



Jax and the Beanstalk Zombies (Fairy True 1)

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Horror

Description: The treasure hunter... Veronica Kwon is determined to be the only person in control of her destiny. After surviving a broken engagement and turning her back on her wealthy manipulative father, she started a treasure hunting company and is ready for the adventure of a lifetime.

The ex-fiance... Jax Taylor is a Southern charmer with enough sex appeal to melt the polar ice caps. He disappeared three months before their wedding and swore he'd never cross paths with Veronica again.

The magic beanstalk... Brought together again by their dying mentor, who has found three enchanted beans, Veronica and Jax agree to an uneasy partnership. Together they'll climb a magic beanstalk to the cloud kingdom, but will their destiny be the riches they so desire, the passion they thought dead...or will the undead get them first?

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Chapter 1

Karma hadn't just caught up with Veronica Kwon. It had gotten behind the wheel of a massive SUV, mowed her down, paused for half a breath then slid into reverse and run her over again.

She had no clue what she'd done in a past life to end up at Antoine Felix Antiquities right in time to bump—literally—into her ex-fiance, Jax Taylor, but it must have been awful. Her father had always told her she was as stubborn as Ghengis Kahn. Maybe there was something to that.

Five brief minutes ago, she'd strolled into Antoine's store, texting her assistant about the latest treasure hunt request sent to Kwon Limited. She'd cut her professional teeth in this store so had navigated around the display of dwarf-sized pickaxes without even glancing up from the glowing screen in her hand. That's how she'd ended up walking right into a man's hard chest. Before they could both topple over onto a miniature pumpkin coach, he'd enveloped her in his strong arms and pulled her close. One whiff of Jax's distinctive spicy cologne, and the lusty feelings she'd buried with her engagement ring roared to life.

Time to get the hell out of here. As much as she loved Antoine, she'd catch up with him another time about his latest discovery, magic beans.

Inhaling one last sniff of Southern Sex God, or whatever cologne Jax had on, Veronica pushed out of his embrace and took a long step back, separating her now tingling breasts from his hard bod. The space should have helped, but it only gave her a better view of the well-defined chest and strong arms his crisp white shirt couldn't

hide.

Damn, he didn't even have the common courtesy to look like shit. He'd grown out his hair since they'd been together. Gone was the close-cropped buzz, replaced with tight black curls that complemented his warm brown skin. The kissable mouth remained with its touch of pink on the center of the bottom lip.

On cue, the butterflies in her stomach careened in spirals and her pleasure sensors hummed to life.

However, judging by the way Jax's full lips had flattened into a hard line, his body was having a totally different reaction. "I never thought I'd see you again."

Of course not. He'd broken up with her during a static-filled cell phone conversation, leaving her crying in the dressing room of Madame Cecile's Dressmakers surrounded by piles of white lace and silk three months before their wedding.

The butterflies dropped dead in her stomach and a red haze bled into her peripheral vision. He'd left her practically at the altar. At the time she'd been crying too hard to tell him off, but now was the perfect opportunity. Maybe running into Jax wasn't complete bad luck.

His gaze locked on her mouth and his pupils dilated.

Her breath caught. The kamikaze butterflies jolted awake.

The air crackled around them, strong enough to blow an electricity transformer.

A moment ago she'd had the perfect scathing remark. Now she barely remembered her own name.

Jax took half a step toward her and every rebellious nerve in her began singing the Hallelujah Chorus in three-part harmony. A year was a long time to go without the man she used to need even more than her twice daily caramel iced-coffee fix. Even if he did take up the first five spots on her shit list. Okay, the entire top ten.

Electricity sizzled in the half foot of open air between their bodies. Needing to touch him, Veronica smoothed his shirt collar. Her pale fingers brushed his neck, which was the same color as the single cup of dark French roast coffee he had every morning. The slight touch of skin to skin sent shivers of awareness up her arm.

“Why now?” He groaned and tilted his head lower.

Not the most romantic of words, but the need rushing through her overwhelmed any SOS because Jax was about to kiss her. The last thing she needed and the one thing she wanted most in the world. Heat rushed over her skin as he leaned in closer and she parted her lips.

The shop door’s shrill bell shattered the moment’s magic.

Jax’s eyes went wide. He straightened and took two steps back.

Embarrassment flushed her cheeks with heat. What had she been thinking? She hadn’t, which tended to happen around Jax. So what if he was sex on a stick? Once the good times between the sheets were over, she’d be the one to end up sobbing while her father issued a curt I-told-you-so lecture. She’d rather stick a spoon in her left eye than have to go through that again.

“Oh good, you two found each other.” Antoine shuffled toward them. “And no one’s been beaten senseless. I have to say, I was worried about that. Fabulous, just fabulous.” He clapped his gnarled hands and his gaze flicked between them. “Everything is alright, isn’t it?”

She squared her shoulders and raised her chin, ready to tell Antoine to find someone else besides her

to round out his little trio. She loved the man who'd been her first mentor, but she'd walk before working with her ex-fiance ever again.

Jax cleared his throat. "Look, I'm sorry, Antoine, but if she's going to be involved I can't work with you on this one. She has to go."

His brown-eyed gaze met hers, unflinching.

Steam blasted from her toes to her perfectly arched eyebrows so hard and fast, her hair should have stood on end.

Oh no, he did not just try to kick her off this job. That she had been about to walk away of her own volition didn't matter. No one pushed Veronica Kwon around—not anymore. "What's wrong, Jax? Afraid you can't keep up with a spoiled little rich girl? If you can't do the job, just admit it."

"My abilities are not in question. I'm the trained archeologist." His slight smile matched his condescending tone.

"A lot's changed. I've gone on more than twenty treasure hunts, ninety percent of which paid off. I heard you burned out. Rumor has it you're living at home with mommy in North Carolina."

His square jaw hardened.

"Oh, did I touch a nerve?" When it came to dealing emotional body blows, she'd learned from the master. Her father tossed out insults with a circus knife thrower's precision.

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“Children, there’s no need for all the dramatics,” Antoine said. “Just wait until you see what I have here.” He waved a crumpled piece of paper. As he made his way through the aisle lined with talking mirrors of all sizes and shapes, his pace picked up to old-dog speed.

He stopped at his roll-top desk and pushed loose stacks of papers aside. “Now, where did I leave those glasses? I can’t read a darn thing without them.”

The mid-afternoon sunlight streaming through the skylight bounced off something tangled in the older man’s shoulder-length flowing locks, making it gleam. “Antoine,” she said.

“Just a minute, Veronica, darling, I have to find my glasses.” A pile of folders jiggled precariously under his touch, nearly falling off the overcrowded oak desk.

“Your head.” She pointed a red-tipped fingernail.

“What about my head?” Papers spilled off the edge, joining a mountain of others on the floor.

God love him, Antoine was always a bit of a scattered mess.

She held back a giggle. “Your glasses.”

“Yes, my glasses, that’s what I’m looking for.” His face stilled for a moment then he ran his fingers through his wild mane of pure-white hair. When his fingers wrapped around the metal frame, he chuckled. “Well done, Veronica. Well done.”

He slid the wire-framed spectacles down to his nose. The thick lenses enlarged his sky-blue eyes to comic proportions as he scanned the words on his prized document. "I know it's here somewhere... Lake Erie...magic beans...golden goose...amazing riches... Ah! Here it is. To work, the beans must be divided between three persons who work cooperatively to spin the spell and grow the beanstalk taller than the heavens."

Antoine looked up, barely-leashed glee beaming from his baby blues.

Jax crossed his arms and kept his face averted. "You still need the magic beans."

The antiques dealer dug into his pants pocket and pulled out a small brown glass bottle. He shook it gently and the contents rattled. "Got 'em."

Any evidence of casual interest melted away from Jax's six-foot frame as he straightened. "Where?"

The bottle disappeared back into Antoine's deep pocket.

"Here and there. It took some doing, but I used my contacts to locate the beans. I found one in Brazil. Another came from Kenya. The last I received a week ago by parcel post from Finland." He shook his shaggy head. "To think after all these years, I finally have them. And just in time too."

"What do you mean, 'just in time'?" Veronica asked.

Jax stepped closer to the desk, concern deepening the lines on his forehead.

Antoine shrugged. "I'm old. The doctors say the ticker just isn't what it used to be when Chloe was still alive. She always made me eat healthy, all the green things and such. It seems the bacon has caught up with me. The doctors say it's just a matter of

time—maybe even months.”

Clenching her teeth, she focused on the spinning wheel in a back corner to keep the tears at bay. Rumpelstiltskin had used it for years to spin straw into gold. It had been her first major find with Antoine and Jax. They’d combed through historical documents, tracked down every lead and searched for years before finding it in the hollow of a dead tree in the Black Forest. After that, she had sworn she’d make her dreams of starting her own treasure hunting company a reality.

Antoine had believed in her, even when her family had warned her to give up her foolish dreams and join the other New York heiresses at charity balls and luncheons. More than just a professional mentor, Antoine had established himself as her friend and champion. She couldn’t imagine not having him in her life.

“Well, there has to be something you can do.” She chewed the inside of her cheek, hoping the pain would keep her from crying.

“Of course. Give up adventuring. Close my wonderful store. Live a life of calm on a beach somewhere. Oh, and eat more fruits and veggies, which in my case would mean any fruits and veggies.” He laughed at his joke. “Don’t be so glum. I’ve had a grand time treasure hunting. Especially with you two. You were my best proteges. I am so proud of how far you’ve come and I can’t imagine going on one last escapade with anyone but you two.”

Jax clapped a hand on the older man’s shoulder. “You should be enjoying your retirement, not running around searching for treasure.”

For the first time in a long time, Veronica was in complete agreement with her ex-fiance. If she could, she’d wrap Antoine in bubble wrap to keep him safe.

“That is the doctors’ recommendation, but I’m not following it. I’m sixty-eight years

old and probably won't see seventy. My wife is dead. I have no family, except for you two. I've searched my whole life for these magic beans. I'll not give up the adventure awaiting me."

Somewhere in the back of the vast antiques store, a grandfather clock bonged three times.

"Do an old man a great favor." Antoine turned the full force of his blue eyes on them. "Come climb the beanstalk with me."

Chapter 2

The full moon hung heavy in the midnight sky, illuminating a battered F-150 that's best days were at least a decade ago. A sparkling new cherry-red BMW Z4 convertible pulled in beside it. Jax shook his head at the sight. Seeing his and Veronica's cars side by side perfectly illustrated how different they were and always would be. He had to remember that next time he felt like jumping on the crazy train and kissing her. The girl was way out of his league.

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But, damn, she still had it going on. Veronica packed a hell of a punch in her slight five-foot-three-inch frame. She'd cut her silky ebony hair. It used to hit the rise of her pert ass, now it teased the top curve of her breasts, drawing his attention and reminding him of how she used to moan when he'd slid his tongue down the shallow valley between them.

Something new had been added to her black walnut colored eyes, a hardness that hadn't been there a year ago. Guilt tightened his chest. No doubt, he and her control-freak father were responsible for that. David Kwon had promised to use his funds and influence as the country's biggest shopping center tycoon to further Jax's career if he'd leave Veronica alone, but that hadn't influenced the decision to make that heart-wrenching call. It had been love.

The sports car's door opened and leather-encased long legs emerged, steering his thoughts from love to lust in less than a heartbeat.

Veronica got out of the driver's-side door and he almost passed out from the lack of blood flowing to his brain. The woman wore a skin-tight black leather jumpsuit and had pulled back her hair into a tight ponytail. A black tool belt lay snug across her hips. The only spot of color in the ensemble was the slash of scarlet across her lips. She looked like the Korean-American

Batgirl, and he wanted to do many bad things just so she'd give chase.

Without acknowledging his slack-jawed stare, she sauntered around to the passenger side, opened the door and helped Antoine out of the low-slung car. The older man was also wearing all black. Not leather that fit like second skin over his potbelly,

thank God.

Jax glanced down at his gray, untucked t-shirt and jeans. He must have missed the memo.

“Come, come. We need to bury the beans thirty yards inside the tree line.” Antoine led the way from the isolated spot on Lake Erie’s shore toward the woods surrounding it.

Marveling at how Veronica was able to tromp through the underbrush in boots that added several inches to her height, Jax brought up the rear—giving him a great view of hers. They needed the full moon for the magic to work when they buried the beans, but he wasn’t above enjoying the side benefits of having a little extra light.

Leaves rustled.

Predators lurked in these woods. A huge, hulking wolf had been terrorizing the local villagers for years, bringing new meaning to the terms big and bad. Then there was a family of bears, the youngest of which had never been the same since a home invasion a few years back. He had tangled with the troublesome cub once. It had left him with a three-inch scar on his thigh and a bone-deep appreciation for the animals back home in North Carolina that had the decency not to talk or act like humans.

Unfortunately, animals weren’t the only ones who might see their little trio as prey. Witches with bone houses and angry, non-union dwarves had staked out a claim in these woods. Not to mention treasure hunters, magical, animal and human alike, who’d slice them to pieces for the magic beans without a second’s thought.

He kept his gaze locked on the darkness surrounding them. “So does anyone know you have all three beans?”

“No, I’ve been very careful in my search,” Antoine said. “I hired different hunters to search for each one, then utilized different mediators to buy each of them. None of them know about the others.”

“If the beanstalk grows, how will we guard the perimeter to keep others from climbing it after us?” Veronica, as always, got to the heart of the problem.

“That’s the beauty of it, the absolute beauty.” Antoine clapped his chubby hands with glee. “Once we plant the beans while chanting the sowing spell, no one can climb up the beanstalk except us. A magical force field not only blocks others from ascending the giant stem, it grants the cover of invisibility.”

“And until the beans are planted?” Veronica asked.

Antoine paused then turned around and faced them. The full moon’s light added a soft halo to the white hair sticking up wildly from his scalp. Deep worry lines slashed across his forehead, destroying his standard joyful expression. Slowly and steadily, he grasped the silver handle of his scimitar and slid it from the scabbard.

Antoine had discovered King Shahyar’s curved backsword decades ago in Persia after following clues scribbled in the margin of the original manuscript of Arabian Nights, as it’s known in English. It was on that trip his beloved Chloe had been struck and killed by a double-decker bus.

“Until we plant the beans and chant the sowing spell, we must be ever watchful. We are not alone in these woods,” Antoine said.

Jax took an automatic step closer to Veronica. The vanilla of her perfume mixed with the moss-scent of the woods, teasing his senses.

She didn’t acknowledge his closeness, but her shoulders relaxed.

His hands ached to massage the knot that formed across her upper back whenever her stress levels peaked. Every time she had returned to their small, studio apartment after dinner at her parents' mansion, he'd pull the Murphy Bed down from the wall. She'd lie in the center and he'd rub the lavender oil across her delicate back, paying much care to the tension tightening her shoulders. Eventually, he would work his way down her spine with his fingers until they wrapped around her hips. Then they'd both end up getting covered in oil.

That memory was the last place he needed to be. Time to smarten up, before he fucked up more. Towering over her much smaller frame, he swore to himself to protect her as he'd done before. No matter the cost.

"Then let's be on our way." Veronica's smooth voice carried over the warm summer breeze.

They trudged in silence until they came to a small clearing. Seven large boulders formed a circle in the tall grass. Antoine marched into the center. Veronica followed without hesitation.

A cold blast of air shot through Jax when he passed between two of the boulders. Once inside the boundary, the breeze disappeared. The air hummed around them and the sound of a child singing in a high-pitched voice was barely discernible. He closed his eyes to concentrate on the lyrics.

"Ring around the rosie, a pocketful of posie. Ashes. Ashes. We all fall down."

An ode to the plague brought up by his subconscious or a warning from beyond? Either way, it sent a shiver down his spine. Again, he stationed himself at Veronica's six, searching the surrounding woods for danger, while Antoine dug a hole with his camp shovel.

A pile of loose dirt grew next to where Antoine kneeled and dug. Finally, the hole was about a foot deep and he stopped. Resting back on his heels, the old man drew a white handkerchief from his pocket and patted down his forehead and under the bridge of his glasses.

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“Veronica and Jax, we need to form a triangle around the hole.” He took a deep swig from a silver flask embossed with a giant and a young boy. “Try to make the distance equal between us.”

Antoine replaced the cap on the flask and deposited the silver canister in his knapsack. He reached out to hold Veronica’s and Jax’s hands. “Now you two.”

Tentative and a bit nervous to touch her again, Jax curled his rough fingers around her smooth ones. She squeezed his hand. A jolt of electricity snapped between them. It could have been a mystical connection here in the stone circle, but it felt deeper, older and more personal. His gaze caught hers and his heartbeat calmed to a deliberate rhythm.

Antoine exhaled a deep breath and closed his eyes. “Mystic beanstalk, grow for this three. To heights unseen, love is the key. Riches we’ll find, all that may be. Three you require, three we be.”

Wind whipped through the circle, picking up stray leaves and debris and blowing it sideways with such speed, Jax couldn’t see the world outside the boulders. The moon brightened until it neared the sun’s brilliance. The children’s singing grew more distinct, ringing out clearly around them.

Undeterred, Antoine raised his eyebrows, urging Veronica and him to join in his chant. The words tumbled forth.

“Mystic beanstalk, grow for this three. To heights unseen, love is the key. Riches we’ll find, all that may be. Three you require, three we be.”

The gusts increased in ferocity, the temperature dropping until Jax's breath froze in his nostrils.

The tiny glass bottle containing the beans floated out of Antoine's pocket. It danced through the air in time with the measured pace with which they chanted the spell.

"Mystic beanstalk, grow for this three. To heights unseen, love is the key. Riches we'll find, all that may be. Three you require, three we be."

Wind yowled around them.

A beam of light shot out of the hole Antoine had dug.

The glass bottle exploded and the three beans dropped like rocks into the ground.

"Ashes. Ashes." The children sang in deafening screams. "We all fall down."

The light disappeared. The air stilled and the voices vanished into silence.

Jax's heartbeat echoed in his ears. Sweat ran down his neck like a flooded river, when moments before, it had been so cold he could see his breath.

The three of them collapsed. Veronica rested her head against his shoulder, her almond-shaped eyes closed. Jax wrapped an arm around her, and was amazed when she allowed him to bring her closer. The bittersweet moment taunted him. If he'd never made that awful call, would they still be together? Married? Would he be sleep deprived and rocking a newborn into the wee hours? An ache burned his gut. The old wound had never completely healed, he'd just gotten used to the daily throb.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into her soft hair.

Veronica stiffened and pulled away. She not only refused to say anything to him, she wouldn't even look in his direction. His arm fell awkwardly to his side.

The hole had been filled in, the dirt patted down. If he didn't know better, he'd believe the ground had never been disturbed.

Antoine rocked back and forth on the grass, mumbling what sounded like an incantation. He circled his hand above the buried beans three times, then brought his palm down to the cool dirt. An otherworldly hush fell and the stars sparkled like literal diamonds in the sky. He looked up at the heavens, the moon bathing his face in light. "Three you require, three we be."

And then, nothing. For a long frickin' time. Nothing.

Something poked him in the butt. He must have settled down onto a rock.

Would Veronica still taste of jasmine? Did she still start with the opinion page first and use the sports page to line her trash cans? What had it felt like when she'd finally built up the nerve to tell her father to fuck off?

Oh yeah, he'd heard the story. At least twelve people had called him up to tell him about how her father had demanded she give up her treasure hunting hobby or he'd cut her off. For the first time in her life, she'd given her dad the figurative bird. Jax had added a Google alert for Kwon Limited when she'd started her treasure hunting company, and had reveled in each of her finds. She'd always had the ability to whittle something down to bare bones and find the clues others had overlooked.

Antoine cleared his throat. "A watched pot never boils, you know. Let's set up camp."

Without waiting for their response, the older man brought out a flat metal object the

size of a business envelope and pushed the single green button on its top. It flipped open, and out popped three miniature tents. Shuffling from one spot to another, he arranged the miniatures in a triangle around the beans. Once they were in place, he clapped his hands three times.

The tents rose from the grass and spun around at dizzying speeds before dropping, full sized, to the ground.

“Well then, children, I bid you goodnight. Have a good rest. I imagine we’ll have quite an eventful day tomorrow.” With that, Antoine walked into his tent and zipped shut the door flap.

Veronica strutted into her tent and closed the flap behind her.

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Now she'd peel off the black leather jumpsuit, revealing her soft, porcelain skin inch by inch...

He'd fooled himself into thinking he didn't want her anymore, when in reality, he'd never stopped loving her. Not that she realized the truth.

When he'd gone home to North Carolina after his mother had broken her hip, he'd recommended Kwon Limited to the clients whose jobs were far from home. The quid pro quo being, those clients couldn't tell Veronica who'd recommended her company.

She hadn't just taken the opportunities he'd thrown her way, she'd made her own. The woman had worked at lightning speed to establish her company. His email had blown up with all the Google alert notices about her.

Damn, if he hadn't already been in love with Veronica, reading about her exploits would have done it. Maybe this was fate giving him a second chance. The idea put an extra spring in his step. He'd find a way to get her to understand why he left. He had to.

Jax turned to his tent, ready to settle in for a long, sleepless night of plotting, but a crunch sounded behind him. He spun toward the sound and, fingers curled around the handle of the knife at his waist, searched the darkness for enemies.

A snapping sounded. This time lower.

Something green on the ground caught his eye.

A vine, three inches in diameter, poked through the dirt.

Chapter 3

Veronica grabbed a handful of thick green vine and pulled herself up, testing how well the beanstalk, so tall she couldn't see the top of it, would hold her weight. She hung suspended, her boot-clad feet dangling in the open space. Gritting her teeth, she completed five pull ups before dropping to the soft grass below.

“So we know it can hold a pint-sized badass. Let's see if it can hold me.” Jax circled her and scurried up the beanstalk.

His strong arms curved around the green trunk, biceps bulging. It was too thick for his hands to meet, but he gripped the intertwining vines making up the bulk of the beanstalk. Soon all she could see were the thick soles of his climbing boots. Her heartbeat sped up. One wrong move, one broken vine and he'd plummet to the ground. A fall like that meant death.

Worry stabbed her in the sternum. “Be careful.”

“What's wrong, darling? Worried about me?” His tight butt came into view as he shimmied back down.

Damn, his Southern drawl used to turn her insides to honey. They'd be having a completely respectable dinner and then he'd lean over and whisper in her ear. It didn't even have to be anything flirty. He could say pass the peas in that voice and it just did something to her. Hell, who was she kidding? Everything about this man still did something to her.

Refusing to surrender to the giddy feeling, she crossed her arms and shot him a dirty look. “No, I just don't want to have to clean your blood off my boots.”

“Tsk-tsk. Veronica Kwon, are you flirting with me?”

“Been there. Done that. Have the snot-covered wedding dress to prove it.” Just saying the words ripped the scab right off the wound.

Jax dropped with a thump to the grass beside her, not touching but so close she could feel the current running between them. “About that—”

She gulped down the lump in her throat. “Let’s not. Let’s just pretend it never happened, get this job done and make Antoine a very happy, very rich old man.”

Now he did touch her, tucking a stray hair behind her ear with his fingers. Then he traced her jawline with his thumb. His eyes darkened to an almost inky black.

Her pulse went into overdrive, sending lust on a wild ride through her. Her nipples tightened to almost painful buds and her thighs turned to Jell-O. She wanted to jump him. Right then. Right there.

Jax dropped his hand and stepped back. Lucky for her, he hadn’t given her the chance. “So we start fresh.”

She needed to pull it together, get ahold of her hormones. “That’s not exactly—”

He shoved his hand out. “Jax Taylor, archeologist specializing in magical relics. I enjoy fried okra, cold bottles of beer and sappy romantic comedies. Shh, don’t tell my buddies.” He gazed at her, wide eyed. “And you are?”

“Veronica Kwon.”

He raised an eyebrow expectantly.

Against her better judgment, she played along. Want with a capital W pooled in her belly when she shook his hand. “Veronica Kwon, former spoiled heiress and current treasure hunter extraordinaire. I enjoy my grandmother’s—and only my grandmother’s—kimchi, drinking too many iced coffees and I hate shoe shopping. Definitely don’t tell my mother.”

“A gentlemen never tells.” Jax gave her an exaggerated wink. “So you doing anything special today?”

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By now she couldn't stop the giggles. No one made her relax quite like Jax. "Nah, just climbing a ginormous beanstalk, having a peek around a kingdom in the clouds and hauling down untold riches. You?"

"Funny enough, I'm doing the same thing. We might as well go together."

"Might as well."

In the time a hummingbird would have taken to flap its wings, the moment went from light-hearted to heady. The heat appeared again in his brown eyes, so intense she wanted to fall in and never climb back out. More than a look, it had power and meaning. It was magic. She couldn't look away—much to the joy of the armada of butterflies shooting off lust torpedoes in her belly.

Antoine let out a whoop of glee. "This bodes well, it does indeed. The beanstalk likes you two. I've heard about how it sometimes acts as an aphrodisiac. Good thing I got here in time or heavens knows what I would have seen when exiting my tent."

Veronica jumped. She hadn't just experienced a real connection with Jax. The effect was the same as grabbing a glass of tea and realizing only after having a mouthful that it was bourbon. Embarrassment at how she'd practically thrown herself at her fiancée burned down her gullet.

Once again she was alone in that dressing room, panicking as the walls closed in on her. "I can't do this, Veronica. I'm sorry." Then he'd hung up. She'd come completely undone, and had refused to leave the dressing room until the clerk tapped on the door for the fifth time. When she'd walked out of the dressing room, still

swathed in lace and silk, she'd sworn she'd never get taken in again. Not by Jax. Not by her father. Not by anyone. Looked like she needed to add anything—plant, animal or mineral—to the list.

Desperate to escape, she kept her eyes averted. “Sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“God, I hope it does.” Jax cupped her chin, tilted her head until her gaze met his. “We need to talk.”

She spun out of his grasp and put a yard of air between them, huffing huge gasps of breath. “Let’s keep it focused on the treasure. Professional.”

A crooked smile curled his full lips. “With us it always goes way beyond professional.”

Refusing to get pulled into that conversation, she squared her shoulders and turned to Antoine. “So are we ready to do this?”

The older man patted his knapsack straps and nodded. “By all means, please lead the way.”

Scaling the beanstalk took almost all her concentration, a little favor from God for which she was more than glad. Antoine took up what was left of her attention with his history lesson about the beanstalk. Still, every once in a while,

an updraft sent a puff of air scented with Jax’s cologne her way and her resolve to keep things professional wavered. Starting things fresh between them began to make more sense.

“So I should warn you that we may not be entirely alone once we arrive at the castle,” Antoine said.

“Don’t tell me you’re expecting giants.” Jax’s voice carried up from a few feet below.
“They passed into extinction a hundred years ago.”

“Nasty thing, Sir Cravish’s supposed cure. They thought it was a chance to live a normal life, you know. Sir Cravish promised the giants they’d be transformed to a more manageable size, wouldn’t have to spend so much on food and could buy ready-built homes as opposed to dismantling mountain ranges for enough stone to build their huge castles.”

“What went wrong?” Veronica asked.

“No one is really sure. They shrank to only a foot or so taller than the average man. Then something went terribly wrong. It was a frightening time. More than ten thousand giants died in forty-eight hours. The rest vanished. One moment they were there in the hospital, the next—poof—they were all gone.”

Nothing disappeared. Not really. They had to be somewhere. Could they have gone back home? “Where do you think they went?”

“Heaven? Hell? Some place in between? Who knows?”

“What do you think is waiting up there?” Jax had voiced the concern growing in her mind.

“Probably nothing. But it’s always best to be prepared.”

“What’s your backup plan, to skedaddle down the beanstalk while we fight off hungry giants?” Veronica couldn’t help but laugh as she delivered the absurd line.

“You’d be surprised.” Antoine cackled like a dime-novel villain. “But enough about that. Let me tell you about the riches told to be in the castle. Gold coins, cups and

treasures. A goose that lays golden eggs. A harp that plays the most beautiful melodies guaranteed to soothe away worries or cares.”

By now the clouds, already thick and puffy, had become impossibly dense. She pulled a retractable garden shovel with a seven-inch pointed tip out of her tool belt. It slid into the white mass like a hot knife into cold, hard ice cream, working like a dream but not without effort. Sweat had formed on her nape by the time she’d scooped out enough cloud to create a tunnel.

Upward she dug, until finally she poked through the top. Feeling a bit like a gopher on the golf course, she poked her head out only high enough to show her eyes. The view astounded her.

Bright sunlight glistened off the snow-white ground. Only a forest of clouds shaped like trees blocked them from their prize, a massive castle in the distance. No sound or movement pierced the stillness. The air smelled of cotton candy and salt-water taffy. Her lungs seemed a little tight because of the high altitude, but that she could live with in exchange for a thirty-three percent share in a golden goose. Since her father had disowned her and she’d started her company from scratch, she had a much better understanding of never wanting to eat cheap noodles for breakfast, lunch and dinner ever again.

Planting her palms on the firm cloud ground, she hefted herself up and out of the tunnel. Her heartbeat raced as she stood guard, watching for anything out of the ordinary. Hell, who was she kidding? They’d just climbed a magic beanstalk and were walking on clouds. This whole event was out of the ordinary, even for her. And she’d once avoided cross-town traffic by taking a flying carpet.

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Antoine hauled himself out of the tunnel, followed by Jax. A bit of white fluff clung to his broad shoulders and it took everything she had not to brush it off for him.

“Alright, let’s head toward the castle.” Antoine marched forward, his head turning from side to side as he kept a watch on the perimeter.

“Worried?” she asked.

“Not at all.” He chuckled. “Just keeping a lookout for that fat goose.”

It took ten minutes to get to the castle. The gray stone walls stretched up farther than Veronica could see. She pressed her hand against the cold, rough surface. There weren’t any doors or windows that she could find.

“Is it a wall?” Jax asked.

“No. Like the rest of this place, it’s magic.” Antoine pulled out a heart locket hanging from a gold chain around his neck. He flicked it open and held it out toward the stone. “Three you require. Three we be.”

The air shifted around them, revealing an oak door so big, a twenty-foot-tall man could walk through without bumping his head. The watermelon-sized door knob was way out of reach.

“So how do we get in?” Jax pushed against the door with both hands.

The creak was nearly deafening, but the door swung open enough for them to squeeze

through into the darkness beyond.

As soon as she crossed the threshold, unease tickled her shoulders. She searched the black void for the cause but couldn't see a damn thing. Get a grip, Veronica. This wasn't the first dark and scary place she'd gone to hunt for treasure. It wouldn't be her last.

At least she hoped not.

"I got your back." Jax's voice gave his location away as being behind and slightly to the left. "Let's get what we need and get the hell out of here."

They turned on their flashlights, illuminating a great hall with two doorways on each side leading to other rooms. A giant-sized side table had fallen over. Broken pieces of huge wooden furniture littered the floor. Over, under and around they went, until they reached the first doorway.

Antoine held up a hand. "Let me search the room. You two stand guard here. I'll be back in ten minutes."

Without waiting for a reply, the older man shuffled into the room. Within a minute, all she could see of him was the beam of light from his flashlight bouncing off the stone walls.

Veronica leaned against the broken table leg behind her and faced the room where Antoine had disappeared. Jax stood on the other side of the doorway, his presence easing her nervous willies. The minutes ticked by as Antoine's light moved in a circular pattern through the room.

She must have stared too long without blinking because her right contact began to irritate her eye. When she closed her eyes for a few seconds then blinked to rewet her

eyes, the pain eased.

A soft giggle broke the companionable silence.

She turned and gave Jax a dirty look. “What’s so funny?”

His wide-eyed gaze was locked on something behind her. “I’m not the one laughing.”

Chapter 4

The urge to sprint away squeezed the air from Veronica’s lungs. But she forced herself to ignore the heebie jeebies highjacking her courage and concentrate on her training. Calm. Cool. Collected. Play it smart, and they’d all make it out of here.

“Don’t make any sudden moves.” Jax kept his gaze on the thing giggling behind her. “Slow and steady.”

Whatever was behind her sounded like a five-year-old girl who’d just sucked down a balloon’s worth of helium in one gulp. The high pitched and slightly wheezing tittering blew the loose strands of Veronica’s hair forward, making her earlobe itch.

She stared at Jax. He’d promised he’d have her back. Well, now was the time to prove it. Exhaling a shaky breath, she eased toward him. One foot in front of the other. Repeat.

“Down now!”

She dropped to her knees.

A long knife whizzed over her head.

A grunt. A thunk. Then, nothing.

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Jax was beside her, his arm wrapped around her shoulders. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “What was it?”

“Fuck if I know.”

She pivoted and strode with him to the humanoid body, which had crumpled to the floor. What was left of the dead man’s clothes were scraps of what might have been blue cotton, but had faded to a washed-out gray. His pants hung to the middle of his bony shins. When alive, he must have stood at least seven-feet tall, and his feet were huge.

Using the toe of his boot, Jax pushed the body over.

His knife had pierced the creature’s right eye, gone in straight to the hilt, but without spilling any blood. Veronica’s stomach heaved and she knew if she looked in the mirror her pale skin would be more than a little tinged with green. She concentrated on taking deep breaths of cotton candy-scented air.

“That’s weird.” Jax pulled his knife free.

“What about this place isn’t weird?”

“No, look closer.” He hunkered down by the body and pointed the beam of his flashlight. “He’s missing a chunk of skin under his eye. It’s almost as if it rotted away.”

Her heart hiccupped. Those were rumors, old wives' tales. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Look for yourself."

That was the last thing she wanted to do, as evidenced by her roiling stomach, but she still ended up squatting beside Jax looking at the dead creature's face. Torn, puckered ashen skin circled a one-inch-in-diameter hole directly underneath his eye socket. Quarter-sized purple sores dotted his face and exposed skin. Ragged teeth poked outward from his gaping mouth.

"It can't be." There had always been stories. Her cousin Lulu had whispered the tale to her late at night as a test of pre-pubescent courage. No one ever had experienced an actual sighting—well, and lived to tell the tale. The proof, however, lay dead in a heap at their feet.

She glanced up at Jax.

"Zombie," they said together.

Somewhere out in the darkness another giggle sounded.

Then, another.

They snapped off their flashlights.

The world turned inky black.

She strained in an attempt to pinpoint the zombies' location by hearing but that information remained elusive. Fear settled in her stomach like a bad Mexican dinner, making her queasy and clammy.

“We have to get Antoine and get the hell out of here,” Jax whispered.

God, yes. All she wanted to do was run screaming for the beanstalk. But they couldn’t. She squeezed his forearm. “Agreed, but we need to be smart about this. We can’t attract their attention.”

“I know you like to make a plan for everything, but we have about two minutes before we’re lunch,” he snarled.

If they went into ninja mode, it could work. “Brunch, it’s only ten thirty in the morning.”

Jax looked like he was barely restraining the need

to shake her senseless. “This is not the time or place for semantics. What’s the plan?”

“Zombies are attracted to shiny things, movement and sound. So, stay low and move slow. Once we’re inside the room, we can pick up the pace to find Antoine. He’s still using his flashlight so it shouldn’t take long to find him. We have to find him before they do.”

Another set of giggles rang out. This time, closer.

Sliding his fingers between hers, Jax squeezed her hand. “Let’s do this.”

Smooth as a freshly swept ice rink, they stood and slunk toward the door. With each step, her eyes adjusted to the darkness, revealing a strange world of giants and their belongings. Half of a ten-foot chair tilted against one wall. A cracked coffee cup, nearly as tall as her stood like a lonely sentry in the hall. Distracted by all the oversized scraps of giant life, when she stubbed her toe on something solid, she pitched forward.

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Jax wrapped his arms around her waist and yanked her securely against his body before she could land on the hard, stone floor. “I got you.”

Something heavy scraped across the floor behind them, the sound echoing up to the high-vaulted ceiling. Footsteps sounded—not soft and careful like theirs, but clomping and clumsy. A trio of snickers followed.

She couldn’t judge in the cavernous space’s darkness how close the zombies had gotten or how many there were. At least three. Probably more. All the zombie speculative research she’d read hypothesized that they traveled in packs of ten to twelve. Technically brain dead, they didn’t move according to any logical pattern, instead being drawn to light, sound and movement, forever pushed onward by a hunger for brains and other internal organs. The giggling was a total new one to her.

Securely on her feet again, she and Jax tiptoed through the open doorway, searching for Antoine’s ray of light.

“Come on, Antoine, where are you?” she mumbled to herself. Her pulse jackhammered in her throat.

In the vast gloom, a faint glow appeared in the distance.

“There!” she said.

Springing forward as one unit, she and Jax hurried across the booby-trapped floor, scurrying over broken furniture and under what little remained standing upright. She clasped his hand, tethering herself to the safe reality of Jax even in the midst of all

this madness.

Out of nowhere, a gangly, twelve-foot-tall zombie appeared in front of them.

His bottom lip hung by a skinny sliver of skin that wobbled when he reached out a hand with only three fingers toward them.

Goosebumps marched up Veronica's skin. The scream escaped her mouth before she could remember her warning to Jax to stay silent.

It bounced off the walls and set off a series of giggles from the room's hidden nooks and crannies. His compatriots' noise distracted the zombie, who swiveled his head, toward the noise. But only for a moment before he returned his empty gaze to them. What had been a high-pitched giggle became lower, heavier. The zombie swiped his shriveled tongue across his gaping mouth.

Jax whipped out a sharpened expandable baton and, in one fluid motion, brought it down against the zombie's neck. The blade sliced through its rotting flesh like a knife through warm butter. The head tumbled off, landed on the floor with a thud and rolled away into the shadows.

"He's all laughed out," Jax said.

Veronica fought to push away the fear threatening to blind her to everything else. "What about the others?"

"We just have to hope they come at us one at a time."

"Then we kill them?"

He turned and grinned. "That sounds like my kind of plan. Let's get Antoine and get

the fuck out of here.”

Sticking to the shadows, she hustled through the obstacle course of giant-sized wreckage, following Antoine’s beam of light fifty yards ahead.

She grabbed the spongy-gripped garden shovel in her tool belt. At seven inches in length, to do any damage with it she’d have to get into close quarters with Mr. Tall, Dark and Dead but it was much better than the alternative.

Holding her breath with every step and exhaling only once she’d made it from one safe spot to the next, she made her way through the debris. Damn, what she wouldn’t give for a nice pair of night-vision goggles. And a bazooka outfitted with one big-ass silencer.

The farther they traveled into the room, Antoine’s illumination grew from a thin ray to a large swath of light. Only a few more feet and they’d be there.

“Why hasn’t he called out to us?” Veronica whispered, seeing visions of Antoine running from reanimated corpses. “Tried to find us? He had to have heard me scream.”

Jax shrugged. “We’ll find out in a minute.”

She dashed from their hiding spot behind an oversized book to a still-upright chair. Antoine’s light crept around the corner, illuminating a human-sized bloody handprint on the chair leg. Refusing to contemplate who had made it, she peeked around the curved wood.

A lone figure, too tall and thin to be Antoine, stood with its back to her in the flashlight’s golden glow. Zombie.

Stringy dishwater blond hair flowed to the middle of her back. A faded, floral print dress covered the zombie's ashen skin. When she turned, clumps of snow white stuck between her rotting teeth.

Antoine!

"Don't worry, love. It's not me," Antoine said from above her.

He perched like a cat on the seat of the huge chair, his shirt askew but he was otherwise unharmed. Relief rushed through her. She climbed the chair, Jax hot on her heels. "Are you okay?"

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“Of course I am. I conjured a fluffy rabbit from my trusty hat.” Antoine held up a black top hat, which he collapsed and stuffed in his knapsack. “I then scurried up to safety. I’ve been watching your progress. Excellent swordsmanship, Jax.”

“We can talk about that later. Right now let’s get the hell out of Dodge.” Jax hopped from the chair to another piece of upended furniture. “If we can stay up here, I don’t think we’ll have any problems. They don’t seem to be climbers.”

“Brilliant, my boy. Brilliant.”

Feeling more confident by the second, Veronica stood up and looked down to where Antoine had abandoned his flashlight.

The female zombie stared right at her, smiled and giggled.

“Shit.”

Ignoring the nervous shake in her left hand, Veronica pivoted around to take a look at what had Jax’s attention. From the top of the chair, she could see all the way to the door. Everywhere she looked, zombies moved like mice through a crowded maze of giant-sized broken furniture and debris.

There were hundreds of them.

Chapter 5

As soon as they got down the beanstalk, Jax was going to kill Antoine. Slowly.

Maybe with a spoon.

The zombies milled around below them, banging into each other and the furniture like bumper cars made out of rotting flesh.

There was no way in hell his mentor hadn't known a horde of zombies was a possibility. The man researched everything to death—no pun intended. Antoine's little secret had risked Veronica's life. That was not acceptable. Anger burned a hole in Jax's gut. "Okay, spill it, Antoine."

"What do you mean?"

"About the zombies. What are their weaknesses?"

Antoine had the decency to look sheepish, his bushy white eyebrows raised. "Well then, they move more slowly in the daylight hours."

"That's why you insisted we leave at the crack of dawn." The steel in Veronica's voice did not bode well for Antoine once they made it down the beanstalk.

"Quite right. The undead are hungry at all times but especially once the sun sets. As I'm sure you've deduced, they're attracted to light and noise. They don't have the brain function to pick a leader, but instead have a pack mentality, attacking—as a group—whatever is unlucky enough to find itself in their path."

Jax glanced down at his watch. "Noon. We have plenty of time, but I don't feel like pushing it. Let's go." The zombies were everywhere in the g

loomy space, but they kept their attention focused only on what was directly in front of them. "It doesn't look like they climb very much. If we can jump from chair to chair, we can get to the door but once we're in the hallway where there isn't as much

furniture, all bets are off.”

“We’ll figure something out.” Veronica moved up beside him, hesitated for a moment and then sailed over the open space between chairs. She landed easily on the next chair.

Antoine huffed and puffed before launching himself across the chasm. His feet touched the edge and he wavered. Jax held his breath. Even as pissed off as he was at Antoine, he’d throw himself to the stone floor before letting the zombies make dinner out of his mentor.

Veronica ran to the edge, wrapped her fingers around Antoine’s forearm and yanked him forward.

Antoine stumbled before regaining his balance and giving Jax a thumbs up.

The man must have nine lives in his back pocket. Jax set his jaw and raced across the wood chair. He whizzed over the abyss, refusing to look down or consider failure. Hanging in the open air with nothing between his toes and the zombies below, a single image overwhelmed him. Veronica first thing in the morning, stumbling blindly to the coffee pot, her eyelids at half-mast and her long ebony hair tangled. The most gorgeous woman in the world. The rubber sole of his boots landed with a light thud on the neighboring chair. He wobbled and went onto one knee.

“Smooth move, Mr. Stud Archeologist.” Veronica held out a hand, offering to pull him up.

“I aim to please whenever I’m on my knees.” He took her hand, but stood on his own power. “And when I’m standing up.”

She rolled her brown eyes, but her cheeks developed a distinctive pink tint bright

enough to appear even in the dim light. “Let’s go.”

And they did, forming a conga line of determination to survive, brains intact, until they reached the doorway. The good news: the hallway, though lacking in furniture to run across, was practically deserted. The bad news: it wasn’t totally empty.

Five zombies stood in a clump by the partially opened front door. The walking corpses were all that stood between them and the beanstalk.

“Okay, I’ll distract them,” Jax said. “You two make a break for it.”

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“You’re an idiot, Jax. There’s no way you can hold them all off.” She had that stubborn tilt to her head that never failed to turn him on. “I’m staying with you. Together we can come up with a workable plan.”

He turned and grabbed Veronica’s hip, pulling her to him. Her body’s soft curves fit perfectly against him, reminding him of the times he’d lain awake in their bed staring at the ceiling and marveling at how damn lucky he’d been to find her. Having to let her go had been life’s way of reminding him of his place on the other side of the tracks, where escargot forks didn’t exist and chickens lived in the front yard. But he’d be damned if he’d miss out on this chance to kiss her—maybe for the last time. His lips came down on hers before he had a chance to second-guess himself.

Almonds and heaven. That’s what she tasted like. He sucked on her bottom lip, gently tugging it. She moaned and it was all the invitation he needed to sweep his tongue into her sweet mouth. He put everything he could into that kiss. He told all his secrets and made all the promises he’d wished he’d given before, when his words still mattered to her. Hungry for more but knowing it wasn’t meant to be, he pulled away.

“Whatever you’re thinking about doing, don’t do it.” Her bottom lip trembled. Once. Just once. That was his girl, as strong as a mummy’s curse.

Jax pressed a quick kiss to her forehead. “Babe, I got this.” He leapt from the chair, landing in a crouched position on the stone floor. He’d kept his knees bent, but pain shot up his shins anyway. He glanced up at Veronica’s beautiful face, dominated by her shocked expression. “I’ll see you at the beanstalk.”

He sprinted away, making as much noise as possible. He had to get the attention of

every last zombie in the hall. Then Veronica could make it out. “Fresh brains! I got your fresh brains right here!”

The giggles rang through the hall and down Jax’s spine. He didn’t stick around to see if the zombies were following. He didn’t plan on letting them get close enough to feel their stinking breath on his neck.

Dodging broken furniture the size of redwood trees, he blasted through the hall. “Here zombie, zombie, zombie.”

Pivoting to the left, he kicked it up a gear. A table leg towered directly in front of him. He dodged right. Ignoring the burn heating up his lungs, he continued to taunt the rotting corpses giggling in the shadows. “Come and get me, you zombie fuckers.”

The words were barely out of his mouth when a nine-foot-tall zombie stepped into his path. This one wasn’t laughing. Its glassy eyes focused on Jax with an intensity that stole his breath.

He drew his knife as he inhaled and flung it as he exhaled. It hit the target, but the zombie didn’t go down.

The black knife handle stuck straight out of the zombie’s throat like a macabre Adam’s Apple. It bobbed as the zombie strode toward him.

Now unarmed, Jax took the lesser of two evils and spun on his heel. He sprinted away from the zombie, making sure to stay clear of the path to the front door. Enough time must have passed for Veronica and Antoine to have cleared it, but he could manage to give them a few extra minutes to be sure.

The heavy clump, clump, clump of the zombie’s feet slapping against the stone floor sounded behind him. Pushing his muscles to the max, he added an extra shot of

tabasco to his pace. It didn't make a damn bit of difference. The zombie was gaining on him.

If he was going to make it out of here alive, he had to get this rotting corpse off his heels.

Sweat soaked his shirt and his lungs burned with the effort to stay ahead of the beast behind him. He spotted something shining up ahead. Instinct pulled him toward it.

A foot away, the object came into view—a gold coin the size of a hubcap. A man's profile showed on the coin's face—chubby cheeks, short curly hair and a laurel wreath wrapped around his head. It looked like a blown up version of an old Roman coin with dirt stuck in the mountains made by the embossing. Jax yearned for his archeology tools to brush away the debris.

A stinking hand ripping his t-shirt jerked him back to the shit storm surrounding him. Not giving himself time to think, he crouched, curled his fingers under the edges of the humongous coin and hefted it up.

His biceps strained under the pressure to lift it, but the adrenaline pumping through his veins gave him all the extra juice he needed. Letting out a shot putter's groan, he twisted his body from the waist and swung his arms, aiming as high as possible.

The coin smashed into the zombie's neck, snapping it.

Undeterred that his ear was now permanently resting on his shoulder, the zombie shuffled forward with his arms outstretched.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Jax raised his arms straight over his head, muscles trembling from the effort, and slammed the coin down on the zombie's skull.

Bone cracked and the zombie fell like a drunk after last call. Something gooey pooled underneath the coin, but Jax sure as shit wasn't sticking around to find out what it was. He zipped toward the front door, dodging debris and pockets of giggling zombies.

Nothing in the world except for Veronica's lips felt sweeter than the sunlight touching his face when he broke clear of the door and sprinted into the cloud trees beyond.

"Over here, Jax." Veronica waved to him from a small clearing.

By the time he arrived at her side, only Antoine's head was visible over the cloud ground as he descended the beanstalk.

"Thank God, you're safe." She wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed so hard he lost the ability to take a deep breath.

Her silky hair slid against his cheek, and he wished for nothing more than to stay with her wrapped around him for the rest of his life. But as his mama said, if wishes came true then mermaids would walk and evil queens would never age. He knew full well wishes weren't reality. Best just to make the most of this limited time with Veronica while he could enjoy it.

She released her death grip. "If you ever do something so stupid again, I swear I'll feed you to the zombies limb by limb myself."

"You know, if you want to touch all of my limbs, you just have to ask." He covered his inner turmoil with a wolfish leer.

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“Oh yeah?” She pressed her luscious body up against him, setting off all sorts of danger alarm bells that his hard lusting body overrode. Her leg hooked around his and before he knew it, he was flat on his ass with Veronica towering over him, hands on her hips and a smirk on her lips. “See you at the bottom.”

Quick as a pixie on speed, she took off down the beanstalk.

“Babe, you have no idea.” He stood, dusted the cloud fluff from his jeans and followed the only woman he’d ever loved.

Chapter 6

A blade of grass poked Veronica in the back of the neck, but she refused to move. Safe at last from the mindless, brain-eating zombies, all she wanted was to lie back in the prickly grass with her eyes closed and meditate until she no longer wanted to throttle Antoine.

She was going to be here for a while.

Her belly expanded with each deep breath, then sank until she swore she could feel it touching her spine. The whole time, she pictured the peacock-blue hammock in her backyard swaying in the breeze. It swung forward as she inhaled and backward when she exhaled.

“Are you still alive?” Jax asked.

Keeping her eyes closed, she fought not to let the hammock disappear. “Just taking a

quiet moment.”

“Afraid you’ll string him up by his nose hairs?”

“Something like that.” She smiled despite the fast-fading hammock.

The air shifted around her as something—or, to be more precise, someone—settled next to her. She didn’t need to open her eyes to know it was Jax. A tingle broke out across her skin, perking up her nipples and a ripple of excitement

washed across her nether regions.

Poof! The hammock vanished.

Shifting a few inches away from him, she prayed the distance would minimize his impact on her. The man had already hurt her once; she’d be damned if she let him do it again even after his heroics—and that kiss—this afternoon. She was plenty grateful, she just wasn’t a glutton for punishment. Forcing her jaw to unclench, she sank, trying to conjure the hammock from the deep, dark corners of her imagination.

Forward, inhale. Backward, exhale. The coiled muscles in her shoulders unwound. Her scowl melted. The hammock reappeared. But this time Jax relaxed in it. He smirked at her as it swung back and forth. Her thighs clenched and her body turned to liquid gold—hot, melty and exactly the last thing she needed to be feeling around Jax Taylor.

“Get out of my hammock.” She yanked out the blade of grass scratching her neck and rolled up off the ground.

“Excuse me?”

She glowered down at him. God, he just looked so edible. He'd changed into a pair of basketball shorts, which he wore slung low on his hips. His smooth, brown skin looked downright lickable. She could start at his hipbone, slither across to his abs and nibble her way up to his neck. He had always shivered when she kissed that spot at the base of his throat. Usually, he'd tossed her onto her back then and there, but if she anchored her body low enough and straddled him, she could keep him right where... Stop that right now, Veronica Catherine Kwon!

Jax held up his hands, palms forward. "Simmer down—" He swallowed whatever else he was about to say as Antoine strode out of his tent and headed straight for them.

Reminding herself of all the good things that had happened in her life because of Antoine, she unfurled her fists. The man had taken her in when her father disowned her because she'd refused to give up treasure hunting. He'd been her mentor and friend for more than ten years, and this one-last-adventure was the only thing he'd ever asked in return. The least she could do in return was listen to him before she told him there was no way in hell she'd go back up the beanstalk and face down a horde of flesh-eating animated corpses.

A red flush extended from Antoine's second chin all the way up to the line of his snow white hair. He looked like a very apologetic Santa. That is, if the jolly old fat man had ever led his elves into a zombie ambush.

"I can only imagine how upset you two are with me at the moment." He focused his gaze on the sun setting in the distance. "But I didn't know one hundred percent that they were up there. When I found Sir Cravish's diary, even he wasn't sure what had happened to the giants who had survived his cure. His favored hypothesis was that the shrinking his elixir started never stopped. The giants continued to shrink until they were too small to be seen."

Antoine clasped his hands behind his back and rocked on his heels. The gold, orange

and pink sky reflected off the glasses perched on his head. He sighed and locked his gaze on Veronica. There was something new in it she'd never seen before, an almost maniacal determination touching on the delusional. He shifted his attention back to the long blades of green.

“But Sir Cravish had a second theory, one he scarcely could write about. He scribbled his thoughts in the margins, a word here and phrase there. It took me years to put the puzzle pieces together. But still, if I hadn't seen it for myself today I never would have believed it. His elixir did indeed shrink the giants into a size that made it easier for them to navigate the world. However, it also killed. Those who survived had a mutation in their chromosomes. At first Sir Cravish thought they'd make it through unscathed. Then one of his subjects cracked Sir Cravish's cat's skull like a walnut and sucked out the brains.”

His normally pink-tinged skin had a distinctive green sheen to it and his hands shook as he drew a small blue book from his shirt pocket. He thumbed through the pages until coming to the information he sought.

“In an entry dated June twenty-fourth, Sir Cravish writes, I can no longer deny the truth. My magic won't protect me any longer and science has long since turned its back on me. I must lead them to a place where they cannot hurt another living soul. The solution came to me today in the form of a boy who had just sold his family cow. I'm taking the giants home. I do not expect to return to mine.” Antoine softly closed the book and held it to his lips a moment. “There aren't any more entries.”

It took a moment for Veronica to break through the fog of shock. “You thought there was a chance there were zombies up there? A chance?”

“I should have told you both everything from the beginning. Let me make up for that error now by sharing all my dirty little secrets. The bank is taking my shop and everything inside. I got caught up in an investment that turned out to be a Ponzi

scheme. I've lost everything. The only blessing to this is, my beloved Chloe isn't alive to see how far I've fallen." His fingers curled into fists at his side. "I refuse to spend my last days on earth begging for my bread. The beanstalk is my salvation."

Damn. On one hand, she was still pissed as shit at him. But on the other, who was she to hold a grudge against a dying man who'd lost his entire world?

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“You can come stay with me in North Carolina for as long as you want,” Jax said.

“Or my place in New York. There’s no reason to go back up there.” She squeezed the older man’s frail shoulders. “What are the chances you’d ever find anything in that zombie hive anyway?”

A little bit of the old Antoine flashed in his blue eyes and a huge smile spread across his face. “The chances are excellent, my dear.”

He rummaged around in his knapsack and withdrew the flat metal container that had held the tents from the night before and pushed the single green button at its top. It popped open, and four small objects floated out of its mouth. They spun around at dizzying speeds high into the newly minted stars above, enlarging with each rotation, then drifted down.

Four gold coins the diameter of a large, floppy beach hat dropped to the grass in front of Veronica’s feet, flattening the grass beneath them. A man’s profile was embossed on the side along with the words *Magnitudine gigantes*. A two-foot-long white feather landed across the man’s Roman nose.

Antoine cackled. “The goose that lays the golden eggs is up there, ours for the taking. With this coin you could hire an in-house nurse for your ailing mother, Jax. I know you thought a nursing home was your only option, but you’re wrong. And, Veronica, this money could make all the difference for your business. Even with your recent successes, your creditors have been calling more frequently. Imagine what you could accomplish if you had access to a large amount of funds that didn’t come from daddy?”

She couldn't rip her gaze from the golden bounty. Hope, freedom and possibilities—they were all hers for the taking if she went back up. Excitement bubbled through her. The golden eggs really could be the answer to everything. Her father had warned her she'd never be able to make a living from treasure hunting. How good would it be to make him eat that predication?

“There are still the zombies.”

“Yes, Jax, there is that.” The older man paced, his step more jaunty than when he'd left his tent earlier. “But if we go at dawn, we can take advantage of their sun affliction. The zombies seem to be confined to the house. The goose must be in the yard somewhere. There was a trail of freshly molted feathers between the castle and the tree line. That's where I picked this up.”

He held the feather aloft like a guiding light. The years faded from his face, replaced by youthful exuberance. If she didn't know any better, she'd figure he was in perfect health. The longer he stood there looking like the Antoine she'd first met when she was an eighteen-year-old archeology student, the more her resistance dissolved.

Searching to bolster her sanity, she glanced over at Jax.

He shrugged his bare shoulders at her. “Okay, I'll go but this is it. We'll get the bird and then we're out of there.”

“As long as we can get the harp too, I'm more than willing

to agree.” The words flew out of Antoine's mouth in a rush.

“The harp is golden?” Jax asked.

“Oh yes. It's fabulous. When it plays, the notes can calm any beast, lulling them into

a state of Zen-like peace.”

Veronica rolled her eyes. This was getting ridiculous, if she didn’t love the man so much she’d never say what she was about to. “Fine, we’ll look for the harp too.”

“Wonderful. Just wonderful.” He clapped his hands. “I’m off to do some more research before it’s time for shut eye. I’ll be seeing you two at the crack of dawn.”

Antoine ambled off to his tent and Veronica tried to ignore the apprehension tugging at her.

“Are you really all the way onboard with this?” Jax’s voice was much closer than he’d been only seconds ago.

“No, but I’m going to spend the night getting my gear together for the return trip. I don’t like being caught unaware.”

He nodded. “That makes two of us.”

* * * *

An hour later she had her armaments laid out in an orderly line across her cot. Two knives with serrated blades. What looked like a leopard-print lipstick case but was actually mace strong enough to knock out a troll. A travel-sized flying carpet. A fistful of throwing stars. Finally, a charmed hand scythe that melded with her hand, giving her a magical claw to shred her enemies. She’d already packed her tool kit with a packet of fairy dust, throwing stars and a pack of spearmint gum. Her lucky scarab beetle was tucked safely into a pocket above her heart. Jax had found the golden amulet in an Egyptian tomb and given it to her early on in their relationship, telling her it symbolized the renewal of life and would bring her luck. It was a silly superstition, but it had been her constant companion for seven years and she wouldn’t

leave it behind now.

While contemplating whether to bring her Japanese Chisa Katana sword, a tapping sounded on her tent flap. She'd wrapped her hands about the handle of the two-foot-long blade before she'd even finished exhaling.

"Veronica, it's Jax. Can I come in?"

Letting the blade fall to her side, she unzipped the flap. The blood rushing in her ears dropped to locations south when she saw Jax still wore only his basketball shorts. "Don't you get cold?"

"What's wrong, darling, am I making you hot?"

At that moment she wished more than anything she had a door instead of a flap. Zipping up wouldn't carry the same umph as slamming a door in his face. But dammit, he was right. The pleasant May evening had gotten balmy. The heating and cooling system hardwired into the fabric of her leather pants must be on the fritz.

Yeah. She'd keep telling herself that one.

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“I’m kind of busy, Jax, what do you want?”

He held out a small green duffle bag. “A peace offering for messing up your meditation time this evening.”

She took it from him and a frisson danced up her arm as strong as if she’d stuck a fork in an electrical socket. God, she ached to touch him, feel those hard biceps under her fingers and wrap her legs around his hips. Unbidden, she took a step toward him. His Southern Sex God cologne wafted around her, teasing her senses. Another few minutes of this and she’d have him naked and flat on his back.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking right now, but I like it. A lot.”

Jax’s quip snapped her out of the spell. After taking three steps back, she unzipped the bag to reveal a pair of golden sandals accented with silver feathers. “They couldn’t be.”

“Yeah, Hermes’ shoes. Promise me you’ll wear them tomorrow. If we get in a jam, you can fly out of there and back to the beanstalk.”

“This is too much. I can’t. You should wear them.”

“Are you nuts?” He backpedaled out of the tent. “There is no self-respecting North Carolinian man who’d be caught dead in those ugly-ass things. I’d wear a toga and dance a jig first.”

She reached out to stop him from leaving without the shoes, but instead of catching

his hand, her fingers snagged the waistband of his shorts. The strong elastic caught her finger between the smooth fabric and his hard abs. Long-denied lust rushed through her like white water rapids. Before she could blink, her panties were wet, her nipples were hard and the part of her brain controlling logical thinking had been whacked by her id.

Jax's gaze traveled from her hand to her face and back again, burning her with its intensity. He reached down and slid her fingers free from their heavenly prison. His fingers encircled her wrist and he turned her hand palm up. He leaned down and placed a devastating kiss in the center of her hand, implanting dreams of hot, nasty sex on rainy days.

"We'll talk more tomorrow night, after we come back down. I have something to tell you, something to make amends for." He lowered her hand to her side, spun on his heel and walked away into the dark night.

Chapter 7

Jax checked his watch. Again. Exactly two and a half minutes had passed since he'd last glanced at the quartz face. The truth bubbled up inside him, threatening to burst out at any moment. No doubt Veronica was going to be a mad as a cat drenched in deep-fat-frying batter, but she deserved to know why he'd called off the wedding. Then they could move forward. Together. No more secrets. No more lies. He couldn't wait until tonight.

The six pancakes he'd gobbled down this morning at breakfast did a triple flip. Okay, maybe he was a little on edge.

"Why'd you stop? Did you see something?" Veronica asked from a few feet below him on the beanstalk.

Real smooth, dipshit. Get your head in the game before you lose it to a bunch of zombies.

“Nah, we’re almost there.” He gripped a thick vine in his right hand and continued to climb.

The hole from yesterday remained in the cloud cover. He scurried up the last few feet and stopped just shy of the entrance to the zombie playground. With his right hand, he unsnapped the button on his knife sheath. Any delay in pulling out the six-inch blade could make the difference between life and death if he found a living corpse waiting for him on the other side of the clouds.

Time for one last equipment check. While gearing up this morning, he’d had no idea what to bring to a zombie fight, so he’d brought it all. A larger blade remained in a holder tied to his back. Two small knives were snug against his ankles. Throwing stars filled a pocket in his camouflage pants. Another pocket held a flash grenade. Around his neck, he’d fastened a Celtic knot made of Adamantite, the same material Perseus had used to decapitate Medusa. He could kick himself for not wearing it yesterday when its prophetic powers could have warned him of the zombies before they were breathing down his neck.

He was as ready as he’d ever be. Time to roll.

“I’m heading in. Wait for me to give the all clear before coming up.” Jax locked his jaw and hit Veronica with his deadliest glare. “If anything goes wrong, go back down. Do not—I repeat—do not come up after me.”

She rolled her brown eyes at him.

“I mean it, Veronica.”

“I got it. We let the zombies floss their teeth with your bones. No problem.” She waved him on. “Get moving. We’re wasting daylight.”

Grinning at her typical sarcastic remark, Jax poked his head through the hole.

Feeling like a gopher sniffing the wind before scampering out of his dirt home, he pulled himself out of the hole and stood on the cloud ground. Fluffy clouds appeared as far as the eye could see until the castle wall in the far distance broke up the sea of white. He strained, listening for the zombies’ telltale giggle. Nothing but the sound of his heartbeat in his ears.

He forced himself to remain still and scan the perimeter again. Nothing moved among the tree-shaped clouds surrounding the hole or the vastness between the tree line and the castle wall. He took a breath to call out to Veronica and Antoine below, when something flashed across his peripheral vision.

Adrenaline slammed through his system, jacking up his heart rate and squeezing his lungs. His head snapped in the flash’s direction. Only that damned white everywhere. The sixth sense that had saved him from a chupacabra in West Texas buzzed through his body as if he had just put three hundred dollars’ worth of quarters in a vibrating bed. He hadn’t imagined it. Something was out there.

He grasped the knife handle on his hip and inched it out of the sheath. Even though it was a big blade, the troll blacksmith had balanced it perfectly so it had deadly aim. All he needed was a target. Slowing his breathing to a turtle’s pace, he concentrated on his surroundings. A line of bright yellow peeked out from the side of a cloud tree about fifty yards ahead, enough to alert Jax to the zombie’s presence but not enough to strike. Bingo. He could draw the slimy corpse out of his hiding spot by yelling, but if there were more, he might be endangering the others. His need for expediency warred with his protective instincts, but the outcome was never in doubt. He’d die before he let anything happen to Veronica.

So he waited. Lucky for the ulcers bubbling to life in his stomach, it didn't take long.

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The yellow spot started to move east, but nothing else appeared. It looked like a floating piece of sunny fabric. A glare? A solar spot? He'd finally lost his ever-loving mind?

He squinted, focusing on the object and blocking out all other distractions. The truth hit him like an arrow from an elf's bow. The golden speck wasn't clothing, it was a bill. Finally, a stroke of good luck.

Jax ducked down beneath the cloud cover. "You'll never guess what is right outside."

"Hungry zombies?"

"Very funny, Veronica." He didn't even try to stop his grin from spreading, almost nothing matching the zinging excitement of finding a prize on a treasure hunt. "It's the goose that lays the golden eggs."

"How do you know it's the right one? I'm not walking into a situation half-cocked again." Veronica glanced down at Antoine, who was right below her on the beanstalk. "Ideas?"

A cool breeze whipped Antoine's white hair around his round head, revealing an angry red scar near his hairline. He flattened his lips and his blue eyes took on an arctic quality as he returned Veronica's query with silence.

Jax's muscles tensed and his senses went on full alert. The Celtic knot his mother had given him when he left for college warmed against his chest. A Zayl witch, his

mother had used a spell Merlin himself had taught her to infuse it with the power to warn him of danger.

The last time the charm had reacted this way without provocation had been right as he was about to dive into a freshwater lagoon teeming with vampiric mermaids hidden just below the surface waiting for their next meal. He'd yanked back from the edge before gravity could draw him into the deep blue. His guide, Sharmel, hadn't. The mermaids had sucked Sharmel dry before Jax could even pull his Bowie knife from the sheath.

There sure as hell weren't any mermaids in cloud country, but that didn't mean there weren't dangers aplenty with zombies taking the number one, two and three top slots on the list of most likely to kill him.

Below Jax on the beanstalk, Antoine blinked. When he opened his eyes, a look of resignation replaced his icy glare. "I'd love to say I am one hundred percent certain, but as we all learned yesterday, an overabundance of caution is never a bad thing when one climbs a magic beanstalk."

He could say that twice. Though Jax was packing enough metal to knock a troll on his fat ass, he couldn't shake the idea he'd missed something important.

"I don't know. Something's off here." He adjusted his grip on the vines. "How is the goose even still alive with all the brain-dead rotting corpses wandering around?"

"Excellent point," Veronica said.

They both looked to Antoine.

"My understanding of giant history is, the goose was a much-revered animal. It never aged or had to be fed. It simply was. And from it came the golden eggs, which

financed the hopes and dreams of an entire race of giants. My theory, given their historical admiration of the goose, and the fact it produces golden eggs—shiny objects, just the type of thing the zombies are drawn to—the zombified giants leave the goose alone and go after the eggs.”

The theory had a kind of twisted logic to it, but it started Jax onto a whole new path of inquiry. “If the zombies don’t eat the goose and there aren’t any people up here, what are the zombies noshing on?”

“That is a question I cannot answer.”

“Guys, this is a fascinating conversation,” Veronica interrupted, impatience as thick as Caro syrup in her voice. “But we have a goose to catch. Let’s focus on the job at hand and get the hell out of here.”

“Point taken, Veronica. Point taken.” Antoine nodded. “Lead the way, Jax. We have a goose to catch.”

Jax poked his head out the hole in the clouds and checked the scene for anything moving that didn’t have a heartbeat. Everything looked clear, so he pulled himself the rest of the way out then helped Veronica. The moment their fingers intertwined and he got a whiff of her vanilla perfume, his body went on a whole other kind of alert. His position standing above her gave him the perfect view of her delectable breasts, framed by her leather jumpsuit’s lowered zipper. At that point, whatever blood was left in his brain took the bullet train south.

Once she stood next to him, he knew it was time to let go of her hand, but damn if his fingers didn’t have other plans, the kind that involved dragging that zipper as far down as it would go.

“Don’t drool on my boobs. It’s not polite.” By the soft velvet caress of her voice and

the frantic rise and fall of her chest, despite her words, she wasn't unaffected by him either.

Antoine tumbled forward from the beanstalk, landing in a heap at their feet. "Don't worry, even though I'm an old man, I'm sure I can manage."

The moment's allure broken, Jax and Veronica unwound their fingers and stepped apart. His fingers still tingling, Jax held out a hand to Antoine and helped him up.

"Thanks, my boy. Now where is our fat little waddling friend?"

The cotton-candy scented trees stood about sky high with trunks so big around it would take at least three men holding hands to encircle one. The bark looked just like it did in his native North Carolina, that is if someone had taken the time to whitewash it. He stroked down the length with a finger, expecting the cloud to fly away under his fingertip. Instead, it remained as hard and unyielding as the Carolina red maple shading his mama's back porch.

How in the world—

The hairs on the back of his neck spiked. He yanked his Bowie knife out and spun around in a smooth, fluid motion ready to attack but all he saw was blue skies and cloud trees.

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“Honk!” came from a few feet below him.

The goose had to weigh close to thirty pounds. It had milky white feathers and a bright yellow bill with small dark patches on the side, making it appear as if it were smiling. It attacked Jax’s frayed jeans cuff, its hard bill whacking against his ankle bone.

Jax jumped away from the snarly bird, but that only seemed to aggravate it. The bird spread its wings and used its impressive six-foot wingspan to take several whacks at Jax’s thigh. Covering the family jewels, he tried to ward off the goose’s blows.

Of course, a goose worshiped by a horde of zombies would act like a bird possessed and have a right hook that hurt worse than ramming into the coffee table at full speed.

“That’s it. You better watch out or I’ll decide to have you for Christmas dinner.”

The goose eyed him with her shifty little black eyes and honked before trying to steamroll Jax back. This time, he stood his ground, crouched at the last second and wrapped his arms around the fat bird, pinning its wings to its body. In addition to golden eggs, the goose had plenty of fight in it as well. It honked in protest, pecked him with its bill and tried to squirm free but to no avail. Jax had it and he sure as shooting wasn’t letting it wiggle away now.

“Here, let me help.” Veronica sidled close, keeping eye contact with the pissed-off beast. “Hey there, big darling, did Jax here tick you off? I know just what that’s like. Shhh, calm down now.”

Miraculously, the goose quieted.

“Now I’m going to touch your head,” she continued in a soft, sing-song rhythm. “There we go. Now, let’s just tuck that pretty beak of yours under one of your wings and I’ll make Jax promise to be nice to you.”

The goose relaxed in his arms and settled in.

“Promise her, Jax.”

“What are you talking about? I’m not talking to a stupid goose.”

The bird in question began to flail about again.

“Promise. Her.”

“Of all the—” The do-it-now look in her eyes stopped him cold. “Fine. I promise to be nice to Ms. Christmas Goose.”

The stubborn bird honked at him from underneath its downy wing.

“Now what?” Jax asked.

“Oh, you’ll have to carry her down, my boy,” Antoine replied.

The old man had to have lost it. How in the world was he supposed to climb down who knows how many miles of beanstalk with a wiggly goose in his arms?

“It’s a good thing I brought my elevator ring.” Antoine pulled the silver ring off his pinky finger. “If you’ll both just come over here.”

He pushed a button the size of a jalapeno seed on the ring's side and aimed the resulting beam of blue light at the vine. A holographic elevator hovered over the opening in the cloud ground.

“Well, come on, we shouldn't dally.” Antoine strode into the mystical elevator.

“You had this all along and yet we still climbed all the way up? Twice?” Veronica marched into the elevator behind Jax and the doors slid shut.

“Unfortunately, it only goes down and I was so distracted by the zombies yesterday, I completely forgot about using it.” Antoine pushed the G button and they floated downward.

It took only a few minutes to reach the ground by their tents inside the stone circle. However, the doors didn't open and the magic kept them inside the holographic walls.

“Oh bother. Jax, can you hit the open door button?” Antoine turned to Veronica. “There's always something that goes wrong with these Bavarian relics.”

Juggling the goose, Jax awkwardly punched the button. Just as the doors opened, the goose went into wild animal mode, thrashing in his arms until it managed to break free. It sprinted out of the elevator, madly flapping its wings, and disappeared into the woods.

Chapter 8

Veronica leapt for the goose and ended up with an armful of air and a mouthful of grass and dirt for her efforts. Jax might have the right of it. That bird just might be the tastiest Christmas dinner ever.

An hour later, she and Jax were still tracking the webbed-footed miscreant through the woods. Antoine had stayed at camp in case the goose waddled its way back there. It hadn't. Instead, the goose had stayed within eyeshot but just out of arm's reach in the woods, its tail feathers wagging back and forth.

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“I think she’s mocking us,” Veronica complained.

“That’s giving her too much credit. It’s just a goose,” Jax replied. “Look! It keeps picking up a twig, tossing it in the air and then grabbing it up off the ground again. It’s like the crazy thing wants to play fetch.”

“That’s it!”

Figuring it wasn’t the craziest thing she’d seen over the past few days, Veronica scooped up a small stick from the moss-covered ground and flung it toward the goose. The bird took off after it in a flash of white and returned a moment later, dropping the stick near her feet. It wagged its tail feathers and stared at her expectantly. When she didn’t do anything, the goose nudged the stick with its bill until it was pressed against her boot.

“You have got to be kidding me. It’s a goose that thinks it’s a yellow lab.” Jax let out a belly laugh.

“Oh no, it’s too smart for a lab. Maybe an Australian Shepherd.” She reached down and stroked its soft feathers. “Aren’t you a smart girl?”

The goose honked happily.

Jax swiped a stick and dangled it in front of the goose before sending it sailing in the other direction. The goose gave chase, returned and dropped it at his feet.

Veronica watched as the two continued to play their game. His laughter filled the

woods. His obvious joy at such a simple thing as playing fetch played havoc with her heart. The late afternoon sun highlighting the warm brown of Jax's skin reminded her of just how good it felt to curl up next to him in bed. How many times had she woken up with his arm tossed across her waist, one of his hands cupping her breast? Too many and not enough.

Jax tossed the stick again. "I spotted an onyx rabbit the other day and thought of you. Are you still collecting them?"

"Not really."

Her father had decimated her miniature rabbit collection when she had refused to give up treasure hunting. With precise movements, he'd smashed the delicate objects one by one while his bodyguards restrained her. He'd thought to control her, to bend her to his will by threatening something she held dear. It wasn't until he stood in a pool of broken glass and ceramics that he realized just how wrong he'd been. Veronica had lived her life under his thumb for too long. She wouldn't do it any longer. She'd started Kwon Limited the next day.

Jax made his way over to her. "Well, here's to hoping you give it another shot." In his palm lay a cameo the size of a half dollar on a silver chain. It had a black background polished to a high sheen with a white rabbit in profile carved in white onyx in the foreground.

"Where did you find it?"

"Pull your hair back." When she complied, he fastened the chain around her neck, never losing eye contact. "There was an estate sale in Durham."

"On the way up to see Antoine?"

“Nah, about six months back.” His fingers followed the silver chain down her neck, leaving a trail of fire. He traced the line to the cameo resting an inch above her breasts’ upper swell.

The air stilled around them. Veronica sucked in her bottom lip, betraying her sanity by wishing like hell he’d continue his path of discovery, pull her jumpsuit’s zipper all the way to her hips and peel the leather from her overheated skin.

Muttering under his breath, he dropped his hand to his side and glanced away from her, seeming to have found something fascinating hidden among the rocks, moss and dead leaves in the woods’ underbrush.

Veronica’s hair slipped loose from her fingers and cascaded down her back. Awareness prickled across her skin as the constant buzz of attraction between them grew into a cacophony of promised pleasure and something more. Grasping for something—anything—to say, she blurted out the first thing that came to mind that didn’t involve tangling their naked limbs together. “When did you start collecting?”

“I didn’t.” He raised his gaze from the ground, hitting her with the full force of those deep, brown eyes. “I got it for you.”

The last bit of resistance she could manage against him crumbled. “And if we hadn’t seen each other again?”

“Then at least I would have had it to remind me of the woman I love.” His warm hands cupped her face and he lowered his mouth.

Veronica considered turning her head a few degrees so his lips would land on her cheek. It was the smart thing to do. The sane thing. Jax had been the one person in her life she’d trusted, the one who’d never tried to manipulate her or bend her to his will. Then he’d broken her heart with the swift brutality of a unicorn skewering a

leprechaun.

But that thought lasted only a millisecond because she couldn't deny any longer that she'd never given up hope that he'd return and explain why. The truth of the matter was she'd never stopped loving him and there was nothing in the world she wanted as badly as this.

She met him halfway, and his full lips tasted like peppermint candy, cool and refreshing. The kiss wasn't delicate and sweet. Hungry and desperate for the salvation she could only find with him, she crashed her lips against his.

He groaned his approval, and glided his hands from her face, down her torso and brought them to rest on her hips. Fingers splayed wide, he grasped her ass and lifted her until she could wrap her legs around his waist.

Relishing the hardness nestled against her clit, Veronica gripped his shoulders and rocked against him as she deepened the kiss. The warmth building in her belly expanded, filling her with a kind of frantic need to touch him everywhere all at once.

Jax must have felt it too because one of his hands drifted up her back, pressed her upper body to the hardness of his. He curled his fingers around her hair and fisted a large swath, pulling her head back.

The action yanked her away from his succulent lips. At first she mourned the loss, but a heartbeat later he found that spot with his mouth where her shoulder met her neck and a sexual lightning bolt short-circuited her system. She quivered in his arms and tightened her legs around him so his cock was as close as it could be to her while they were both fully clothed. It took everything she had not to mewl her pleasure.

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He continued his hedonistic assault on her, skimming across her flesh with his lips, stopping to suck on her collarbone before continuing downward. “I’ve missed you so much. Your soft skin. The smell of vanilla trailing after you wherever you go. The way you make me sit up and take notice. I’ll never stop loving you, Veronica Kwon.”

Forget the gold coins and the magic goose. Finding Jax again was her greatest discovery. “I love you too.”

“I have to explain what happened before—”

“Let’s talk about it later.” She inched the zipper on her jumpsuit down over her teal lace bra, stopping only after her belly button came into view. “Right now, we have other matters that demand our attention.”

Jax’s already dark eyes became almost black with desire.

She snapped open a pouch attached to her tool belt and pulled out a piece of soft fabric. “Have you ever fucked on a magic carpet?”

With a flick of her wrist, she unfurled the cobalt blue material. It hovered a few feet off the ground. The goose nudged the corner with its beak, but when nothing happened, wandered over to a patch of mushrooms.

The magic carpet tickling the back of her knees, Veronica snagged his cotton t-shirt, pulled it free from the confines of his jeans and snuck her fingers inside. His abs twitched underneath her fingertips. “What are you waiting for? Let’s go for a ride.”

Whatever internal battle Jax had been fighting ended, and he kissed her like a man possessed. He pushed her jumpsuit off her shoulders until it hung loosely at her waist. His mouth found her breasts, licking and then sucking her nipples peeking out through her lace bra.

The ardent attack made her entire body vibrate with need. She shoved the jumpsuit off her hips and shimmed it down her legs, while Jax worshipped her tits like a new convert. With a hand on his shoulder, she pushed him away so she could slip her feet out of the boots and the leather. Without the height from her heels, she only came up to his clavicle.

He whipped his t-shirt off and made short work of shucking his jeans. “Damn, you look good enough to eat.”

“Is that a promise?”

He hooked his thumbs in the band of her lace panties and sank to his knees. “You know I can never get enough of your sweet taste.”

She expected him to sweep the flimsy material down her thighs. Instead, he found the tender spot right above the silk bow on the waistband with his lips. That kiss melted her bones into warm caramel. Lucky for her, the magic carpet was there to catch her fall. The ancient threads caressed her back as Jax finally slid the lace down her thighs and spread her legs.

He delivered feather-light kisses from her knees north. Then he flicked her clit with his tongue, making every nerve in her body cheer.

“So damn good.” He whispered the words against her center before weaving a spell with his tongue that made actual magic seem paltry in comparison. His hands gripped her hips, anchoring her to him as he pushed her farther, demanded more of her.

She clenched the magic carpet in her hands as pleasure twisted her body. The trembling started in the small of her back, a mini-bodyquake tensing her muscles. It built in waves, heightening th

e sensations until her orgasm arched her back and her scream filled the woods, scaring flocks of sparrows from their hiding place in the branches.

Thighs still shaking from her climax's aftershocks, she watched Jax rise to his feet. Her attention started out on his juicy mouth, but slid down, taking in his well-defined pecs, defined abs and the stiff cock jutting from between his legs. Damn, she'd missed that, and all the many ways he knew how to use it.

Jax stepped between her splayed legs and slid his hard length into her an inch at a time.

Slowly, so slowly, the bliss of being filled nearly overwhelmed her senses. "Please Jax, I need you."

"I live to please you." He pushed forward in one thrust until his pelvis rubbed against her sensitive nub.

It only took a few heartbeats for them to find their old rhythm. Pressing her feet to the magic carpet, she lifted her butt up, matching his thrusts in and out with an up and down motion. The increased contact sent waves of hot, silky tension through her clit. Again, the vibrations intensified throughout her body, tightening her muscles enveloping him.

"Oh God, yes," Jax groaned. "Babe, I'm gonna—" His body went rigid as he plunged into her one last time as his orgasm overtook him.

She continued to move against his shaking form, and a moment later, her back

snapped with a second climax.

They snuggled on the magic carpet, Veronica trying to catch her breath. Surrounded by a languid cocoon of satisfaction and the warmth of Jax's arms, she relished the bliss that had turned her body to mush. She couldn't stop smiling. A warm breeze tickled her cheeks. This was how she was meant to be. Not naked in the middle of the woods necessarily, but happy, relaxed and at peace. And Jax had wanted to talk first. What had the crazy boy been thinking?

"Thank you for agreeing to do this first." She kissed the underside of his jaw. "So what was it you wanted to tell me? What deep, dark secret have you been hiding?" She laughed at her joke.

Jax turned onto his side, propped his head up with one hand. He'd lost his contented smile. Worry lines crinkled his forehead and tension radiated from him despite his relaxed posture.

Her stomach sank. She wanted to reach out and cover his mouth. Whatever he was about to say wouldn't be good.

A vein throbbed at his temple. "I used a love spell to make you fall in love with me."

Chapter 9

Before Veronica even opened her mouth, he knew he was doomed, but like a condemned man, couldn't let go of the last thread of hope.

"Are you fucking kidding me? Tell me you're joking, Jax." She jumped off the magic carpet. "Tell me!"

As if Mother Nature needed to add her two cents to the discussion, thunder boomed loud enough to startle the goose. It waddled over to Veronica and scooted its feathered butt close to her leg.

A fat drop of rain splattered Jax's bare shoulder. "I didn't do it on purpose." He sat up and reached for her but she brushed his hand away.

She rolled her eyes. "What, you just accidentally whipped up a cauldron of double, double, toil and trouble?"

She couldn't get much closer to the truth than that, but she'd never see it that way. Wind scattered the leaves at their feet and twisted her ebony hair around her face. Lightning flashed across the sky, illuminating Veronica in her fearsome glory. Like a vengeful goddess, she didn't even flinch when thunder cracked a moment later.

"Answer me, dammit."

He'd wanted so badly to make her his that he'd lost her. Bile rose in his throat as his body rebelled against his own stupidity. "Sort of."

“What kind of answer is that?” She snorted and started to get dressed. “Then again, why should I expect any more out of someone who was willing to manipulate me with magic to make me do what he wanted.”

She stilled in the middle of pulling on her leather jumpsuit, her long hair twisting and turning around her head like an angry bird’s nest come to life. When she looked up, tears glistened, heavy in her eyes. Shoulders slumped with resignation, she slouched, half naked and emotionally vulnerable. She took in a deep breath and blinked furiously.

“You’re worse than my father. He’d berate and humiliate me in an effort to create his perfect little heiress, but he never stooped so low as to use magic to trick me.”

When Jax started to speak, she held up her hand. “Don’t bother.”

Helpless to do anything to stop her, short of sitting on her, he stood by while she finished dressing, her movements jerky. Every once in a while she’d go perfectly still with her hands curled into fists by her side. After a few deep breaths, she would loosen her hands and seemingly let go of whatever emotion had tied her up.

Seeing her like this was his worst nightmare come to life. He’d never wanted to hurt her, but it was all he’d done. A potent cocktail of guilt and remorse nearly choked him as his lungs tightened. His mother had urged him from the beginning to tell Veronica the truth, but like an idiot, he hadn’t listened. He took a deep breath and prayed it wasn’t too late. “I’d gone home to North Carolina to visit my mama after we’d recovered the Bavarian wolpertinger. You remember the craziness of tracking down that mean little horned rabbit? I’d fallen in love with you on that trip, but I couldn’t figure out how to get you to see me as more than that Jax boy with the funny accent.”

They’d spent two days tracking down the wolpertinger before cornering it in a hollow

tree stump. Little did they know, the stump was actually a fairy house. A blast of magic had blown the wolpertinger out of the stump and into Veronica's arms, the force of it knocking her on her ass. She'd lain there with twigs in her hair, laughing, but never let go of the horned rabbit. Something inside him had shifted as he'd watched dawn's light dance across her smiling face.

"My mama had been working on a love spell when I surprised her by showing up unannounced. She'd left the bat's wool, dog's tongue, fairy wing and moon dust on the counter and run up to the house to fetch us some sweet tea. When I was checking out her crafting ingredients, I accidentally slipped and knocked them into her cauldron. Now, I'm a witch's boy. I grew up next to that pot and know just enough magic to be dangerous, but not enough to help anyone a damn bit—including myself. Still, I know a love spell when I see one."

He hadn't planned to do it, but he'd been too selfish and lovesick to realize what a fatal mistake he was making.

"The water began to boil and swirl. A pink mist rose up, filling my nose with the scent of vanilla and my eyes with visions of your beautiful face. It knew what I wanted and just how desperate I was. I should have known better, but I called out your name anyway. That's all it took. I tried to take it back, but it was too late. By the time my mama returned with two big glasses of sweet tea, the die was cast. Mama told me not to worry—love spells were notorious for being weak magic and the spell wouldn't take. But when I got back to New York, it was like the world had started to spin on another axis. Within a week we were dating, a few months later we were engaged. I should have been the happiest man in the world, but the knowledge of what I'd done ate away at me. I knew I had to reverse the spell, whatever it took. What I did to you was the lowest thing one human being could do to another. I was wrong and I am so sorry."

Pain shimmered in Veronica's eyes as she zipped up her jumpsuit. "Did you reverse

it?”

“Yes.” It had taken several pints of his blood and he’d had to forfeit three years off his life, but a medicine man in Haiti had done it.

“How do I know you’re not lying?”

“Would you rather kiss me right now or kick me in the balls?” She flipped him off and his gut sank. “Yeah, well that answers that question.”

She glared at him, bringing her hands up behind her neck. A moment later the onyx rabbit cameo fell to the ground. “Tomorrow morning we’ll go up that beanstalk. We’re going to find that damn harp for Antoine and make a dying man happy one last time. Then I’m going to walk out of these woods and never set eyes

on you again.”

She snapped her fingers. The magic carpet folded itself until it was the size of a business card and flew into a pocket on her tool belt. Without another word, she pivoted and marched toward the campsite, the goose dogging her heels.

The sky let loose with a torrential rainfall, pelting Jax with icy droplets that skated across his skin. Naked, alone and shivering at the sudden temperature change, he stood in the middle of the woods that only an hour before had been filled with their laughter. He had well and truly lost the only woman he’d ever loved and it was his own damn fault.

Chapter 10

Dawn broke without a single sparrow’s song or bright yellow ray of light. Veronica stomped out of her tent, not giving a damn about the thick gray clouds that blocked

out any hint of sunshine. All she wanted was to get this last day over with. She tossed the duffel bag with Hermes' shoes in front of Jax's tent. She'd rather fall than accept any gifts from him.

One of her clients had been begging her to come to South Korea and hunt for Yongwang the Dragon King's jade shield. She'd call them as soon as they got back down the blasted beanstalk. The Eastern Seaboard couldn't get in her rearview mirror fast enough.

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So dark was her mood, she ran smack dab into Antoine near the beanstalk's base, nearly knocking the older man onto his well-padded behind.

“Well, don't you match the skies today? You aren't planning to slit my throat with that, are you?”

She had a white-knuckle grip around the Chisa Katana sword's handle. With conscious effort, she peeled one finger off at a time, then slid it into the worn leather sheath on her thigh. “Sorry. Rough night.”

“Nightmares?”

“Only when I'm awake.”

“I know all of this.” He waved his hand at the beanstalk. “It has been a bit much, but it has to be done. One last trip up.” Her mentor paused and stroked his chin. “But that's not it at all, is it? Do tell.”

Heat raced to her cheeks, while anger and humiliation mixed together in the pit of her stomach. Her body flirted with the need to puke. Admitting to what had happened—even to her mentor—seemed like an exercise in self-abuse, but if she couldn't tell Antoine, she couldn't tell anyone. And she needed to let her frustration out so it wouldn't interfere with the job ahead.

“Jax used a love spell to make me fall in love with him.”

Antoine lifted his shoulders in the Gallic way the French Canadians had about them.

“Oh, is that all.”

“Is that all?” Fire and brimstone whooshed out along with the words.

“Those spells are really a bit of snake oil, even the witches agree. They’re like a mood ring. You had one of those as a child, didn’t you?”

She shook her head.

“Strange, I thought every young girl had one. Anyway, they are cheap, little rings with stones that change color, supposedly based on your mood. It’s a fabulous con, of course. The stone is actually a hollow glass shell filled with thermotropic liquid crystals that twist in response to changes in temperature. The eye reads these different configurations as colors. A blue color, for instance, meant the wearer was feeling high passion. Really what was going on was the crystals were twisting in response to the wearer’s increasing body temperature, not because of her mood.”

In full-on professorial mode now, Antoine paced through the thick grass. “Love is not something the witches can create. Trust me, I put serious effort into researching this. Love is a magic unto itself and beyond our measly interferences. All a love spell can do is show you what you’re already feeling—much like a mood ring when it turns blue.”

He clasped his hands in front of his round belly and stared at her expectantly with his keen blue eyes.

Realization hit her like a sucker punch. “So it was real.”

“Of course it was real. It still is. That boy loves you like the Yeti loves snow. And you feel the same. You can’t hide your feelings from me. I’ve seen the way you watch him when you think no one is looking.” He patted her shoulder. “If I’ve

learned anything in my life it's that it's too damn short to deny yourself the things that make you happy and that you have to take what you want. No one is going to hand it to you. In fact, if you're not careful, they'll yank it away before you even realize what's happening."

All the fury wheezed out of her body, leaving her as deflated as a flat tire. Jax had fucked up and he'd have some mighty groveling to do to make up for it, but he hadn't turned her into some kind of emotional zombie there to do his bidding. Their time together, their love, had been real.

"Do you love him?"

She didn't even have to think about it. "Yes."

"Good. That is exactly what I needed to hear." Antoine gave her a light push toward the beanstalk. "Then start climbing. He's got a half hour head start on us."

Lucky she loved Jax, because otherwise she'd wring his neck when she caught up to him. "What was he thinking, going up alone?"

"You'll have to ask him when we get there."

They climbed through mist and fog so thick in places, Veronica could barely see the bright green vines she used to pull herself higher. By the time they'd reached the top, the precipitation had soaked her hair, the short strands at her nape stuck to her skin.

Jax waited for them a few yards away surrounded by the cloud trees. "Go back down," he whispered.

"Jax—"

He silenced her with a raised hand. "Please, go. Chop the beanstalk down when you get to the bottom." In a heartbeat he was next to her, his lips on hers delivering passion, hunger and a hint of regret. "I'll always love you. Now go."

He shoved her away, toward the beanstalk poking out of the cloud then spun around, his attention focused on the castle. Tension hardened every muscle in his back and down his arms. A Bowie knife hung loose and ready in his fist. He bounced on the balls of his feet as if an attacker were about to come flying at him.

Veronica couldn't see the danger. A breathy giggle came, from no more than fifteen feet away. Then another, this time deeper. A third giggle sounded from the other direction farther off.

Fear curdled her breakfast, but not enough to dampen her instincts. She withdrew her blade with her right hand and snagged a throwing star with her left. Scanning the perimeter for any movement, she stood in a protective stance ready to guard Antoine, who hadn't moved away from the beanstalk.

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“Oh, my dear, you don’t need to worry about my safety.” He pulled out a small object the size of a hardback book wrapped in a black cloth. In one smooth motion, Antoine drew the cloth away, revealing a small, golden harp.

Relief swept through her, easing the anxiety from her limbs. “That’s brilliant. You’re going to calm them with the music.” But where had the instrument come from? “Wait, when did you get the harp?”

The cheery face framed by a wild mane of white hair hardened. “The harp doesn’t calm them. It’s their dinner bell.”

“What?” she and Jax exclaimed at the same time.

“They’re really quite fast on dreary days like these.” Antoine plucked the strings, awakening the harp.

The song it played started out as a few random notes then quickly grew to a crescendo of chords and melodies loud enough to wake the dead. Or in this case, the undead. “I suggest you two start running. Now.”

Giggling erupted all around them and the cloud shook beneath Veronica’s feet.

Jax grabbed her hand, and they sprinted toward the beanstalk and escape. Zombies appeared from behind every white puffy tree and bush, their deranged giggles closing in on them.

A gray hand, the skin peeling away from a finger bone, curled around Veronica’s hair

and yanked her back. Only Jax's tight grip kept her on her feet.

"Let go of her." Jax let loose with a roundhouse kick and sent the zombie flying through the air.

The zombie sprang to its feet with the skill and grace of a ninja at the top of his game and lumbered toward her, licking his chops.

Before she had a chance to deflect the attack, Jax slingshotted her the last two feet to the beanstalk. A transparent dome fell down, trapping her within its magical force field walls.

The zombie roared its disapproval, spit spraying from its toothless mouth.

By now a small pack of zombies surrounded Jax. He swung his knife, slashing off their rotting flesh. His frantic movements did little except annoy the zombies, who kept coming, surrounding him. They tore at his clothes and slashed his arms.

Veronica flung a handful of throwing stars at the dome, embedding them in its thick protective barrier. They had no effect on the magic force field. She beat against the thick walls, frantic to reach him before it was too late.

A pack of ten zombies encircled Jax, their giggles making the clear, plexiglass force field walls vibrate. The dome magnified the high-pitched cackling to a near deafening-level. Involuntarily, she clapped her hands over her ears and fell to her knees, unable to move under the weight of the insidious cacophony.

Jax pulled another knife from the sheath on his back. The wicked blade, adorned with ancient Celtic swirls, gleamed even in the gathering gloom. Swinging it like an ancient Scottish claymore, he sliced off the heads of three zombies in one fluid movement. Their bodies crumpled to the cloud ground, disappearing in the white

fluff.

Taking advantage of the zombies' momentary shock, Jax pivoted and took off in the cloud trees, bolting away from the beanstalk and safety. Just as she was sure he had planned, the zombies trotted after him, the rotting flesh on their shoulders shaking with mirth.

Panic squeezed her lungs tight and blood rushed in her ears as she searched for any sign of movement. Any hint Jax was still out there fighting. She peered frantically from one clump of white to another without ever sighting his warm brown skin or black hair. The world threatened to fall in on her. He couldn't die. Dammit, she wouldn't let him.

&nbs

p; Fire burned in her belly as she turned to her former mentor, raising her sword to the perfect angle to decapitate him. "Remove the dome, Antoine. I have to help him."

Quick as a rabbit, he skittered out of reach.

He slipped a hand inside his jacket and withdrew a long-barreled silver gun and fired.

The bullet burrowed through the arm holding her sword.

"Don't worry, they won't eat him, at least not right away." Antoine skirted around the beanstalk until it stood between them. "First, they'll tie him up in the kitchen until the moon rises. Then, they'll gobble him up and clean between their rotting teeth with his bones. You were right on that point."

Pain blossomed outward from her arm. The fast-flowing stream of blood soaked her shirt and turned the white cloud below her scarlet. "Oh my God, this isn't the first

time you've done this."

"Of course not. How do you think I financed my expeditions? You know firsthand how financially risky owning a treasure hunting business can be. Luckily for me, I found Sir Cravish's journal and learned of the riches hidden away among the clouds. Every time I come up here, the couple with me has to pay the toll. The zombies don't live off air. They require brains seeped in oxytocin at levels only experienced by those who are in love. I supply them with sustenance and they return the favor with gold."

A neon blue laser light blinked on Antoine's watch. It hadn't done that before. He must be controlling the force field with the watch. If she could just get him to get within reach of her good arm, she could swipe the band off his wrist, disable the dome and go after Jax.

Antoine couldn't resist telling a story, she just had to get him talking and then she'd have him. "How could you?"

"I have to admit, with the others it was easy. The hard part was finding two people who truly loved each other. But when I found out the bank was foreclosing on my shop because the Ponzi scheme left me unable to pay the mortgage, I knew I had nothing left to lose. I've spent sixty-eight years on this earth and I deserve to spend my golden years reclining on a beautiful, sunny beach. So, I didn't have time to search for a couple in love. I had no choice, really, but to convince you and Jax to come."

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He strolled nearer, preening as he closed the distance between them.

Keep coming, old man. She just needed him a little closer. “And the story of one last adventure for a dying man?”

“Oh it’s definitely my last grand exploration in the cloud country, but I have many years—if not decades—ahead of me to enjoy the fruits. I’ve spent my life groveling for the mystical scraps, ignored by the academic journals and the large treasure hunting companies. I deserve this.”

“You bastard.”

Just outside her reach, he stopped and narrowed those icy blue eyes at her. “Come back to me when the world has taken away your love and your livelihood and then see if you can label me as the bastard.”

Veronica gathered the last bits of her strength and leaped at him.

Antoine sidestepped her attack and fired the gun at point blank range.

The impact sent her flying backward, and oblivion blackened her vision.

Chapter 11

A wet splash hit Veronica right between the eyes. Gasping for breath, she whipped up into a sitting position, agony exploding in her chest. Her hand went to the pain’s epicenter in front of her heart. She pulled her scarab beetle from the pocket. It clasped

a small lead ball that hadn't been there before in its golden arms.

Another huge drop of rain hit her shoulder, and she realized the force field dome had disappeared and so had Antoine. The beanstalk's tip shook. Crawling closer to investigate, she spotted him making his way slowly down the vines. The temptation to grab the stalk with both hands and shake until he went flying into oblivion hit her like a Mack truck, but she had more important things to do.

After giving the lucky bug a quick peck, she slid it back home. Her breastbone throbbed, but she was breathing. Now to find Jax and make sure he stayed alive too.

She grabbed a pinch of pixie dust from a pocket on her tool belt and sprinkled it on the hole in her upper arm. It burned like a bitch and smelled like she'd just fallen into a vat of sulphur, but it did the job. By the time she'd risen to her feet and plucked her sword off the ground, the wound had vanished. Only the dime-sized hole in her jumpsuit remained as a reminder of Antoine's betrayal.

A zombie giggle blasted through the silence, and she charged toward the sound. If there were zombies, she'd bet her last Pegasus feather there'd be Jax. Bounding through the cloud trees, she dodged mammoth raindrops and ducked below low-lying branches.

She found him on the other side of a particularly massive cloud tree. Relief rushed through her like a tornado in Kansas, sweeping away the fear and panic.

Then she noticed the blood. Not a lot, but a steady flow from his left arm, which dangled at an awkward angle at his side.

His back was to her as he faced off against the hungry mob getting ready to rush him.

The zombies lifted their faces to the dripping sky, noses twitching in response to the

metallic scent of fresh blood. There had to be fifty of them, all starving for their long-denied meal, judging by the way their fat tongues rolled from their open mouths.

A short one in front giggled, the sound transforming into a low, ugly cackle.

Terror jabbed her heart, spreading in waves across her skin and immobilizing her.

The skies really opened up then. As the rain pelted the zombies, their limbs expanded. Their torsos elongated and widened with breathtaking speed. The short one now stood sixteen feet tall. His glassy eyes locked on Jax, and the zombie smiled, revealing pointed teeth as sharp as talons—perfect to sheer flesh from bone and crack skulls open with one bite.

The horror snapped Veronica out of her daze, and she dashed the last ten yards to Jax. She'd die beside him before she'd leave him to face down a hungry mob of giant-sized zombies.

They stood back to back, knives and swords drawn. Her breath came in short bursts as her heaving lungs tried to replenish the oxygen she'd lost on the sprint here.

“What are you doing?” He hissed over his shoulder.

“Saving your ass.”

“Get down that beanstalk, I don't need your help.”

She scoped out the gathering horde encircling them. “Sure you don't.”

“You're a real pain in my butt.”

“Yeah, I love you too.” She swiped one of the three throwing stars she had left out of

her tool belt. “Now, let’s do this.”

She flung one of the razor-sharp weapon at a zombie leading the charge on her side. It whizzed through the air, connecting near his jugular. The metal ripped through the sinew and bone in his neck. His head bobbed for a second then rolled down his body, landing with a thump on the cloud ground.

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The carnage transfixed the zombies as they stared down at their fallen brother. Then, a roar went up in the back and the entire legion barreled toward them.

Everything from that point on became a blur of metal clanging against bone and the pin-point teeth gnashing together.

Veronica sank her sword through the eye of one zombie as it bent to take a bite from her shoulder. As she exhaled, she pulled the blade free, swung it around and connected with the midsection of another. Putrid organs and intestines spilled out of the gash. She was holding her own against the massive beasts, but for every one she dispatched, another two joined the throng.

“We have to start moving toward the beanstalk!” she hollered.

“You lead, I’ll follow.”

“On my count.” She fired off another throwing star, and three of the five blades embedded themselves in a zombie’s forehead.

“One.” Hot, decaying breath exploded against her neck, and she gripped the sword with both hands and aimed for the target next to her.

“Two.” The blade slide home between the zombie’s ribs. She followed the move with a side kick to the corpse’s crotch.

r /> “Three.” She pulled the blade free and hustled toward a pocket of empty space in the zombie’s defense perimeter, Jax hot on her heels—and a moment later, the

zombies.

She sped around trees, taking advantage of her and Jax's smaller size to make last-second course corrections. It befuddled the giant zombies, who in some cases plowed right into the trunks of the trees she and Jax dove behind.

"I can see it." Jax grabbed her hand and they ran toward the beanstalk's green tip sticking a foot up out of the white ground.

The zombies thundered behind them, cutting the distance with their long, firm strides.

A couple more steps and they'd be there.

Her muscles ached from exertion, her chest throbbed from Antoine's gunshot and Jax's injured arm was bleeding like a son of a bitch, but that little bit of green freedom was within their grasp. Digging deep, she let loose with one more blast of energy and sprinted forward.

She shimmied down first, barely grasping the tough vines, instead choosing speed over safety.

Jax dropped through the cloud, holding on with only one hand because of his bum arm. His boot slipped off the wet beanstalk and his feet went flying into the blue abyss.

Veronica's heart almost jumped out of her chest after him. "Jax!" On autopilot, she shot out a hand, grabbed the back of his t-shirt and hauled him back.

He secured his boots on the thickest vines. "Thanks."

Before she could respond, a zombie's ravenous face poked through the cloud above

them. A long, wet line of saliva hung from his bottom lip, and he snapped his pointed teeth.

Not waiting around to see if the zombie wanted to chat or eat, she and Jax high-tailed it down. They'd made it another few feet, when the beanstalk started to sway violently.

"What the hell is going on?" Jax hollered.

Holding onto the beanstalk with all her might, Veronica turned her gaze to the ground. Her former mentor stood at the beanstalk's base, hacksaw in hand, viciously sawing away at the beanstalk. "Antoine is cutting it down."

"Can't he see us on here?"

"Oh, he sees us all right. The whole expedition was a trap. We were supposed to be zombie munchies so he could get the gold."

Jax's mouth dropped open. Even with all the craziness over the past few days, he must have not seen that coming. Neither had she. "You're kidding."

Veronica shrugged. "Take a look at his hacksaw and tell me if you still think I'm joking."

"Fuck, we've got more problems on this end too."

Veronica glanced up and her stomach bounced against her toes. Dozens of zombies clung to the upper stretch of green. The beanstalk gyrated under the one-two punch of Antoine's hacksaw and the zombies' bulk.

Her gut twitched. "This thing is going down."

“I’d rather take my chances here than to see if I can sprout wings.”

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“What if you’re flying on a magic carpet?” She unsnapped a pocket, and the carpet unfolded itself in midair, close enough, she leapt onto it. Scooting over as far as she could, she held out her hand to Jax, who scrambled aboard.

From their vantage point above it all, Veronica watched in silence as the drama unfolded, but she slid her hand across the soft blue threads and wound her fingers in Jax’s. His warmth anchored her to a world where not all men were like her father or her mentor, who constantly plotted to take what they wanted, no matter the cost to others.

The beanstalk’s shadow covered Antoine like death’s dark blanket. He abandoned his hacksaw and took off running.

The old man took only two steps before the beanstalk he’d been working so hard to cut down broke under the weight of the hundred or so giant zombies climbing down. Unable to hold onto the unstable beanstalk, they slipped off the vines. Their large bodies tumbled through miles of sky before landing with whumps that shook the leaves off the trees. Even their hearty bones couldn’t take the impact, and they died with a bang and a giggle.

Antoine scurried on the ground as the beanstalk toppled over, crushing him under its unbearable weight.

As the magic carpet floated down to the campsite’s long grass, Veronica searched for some sense of loss for the man who’d shown her the wonders of the world and stoked her passion for discovery. She came up empty. That man, if he had ever existed, had left the world a long time ago.

As soon as the magic carpet was close enough to the ground, she jumped to the grass. A single honk served as her only warning before the goose rammed into her legs, flapping its wings.

Veronica hunkered down beside the flustered bird and petted its soft feathers. “It’s okay, Christmas. It’s all over now.”

The wet earth stank of decomposing bodies and greed. It was a sickly combination. For the first time since she’d ended up on the business end of Antoine’s gun, the reality of the deception hit her. How many people had he sacrificed in this twisted little plot of his? The more she tried to hold in the angry tears, the more her shoulders shook.

Jax’s hard chest pressed against her back. He didn’t say a word, just wrapped his good arm around her waist and held her as she cried.

She wiped her wet cheeks with the back of her hand and sniffled a few more times. “Thank you.”

“Hey, if a one-armed man can’t help the woman he loves, what good is he?”

“Oh my God, your arm.” Embarrassment infused her cheeks with heat. “Let me see it.”

She reached into her pocket, brought out a handful of pixie dust and scattered it over the shredded remains of Jax’s shoulder. The dust worked its magic, reconnecting the torn tendons and popping his shoulder back into place. Just as she was patting the newly healed skin, a cotton candy-scented breeze drifted through camp and the hair at her nape sizzled to life.

“Jax—”

The earth shook under their feet, throwing them this way and that.

Christmas honked and waddled into the woods faster than any bird should be able to.

“What’s going on?”

Jax grabbed her hand and pulled her close. “Nothing good.”

The beanstalk’s vines unwound, gathering speed until the force created a gale in their small campsite. Three individual thick vines thrashed around, slapping against the ground and flattening anything in their path.

“Come on.” She and Jax sprinted out of the stone circle, into the woods and hid behind the trunk of a stout tree.

A gust of wind whipped through the camp, sending their tents flying through the air. She and Jax huddled together, his arms around her and his body blocking her from the debris sailing by.

The commotion ended as suddenly and unexpectedly as it began. Veronica peeked around the redwood. The zombie bodies were gone. Antoine’s remains had disappeared. All that remained of the beanstalk were three, small brown beans lying in the middle of a flat circle of grass.

“Is it over?” Her frantic, ragged breathing shredded her lungs. Each inhalation painful, but necessary. She’d made it this far and would be damned if she’d die from holding her breath.

“Not yet.” Jax picked up the beans and rolled them around in his wide palm. One at a time, he deposited each one in a separate pocket. “I have to scatter these so they can’t ever be put together again. Not all the zombies were on that beanstalk. There’s more

of them waiting up there. God help us, if they ever manage to get down.” He cupped her chin, raising her face. “I’ll be back for you.”

His lips hovered an inch from hers, stealing the last residual fear from her and replacing it with a sexual heat that teased her nipples as surely as if he’d touched her. Awareness plucked at all her sweet spots, and her breath caught.

Desperate to hold onto her sanity, she rallied against her body’s mutinous reaction. “I’m still mad at you.”

The corner of his mouth curled. “I’m sure you are.” His hands moved to her waist, and he traced an infinity symbol on the upper swell of her ass with a firm touch.

“It’s going to take a while before I’ll stop being pissed.” Need dampened her panties, and she gave in, raising to her tiptoes and rubbing against the hard bulge in his jeans.

He groaned against her cheek. “Just know I’ll be there whenever you’re ready. I love you Veronica Kwon.”

Finally, he covered her lips with his and the rest of the world ceased to exist.

Chapter 12

Veronica's fingers flew across the touch-screen keyboard on her phone as she navigated the hallways at Kwon Limited, flicking through the list of emails in her inbox. Her assistant, Sharon, had lined up the charter plane for the trip to South Korea next week, meaning the only thing she had left to do was pack and finish some last-minute research. Treasure hunters had been searching for Yongwang the Dragon King's shield for hundreds of years. She was determined to be the one to find it.

Strong arms locked around her waist, pulling her in close before she could fall. His Southern Sex God cologne gave Jax away before she even raised her gaze to take in the mountain of hotness who had been sexting her nearly every hour on the hour for the past three weeks.

Dressed in his uniform of tight jeans and ab-hugging t-shirt, he looked even better in person than in her late-night imaginings.

"We really have to stop meeting like this." His warm honey voice caressed her skin, warming her inside and out.

She traced a finger across his rock-hard abs, wishing like hell he was naked and in her bed. "If you'd like, we can do this again in half an hour at my place. I've been shopping."

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh really. Anything I'd like?"

“I don’t know, what are your thoughts about black leather and gold lace?”

“Babe, there’s not enough blood in my brain right now to form any thought besides I can’t wait half an hour.”

Her phone vibrated and Sharon’s number flashed on the screen. Damn, she had to take this. Sometimes being the boss sucked. “Hi, Sharon, is everything okay? Good. Look, something...came up. Can you cancel my afternoon appointments? Oh, and can you pick Chri

stmas up from the vet? Thanks, you’re the best.” She turned off her phone and shoved it into the very bottom of her handbag. “Come on, I have something I want to show you.”

He kissed the base of her neck, melting her spine. “That sounds promising.”

“You have no idea.” She slid a card into the elevator keypad. The doors whooshed open and she pulled Jax inside by the tail of his blue t-shirt. The man looked too good and it had been too long to wait. She whipped the cotton garment over his head.

“Aren’t you worried someone on the next floor will see the boss getting frisky in the elevator?”

“This is my private elevator and it only stops at my apartment on the top floor.” She popped the button on his jeans. “I can’t wait to show you all the goodies I found.”

With his strong hands, he dipped underneath her skirt, hiked it up to her waist. “Babe, I already found everything this man could ever want.”