



Jimmy

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Category: Romance, Adult, Paranormal

Description: I call on the fates to bring my love to me. As I will it, so mote it be...

What if those simple words plus a name on a scroll could guarantee true love? Karey's determined to find out if the spell, Summon a Bad Boy, works, and she knows just who she's going to ask for. Jimmy McCreadie. The tattooed man makes her weak in the knees — he's every naughty desire she's had come to life. She's nothing like the women he dates, and far too shy for her own good, but she's not giving up.

Mix a bad boy with some magic and have faith. Anything's possible. Karey's desire just might come true.

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Chapter One

“I’m tired of being single.” Karey folded her arms. She’d met with her friends at the same cafe every Thursday evening for the last year, and every time they complained about their collective troubles with men. None of the five had a boyfriend, and not for a lack of trying.

Karey couldn’t help her crippling shyness. The moment a handsome man started talking to her, she clammed up. Part of her brain understood the man was simply talking to her, but the rest of her couldn’t understand how a good-looking guy would want to be seen with her.

She’d been told she was mousy and boring her entire life. If she’d get her nose out of her books and understood how to use makeup, she’d be better looking. Makeup confounded her, and she’d never been good at using hair styling tools. A simple ponytail worked for her.

“Well, what do we do?” Natalie asked. “We’ve tried the clubs.”

“Bust,” Mandy said. “So were the bars.”

“Double bust,” Nikki added. “I want a bad boy, but not one that will do me harm. Those guys looked scary -- not in a good way.”

“Agreed.” Sarah thumped her spoon on the table. “And I have a suggestion.”

Karey sat up straighter and paid more attention. Instead of their normal grumbling,

someone had a plan? Good. “What is it?”

Karey admired her friends. Nikki was the sexy one. She could walk into any establishment and have men falling at her feet. They seemed to love her tall, slender appearance and deep brown eyes. Then there was Mandy. She embodied sweet-natured and cute. At just over five feet tall, Mandy was the sprite of the group. She laughed easily and smiled a lot. Natalie could be moody, but she knew how to play nearly any sport -- and usually better than her male counterparts. Karey loved cheering her on at the local baseball games. Sarah was the born leader and the pushiest of the five. Her intelligence could be a hindrance or an asset, depending on how she used it. Most people saw her as pushy, but she could organize and plan like no other.

Karey sometimes wondered how she fit in with these fantastic women. She was smart, but not hyper intelligent. She loved books and observing but tended not to talk much.

“The plan?” Natalie checked her watch. “I’m late for a game.”

“Tonight, we meet at my place. I’ve found a spell that guarantees we’ll find our perfect man within the next seven days.” Sarah smiled and narrowed her eyes in triumph. “All we have to do is write down exactly what we want on a scroll, say the words of the spell, and toss the scroll into the fire. What do you think?”

“It’s guaranteed to work?” Karey didn’t believe it.

“Really?” Mandy toyed with her water glass. “You’ve had can’t-miss plans before that were duds.”

“I know, but this one is really guaranteed.” Sarah nodded. “If you’re in, be at my house at nine. I’ll have the scrolls ready.”

“You’re sure this works?” Karey asked again. “You don’t seem to have all the details.”

“Hey, where I found it says it’s foolproof.” Sarah shrugged and toyed with her scroll. “I might not have all the details, but it’s just a spell. For all we know, it won’t work. Do we really need every last piece of minutia? No.”

“Right.” Karey sighed. What did she have to lose? She lived alone, didn’t go out much, and only met people at the store. If a spell could work, then why not give it a try? If nothing else, she’d have an adventure.

Right?

* * *

At nine that night, Karey stood on the back porch at Sarah’s home. Sarah was the type of woman who always managed to have things go her way, except in romance. She’d found the perfect little house on a quiet street, paid below market value for the house, had a posh job as a secretary for an advertising agency and never had a hair out of place. Karey guessed she must spend a small fortune at the salon.

Karey liked her simple cable-knit sweaters and jeans. She liked to be warm and comfortable -- except today. She rubbed her arms to stave off the chill. September in Ohio didn’t tend to be this cold, but they’d had a front come through, and the temperatures had dipped to the lower fifties. Great for cuddling under a blanket, if she had someone to cuddle with.

If the spell worked, then she might have that someone sooner than she thought.

“So.” Sarah passed out the scrolls and pens. “We’re all here. This is what we’re going to do -- you write down exactly what you want in a man. If you’re not sure exactly

what you want, then the attributes you want. If there's a specific person in mind, then put his name down. Once you've written on the scroll, roll it up, then say, 'I call on the fates to bring my love to me. As I will it, so mote it be.' Toss the scroll into the fire, and that's it."

Nikki shrugged. Mandy fiddled with her scroll, and Natalie tapped hers on her fingers.

Sarah snorted. "Well? Who's going to do it?"

Karey unrolled hers, then scrawled the name of the man she'd lusted after for the last six weeks. He'd never talk to her, and she was so out of his league, but what would it hurt? Maybe they'd become friends. If the spell worked, she'd have a chance to talk to him, and if it didn't, then he'd never know, and she could return to watching him from afar. She wound the scroll up. "I say, 'I call on the fates to bring my love to me. As I will it, so mote it be'?"

"Yes." Sarah nodded to the fire. "Do it."

Karey summoned her courage. "I call on the fates to bring my love to me. As I will it, so mote it be." She held the scroll for one more moment, then tossed the curled-up paper onto the fire. Wait seven days. Sure.

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“One down!” Sarah whipped her arm in the air. “Who’s next?”

Karey massaged her forehead. She’d done it. She’d summoned a man -- maybe. Seven days to a man in her life. The thought both excited and scared her. What if she lusted after him, but he wasn’t interested in her? Then she’d wasted her time.

She sank onto the steps and stared at the fire. The yellow-orange flames licked the air, and sparks shot up when one of the logs moved. The sparks almost reminded her of magic. She closed her eyes.

Could love and romance truly be controlled by magic?

She had no idea.

* * *

Friday morning, Karey walked from her apartment on Second Avenue to her job at the Last Exit Bookstore downtown. She wasn’t a good enough barista to work in the coffee-shop portion of the store and prided herself on her ability to weed through the books to find just the right one for the interested shopper.

On the way to the store, she passed by Tattoo You. The ornate art on the windows, showing the various tattoos one could have done at the store, fascinated her. She’d never been good at art but loved to appreciate the work. The man who ran the store, Jimmy, fascinated her the most.

She’d always been drawn to tall, dark, and handsome men. She loved the way he

styled his hair in a pompadour, like he'd stepped out of the 1950s, and how his usual black shirt seemed tailor-made for him. She longed to explore the sleeves of tattoos covering his arms and see where else he had ink. Every so often, he'd catch her watching him and would smile. The warmth in his pale blue eyes sent shivers to her core. She even liked the heavy chain he had on his belt. For his wallet? She wasn't sure, but it added to his allure and gave him an air of danger.

She held onto her bag as he arranged his tattooing equipment. She sighed. How could one man look so dangerous and sexy, but approachable?

Jimmy glanced over his shoulder and smiled.

She froze. He'd seen her again. Shit. He had to think she was a creeper. God knew she was too chicken to go in and have him tattoo or pierce her. Needles made her faint.

A leggy blonde woman wearing a crop top perched on the tattoo chair and lifted her shirt out of the way, exposing her ribs. The smile on Jimmy's face told Karey everything she needed to know -- he had a thing for blondes. Maybe just skinny girls. Maybe anyone but her.

Damn her low self-esteem.

While the woman arranged herself on the chair, Jimmy stood and ventured over to the window. Karey wanted to say something, but her knees wobbled, and she gave in to the urge to flee. He might talk to her, but he'd never be interested in something more than a chat.

She ducked her head and hurried down the street to the bookstore. She swore she felt a connection to Jimmy, but she'd seen him around town with various beautiful blonde women. She wasn't tall, blonde, or beautiful.

She was just Karey.

She darted through the staff entrance of the store and wished she hadn't written Jimmy's name and description on her damn scroll. She had no chance in hell with a sexy man like him. None.

What in the hell had she been thinking?

* * *

Jimmy McCreadie pulled a pair of latex gloves from the box and chuckled. He'd seen the pretty brunette watching him from the sidewalk nearly every day. If he could trust the rumors, her name was Karey.

She intrigued him because she wasn't anything like his usual type. He tended to gravitate to leggy blondes, but something about the petite, curvy brunette called to him. She seemed so shy, and he wanted to meet her.

Kurt, his best friend and co-owner of Tattoo You, joined him in the front room. "I'm ready."

"I thought Jimmy was inking me," Brandy said. She stuck her bottom lip out and frowned. "Are you as good as Jimmy?"

Kurt snorted. "I'm better."

Jimmy rolled his eyes, then offered Kurt the gloves. He and Kurt had a good-natured rivalry concerning tattooing. Kurt was more imaginative, but Jimmy swore he had more artistic talent. As for the tattoo Brandy wanted, Kurt would be the best choice. "You want a phrase on your ribs. He's better at delicate tattoos like that one. I'm just here to assist."

“See?” Kurt sat on the stool. “Let’s rough this in.”

Brandy sighed and hiked up her shirt, showing her lack of undergarments. “Next time, then?”

“Next time,” Jimmy replied. He spotted a customer at the counter. “I’ll be right back.”

Forty-five minutes later, he’d blocked in time for the tiger tattoo and Kurt had finished the tattoo for Brandy. She smiled and tipped both men, including her phone number with the bills, then left.

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“She does know we have her phone number from the booking?” Kurt said. “And I won’t call her because she’s a client?”

“She knows.” Jimmy closed the appointment book. “She doesn’t care.”

“I can tell.” Kurt tipped his head. “You look happy. What’s going on?” Where Jimmy loved to evoke the feel of the fifties, Kurt had the punk look going for him. He’d spiked his dark hair, and piercings glittered in his eyebrow. He wore eyeliner and thick leather bands on his wrists.

Jimmy hated the idea of anything on his wrists aside from a watch. “I could be on the verge of meeting someone.”

Kurt frowned. “Wait. On the verge? Huh?”

“That woman who walks by the store every afternoon around two. Do you know her?” Jimmy asked.

“Yeah, that’s Karey. She works over at Last Exit. She’s quiet.” Kurt sat on the stool behind the counter. “Why? Does she want a tattoo? I tell you, it’s always the quiet ones.”

“No. She hasn’t come into the shop.” Jimmy leaned on the doorframe. “She’s never spoken to me.”

“Oh.” Kurt’s scowl deepened. “Are you going to talk to her? You might scare her.”

“Why?”

“To some, you look dangerous.” Kurt shrugged. “Oh, well. Go talk to her. She might be wild once she opens up.”

“Might be.” He couldn’t help but be drawn to her. Something about her called to him, and he wanted to get to know her better. “I think I’ll stop down there.”

“You should.” Kurt smiled. “I think she’d like it.”

Couldn’t hurt to find out. “I’ll be back in an hour.” He left without another word and strolled down to the bookstore. Once he stepped into the shop, he spotted her at one of the bookshelves with a customer.

Karey pointed to a red book and fluttered her free hand. “If you love the classics, then try Dickens. It’s heavy reading, but worth it.”

The buyer, a woman who appeared to be in her fifties, took the book and left.

Karey might be shy -- at least she seemed shy to him -- but she was more self-assured around the books. She seemed to know enough about Dickens. He’d never read Dickens or much else for that matter. His dyslexia made reading a pain and drawing was easier, but he did enjoy a good Poe short story.

He hesitated by the magazine rack. If he approached her, would she be interested? Or would she see him as a freak? She might only be staring at him from the sidewalk because he scared her.

Shit. He’d better go before he made a fool of himself.

As he rounded the corner, he collided with a stack of books, knocking every volume

onto the floor. “Fuck,” he muttered. “Damn fool.” He had knelt to pick up the mess when he spotted Karey coming toward him.

“Let me help you.” She picked up a few of the books. “I keep telling them this display is dangerous.” As she stood, she locked gazes with him. “You.”

“Me?” He tucked the books under his arm.

“You’re him.” She blushed, and her eyes widened.

Shit. This usually turned into him being escorted out for potentially causing trouble or being accused of theft. “I wasn’t looking where I was going. I’m sorry. I’ll go.”

“No.” She put the novels on a nearby table. “You’re the man from the tattoo shop.”

“Tattoo You? That’s me.”

Her blush deepened. “You’re quite the artist. I admire your work.”

“You do?” Did that sound dumb? “Thank you.”

She hesitated. “Would you like some coffee? I’m lousy at brewing, but I can pour it for you. On the house?”

“I’ll gladly pay for it. I’m the one who caused the trouble by knocking over those books, but yes, I’d love a cup.” He followed her over to the coffee counter. “Thank you.”

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“Here.” She pulled two mugs from the rack. “Have a seat.”

He settled at the counter where she’d directed him and waited. His hands shook. The last woman to invite him to have coffee with her was Jackie, his ex-wife. He’d dated a few times since the divorce, but only one-night-stand kinds of dates. Nothing of substance. But with Karey, he felt a connection, even stronger than the one he’d felt when she looked at him through the window of his store. When she smiled, a piece of his heart melted.

“Here.” She placed two mugs on the table. “My name is Karey. I didn’t know if you’d want cream or sugar. I can get them if you’d like.”

“Black is fine.” Karey. He liked the way her name sounded. “I’m Jimmy.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Jimmy. Talking to you in person is much better than me staring at you through the window. I probably looked like a creeper.” She blushed. “I like your work and watch you because I’m fascinated. I’m terrible at art and admire anyone who can draw.”

“When did you stop trying?” he asked, then sipped the coffee. “This is good, by the way.”

“Huh? Thanks.”

“Art is about ability, but it’s also about practice. If you don’t practice, you won’t improve,” he said. “My art professor used to say that. If we’re told at a young age that we can’t draw, it’s ingrained in us. Doesn’t mean we can’t draw -- it means someone

said we couldn't."

"Would you believe it was my junior high art teacher who said I should find something else to do besides art? I should study more reading and science and less art. I had no talent for it."

"I've never seen your work, but I'd be willing to bet he or she was wrong." He continued to drink his coffee. "Thank you for this. How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing." She smiled. "Sharing your company is payment enough."

"Don't you get enough attention?" That sounded strange. "I mean, don't you have someone to chat with?"

"Not for a while." She wrapped her hands around her cup. "Guys tend to steer clear of me. I'm not pretty like my friend Nikki. She's probably more your type."

"You know my type?" He had one, but the more time he spent with Karey, the more he wanted to rethink that type.

"I'd assume tall, blonde, and thin. Guys like tall, skinny blonde women." She sighed. "I'm not getting any taller, and I'll never be slender. My brother got the slender genes."

"What if I told you I'm attracted to you and would like to take you out for drinks?" he asked. "Not just coffee."

She stared at him. "Me?"

"You." He held his hand out to her. "I'd like to take you to dinner. How about after you get off work?"

“At nine?” She placed her palm on his, but it seemed like she’d take her hand away at any second.

“Sure.”

“Aren’t you doing tattoos?”

“Not that late. It’s Kurt’s turn to work the second shift.” He caressed her palm with his middle finger. “Would you go to dinner with me?”

She stared at him for a long moment. Her blush intensified, and her eyes widened. “I...” She clasped his hand in hers. “Yes.”

“Perfect. Should I pick you up? I can meet you here when you’re done,” he said. “Do you like motorcycles?”

She wobbled in her chair. “Yes.”

“I’ll take that as a blanket yes.” He winked. “We’ll have a good time.”

“We will.” She pushed an errant lock of hair from her eyes. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Karey?” A man strode up to the table. “I thought you were doing inventory.” He glared at Jimmy. “Who are you?”

“I’m Jimmy McCreadie. I own Tattoo You and thought I’d come down here to visit a block neighbor.” He held up his coffee mug. “And try out the coffee.”

The man crooked his eyebrow. “I see.” He nodded to Karey. “Get back to work. You’re not here to fraternize.”

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Karey let go of Jimmy's hand. "Sorry. I should go. See you at nine?"

"It's a date." He finished his coffee. "Thank you." As she left, he turned to the irritated man, whom he guessed to be her superior. "She's an asset to your store. If not for her, I wouldn't have come in."

"Right." The man rolled his eyes. "Just go."

What a pleasant guy. Jimmy placed his mug in the bus tub over the garbage bin, then tucked a five-dollar tip in the jar. He couldn't wait to see Karey tonight. Something about her called to him. He wanted to see her smile, feel her in his arms and taste her kiss. He'd never been this head over heels so fast for someone, and he liked the way it felt.

He had a date.

Hot damn.

Chapter Two

Karey could've floated. A date. With Jimmy. It didn't seem possible. She finished her inventory work and added the figures to the computer. Jimmy didn't seem put off by her awkwardness. He'd asked her out to dinner, too. The idea seemed so strange.

"Are you done?" Brett joined her at the computer. "All the numbers are in?"

"Yes." She saved the file. "All added."

“Good.” He kept up with her as she left the counter. “You know I don’t mind bohemian types in the store, but are you sure that guy’s safe? He’s tattooed. You know I don’t trust people covered in tattoos.”

“He owns his own business. I can only assume he’s an upstanding guy.” She shrugged. “Why do you care?”

“He seemed a little too rough around the edges.”

“So?” Jimmy wasn’t hurting anything.

“Isn’t he a little rough for you?”

She stopped next to the romance section. “So?”

“Karey, you should reconsider your friends.” Brett shook his head. “He’s not your sort.”

Oh, for the love of God. Brett had taken her out three times a year ago and swore he knew her. He had no clue.

“You should date someone more your age and speed,” he said. “Not that guy.”

She’d had enough. “For your information, he’s a nice guy. Instead of going on his looks, take him for his behavior. He’d been upstanding, so he’s just fine by me.”

“Karey.”

“Why do you care?”

“About you? Because if he hangs around the store, he might bring his friends. If his

friends look like him, we'll get a reputation." Brett shook his head again. "We don't want that sort of reputation."

"Because we'll lose business?"

"Yes."

"Right." She'd do as she pleased. She didn't own the store and wasn't the face of it. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Good." Brett smiled. "Would you like to go to dinner?"

"Tonight?"

"Yes."

"Sorry. I've got a date." She took off her apron. "Good evening." She left him at the computer and headed to the break room. She stopped at her locker and collected her belongings.

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Brett rushed after her. "With whom?"

"Not your business." She checked that she had her phone and keys in her purse, then pulled her sweater from her locker.

"No? I feel responsible."

She snorted. "You do, huh? Because I went out with you those times?" She rolled her eyes. "We went to a party for the store and a couple meetings for the store. Nothing big. Not real dates."

"Karey." He folded his arms. "Oh, come on. It was a fun time. They all were."

"They were fun when I walked away from you." She closed her locker. "I need to go." She still had to clock out.

"Who is it?" He trailed right on her heels as she punched her timecard. Why hadn't they moved to electronic methods to do this? For all she knew, Brett liked the old-fashioned machine and was too sentimental to change it. "Tell me."

"No." She put her card in the holder. "I'm not your responsibility. You're free to chase someone else."

"Karey."

"Good evening, Brett." She strolled through the shop to the front door. She should've told Jimmy where to meet her -- not in front of the shop. She headed north on Clay

Street like she was headed home.

The roar of a motorcycle caught her attention. She glanced over her shoulder.

Jimmy rode up on a shiny, chrome-emblazoned motorcycle. “Hi.” He parked beside her and cut the engine, then took off his helmet. “Why are you halfway down the street?”

“Why don’t we go, and I’ll explain when we get where we’re going?” She wanted to be out of Brett’s sight.

“Sure.” He offered her a helmet. “Safety.”

He continued to amaze her. He looked rough but acted tender. He rode a motorcycle, but was concerned with her safety, not how she looked on the bike. She accepted the helmet and put it on.

“Let me help.” He adjusted the protective gear on her head, then offered his hand. “Climb on and put your arms around me. I won’t bite.”

She laughed. “What if I want you to?”

He held her gaze and grinned. “You’re full of surprises.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t assume things.” She couldn’t assume anything about him.

“You’re right.”

She climbed into the bike and settled behind him. She wrapped her arms around his waist. The scent of his cologne curled around her, and she liked holding him. She’d never ridden a motorcycle but sitting with him felt right.

“Ready?” He engaged the engine and donned his own helmet, then zoomed off.

She gasped and held on tight. The wind rushed through her sweater and chilled her face. She pressed her cheek through the helmet to his back.

Instead of asking her where she wanted to go, he sped through town to the freeway. There were funky bars downtown, but diner-style restaurants over at the edge of town.

He pulled into the parking lot of one of the carhop diners. “Will this work?”

“Sure.” She was cold enough to need another jacket, but not so cold that she wanted to be anywhere else. “Thank you.”

“I wanted to take you somewhere nice, but this is good and open late.” He cut the engine.

Should she leave the bike? The last time she’d eaten here, she’d been in a car. She let go of him, but stayed on the motorcycle.

He threw his leg over the seat to stand beside the bike. “What would you like?”

Her stomach rumbled. Until now, she hadn’t realized she was hungry.

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“I recommend the burgers.”

“Should I get off?” She wasn’t sure where to go or what to do.

“Stay there. You’re a natural on the bike.” He flashed a brilliant smile. “What’ll you have?”

“A burger, fries, and tea. Thank you.” She took the helmet off since she didn’t need to wear it when the vehicle was stopped. Her hair slid in front of her eyes.

“Mind if I put in the order?” He tapped a button to call the carhop.

“Go ahead.” She tried to finger-comb her hair back into place. Did she look okay?

He gave the young man on roller skates the order, then focused on her. “So…”

“So.” She held onto the helmet. “I’m glad you asked me to dinner. I’m starving.”

“I am, too.” He leaned on the post next to the bike and crossed his ankles. “How long have you worked at Last Exit?”

“Two years. It’s steady and pays the bills. Honestly, I started there because I needed a job when my scholarships ran out, and I realized I liked working with books. It’s not enough to pay for college, but I can live on what I make.” She knew she sounded sad, but not that much so. Jesus.

“What did you study?” he asked. “At Northern?”

“I started out at a community college when I was seventeen, but I had to do that part-time, and it wasn’t enough to get all the credits I needed.” She picked at the foam on the helmet. “If I hadn’t earned the scholarships, I wasn’t going to be able to go to college. I tried to make it work with what I make at Last Exit, but it’s not enough. I’ll have to keep saving up.”

“Good for you for trying.” He crossed his ankles the other way. “Do you like Brighton?”

“I do. The library services program at Northern is top-notch, and I jumped at the chance to be here.” She wasn’t about to tell him her mother had run off and she’d lost her roots at home in Lorain.

“So... no degree, then?”

“No. It’s either study and have a piece of paper saying I’m qualified to be a librarian’s assistant or eat.” She chuckled. “As you can see, I like food.”

“You look fine.” He stood tall as the carhop returned with their food. “Thank you.” He offered her one of the burgers and fries.

She ate in silence, not sure what to say. The last date she’d been on had been with Brett and had been a disaster.

Jimmy wasn’t a disaster.

She summoned her courage. “What got you into tattooing?”

“My uncle had a shop,” he said. “He normalized having ink, then I liked how they looked, and I liked art.” He finished his fries. “I can draw, so tattooing seemed natural.”

“You’re good.”

“Would you believe I wanted to be an art teacher?” he asked. “Crazy, right?”

“I don’t know how you are at teaching others, but based on your talent, I can see it.” She sipped her tea. “Why didn’t you get your degree? Or did you?”

“I stopped two years in.”

She scooted back in her seat. “Want to sit?”

“In a little while. I’ve been busy tattooing and haven’t stretched much. Feels good to stand. Plus, the tray works right here on the stand.”

“Okay.” She ate her burger. “I’ll share my seat if you want.”

“I’m sure you will,” he said. “To answer your question, I stopped because I’m not a book learner and because I was in an accident. I lost too much time recuperating and decided I’d rather do art than learn about it. I apprenticed with my uncle, met Kurt, and we decided to branch out. We settled here and twelve years later, we’re still here.”

“Nice.”

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“How did we not run into each other before now?” he asked. “We’ve been in the same town for three years -- three, right?”

“Two.” She smiled. “I tend to melt into the background. Guys see my friends, not me.”

“Then they’re looking in the wrong places.” He finished his burger. “Want to go to the Riverwalk?”

“I’d love to.” The Riverwalk was public, well-lit, and populated. She sipped more of her tea. “What do I owe you for this?”

“My treat.” He tossed his empty cup into the waste can. “I asked you out, and I’m happy to pay.”

“Thank you.” She left the bike. “Here. Now you can get back on.” Plus now she could watch him move. God, the man was so graceful and pretty.

“Thank you.” He gave the carhop a tip, then turned his attention to Karey. “Shall we go to the Riverwalk?”

“Sure.”

He climbed onto the bike, then gestured to her.

She settled behind him on the bike and held on tight. She had this evening to enjoy herself with the man of her dreams.

Why not enjoy it to the fullest?

* * *

Jimmy sped away from the diner and headed back into town. Brighton featured a great Riverwalk area and beautiful vistas along the river. Truth be told, he had the best view behind him on the bike.

Karey might think she blended into the background, but she demanded his full attention.

He liked her adventurous streak and the way she held him. She might think she was bland, but she sent the blood coursing through his veins. He wanted to kiss her. To unwrap her and explore her body, while learning all her secrets. He could get lost staring into her eyes.

He thundered through town to the Riverwalk area. People were already out and the area seemed to hum with activity. He parked and made sure to pocket his keys.

Karey climbed off the bike first. "You drive fast." She took off the helmet. "Wow."

"Exciting, isn't it? The bike is a drug." He clicked the helmet onto the bar behind the saddle. "I love just going for rides. It clears my mind."

"I bet."

He offered his arm. "Walk with me?"

"Sure." She threaded her arm around his. "I love coming down here, but I feel strange doing it alone."

“It’s nice to stroll with someone.” He walked with her to the fencing. “I enjoy coming here, too.”

“Do you often?”

“No. I tend to be at the shop more often than I should.” He liked to hide there. Staying isolated meant he didn’t have to deal with the messiness of his life.

“I don’t come here much, either. Being single makes it tough.” She shivered.

“Cold?” Silly question. It was getting chilly out, and they’d just been on the bike. “Here.” He removed his jacket and draped it around her shoulders.

“Thanks.” She cuddled in the jacket. “Toasty.”

She had his temperature hiked up. Right now he wanted to peacock and show everyone he’d found a great girl.

“Don’t let me have all the warm.” She snuggled up to him. “There. I can share.”

He enveloped her in his arms. Holding her felt so right. He breathed in the scent of her and enjoyed the softness of her hair on his cheek.

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“This is so romantic.” She leaned into him.

“It is.” He’d never expected to have such a wonderful night this way.

His back pocket vibrated as he received an incoming call. He didn’t tend to leave his phone in his pocket or ignore calls, but he’d rather be with her right now.

“Karey?” A tall, dark-haired woman strolled up to them. “I thought you were working.”

Karey turned in his arms. “Hi, Nikki. I finished at nine. How are you?”

“Good.” Nikki swept her gaze over Jimmy.

He knew Nikki -- not by name, but by her flat belly, where her tattoo was located, because he’d tattooed her. “Hi.”

“Oh.” Karey laughed and fumbled. “Gosh. I’m sorry. Nikki, this is Jimmy. Jimmy, this is my friend, Nikki.”

“You’re on a date? Or do you know each other from college? He’s a professor or something? Or did you decide to get a sugar daddy?” Nikki asked. “You can’t be the guy who tattooed me. He wouldn’t be here with Karey... but you are.”

Sugar daddy? He didn’t think he was that much older than Karey. He also didn’t like Nikki’s condescending tone. “A date, and yes, I’m the one who inked you,” Jimmy said. “What brings you out?” He liked Karey’s nervous laugh. It was cute.

“Oh.” Nikki nodded once. “This is the guy whose name you threw into the fire. I mean, I know who you are, but I’m shocked you’re out with Karey.”

Huh? He should question Karey about that later.

“Something like that,” Karey said. “Are you out with someone?”

“No. I’m meeting my friend, Denise. She wanted to get a tattoo, and we were headed to your shop, Jimmy.” Nikki rocked on her heels, making the clunky soles of the high-heeled boots thump on the walkway. “I guess she’ll have to settle for Kurt.”

“She will.” Jimmy had loved being here until now. Nikki was ruining the moment.

“Well, you should go. Denise has chickened out a hundred times,” Karey said. “When she gets it, I’ll consider getting one, too.”

She would? She didn’t strike Jimmy as the ink enthusiast type.

“You won’t. Needles make you faint.” Nikki snorted. “So, yeah... no.”

Poor Karey. He rubbed her back. If she wanted a tattoo, he’d be the one to do it. But only on her terms.

“I see Denise, so I should go.” Nikki waved. “Good to see you both.”

Jimmy dipped his head but said nothing. He hadn’t done anything wrong, but he felt guilty. He wanted to give Karey a perfect date because he wanted another one with her.

Karey relaxed when Nikki left. “Sorry.”

“Why?” He held her tight.

“She was being nosy.”

“It happens.”

“I guess.” Karey sighed. “I’d like to go.”

“Sure. Not having fun?” He let go, then offered his hand. “I’ll take you home.”

When they reached the bike, she stopped. “I had fun.”

“We’re not at your place yet, you don’t have to give me the kiss-off.” That sounded terrible. “I mean...”

“Tonight isn’t over yet?” She smiled and squeezed his hand. “I know.”

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“But?” Now would be the time she’d tell him he was too dirty looking, too rough for her.

“No buts. I’m enjoying myself. Nikki made things difficult, but that’s life.”

He sat her on the saddle of his bike. “What’s wrong?”

She tucked tight into his coat and tensed. “I need to tell you something.”

“You’re married? Skeeved out by my ink?” He toyed with the grip on the handlebar. “Changed your mind?”

Her eyes widened. “Whoa. No.” She frowned. “I’m not married. No one seems to want me enough to marry me, and I’m not skeeved out. I like your ink. It’s beautiful, and I’m enjoying myself with you.”

That helped. “Then what’s wrong?”

“I should explain what Nikki meant by the fire.” She tensed again. “Long story short, our friend Sarah decided we should all have boyfriends, so we all participated in a spell. I have no idea if the spell is real, but I participated. I wrote a name on my scroll and tossed the scroll into the fire.”

“To get rid of them?” He didn’t understand but was fascinated.

“To be my beloved.” She blushed. “My friends would tell you I’m shy. I don’t talk much, and I’m a little fearful.”

“Of me?”

“No.” She shivered.

He embraced her. “Tell me. What’s wrong?”

“I wrote your name on the scroll.” She met his gaze. “I wrote your name on it because I wanted to be with you.”

“You did? Why didn’t you just ask me?” That explained the unwavering drive he had to meet her, but not the attraction. The connection was organic.

“Yes, but I’m shy, and I thought you’d turn me down.” She wrestled with the sleeves and covered her face with the cuffs. “I’m sorry.”

“Wait.” He held onto her hands through the fabric of the coat. “So you wrote my name on the scroll and tossed it into the fire so I’d be your beloved?”

“Yes. I like you.”

“So you asked for me?” He liked the sound of that.

“Yes.”

He met her gaze. “Karey?”

“You fascinate me and you’re sexy... and so not like anyone I’d date, but you’d never see me. I’m sorry I wrangled you in this way because I shouldn’t have used a spell to get you to notice me, but I did.”

He cupped her jaw in his hands, forcing her to look at him. “I already saw you.” He

caressed her cheek with the pad of his thumb.

“You did?”

“You stop in front of my shop every day. I look forward to seeing you,” he confessed.
“I never said anything or approached you because people tend to be afraid of me.”

“Why?”

“My ink?” Among other reasons.

“Oh.” She freed her hand from the sleeve and held onto his wrist. “I didn’t want to tell you I’d used a spell -- even if it was a lark -- because I thought you’d decide I’m lame.”

“No.” Sometimes a push was what he needed to make a move. “I’m honored.”

She stared at him.

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“I’m attracted to you.” He lowered his head until he was a whisper away from her.
“May I kiss you?”

“Yes.” She met him for the kiss and whimpered.

He loved a hot kiss with a woman who melted into him. He slid his arms around her. He’d kissed other women, but never used his bike as a romantic prop. Sexy.

He broke the kiss and rested his forehead against hers. “Perfect.”

“Yeah,” she whispered.

“May I see you again?” he asked.

“Yes.” She kissed him again.

He groaned and delighted in her taste. She pleased him. She made him consider trying again to have a lover in his life.

She broke the kiss and panted. “Whoa.”

“Like that?”

“Yes,” she said. “I should have you take me home so we can slow down, but I want to stay right here.”

They weren’t going too fast for him, and he didn’t want the night to end, either.

“How about another date tomorrow? When are you able to leave the shop?”

“I won’t be done until nine-thirty. I’m second shift again,” she said. “I’d like to see you, though.”

“I’m the night shift at the shop, too.”

“Until when?”

“Midnight. People love to get inked after dark.” He shrugged. “It pays the bills.” Given the chance, he’d rather have more regular hours, but they did better business after five in the afternoon.

“Are you scheduled all night?”

“I’m booked until ten.”

“Could I bring pizza? Subs?” she asked.

“Sure.” He’d love to see her. “I don’t keep hours on Sunday.”

“We do, but I’m not scheduled.” She smiled. “How about a Sunday date?”

“Sure.” He’d do pretty much whatever she wanted. “We could watch a movie.”

“Or football?”

“You like football?”

“I do. I’m a sucker for the underdog.”

“I love it.” He laughed with sheer delight. He hadn’t said he loved anything in so long, but with her, it was easy. “Let me take you home.”

“I hope you do. It’s eight blocks to my apartment and not much of it is well-lit.” She snuggled into him. “And I’m cold.”

“Then let’s go.” He released her and joined her on the bike. “Helmet on?”

“It is.” She collided with him and clocked him in the back with the front of the helmet. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He’d rather be bonked with the helmet than have to worry about her getting hurt. “Where to?”

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“The Stepney Apartments. Building A.” She threaded her arms around him. “Ready?”

He’d seen the Stepney and wasn’t a fan. He didn’t see much security and knew about the drug activity on the premises. He wouldn’t be bringing his bike there for long. He rode to the complex and pulled in front of her building. “I believe this is yours.”

“It is.” She left the bike, then took the helmet off. “I’d invite you in, but you’ll get your bike stolen. It’s not the best neighborhood.”

He’d rescue her from this. He had to. “I’ll just make sure you get into the building, then.”

“I appreciate it.” She hesitated. “Mind if I stop in on my way to work tomorrow?”

“At the shop?”

She nodded.

“I hope you do.” He grasped her hand. “I had a good time.”

“Me, too.”

“I will see you tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

He kissed her. “Have a wonderful night.”

“Dreaming of you? Tonight?”

“I’ll be replaying it in my mind.”

She shrugged out of the coat and smiled. “Then I will.” She lingered another moment. “See you tomorrow.”

He kissed her, then let go.” Until tomorrow.”

She left him under the awning and headed into the building. She waved from the other side of the glass in the foyer, then left.

He waited until she was out-of-sight before driving off. He didn’t like her living at the Stepney, but he couldn’t condemn her for having a place. His house wasn’t huge, but he kept it clean and maintained.

He rode home and parked his bike in the garage. He hadn’t been looking to start over with anyone, but Karey gave him hope.

She could truly be the one. She was his opposite in many ways, but he didn’t care. He enjoyed her company. He wanted more of her time, too. Lots more.

The sweet, bookish woman entranced him.

Tomorrow, he’d see her, and he’d get to know her more because she’d become his new drug. He’d already become addicted to her.

Hell, yes.

Chapter Three

Karey went to bed, but her thoughts never shifted far from Jimmy. He'd been so sweet to her. He was the first man to offer his coat. The first one to ask her on a date where she didn't have to pay.

She'd never been on a motorcycle or worn a helmet except on a regular bicycle. Changing up her life enlivened her..

She loved how he held her, too. In his arms, she felt cherished.

She fell asleep and dreamed about the date. When she woke in the morning, her phone buzzed.

She checked the device and shielded her eyes from the harsh glare. A text from Sarah.

Heard you went on a date. Spell guy?

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She should answer her friend but would rather ignore it right now. Sarah was a dear friend, even if she was pushy, but it was too early in the morning. Wasn't it? Sarah probably wanted data to prove the spell worked.

She checked the time on her phone. Ten in the morning. Shit. It wasn't so early after all.

Karey typed a reply. Yes, I did.

She could've given details, but why? Nikki probably called or texted Sarah right after seeing Karey and told her everything. This time, the phone rang. Sarah. Karey couldn't ignore the call. "Hi," Karey said. "You're actually calling."

"I am. You're sleeping rather late," Sarah said. "I hear you went on a date with a guy I didn't know we both knew."

"It's possible."

"Karey." Sarah groaned. "Did you go out with Jimmy McCreadie? Nikki saw you."

"She did, because I did." She scrubbed her hand across her face. "So?"

"Was he the guy on your scroll?"

She'd told him the truth, not that Jimmy probably believed her. Why not tell Sarah, too? "Yes."

“He was? You asked for him? Wow.” Sarah snickered. “So it worked? I really didn’t think it would.”

“Maybe. We saw each other and started talking. We’d seen each other before, so it might not have been on account of the spell.”

“Ah, but you connected after the scroll ceremony.”

“I guess so.” She should get up and get dressed. Should shower at some point along the way, too. “Did anyone else have success?”

“Not yet.”

“Maybe it’s a fluke,” Karey said.

“No, it worked,” Sarah said. “I’m quite pleased.”

“Then good. I’m glad to make you happy.” She sat up. “I should get ready for work.”

“Are you seeing him again?”

“Yes.”

“You are?”

“Why is that so shocking?”

“Wow,” Sarah said. “Where to start. First, you tend to date safe guys, and he doesn’t look safe. By safe, I mean the guys who are so dull it’s not even funny. You date dorky guys. Second, you’re as nerdy as they come. He’s not nerdy or safe. He’s a rebel. Do you have a tattoo?”

“No.” What did that have to do with anything?

“See? He’s covered -- or did you check?”

“I checked, and how do you know?”

Sarah snorted. “I’ll bet you did. What? Did you see him like I did, out mowing his yard with his shirt off?”

“Something like that.” She’d seen him in a sleeveless shirt when he’d been at work back in August. The late summer heat made him even sexier. But Sarah had seen him shirtless, and the idea that she’d seen something Karey hadn’t made Karey just a little bit jealous. She wanted to see him shirtless, too.

“Have you had sex with him?” Sarah asked. “You do know he was married?”

“I did know.” No, she hadn’t, but she hated looking ignorant.

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“As long as you know he has baggage. He’s forty, as well. He’s not young.”

“We all have baggage, and what does his age have to do with things?” Jesus. Sarah wanted to cause a fight.

“Just wanted you to know,” Sarah said. “What time do you work tonight?”

“I’m a one to nine-thirty. I’m not closing, but we don’t have enough people, so I’ll be held over.” She hated closing, but she had little choice. If there wasn’t anyone there, then she had to step in. The other workers had classes or homework. Her jealousy increased. They could finish their degrees while she was stuck. Damn.

“I’ll see you later. I need to replenish my book reserves.”

Sarah could be so smart, then make no sense. On one hand, she liked to make light of Karey being bookish, but on the other, Sarah loved to read. “Then I’ll see you later.”

“You will. Bye.”

“Bye.” She hung up and tossed the phone onto the bed. She loved Sarah, but she swore the whole spell-and-scroll thing was a lark. Magic might be nice, but it wasn’t real.

She left the bed and headed into the bathroom. She showered, brushed her teeth and braided her hair to keep it off her face at work. She dressed in a comfortable sweater and jeans, then packed her lunch. She should eat before going to work, but she’d rather see Jimmy.

She put on a little makeup, then checked her appearance in the mirror. She wouldn't win any beauty contests, but she did okay.

She packed her bag with her lunch, phone, keys, cords, and wallet, then put on her shoes and socks. She grabbed her jacket from the hook before locking up and heading out.

Karey kept her pace brisk as she left the apartment complex. One of these days, she'd move out of this place and have somewhere nice to live. One of these days...

"Hey, sexy mama." One of the dealers waved to her. "Give me love."

She ignored him and kept walking. Times like this made her wish she had her car. Damn Ron for wrecking her car and not paying for the damages. She should've known Ron would be bad news.

Karey hurried up the block to the shopping district and blended into the midday crowd. The more she blended, the better her chance to hide from the dealers. She'd never done drugs and never engaged with the dealers, but that didn't stop them from approaching her.

She marched up to Tattoo You and opened the door. The other guy, a man she'd met once named Kurt, stood at the counter. "Hi." She closed the door. "You must be Kurt."

"I must be Kurt." He half-smiled. "You're the girl who watches Jimmy. We met once. I don't know if you remember. It was with friends. I know Sarah."

"Ah. I sort of remember."

"You didn't talk much." He grinned. "Are you here to get inked? Or to see Jimmy?"

“To see him. I’m not ready to get a tattoo,” she said. “Is he in yet?”

“He’s with a client, but he’ll be right out.” Kurt’s smile widened. “Did you go out with him last night?”

“I did.”

“Damn. I knew he had a thing for you. I’m glad he made a move.”

“He had a thing for me?” She tried to mask her shock. She’d assumed Jimmy had gone out with her initially to placate her, but there had been a connection. “I stared at him, and I was awkward.”

“Maybe, but you’re different and approachable,” Kurt said. “I’m glad. He needed something good in his life. He’s been grumpy lately, which allows him to do great art, but makes him a bear to live with.”

“I see.” She splayed her hands on the counter. “Do you live with him?”

“No, but working together for all these years feels like it,” Kurt said and laughed. “Want to see some of his art?”

“Yes.” She’d love to.

“Here.” He stood, then opened the swinging doors leading back to the counter. “I’ve always wanted a set of saloon doors and when I saw these, I had to have them. Jimmy thinks it’s silly, but he let me do it.”

“It’s whimsical.” She hesitated, then joined him at the counter.

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Kurt opened a book filled with plastic pages containing drawings. “I’ll tell you a secret. He draws when he’s down. Does some of his best work when he’s upset. We have great tattoo art because of that. I hate that he’s been upset, but I love the work.” He turned the pages.

She admired the images, so many skulls, daggers, roses, and horror characters. The images were a tad gruesome, but beautiful, too. She touched the plastic on a drawing of a skull with a rose and Gothic writing. “Is he into books or plays? This looks very Hamlet to me.”

“I’ve never seen him read. Why?”

“It’s pretty and reminds me of a play.”

“He did that one for a guy who had a friend in the movie industry, so it could be inspired by a play.” Kurt shrugged. “Do you like them?”

“The works? I do. I don’t want to be inked with them, but they’re beautiful.” She touched an image of the name Christine surrounded by roses.

“You don’t want to look at that.” Kurt changed the page.

“Why?” She wanted to go back to the pretty roses.

Kurt sighed. “It was done for his wife, Christine.”

“Oh, did she like roses?” The image was a sweet gesture.

“Her middle name was Rose.”

“Ah. It’s a pretty design.”

“It is. Done with love, too, but she ripped his heart out, and he hates looking at it.” Kurt closed the book. “Look natural.” He whistled as Jimmy rounded the corner.

“Shut up. You’re guilty -- of what, I don’t know,” Jimmy said. “Karey.” He stopped short. “Hi.”

“He showed me your art. It’s wonderful.” She left the stool. “How are you?”

His eyes blazed, and she wasn’t sure if he was upset with her or Kurt... or just upset in general.

“Why did you get that book out?” Jimmy asked. “Jesus.”

“It was on top.” Kurt left his stool. “I need to prep for an appointment. Bye.” He ducked around the corner and disappeared.

Karey wanted to melt into the floor. She didn’t think she’d done anything wrong, but she wasn’t sure what to do. Instead of speaking, she kept her mouth shut.

“So you saw my art.” Jimmy leaned on the counter. “You like it?”

“I do.” She clasped her hands together.

“Do you?”

“I said I did.” How else should she answer? “I should go.”

“Why?” He stood, but his shoulders sagged. “Karey.”

“What? You’re uncomfortable with me being here, so I’ll go.” She left the counter.
“See you around.”

“No. Wait.” He stopped her at the door. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Being a dick.” He grasped her hand. “I’m touchy about my ex and my past. When I saw Kurt showing you that book of tattoos, I knew he’d shown you the one I did for Christine. It made me prickly because I wanted to hide and erase that you’d found out.”

She exhaled. “Why? Because you have a past? So? I do.”

“I wasn’t enough for my ex, and I got scared that I’d never be enough for anyone else.” He rubbed her hand. “I like you and I want to keep seeing you -- despite my being a thickheaded doofus.”

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She stared at him and debated what to say. “You’re a nice guy. You’re broken in some places, but not in others. Your past doesn’t bother me, and I like you, too, but it’s too soon to tell if we’ll let each other down. We had one date.”

“We did.”

“It’s not enough to decide if we’re going to fall apart.” She cupped his cheek. “We went out once and met up today. Is that enough to decide that you want to be with me?”

“Yes.”

She sucked in a ragged breath. “You want me?”

“I do.”

He had to be kidding. No one else took her this seriously.

“When I went out with you last night, I felt whole.” He rested his forehead against hers. “I want another date. I want to see you tonight and every other night. I want to try, to see you laugh and hold you when you cry. I don’t want to be the reason you’re upset.”

He said some very powerful things, but she understood why he had to be careful. She had to be, too. She didn’t know him well, but she wanted to be with him. “Let’s try that second date tonight. We can take the time we need to be with each other and experience what this will be like.”

“I like that.” He kissed her. “I’m not easy to love, but I hope you’ll give me a chance.”

“Of course.” She lingered a moment. “Want me to stop by when I get off work?”

“I’d love that,” he said. “But I’ll come get you or will have Kurt get you. I don’t like the idea of you walking here at midnight.”

“Truth be told, it’s not my idea of fun, but it should be closer to ten when I arrive.” She hated the walk home at ten in the evening and the danger of being alone in the dark. “But it’s only a couple blocks from Last Exit to here.”

“I know.”

She rubbed his hand. “But I’ll take a ride, so I appreciate it. I should go. I’ll be late, and Brett can be a jerk when we’re late.”

“Men.” He smiled. “Okay. See you at ten?”

“Ten.” She lingered another moment. “See you.”

“See you.”

She kissed him, then left the shop. Part of her wanted to question him about getting upset. Maybe he was having a bad day and seeing the reminder of his past hurt more. Maybe he had a protective streak a mile wide. What did she know?

His upset didn’t bother her, but it made her wonder what had left him so insecure.

She strode down the block to the bookstore and pushed aside her concerns about Jimmy’s reaction. She had to get to work.

* * **

Jimmy watched her leave and inwardly chided himself for letting his emotions get the better of him. She hadn't done anything wrong and had complimented him on his work.

"Are you okay?" Kurt asked. "You seem rattled."

He rolled his eyes, then faced Kurt. "You really just asked that?"

"Yes." Kurt settled on the stool. "I messed up, didn't I?"

"Uh, yeah." He hated being irritated with Kurt, but the guy could be clueless.

"In my defense, I wanted her to see your brilliance," Kurt said. "But I also wanted her to see that you aren't perfect. There will be problems. She's come into this sort of wide-eyed, but also innocent. How old is she?"

He gritted his teeth. Despite his attempts to regain control, Kurt frustrated him all over again. "She's legal, I know that." He wasn't totally sure and should find out, but he hadn't fucked her. "But it's not your place to tell her about my past. I should be doing that, and we've had exactly one date. I haven't had a chance to say I've got a messy past because my wife cheated on me and left for another guy."

Kurt paused. "Wow. You never talk about her."

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“No shit. It’s a shitty past. Why would I want to?” He hated admitting his mother abandoned him when he was eight years old, that his father beat the fuck out of him when he failed to make the football team and only lettered in track -- the sport his father considered sissy -- or that he’d run away from home the day after he graduated because he believed he deserved to be loved and wouldn’t find it at home. He’d run off to college, which he couldn’t afford and didn’t enjoy, only to come home to learn tattooing.

“Because she needs to know what she’s getting when she gets you.” Kurt folded his arms. “So Christine was a jerk and dumped you? So what? She’s busy climbing those ladders and what are you doing? You’re inking the tri-state area, making a name for yourself, and you’re happy. You’re a businessman. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I guess.” He thought he got into Christine’s way. She’d been honest about not wanting to settle down, but he’d been foolish enough to think he’d be the one for her. She needed to be the center of attention. She needed to have everyone love her, and when they didn’t, she freaked out. One person would never be enough for her. The whole debacle made him think he wasn’t good enough to be loved.

“But you’re with Karey, right?” Kurt asked. “You’re happy -- for now -- right?”

“Yeah.” He’d jumped in with both feet and wanted to be exclusive already. After one date. Why? He’d seen the good in her and wanted it to rub off on him. He needed that positivity.

He hadn’t slept with her yet, and he wasn’t sure she’d want to, but he craved her.

Kurt rounded the counter. "I'm sorry. I thought I was helping, and if she saw some of your rough edges and didn't freak, then she'd be good for you. If she saw the edges and ran away, then you'd know to give her space."

Kurt could be a pain in his ass, but he had a point.

"She liked your work and found it hauntingly beautiful -- her words." Kurt clapped him on the shoulder. "Give her a chance, like I know you want to do, but don't go crazy. Don't quit on her or you yet, either."

"I won't." He'd back off a little, too.

"We have a piercing coming in at two, and you have that monster tattoo to finish today." Kurt fiddled with the sign. "Ready?"

"I am." Work was therapy. The buzz of the machine and the conversation with the client relaxed him. He loved creating art. He could lose himself in his creativity.

Besides, work gave him something to think about besides Karey.

He'd come on too strong and would have to work to fix the situation if he didn't slow down a bit.

Good thing he liked his work. He had to prepare for the tattoo session.

Time to be creative.

* * *

At half-past nine, Jimmy prepared to leave the shop to pick up Karey. Coming on too strong or not, he didn't like the idea of her walking in the dark alone.

“I’ll be right back,” he said. “Should be about twenty minutes.”

“You have an appointment at ten-thirty,” Kurt replied.

“I know.” He’d rearranged his schedule to give himself a break long enough to leave. Instead of taking the bike, he opted to walk and hustled down the block to the bookstore. Ten minutes later, he entered Last Exit. Although he looked for her, he didn’t see Karey.

Brett stood at the register and glared. “Hello.”

“Hi.” He dipped his head. “Is Karey off the clock?”

“At ten,” Brett said, the words clipped. “Why?”

“I’m giving her a ride home.” He shoved his hands into his pockets.

Brett crooked his eyebrow. “You should make a purchase. You can’t come in here just to pick up chicks.”

Chicks? He frowned. Brett wanted to push the issue because he didn’t like Jimmy. Fine. Jimmy would make a purchase. He picked up a copy of Poe’s short stories. “I’ll take this.”

“I see.” Brett rang up the purchase. “That’ll be nine dollars and twenty-seven cents.”

Jimmy placed a ten on the counter. “Keep the change.”

Brett snorted.

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Karey emerged from the left half of the store and walked up to Jimmy.

“Thank you.” Brett cleared his throat and dropped the paperback book into a bag.
“Sir.”

“Thanks.” Jimmy had make a point to buy books every time he visited the store. He turned his attention to Karey. “Ready?”

“I am.” She held onto her purse. “Good night, Brett.”

Brett grunted but said nothing otherwise.

Jimmy waved, then walked outside with Karey.

“I don’t know what that’s all about, but I’m sorry.” She shivered. “It wasn’t this cold this morning.”

“It’s almost ten in the evening.” He threaded his arm around her. “Better?”

“Much.” She snuggled into him. “He’s been extra grumpy since you showed up.”

“He’s afraid of me.”

“That’s silly.”

“It’s true. People see me and decide I’m scary because I’m tall and inked. I wear black so I must be dangerous.” He rubbed her shoulder. “I’ve dealt with it for years.”

“They’re wrong. You’re a teddy bear.” She rested her head against his shoulder.

“You bring out my tender side.” He kissed the top of her head. He wanted to protect her.

“Do you have appointments tonight?”

“I do, but I have an idea what you can do while I’m working.” He opened the door for her. “Would you like to help Kurt handle the desk?”

“Sure. What do I need to do?”

“Kurt will take the lead, but people will drop in for a tattoo. You have them look through the book to decide what they want, because most of them don’t know what they want -- if they drop in, it’s not a planned tattoo. If they’re determined to have something in particular, they make an appointment. Anyway, the longer they look through the book, one of two things happen. Either they’re encouraged and go through with the tattoo or they chicken out.”

“Sounds about right.” She nodded. “Okay.”

“If they’re still interested, Kurt will have them fill out the form. If they want a piercing, that’s a little different. They’ll go through with that pretty much no matter what. I don’t do much piercing, but Kurt does.”

“Sure.”

“Thank you,” he said. He’d wanted to hire a receptionist but needed the right person.

She tucked her hands into his front pockets. “It’s nice to be needed and appreciated.”

“Plus you have a cute ass.” He embraced her and squeezed her rump.

“You’ve got a nice ass, too.” Her eyes flashed. “Looks good in those jeans.”

God, he couldn’t wait for the night to be over so he could take her home. He wanted to taste her everywhere.

Kurt joined them at the counter. “Your appointment is in ten minutes. You’d better get ready.”

“They’re not here yet, are they?” He hadn’t seen the woman in his chair.

“No,” Kurt said. “Hi, Karey.”

“Hi.” She let go. “I’ll be fine.”

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“I know you will.” Jimmy kissed her. “I need to prep.”

“She’s in good hands,” Kurt said. “Promise.”

“You know where I’ll be,” Jimmy said. He winked, then headed into his tattoo studio to wash up.

As he prepped for the tattoo, his thoughts never strayed far from Karey. He’d fallen for her. He’d never been in this deep this fast. She consumed his thoughts, and he craved her kiss. He’d been crazy over women before, but this was so fast his head swam... and he’d promised himself he’d go slow.

Did it have to do with the spell? Was he enchanted?

Could be.

Did it matter? Part of him believed it did. What if he’d seen her without the spell involved? Would he still have noticed her? He guessed so. She grabbed his attention, and he didn’t want her to let go.

Honestly, he liked the speed. He liked being with someone. Having someone to protect and care for suited him.

He’d found someone who seemed to accept him, despite his flaws, and he wanted Karey in his life for a long time -- spell or not.

Was that asking too much?

Chapter Four

Jimmy finished the tattoo session and escorted the client to the front desk. Karey sat with Kurt and seemed absorbed in their conversation. Jimmy wanted to listen in but didn't. He handled the payment for the session and scheduled the final one before the client left.

"Do you have other spots pierced?" Karey asked.

"Nips and sac," Kurt replied. "But you can't see those."

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "Christ. You can show her your chest. Maybe not your sac, but your chest isn't off-limits, dickhead."

Kurt grinned. "Ah, my smart ass is back." He sat up straighter. "So is my eleven o'clock."

Jimmy switched spots with Kurt and joined Karey at the counter as the leggy woman in skinny jeans and a sequined blouse sashayed past them.

Karey averted her gaze. "She's beautiful."

"She is, and Kurt has a huge crush on her. He gives her a cut rate on her tattoos because she shows them off at conventions. It's good promotion, but she'll never date him."

"They'd be cute together. Is it a work thing?" she asked. "Like she won't date anyone she works with?"

"She's just not interested. He won't advance her career." Jimmy shrugged. "He wants a date, and she wants to become famous as a tattoo model." He'd tried to tell Kurt a

hundred times that she wasn't interested, but he'd been rebuked. "She models, and he helps her look edgy."

"She's using him as much as he's sort of using her." She stared at him. "You've got your ears pierced, too. Did the ones in your cartilage hurt?"

"No. I had my lobes gauged, and that hurt to stretch them, but I hated the way they looked without the gauges in, so I had them closed and fixed, then pierced regularly." He curled his fingers under her chin. "Do you want a piercing?"

"Maybe." She blushed. "I've only had my ears done once. Do you have any others like Kurt?"

"Nipples only." He placed her hand on his chest. "See?"

She shivered and her eyes widened. "Wow."

"Do I measure up?" He hoped so.

"Yes." She sucked in a ragged breath. "I'm not sure I do."

"Why?" he asked. "Are you going to tell me you're underage?" Jesus, he prayed that wasn't the case.

"No. I'm twenty-two." She sighed. "Why? How old are you?"

“Forty.”

She crinkled her nose. “You don’t look it.”

“You’re flattering me.” He felt forty most days. “But I appreciate the compliment.”

“You should. You’re beautiful. I’m just plain.” She kept her hand on his chest. “I don’t feel worthy of you.”

“You are.”

“Are you going to take me home?”

“With me?” He tugged her close, tucking her between his legs. “I want to go slow, but I need you.”

“Is this a joke?”

This time, he frowned. “No?” She’d wounded him. “Why would it be?”

“I can’t wrap my head around you wanting me and not that girl with Kurt.”

“You’re adorable. Any man should be honored to have you on his arm.” He embraced her. “Yes, I want you.”

“You can have me.” She kissed him. “I want you, too.”

He'd rather close the shop right now and take her home, instead of waiting another hour. The bell dinged, and two women strode into the foyer, giggling. "Do it," the brunette challenged. "You won't go through with it."

"I will." The blonde stood at the counter. "I'd like to have you do my tattoo." She pointed to the book. "I know which one."

Karey opened the book. "Which one?"

"I'm talking to him." The blonde stared at Jimmy. "I want the butterfly done tonight. By you."

He knew the tone of her voice and the desire in her eyes. She'd been in a couple times but chickened out before getting the tattoo. "Which butterfly?"

She pointed to a particularly detailed image. "That one."

"Well, that design will take four hours and runs eight hundred dollars. You'll need to make an appointment. I'll happily book you, but I couldn't get it started tonight. We close in forty-five minutes."

"Oh. Then I'll make an appointment."

"I've got the next opening at six on Thursday next week." He brought up his schedule on the tablet. "Or at eight on Friday."

"See?" The brunette giggled. "Told you. Ask him the other part."

Karey folded her hands on her lap and smiled. "Good choice, the butterfly. It's pretty."

“Right.” The blonde turned her attention back to Jimmy. “How about Friday? We could go for coffee afterward.”

“I’ll schedule you for Friday, but I won’t be available for coffee. Sorry.” He offered the tablet. “Fill in your information, and I’ll send the confirmation email.”

The brunette laughed. “Jesus.”

Karey fiddled with her phone, seeming to ignore the conversation. Was she upset? He dealt with this all the time.

The blonde filled out the form, then pushed the tablet to him. “How about drinks tonight?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t.” He hesitated. “I’m seeing someone.”

“Oh.” She blushed. “You really are?”

“I am,” he said.

She fluttered her hand. “Never mind. I’ll schedule the tattoo later.” She left the shop with the second woman in tow.

“What was that?” Karey asked. “Is she scared?”

“She wanted a date.” He saved the information in case the woman returned. “It happens often. Kurt gets most of the offers.”

“And you?”

“Not as much. Besides, I have a date tonight.” He left his stool and kissed her. “You handled that like a pro.”

“I was blind to what she was doing.”

“Just know this: I’m coming home to you. Yes, I’ll tattoo all sorts of people, but you have my full attention.” He nuzzled her cheek.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She slid her hands over his chest. “When can we go home?”

“Midnight.” Right now worked for him. He should count the take and check the receipts... but he could do that in the morning. Christ, he’d never been so caught up in someone before. All he saw was Karey. She made him feel again. Made him want to be with someone again.

The speed of his feelings worried him. He'd known her for two days, but he couldn't imagine not being with her. He should ask her more about the spell -- if it was real, if it'd wear off and if it was going to trash his life. Right now, he wanted to get her home and indulge in every inch of her body. No, he needed to.

* * *

Karey helped him lock up and count the register, then lock the cash in the safe. She liked how he'd worked her into his life. Like they'd always been together, and this was their thing. She loved the feeling of belonging. She liked how he looked at her, too. Like she was beautiful.

The woman Kurt had tattooed paid and left, then Kurt locked the front door. He switched off the neon sign, then dropped the security gates. "We're closed, people."

"There's no one out there, drama queen," Jimmy said. "Just do the count." He closed and bolted the metal door, shutting the shop off from the street.

"It's like being in jail," she said. "Do you have to do this every night?"

"For the safety of the shop, yeah." Jimmy locked the gates. "It's best."

She wouldn't argue. "So now what?"

"Done," Kurt said. "We had mostly card sales. You can count it again, but there's not much in cash, as you can see."

Jimmy took the additional money to the office.

Kurt shrugged. "We always count two or three times."

“Sure.” She knew that from the bookstore. She yawned. “It’s late.”

“People come out late for ink.” Kurt bolted the second set of locks. “Want to see the garage?”

“Garage?” She gathered her purse. “Where?”

“Here.” He led her through the building to a garage with a car and Jimmy’s motorcycle.

“You showed her the garage.” Jimmy caught up with them and rubbed her back. “It’s the only way we’ll keep the shop here.”

“Can’t trust anyone not to dick with our rides,” Kurt said. “Do I get the deposit?”

“I left it in the safe. Go home and enjoy your Sunday.” Jimmy clapped Kurt on the shoulder. “Rest. It’s been a good day.”

“Then make it a good night, too.” Kurt waved, then slid behind the wheel of his car. “See ya, Karey. Don’t hurt him.”

“I won’t.” Unless the spell wasn’t real... then they’d both be hurt. She would be hurt because she’d have to admit she’d fallen in love with someone who didn’t love her. In just forty-eight hours, she’d fallen for him. She liked him a lot and loved being around him.

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“Ready?” Jimmy offered her the helmet. “We’ll go to my place.”

“Sure.” She checked her watch. Twelve-twenty. So late. It was also the start of their third day. Only four more days left... until the spell would be over? Shit. She wasn’t sure. She needed to talk to Sarah again. She’d never been given all the particulars concerning the spell.

Jimmy helped her onto the bike, then tapped a fob. The garage door opened. Jimmy climbed into the bike while Kurt backed out. He left the garage, then closed the door and tapped another button.

Her heart hammered. She’d be going home with Jimmy, the sexiest man alive. Holy shit. She threaded her arms around him.

Jimmy sped off into the night, leaving Kurt behind. She held on tight, afraid that if she let go, the dream would end.

He rode through town to the west end. She’d taken the bus out here to a party thrown by a professor. She’d never driven here in her car -- the car had been totaled by then.

Jimmy pulled into the Kirkpatrick Estates, and her breath hitched. The Kirkpatrick Estates was an exclusive area, gated and well-protected. Jimmy waved to the guard at the gate, then continued into the development.

After meandering through the streets, Jimmy slowed, then turned into the driveway of a brick ranch-style home. It didn’t strike her as the kind of house he’d own -- but what would he have?

He parked in the garage and put the overhead door down. “Welcome to my home.”

She took the helmet off. “I’m happy to be here.” She spied a second motorcycle and a sports car. “Wow.” She’d seen that particular model of Camaro, but not in person.

“The car?”

“Sorry. Yes.” She shouldn’t act so starstruck. She should be more casual. Being from the poor side of town, not having much to her name and believing she’d never rise out of her level, meant she saw life differently from most people. Flashy cars impressed her.

“The Camaro was my impulse buy.” He touched the fender of the car. “I’ve always wanted one and saw the color I wanted, so I bought it. I don’t take it out much because the bike is easier -- unless it’s snowing.”

“Makes sense.”

He offered his hand. “Come inside with me.”

“Sure.” She needed to stop being so awed, but the car was nice.

“I ordered pizza before we left the shop. Should be here in a minute or two.” He led her into the house. “Forgive the decorating. I’m good at art and tattoos, but not furniture arrangement.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” She held his hand. “I have milk crates and one-by-sixes for bookshelves and a mattress and box springs that sit on the floor. I’m not the height of chic.”

He gathered her in his arms. “I wish I’d found you earlier.”

“Why?” She clung to him. “I’m not special.”

“Are to me.” He kissed her. “You make me happy.”

“You make me pretty happy, too.” She’d hoped he’d have seen her before now and would eventually fall in love with her, but she’d never expected any of that to come true.

A bell dinged.

He loosened his grasp. “Pizza is here.”

She left her purse on the table and explored the house. Dark carpets, lots of wood, and one of the lamps appeared to have been made from an oversized vodka bottle. The furniture didn’t match and compared to the immaculate landscaping and outdoor lighting, the inside of the house didn’t match. The interior screamed of masculinity and the outside spoke of order -- like the development demanded the landscaping be pristine.

Jimmy returned with the box. “My friend Gino makes the best pizza.”

She hadn’t been hungry until she smelled the pie. Her stomach rumbled. “Smells delicious.”

“I’ll get plates,” he said and carried the box to the coffee table. “Make yourself at home.”

She kicked out of her sneakers and shrugged out of her jacket. She missed living in a house. Missed being able to walk in the front door without having to go through a maze of entry points and using so many keys. She settled on the sofa and breathed in the scent of his cologne on the fabric. She felt surrounded and protected by him.

He returned with plates, napkins and two glasses of water. “Want to watch a movie?”

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“Sure. Pick something.” She tucked her legs under her. “Want me to serve?”

“You can.” He switched the television on while she plated the slices. He turned on an old sitcom. “There isn’t much on.”

“This is good.” She folded up on the sofa again and held her plate. The second she bit into the piece, she groaned. The pie was good.

Jimmy switched the channel to a music station. “Better. This way we can talk.”

“We can.” She continued to eat. “This is yum.”

“Gino is a whiz with pizza,” he said. “I met him in school. He dropped out of business school to open a pizza shop and I left to start Tattoo You.”

“Sounds like you’re both successful. I meant to ask if you’d grown up here.” She continued to enjoy her food.

“No. I grew up in Crestline. I came here for college and because college towns are good for tattoo business. People want to break out and be different while getting ink.” He shrugged. “I can’t complain.”

“Makes sense.” She wanted another piece but didn’t want to look greedy.

“Want more? Help yourself.” He sipped his water. “Where did you grow up?”

“Here.” She tensed. “My parents had a trailer in Savoy Court Estates. I never

understood why the developer called the place estates. This area seems more like a place for estates, not the trailer court. The Savoy is god-awful.” She hated talking about her past, but Jimmy made talking easy. “Sorry.”

He put his plate down. “You don’t have to apologize about your past or feel ashamed. I didn’t exactly come from a great situation.”

He had a point, but that didn’t make her past any rosier. “I hate talking about it.”

“Then we won’t.” He took her empty plate, then gathered her on his lap. “I’ve craved you all day.”

She draped her arms around his shoulders. “Have you?” She liked knowing he wanted her.

“Uh-huh.” He caressed her ass. “I wanted to taste your kiss, feel you in my arms and hear you whimper when I touch you.”

She sucked in a ragged breath. “Do you want to do that now?”

“Yes.” He rubbed her back under her sweater.

She wanted this man and needed this moment. No one else would do. She grasped the hem of her sweater and tugged it along with her T-shirt over her head. Her hair fell around her shoulders and her nipples puckered through the fabric of her sports bra. Of course, she’d wear a sports bra today -- wearing something sexy would’ve made sense.

“Beautiful.” He kissed from her jawline to her throat, down to her collarbone, then along the upper swell of her breasts.

She threaded her fingers into his hair as he unzipped the front of her bra. Her skin sizzled, and she couldn't breathe. She'd never done anything this sexy in her life. The lights were on, he could see everything, and she wasn't afraid of him looking at her naked.

He parted the sides of her bra, revealing her breasts. Instead of speaking, he sucked on her nipple.

She groaned. He knew how to touch her in ways that fried her brain. She stroked his neck and continued to toy with his hair.

He switched to her other nipple, giving it the same sexy treatment.

She whimpered and shivered. She felt alive and exciting. Her curves were an asset.

He palmed her breast and worked his way back to her throat. "I want you naked."

"Only when I get to see you naked." She let go of his hair and tugged on his shirt.

"Whatever you want." He pulled away from her enough to pull his shirt over his head. He revealed his upper body to her, and she gasped.

Every inch of him from just below his collarbone to just above his wrists was covered in tattoos. The piercings in his nipples glittered in the light. She'd never seen a man so beautiful and sexy -- at least not in person. She'd seen beautiful people in magazines. He was here and hers... for four more days. She'd ignore that for now and focus on him.

"Like what you see?" He resumed palming her breasts. "Am I good enough?"

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“Yes.” She caressed his chest. So much strong, taut muscle. She drank in the view of him and his ink. Skulls, vines, a wounded heart, and across his ribs, it appeared that the ink was his skin ripping away to show his bones.

“You don’t like it?” he asked. “Too much?”

“It’s a lot to look at, but I like it. The ink makes you unique.” She curled forward and nipped his chest.

“Babe.” He nudged her onto her back on the sofa. “Need you.”

“You’ve got me.” She unbuttoned her jeans. “Make love to me.” She needed to feel his precise and exquisite brand of love.

“Yes.” He left the sofa and unzipped. He shoved his jeans and boxers to the floor, revealing the rest of him.

She couldn’t get out of her jeans fast enough. She’d felt his cock moving against her ass last night. Now she could see him, and her mouth watered. She longed to taste him. She wished she had a condom and could go for a ride... after she tasted him.

“I need to be with you.” He pulled a condom from his wallet. “Karey?”

“Yes.” She reached for him as he sheathed himself. “Please?”

He stroked his cock a couple times, then kissed her inner thigh. “Mine.” He crawled between her legs and filled her in one thrust.

She gasped at the fullness. He stretched her, and she welcomed the burn. She clutched his shoulders. When she looked into his eyes, if she didn't know better, she swore he looked at her with love.

Could he be in love with her? This fast? Did she love him? She'd fallen for him.

She didn't know him, but yet, she did. She swore she could be in love with Jimmy McCreadie.

Jimmy built into a steady rhythm. He rested his forehead on hers and lost himself in making love to her.

She met him thrust for thrust. She groaned as the sound of their lovemaking echoed in the room. She couldn't breathe or think straight. She swore the scent of his cologne wrapped around her and up close, she noticed the flecks of dark blue at the edges of his ice-blue irises. He had such thick lashes and slight crinkles at the corners of his eyes. The warmth of his breath skittered across her skin.

She tingled all over. The orgasm started low in her belly and spiraled through her system. When she reached between their bodies and caressed her clit, she cried out. The orgasm sped through her body, and her restraint held by a tiny thread.

"Fuck." He kissed her as he increased his pace. "God."

She agreed. He swept her away. She tensed as the orgasm hit hard. She swore she floated. "Jimmy."

"Yes. Shout my name. Fuck." He pistoned into her, and his brow furrowed. "Oh, fuck."

She squeezed her legs around him and rode the waves of pleasure. She sagged

beneath him.

“Oh, God.” He slammed into her once more and tensed as his cock throbbed. He relaxed and settled on her, peppering her face with kisses. “Damn.”

She smiled to herself. She’d never had a guy react this way. Had to be the spell. Still, she didn’t care.

“You fry my brain.” He withdrew and sat up long enough to remove the condom. He ditched the rubber as she sat up.

“Come to bed with me.” He stood, then offered his hand. “Please?”

She wasn’t sure what to say. She accepted the invitation and followed him to the bedroom.

“Make yourself comfortable while I clean up the pizza.” He held her in his embrace. “I’m head over heels for you already.”

“Are you?” She marveled at not having to hide her curves and not having to be fucked in the dark. Even so fast, he cherished her.

“You intrigue me.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “It’s too much and yet, just right.”

“Same here.” She squeezed his ass, loving the feel of his buns under her palms. The whole situation had to be a dream. If so, she didn’t want to wake up.

“Rest. It’s late and I want to hold you,” he said.

“I’m all yours.”

When he let go, she crawled into his bed. She breathed in the scent of him on the sheets. Her body ached in so many ways, and she regretted nothing.

She’d have to tell him the truth about the spell and the chance it could collapse in four days. It could all be for nothing.

She’d fallen for him, though. She wanted more than seven days. Wanted more than a tumble in the sheets, too.

Unfortunately, she had to be honest and hope he still felt the same in four days -- unless there was a way to fix the situation. A counterspell? A chance the connection could withstand the spell? Maybe he’d love her anyway...

Hell, this was more complicated than she’d ever expected.

Chapter Five

Jimmy cleaned up the pizza and tucked the extra slices in the box within the fridge. He’d never been one to strut around in the nude, but he wanted to show off for her.

His phone buzzed with an incoming text. God. Who needed him now? He picked up the device and checked the notification.

A text from Kurt. Christ. He’d better check.

Hope U&Karey R hittin it - hurd a rumur she used magic 2 snag U. Might B good or dangerous. Keep UR iiis open. She's cute, but think, K?

He read through the message twice. He knew about the spell and magic. So what? Maybe they needed some magic to coax them together faster. If the spell worked, then great. But why would Kurt think Jimmy being with her was dangerous? Sometimes Kurt made no sense.

The spell could wear off? Fuck it. He wanted Karey.

But if there was magic... it could wear off. Would he still crave her? He hoped so. He'd never fallen this fast for anyone, but this overwhelming desire couldn't be because of the spell, right? He typed a reply.

Thx. Will stay sharp.

At least Kurt was trying to protect him.

He left his phone on the coffee table and turned off the light, then joined Karey in the bedroom. She'd stretched out between the sheets and fallen asleep. She looked so comfortable and beautiful. So peaceful. She also looked like she belonged in his bed.

He brushed his teeth and caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror. He appeared happy. The smile wasn't forced. The light sparkled in his eyes. He resembled the man he'd been before the divorce and his addictions.

He cleaned his face and left the bathroom, then joined her in bed. He gathered Karey in his arms. She felt so right. He loved the way she ground her ass into his groin. She held onto his arms and sighed. He'd found the woman of his dreams. The spell thing niggled in his mind, but he'd worry about that later. Right now, he needed to keep strengthening their bond.

He woke to her curled against his chest. As she slept, he wondered what she'd been through. She seemed so happy, yet so alone. She brought out a protective streak within him. He needed her in his life.

He couldn't quite shake the intensity of Kurt's text. Kurt could be nosy and butt in too much, but he'd been Jimmy's tightest friend for so long.

What did Kurt mean? Was she from the wrong side of the tracks? He hadn't come from luxury himself. He'd dealt with shit from his family and the shit of his own making.

He slipped from bed, dressed in sleep pants, then headed to the kitchen. His phone buzzed on the coffee table. Probably had been buzzing all night. He checked notifications.

Three texts from Kurt.

Hows things?

Hot?

U better B gettin bizy

Jesus. The man wouldn't quit. Jimmy should reply. He withdrew a piece of pizza from the fridge, then leaned on the counter and sent a reply.

Hot, indeed. I like her.

He ate the pizza as he waited for a reply. If Kurt was around, then he'd want to chat.

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The phone rang. Kurt.

He hurried to answer. "Yes."

"Hey. Good night?"

"It was," Jimmy said between bites. "It'll be a good early afternoon when she wakes."

"She's still there?" Kurt asked.

"Yeah." So?

"You never have anyone sleep over."

"She changed my mind."

"She did?"

"Yes." He kept his answers cagey. He wanted to tell Kurt the truth. "What's the deal?"

"I talked to a friend of mine -- well, she's more like a... it's complicated. Anyway, Sarah and Karey are friends, too. They're part of a group of women who decided to use a spell to cure their love life," Kurt said. "To find, as Sarah said, hot guys."

"Karey mentioned the spell." Was he her version of a hot guy? Seemed like it.

“Did she tell you she has seven days to find you? It seems she didn’t have all the details when she decided they should enact the spell.”

“No.” Did that matter? “What are the details?”

“For one thing, the spell only lasts seven days from when you hook up.”

“What?” Jesus, this spell was complicated.

“I guess you have seven days to find the person, and once you do, then you have seven days to make them love you,” Kurt said. “Something like that.”

“To fall in love?” That tended to be how such things worked.

“Yeah. It seems fast, but what do I know?” Kurt asked. “Anyway, you’d better be smart.”

“Did she say if the spell forces you to love someone?”

“What do you mean?” Kurt asked. “Like you might not love them without it?”

He hesitated, not wanting to admit that truth. “Yeah.”

“I don’t know.”

“Why’d Sarah tell you all this?”

“Because she thinks you and Karey are wrong for each other. It’s a bad-boy thing, I guess. Is that a real thing? Are we bad boys?” Kurt asked.

He groaned. He should be having this conversation with Karey. “Yes.”

“We are?”

“We aren’t wearing suits and in high finance. People see our tattoos and your piercings and think we’re into shady shit.”

“I’m not into shady shit,” Kurt replied.

“Well, they think that.”

“That’s horrifying.”

“I know.”

“Does she see you as a bad boy? Or a phase?”

“I hope not.” The seven-day thing had him spooked. What if after seven days the connection failed? He liked Karey. He could see having a life with her, even this fast.

“Thanks for the info.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt. I know how Christine screwed you over.”

“It was my fault for thinking we could work.”

“You loved her.”

“And you loved Moira,” Jimmy said, referencing Kurt’s ex. “See where it gets us?”

“True.”

“I need to go.”

“Sure. See you Tuesday?” Kurt asked.

“Two in the afternoon.”

“Cool. Later.” He hung up, then scrubbed his face with both hands. Seven days. The

spell might have been crafted to last for seven days, but the world was supposed to have been created in six days. True love could happen that fast, too.

It was possible.

“Hi.” Karey stood in the doorway in one of his shirts and barefoot. “Nice chat?”

“With Kurt.” He placed his phone on the counter.

She nodded. Her breasts strained against the fabric.

“Not going to ask me what we talked about?”

“Not my business.” She tensed. “Do you need to meet up with him?”

“No.” He rounded the bar and sat on the couch. “Come here. I think we need to do some cards-on-the-table chatting.”

“Put it all out there?”

“Yes.” He patted his thighs. “I want to hold you.”

She hesitated, then joined him on the sofa. “What do you want to know?”

“Why did you tense so much? Is it me?” he asked. “Do I scare you?”

“No.” She picked at the strings on his sleep pants. “You’re not scary.”

“Will you tell me why you tense?” He needed to know.

She sighed. “I’m scared, but not of you. Of separation. My parents split when I was

little. I don't know what happened to my dad, but my mom was an addict and forced me to raise myself. It sucked, but I did it. I'm ashamed that I can't seem to get out of that rut of being less than important. I never have any money, but I don't spend it. I have no extra education outside of the two years, and it's not enough to get a decent job. I dated a piece-of-shit guy who wrecked my car and credit rating, and I don't feel worthy of you." She shivered. "That's the thing. Everyone else left me, and I'm afraid you'll decide to dump me after you've dumped on me, too."

"And the spell?" Christ, this poor girl had been through a lot.

"What about it? I picked you because I'm drawn to you. You and your art fascinate me," she said. "I'm shy, and I don't think you'd want to be with me if there wasn't a spell involved because I'm not like you."

"Because you're bad?" He didn't agree.

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She tensed. “Yeah, I’m bad. There must be something wrong with me that no one wants to stick around.”

“No.” He held onto her hands. “Do you think I’m bad?”

“No. Why would you think that?”

“Kurt talked to Sarah,” he said. “I guess they’re friends.”

“That’s not surprising. Sarah knows everyone.” She didn’t pull away but didn’t relax. “So?”

“She told him about the spell. Said you have seven days to find me, then seven days to fall in love.” He met her gaze. “Is that true?”

“I’m not sure.”

He dipped his head. “Karey?”

“I don’t know because she didn’t tell me everything.” She curled into herself. “I knew it gave me seven days to find you, but beyond that, I wasn’t sure. Sarah never gave details, and I trusted her, but I shouldn’t have. Should I go?”

“Why?”

“You don’t want to get mixed up with me. I didn’t even know how the spell worked. For all I know, in three days, you’ll decide I’m junk and we’ll split.” She trembled.

“Fuck. I hate the way that sounds.”

“Who said you’re junk?”

She left his lap. “My dad? I was so not good enough for him that I’ve never seen him again. My mom -- she couldn’t lay off the coke enough to parent me. Brett can’t handle it when he can’t control me. Ron wanted my money and car. Now you. I like you, and you’ll realize I’m not good enough, too.” She sucked in a ragged breath. “I sound like a hot mess.”

“I never said you were.”

“Maybe not, but I’ve heard it a lot,” she said. “I’ve pulled myself up a lot, and I’m still doing it. I’ve got money saved back, and I’ll get a better apartment. One of these days I’ll get my car fixed or get a new one. I can do it.”

“I know you can.”

“You do?”

“I do,” he said. “But you’re scared, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Of not being enough again?”

“I need to go. I need air.” She pulled away, leaving him in the living room.

Her words cut to his marrow, and so did the pain in her eyes. He’d been in her shoes. He’d thought he was a throwaway person, too. The Brett thing bothered him because who was this guy to think he could run her life?

It was too cold for her to go outside and too far away for her to set out on foot. If she wanted to go home, he'd take her. He left the couch and found her in the enclosed patio at the back of the house. Her sobs tore at him. He wondered if she'd been abused, too.

"Karey." He followed his instincts and embraced her. He rocked with her in his arms. "I get it. My mom wasn't around, and my uncle raised me. I didn't follow the career path she chose for me, and she cut me out of her life. I was an addict for a while, too. I used tattoos and booze to make myself feel something. Then Christine fucked me over, and I thought I wasn't worthy of anyone. I'm forty years old and feel like I'm a thousand instead."

She trembled and said nothing.

"Then you came along, and I dared to hope. I feel like me again."

She turned around in his arms. "Because of me?"

"Yes." No question.

"What about when the spell lifts?"

"We see what happens." He held her tighter. "We'll keep trying. I'm not ready to quit on you or us because it's only been a few days. You mean a lot to me, and I want this to keep happening."

“So soon?”

“So soon.”

“We barely know each other,” she said. “What if...”

“What if we use the time to get to know each other and fall harder for each other?” he asked. “We probably have a lot more in common than we think.”

“I guess so.” She smiled, despite her tears. “Do you like football?”

“Love it. Do you?”

She nodded. “I do.”

“Then I’ll reheat the pizza, and we can watch whatever game is on.”

“And pick winners?” she asked. “Whoever’s team loses, they go down on the other?”

“Yes.” He loved her idea and held her in his embrace. “Karey?”

“Yes?”

“Are you willing to keep trying with me?” he asked. “I want to.”

“I do.” She kissed him. “This is new and scary because it’s unknown to me -- having a normal relationship -- but I’m ready.”

“We’ll do it together.”

“We will.” She smiled. “Are you really forty?”

“Really. Just like you’re really twenty-two.”

“You don’t think I’m too young for you?”

“Not a chance.” She’d be the death of him or his greatest salvation. Only time would tell, but he didn’t need seven days to know he needed her.

He’d made his decision about Karey.

He loved her.

* * *

Karey spent the remainder of the weekend with Jimmy and loved every second. He’d taken her for another ride on his motorcycle and treated her to homemade pasta. She never would’ve guessed the handsome tattooed man knew how to make spaghetti.

And the sauce! So good. She’d been spoiled.

She stopped at her apartment on Tuesday to change her clothes, shower, and get ready for work. She’d needed to charge her phone, too. She tucked the extra cord in her bag, so she’d have it for later and ensured she had a spare battery, too.

Her phone rang, and she checked the ID. Sarah. She might as well answer. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Sarah said. “Are you working today?”

“Yes.” Ah, Sarah. Right to the point. “Why?”

“I need to talk to you. Can I give you a ride?”

“Sure.” She’d rather chat in the car. “I leave to work in ten minutes.”

“I’m in the parking lot.”

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“Oh.” She collected her things. “I’ll be right down. What do you want to discuss?”

“We need to talk about you, Jimmy, and the spell.”

“Ah.” She ensured she had everything, picked up her keys and left the apartment. She checked she’d locked the door, then raced downstairs. The longer she left Sarah in the parking lot, the more Sarah risked getting her car keyed or worse.

Sarah had parked under the awning. She waved.

Karey joined her in the front seat. “You should circle the lot.”

“I should, but the guy over there was staring at me, so this felt safer,” Sarah said and drove away. “When are you moving?”

“When my credit rating recovers.” She tucked her bag between her knees. “It’s still crappy. I need to raise it to get a better place.”

“Jesus.” Sarah pulled into the traffic.

“Well? What about the spell?” She hated to be left waiting.

“Oh. Yeah. So you chose Jimmy, right?”

“I did.”

“You like him?”

“I do.” A lot.

“He likes you?”

“I spent all weekend with him -- does that answer your question?”

“It does.”

“We’re on day five since we hooked up.” Karey watched the traffic. “Two days left -- unless you know something I should know.”

“Well...” Sarah parked in front of the bookstore. “The thing is, I don’t know if you’ll stay together.”

“Does anyone really know?” She’d been jilted enough.

“True, but I mean, you’re the first one to enact the magic. You connected,” Sarah said. “No one else pitched a name into the fire and fessed up about it.”

“I was?” She thought she’d seen Nikki toss hers in.

“You were. Everyone else claims they chickened out.”

“Lovely.” She knew this would happen. She’d been told about the conversation between Jimmy and Kurt. “So what happens next? Do we split?”

“I’m not sure.” Sarah switched off the engine. “According to the spell book, you will meet within seven days and have seven days to fall in love.”

“So fourteen days?” She liked that idea. “Give me the rest of the details.”

“The way I read it, you get seven days from the meeting. No extensions.”

“I see.” Then she and Jimmy were back to two days left. “Then we get it.”

“Is it possible you love him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Karey.” Sarah parked in front of the bookstore.

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“Well, I don’t know. I thought I loved Ron, and he was a dud. Then I thought I might love Brett... for a day or two, and he treats me like shit.”

Sarah sighed. “Ron was a turd, and no one liked him.”

“And Brett?” She wished she’d been told this before now.

“If you didn’t work for him, I’d tell you to get the fuck away from him.”

“Ouch.”

“He’s a jerk. He knows you won’t grow in your life because he’s holding you down. He needs control, but he also knows you love books,” Sarah said. “You’re a captive, and you don’t know it.”

The truth hurt because Sarah was right. “Damn.”

“I know. It sucks to hear the truth, but that’s what it is.” Sarah shifted in her seat. “Is it possible you could love Jimmy?”

“Yeah.” It was possible she’d fall into a black hole, too. “He’s intriguing and cute. He’s also dangerous-looking, but sweet. We watched football together.”

Sarah rolled her eyes.

“You might hate football, but I enjoyed being with someone who didn’t make me feel silly because I like the sport or because I understand the game.”

“It’s boring.”

“Have you seen a football player without his shirt?”

Sarah scrunched her nose. “Should I?”

“Yes. Muscles, tattoos and raw power... all in one body.”

Sarah whistled. “I could be convinced.”

“Anyway, Jimmy enjoys football, and it’s nice to have something to discuss.”

Sarah nodded, then grasped Karey’s hand. “Good enough, but is it what will sustain you? Could you see giving him up after two days?”

Oh shit.

“No?”

Her heart hammered. “I...”

“You can’t,” Sarah said. “If he poofed into nothing or died tomorrow, would you be lost?”

She hesitated. “Fuck.” Her heart ached. “Yes.”

“Then you might be okay.” Sarah sighed. “I hope you stay together. If you do, then it gives me hope for the rest of us.”

“Nice.” She hated being the test subject.

“Karey, I hate being lonely and I hate seeing you with dead end guys. I’m rooting for you.” Sarah groaned, then let go of Karey’s hand. “I see Brett. Damn.”

Shit. “I’m probably late.”

“Blame me.”

“That won’t matter.”

“Can’t hurt to say it,” Sarah replied. “I’m the reason you’re late, though.”

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“He won’t care.” Her boss was a worm.

“Think about what we discussed and if you love Jimmy,” Sarah said. “It could be the start of your happy ever after.”

“It could.”

“But the thing I’ve read is that if you don’t truly love each other at the end of the seven days and say that you love each other, the spell ends, and he’ll forget you.”

She stared at Sarah. “You’re fucking kidding me.”

“No. It’s the clause I can’t explain. Truly, you have to fall in love and vocalize it, then you’ll stay together. If you don’t, then he’ll forget who you are.”

“That’s messed up.” She spotted Brett. “But I don’t have time to worry about it.”

“Go. I’d hate to see you get fired because of me.” Sarah snorted. “I’d love to see you get fired because you told him to go to hell instead.”

“That could be arranged.” The more she got to know Jimmy, the more she started believing in herself and the more she realized how much of a crumb Brett could be.

She deserved more, but Brett did know how to use her love of books against her.

“I’ll let you go, but I do hope you and Jimmy make it. If you love him, tell him.”

“We’ll have to see.” She did care about Jimmy so much. “I’ll see you. Thanks for the ride.”

“Anytime,” Sarah said. “You’re giving me faith in people and love.”

“Not yet.” She hadn’t admitted she loved Jimmy yet.

“You will fall so hard for him, if you haven’t already,” Sarah said. “And I’m jealous. Go.”

“I will.” She left the car and hurried into the store. She clocked in and tucked her belongings into her locker.

Brett stopped her in the doorway from the breakroom. “You’re late.”

She checked her watch. “By two minutes.”

“You owe the store two minutes,” Brett said. “I’m tired of your tardiness.”

She folded her arms and cocked her hip. She’d only been late twice, including today. She’d been a perfect worker and tended to stay late without question. She’d also had enough of Brett. “What is your deal?”

“Excuse me?” Brett stepped back. “Are you getting snappy with me?”

She fortified her courage. “Yes, I am.”

“You’d better watch yourself.” Brett folded his arms. “You can be replaced.”

“No kidding.”

Brett's eyes widened, and he opened his mouth but said nothing.

She'd stunned him? Good. "I can easily be replaced because I'm a worker bee. I like being a worker bee, but I also like being respected. I do my job, and you don't see it because you're too busy feeling superior. Fine. Be that way."

"You really have found your voice." Brett crooked his brow. "You're too full of yourself. And what are you going to do about it?"

"What am I going to do? I believe I deserve better." She stood straighter. "Do you know why I stopped dating you?"

"You took up with that dangerous guy," Brett said. "You decided you wanted a dirty, bad man."

She rolled her eyes. "I stopped because you're a jerk. You're a jerk to work for and terrible to date. You want to run everyone's lives, and I'm not here to be controlled."

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“He won’t control you? You’ll be tattooed, pierced, and turned bad just like him.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive. Look at you. You didn’t act out until you met him.”

Ah, this whole exchange showed how little he knew her. “I’m afraid of needles and pass out at the sight of blood, so I won’t be tattooed. I might get a piercing, but if I do, it’s because I want to, and it will be where you can’t see it.”

His eyes widened again. “My God.”

She snorted. She liked this power exchange. “Don’t get so upset about tattoos. You have a tattoo.”

“So? I’m a man.”

“You’re a weasel.”

“You’re fired.” He pointed to her locker. “Get out.”

Fired? She’d never been fired before. She squared her shoulders. “Fine.” Without a backward glance, she collected her belongings and cleaned out her locker, then slammed the door as she faced him. She tucked her things into her bag, then strutted out of the room. “Bye.”

“Good riddance,” Brett snapped.

She marched through the store to the front and left. Part of her wished she hadn't been fired. She had no idea what to do next and no job prospects. The rest of her was relieved. She hated working for Brett and being held back. He didn't like her because she'd turned him down. Why sleep with someone who didn't respect her?

Still, she wasn't sure what to do. She only had two days left with the spell. Would Jimmy help her? Or laugh at her for getting herself fired?

She stopped at the bench in front of the barber shop and sent Sarah a text. You'll be shocked to know I just got fired. No more bookstore. She tucked her phone away and stared down the street to the tattoo shop. She wasn't sure they'd even be open.

Crap. Should she practice what she'd say when she went there? Just blurt out her problem? She forced herself to walk to Tattoo You. The bars and indoor shutters were up, but the light wasn't on. She knocked on the door. Maybe they were just getting ready?

Jimmy came to the door. She could see Kurt at the register. "We're not open yet."

She waved. Had the spell ended early? "Jimmy."

He stared at her. "Karey?" He opened the door. "I thought you were at work."

"Is this a bad time?" She joined him in the shop. "I should be at work, but I got fired."

"Why?" He locked the door behind her. "What happened?"

"I told Brett off." She clutched her bag. "I was two minutes late, he chewed me out, and I decided I'd had enough."

“How will I fill out my Poe shelf?” Jimmy asked.

“Online shopping?” She fidgeted. Didn’t he like her any longer?

“And there was this girl there. So cute and helpful. How will I see her again?” Jimmy grinned. “Maybe I should hire her.”

Hire her? Was he serious? She must’ve misunderstood him. “Jimmy?”

“What? We could use a receptionist, and you’re a people person.” Jimmy smiled and held out his hand. “Why not?”

She still couldn’t believe her ears. “I --”

“Will you?” Kurt asked. “You’ll be perfect.”

She wobbled. She’d never had anything like this fall into place. Her life never quite worked out. But this time... it was.

“Karey?” Jimmy dipped his head. “Whatever you were making at the bookstore, add three dollars an hour.”

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“It’s too much.” She shook her head. “I made minimum wage.”

“Jesus. No wonder you didn’t have shit. You weren’t making shit,” Kurt said. “Please work here.”

They didn’t need to beg her. “Yes.” She worried the spell would end, and she’d wind up on her ass, but she needed the job and more time with Jimmy. Maybe if they worked together, they’d fall for each other without the help of the spell.

“Perfect.” Jimmy embraced her. “You’re hired.”

He had to have lost his mind, but she didn’t care. She’d do the best job she could and hope he fell truly in love with her.

Hopefully.

Because she loved him.

Could she tell him? She hoped so.

Chapter Six

Jimmy spent the next two days getting Karey up to speed and set up as their receptionist. He wondered why they’d gone so long without a dedicated person at the counter because she slid into the role so seamlessly. At night, he made love to her and made sure she was protected. His heart belonged to her, and he couldn’t imagine not having her in his life and home.

Crazy. The whole relationship had happened so fast, but he liked the breakneck speed. She made him happy.

Friday afternoon, Jimmy set out his tools and prepared for his appointments. He had another session on a dragon tattoo, a set of mother-daughter tattoos, a memory tattoo, and the rest of a monster tattoo. He loved tattooing images of monsters.

His thoughts turned to Karey. She didn't see him as a monster. She saw him as a good guy. She warmed his heart. Tonight, he'd ask her to move in with him. He needed her with him and living together.

Kurt joined him in his tattooing room. "Hey. Karey's got you set up for the day and managed to schedule a small moon and stars tattoo for you at nine. She's good at evening out the times."

"She is." He prepped the tray. "I'm glad he fired her."

"So am I."

"Where is she?" he asked. "I thought she'd clocked in."

"She went to get our lunch order at the sandwich shop," Kurt said. "Since we're at a lull, she volunteered to go."

"Smart." Made sense.

The bell dinged, and Kurt sighed. "Always when I'm not out there." He left Jimmy in his room. "Hey, Jim? You might want to come here."

He sighed, himself, and tossed his gloves into the trash. "What's up?" He joined Kurt at the counter. A pretty woman stood in the reception area. She was cute, but not his

type now that he had one -- Karey. "Hi. May I help you?"

"I'm Sarah." She fluttered her hands. "We need to talk."

"About?" Kurt folded his arms. "You hate me, and you don't know him."

"I do hate you, but I'm not here to give you shit. I'm here for him -- like I told you." She groaned. "This is important and about Karey."

Jimmy shuffled the tattoo book pages. "Kurt? Give us a minute?"

"Sure." Kurt shrugged, then ducked out of the room to the back of the shop.

Jimmy focused on Sarah. "Okay. What's wrong? Karey? Is she okay?"

"She's fine." Sarah shook her head and folded her arms. "I read up on the spell. See, we enacted something we weren't entirely sure about and... there are consequences."

"We? You and Karey?"

"It was my idea, but Karey took part and so did our friends, Nikki and Mandy. Our friend, Natalie, didn't yet, but that doesn't matter. What does is that the spell wears off today," Sarah said. "Like in a couple of hours or less. What time did you connect with Karey?"

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“About now. So?” He didn’t need the spell to know he cared about Karey. He wouldn’t have hired her if he had doubts.

“When the spell ends, you’ll forget about her. You’ll forget about each other unless you really love her and tell her so.” Sarah stomped her foot. “Do you love her?”

“It’s pretty quick.” He did have strong feelings for her. Was it love? He cared for Karey more than he ever did for his wife, but the speed and the threat of the spell annoyed him. “You’re sure she’ll forget me? She works for me.”

“She won’t forget you. You’ll forget her -- unless you tell her you love her, and she returns your love.”

“That’s ridiculous. Why hasn’t she mentioned this?” She should’ve told him, not let Sarah do it.

“Because she’s probably scared. She’s never been in love before, and she probably is with you, but it’s freaky. It’s a big change, and what if you don’t love her in return? She’d be crushed.” She rolled her eyes. “Look, if there is a chance that you love her and she loves you and you tell her so, even if it’s fast, then this spell won’t matter. If there’s not even a chance you love her and she loves you, then you’ll be strangers.”

“She won’t know me then?”

“If there’s no love, then she won’t.”

He closed the tattoo art book. “Will I know it’s happening?” He wasn’t about to lose

Karey. She meant too much to him to let go. “Will I remember her at all?”

“The spell works for seven days. If it’s meant for you to be -- you and her -- then you’ll come back together. If not, then you won’t. I can’t guarantee you won’t forget who she is, but I know damn well there’s something special between you. Don’t give up. But will you forget her completely? I don’t know. It might be a dream feeling or it might be that you simply are face blind to her. I’ve never done the spell before. I don’t know what will happen. I mean, I saw it and thought it had such a silly name, the spell, that I thought it was a lark. But then we did it, and you found Karey.”

“What’s the spell called?”

“Summon a Bad Boy.”

He looked bad to some and was considered bad by others, but he wasn’t a bad guy.

“Nice name.”

“I didn’t think it’d work.” She shrugged. “Look, if you feel strange and she doesn’t look familiar, then give her a chance to talk to you. Let your heart guide you, okay? If you’re meant to be together, then you’re set.”

“If not?”

“Then you’re not going to know her.” She rapped her knuckles on the counter. “I need to go. Mandy thinks she found true love, and it’s only day two. Let me know how it goes. Kurt has my digits.” She left him in the store in stunned silence.

There was too much to comprehend in what Sarah had said. He’d know about the spell and some of the limits, but not knowing Karey at all? What if he didn’t recognize her at all? Would his heart forget her? He jotted a note on a page of the art book. He’d have to remember her.

Had to.

His happiness depended on it.

He kept the page open, then switched on the music. The silence bothered him. The joint needed music.

The bell dinged, and a woman carried two white paper bags into the shop. “You’ll never believe the rush at Bob’s Sub Shop. The line was crazy.” She placed the bags on the counter. “Are you okay? I brought lunch like Kurt wanted.”

He stared at her. “You did?”

“Yeah... because Kurt asked.” She tensed. “Jimmy?”

He didn’t answer her. She knew him, but he had no idea who she was and why she’d brought lunch.

“Jimmy?” she repeated. Her eyes widened, and she backed away from him. “You don’t remember me.”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t.” He wished he did. She was cute. “We’ve met?”

She nodded. “We have. I’m Karey.”

“Karey?” The name didn’t ring a bell. “I’m sorry. Are you scheduled for a tattoo this afternoon?”

Kurt ventured out of the back room. “Ah, good. Food. Thanks, Karey. You’re the best.” He picked up one of the bags, then paused. “I missed something. Are you having a lovers’ spat? Did she get the fixin’s wrong? I mean, you’ll live if you don’t

have banana peppers.”

God. Kurt could babble sometimes.

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Karey toyed with the strap of her purse. “He doesn’t know me.”

Jimmy doodled on the page of the art book. “I don’t. Is she your girlfriend? I thought you’d sworn off dating for a while.”

Kurt paled. “You’re serious? All that time you spent with Karey, being joined at the hip, and you don’t know her? Jimmy.” He stepped between Jimmy and the counter. “You really don’t know her?”

“I don’t.” He hated the pain he noticed in Karey’s eyes. The hurt she must be feeling resonated to his core. He’d made her ache -- he wasn’t sure how, but he knew to his soul he’d done it.

“She’s your girl.” Kurt frowned, then pinched the bridge of his nose. “Oh, shit. The spell Sarah mentioned has come true.”

“Spell?” He didn’t understand.

Kurt nodded once more. “You and Karey are an item. True and devoted items.”

He shook his head. “Then why don’t I know her?”

Karey balled her hands on the counter. “Okay. I need some air.” She turned on her heel and left the shop.

Watching her go ripped his heart into a million pieces. He didn’t know why, but there was a connection to her. Not just the one Kurt mentioned, but something deeper. He

turned to Kurt. "Tell me everything."

Kurt pointed to Jimmy's doodle. "I think you need to read this. Trust me."

Jimmy stared at the doodle and noticed the words at the center of the page.

You love Karey. Look into her eyes. The spell might be over, but the way she holds your heart will never change ~ Jimmy

He frowned. "I signed this?" He didn't remember doing it. "I did?"

"Yes. You're the only one who writes that way." Kurt nudged him. "Go get her. She needs you, and you need her."

He had a million questions, but he moved on instinct instead of chasing answers, and darted around the counter. He burst out onto the sidewalk and glanced north. He had appointments today, but he didn't care. He had to find Karey and sort this out. Where would she go? Shit. He had no idea.

He had to find her. "Karey." His heart ached and he wasn't sure why.

"I'm right here." She stood in front of the bench next to the shop steps. "At least you know my name."

"I do." He raked his fingers through his hair. "We..."

She put her hand up, interrupting him. "I need you to hear me. I'm not quitting on us. Not at all. I know what I want, and I want you. If that means we take the next thousand years to get back to where we were half an hour ago, then it does. I love you, Jimmy McCreadie. I didn't think it could happen this fast, but I will take the next thousand years to fall harder for you. If that's a problem for you, then tell me,

but don't think I'm giving up. I finally found the man I love."

She loved him. Holy shit. Thank you, God. But why didn't he remember falling for her?

"So there. That's it." She rested her hands on her thighs. "Rebuttal?"

He cupped her jaw in both hands and kissed her. He might not know her, but he had to do this. Had to taste her. The moment his lips touched hers, he knew. No spell required. The memories rushed right back. She belonged to him. He gathered her in his arms and held her. Christ. The warmth of their love, the depth of their devotion to each other washed over him. He'd never let her go.

She balled her hands on his chest but didn't pull away.

She flowed in his veins. He sucked on her tongue, relishing her taste. When he broke the kiss, she met his gaze. He knew every detail of her face, every freckle on her nose, chips of green in her eyes, the fullness of her lips, and the way she blushed when she smiled.

"Karey." He caressed her back. "I don't need a spell to know how much I care about you. I love you, too. I want you to live with me, work with me... be my lover and my forever."

She crooked her eyebrow. "You remember me?"

"Very much so."

She narrowed her eyes. "Did you make it up? If you did, I will so not stay here. I don't want to be a joke."

“I didn’t make it up. Promise.” He tucked her to his chest and wrapped her legs around his waist, then carried her into the shop straight to his office. He kicked the door shut and placed her on the desk. He rested his forehead on hers. “I know you love when I nip the back of your neck, you dig your ass into me when we sleep, and you wear my shirts better than I do. You’re curvy and perfect and I don’t ever want to lose you.”

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She caressed his shoulders. “What’s my middle name?”

He grinned. “Nicole.” He curled his fingers under her chin, then caressed her breast through her shirt with his free hand. “And you have the cutest birthmark right here.”

She shivered and leaned into him. “Jimmy.”

“I love the way you say my name and how you fit me completely.” He arranged her legs around his hips and ground against her pussy. “Move in with me. Make love to me every night and kiss me in the morning. Work with me.”

She eased her hands under his shirt, splaying her fingers on his bare abs. “Yes. Everything, yes.”

He kissed her hard. Fuck the spell. They didn’t need magic. They’d created their own special magic organically. She had her bad boy, and he had his perfect woman. Now he never had to let her go.

* * *

Karey clung to him. He loved her and remembered. She couldn’t wait to tell Sarah -- after she made love to Jimmy. She needed to know this was real. Every fiber of her being belonged to him, but she craved a moment with him on the deepest level.

“Make love to me,” she said. “Now.”

“Christ. Yes.” Jimmy let go of her long enough to engage the lock on the door.

“Where were we?”

She yanked her sweater over her head, then tossed the garment onto the floor. Her nipples beaded beneath the lace of her bra. She’d remembered to wear a fancy bra today.

“I love your tits.” He opened his jeans, then buried his face in the vee of her cleavage.

She caressed his head, loving the feel of his hair -- so silky. She moaned. “Jimmy.”

His muffled reply pleased her. He nuzzled her breast, and one of her straps slipped down her shoulder.

“Make love to me.” She ground on him. “Please?”

He nipped his way to her throat, then chin. “Yes, babe.” He scooted her to the edge of his desk and opened her jeans. He tugged the denim and her panties to her ankles.

She shivered at the chilly air over her pussy. Her nerve endings sizzled, and she gasped. Her brain cells seemed to melt as he gazed at her. She kicked out of her clothes and opened her legs.

“Mine.” He withdrew his cock from his pants, then stroked himself before grasping her hips. He pushed into her in one thrust.

She held onto his forearms as he pushed into her, in and out. She felt him to the very center of her being. She knew he loved her. Knew she was where she belonged.

He increased his pace. The sound of skin on skin and her panting seemed to echo in the room.

She felt every ripple of him within her body. His cock throbbed, and his breath tickled her cheeks. She held onto his shoulders and rode the waves of pleasure. Her limbs trembled, and she dug her nails into his skin. “Jimmy.”

“Yes.” He buried his face against her neck.

She arched beneath him, and her restraint snapped. The orgasm crashed within her. Her whole world centered around him. The rest of the universe ceased to exist. The room spun.

She panted as he continued to thrust. When she held onto him, she swore she saw stars -- and her future.

“Karey.” He slammed into her and stilled. He sucked on her neck. “Oh, God.”

She agreed. She wanted this moment to last forever.

He groaned, then kissed his way to her lips. “I don’t need a spell or magic. I’ve got you, and that’s all I need.”

“Me?” She’d never heard anything sweeter in her life.

“You.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “I should get to work, but I’m happy right here.”

“Me, too.” She couldn’t care less about the clients.

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“Guys.” Kurt pounded on the door. “First, I could hear you. Both of you. I don’t mind a good show, but this isn’t the time or place, and I don’t want to hear it. Second, I’m glad you got this sorted. It’s nice to see you, er, hear you, happy, but people can hear you all up and down the block. Third, you have clients here. Get your butt in gear.”

Jimmy chuckled and kissed her. “Well, I guess we’re totally legit.”

“We are.” She stroked his back. “I love you.”

“Love you, too.” He kissed her again. “So much. Never leave me.”

“I work for you, and I guess I’m moving in with you, so it’ll be hard not to be around you.”

“True.”

The gravelly tone of his voice sent shivers down her spine. “You’d better get to work. We have forever to do this and a big bed at your house to use.”

“We do.” He kissed her a third time, then pulled out. “Although I would love to keep you just like that on my desk, I can’t. I share my desk with Kurt. Still, I’m lucky to be with you. So lucky.”

She sat up and held his hand. “The feeling’s mutual.” She considered herself the luckiest girl in the world to have such a handsome knight in stunning ink.

“You make me want to stay.” He stuffed himself into his pants. “Babe.”

“Go. The faster we get through the day, the faster we get home to do what we want,” she said. “I’m all yours.”

“You are.” He composed himself and grinned. “My love.”

“I am.” When he left the room, she sighed. Maybe the spell and true love weren’t bullshit after all. She had the man of her dreams and his love.

What a lucky girl, indeed.

Epilogue

Karey joined Jimmy at the table and fiddled with her glass of soda. In the last month, she’d moved her things to his home. The stability and safety were nice but having him to wrap up in was the best. He knew how to hold, kiss and touch her to make her come apart. He’d become her partner and lover, as well as dear friend.

She hadn’t planned on spending Monday night at a restaurant, but the moment Sarah called saying she needed to talk, Karey took heed. She appreciated her friendship with Mandy and the other women and wanted them to be happy.

Her stomach growled. The pickle spears were tasty, but she wanted more than an appetizer. She’d rather be home nibbling on Jimmy. At least he’d come with her to the pizza shop. If Sarah wanted to chew her out -- God only knew why she might -- then Karey wasn’t alone.

“Where are they?” Jimmy asked, then sipped his ginger ale. “Sarah and who?”

“Mandy.” She fidgeted. “I guess Mandy tossed in a name. I didn’t see it, but she says she did.”

“Kurt said she did it a month ago.” He nibbled on a fried pickle spear. “And he turned out to be a bust.”

“That guy was. I mean, she did pick up someone at the football game, and he wasn’t interested in anything besides notching his belt.” She sighed. “I don’t know what this is all about, though. I just show up when they scream.”

“Probably smart.” Jimmy draped his arm around her. “I think I see them.”

“They’re here.” She sat up straighter. “Hi.”

Sarah gestured to Mandy. “Hi,” Sarah said. “How are you? Moved all in?”

“I am.” She shifted in her seat. The sarcasm in Sarah’s voice annoyed her, but she wished Sarah could find a good guy, too. “What’s up? You called this meeting.”

Sarah folded her hands on the table, but Mandy spoke.

“It worked?” Mandy asked. “You have Jimmy and it’s for real?”

Jimmy rubbed Karey’s shoulder and said nothing.

“I threw his name in, yes, and we’re really together,” Karey said. “Did you toss a name in?”

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Sarah shrugged. “We had another fire last night.”

“We did,” Mandy said. “But when you tossed his name in, I tossed one in, too.”

“Mine?” Jimmy asked.

“Another guy,” Mandy said and blushed. “And the first one did connect with me.”

“But?” Karey asked. “Is he the one that didn’t work out?”

“Yes. I thought he could be the one, but he wasn’t. I’m worried that the magic isn’t true. What if this doesn’t work? What if it only worked for you?” Mandy asked. “I don’t want to put faith in this only to be let down again.”

Karey glanced over at Jimmy. “If I learned anything, it’s that you have to go on faith. Put yourself out there. It’s all you’ve got. When I wrote his name on the scroll, I had no idea he’d end up finding me, but it worked. You have to trust that this person you’ve chosen is worthy of you.”

Jimmy kissed Karey’s temple. “Give yourself the faith that you’re choosing someone good enough for you. Trust your judgment.”

“That’s it.” Karey nodded. “I never thought it’d happen -- us -- but it did. The magic was the nudge to get it started, but we had to finish it off.”

“See?” Mandy elbowed Sarah. “I told you.”

“It probably should be organic,” Karey said. “Don’t force it.”

“And don’t knock it when it does happen because it’s not the person you expect,” Jimmy added.

“Right.” Mandy nodded. “I need to go. I have to meet someone. See you.”

Sarah groaned again as Mandy left. “I’m still not convinced this all works. I think you got lucky.”

“We did,” Jimmy said. “Lucky she walked down my street, lucky she noticed my art, lucky I looked out the window, lucky she loves me...”

“Barf.” Sarah rolled her eyes. “I can’t quantify this.”

“Why do you need to? Let Mandy be happy and enjoy the win.” Karey shrugged. “Honestly, you should find your guy, too.”

“Get yourself a bad boy. We look bad, but we’re not,” Jimmy said. “We’re teddy bears.”

Sarah gagged, then shook her head. “Maybe the bad boy I want is terrible for me, and it’ll never work. I’ve got to go.” She left the table and hurried out of the restaurant.

“Gee. You’d think she’d see Kurt has a thing for her almost as strong as the one she has for him,” Jimmy said. “He’d give his left nut for her.”

“Whatever he did that annoyed her must’ve really done a number on her, and I’m guessing it’ll take an act of God to fix it.” Besides, Karey didn’t want to see anyone give their left nut for anything.

“God or magic.”

She laughed. “It did help us.”

“It did.” Jimmy snorted. “Speaking of helping, I forgot to tell you about Brett. He got some serious help.”

She lost her joy in an instant. The mention of Brett’s name sent a chill through her. “What happened?”

“Brett hadn’t paid the rent on the bookstore and the building owner, Joe Lordes, pulled his lease. He then offered the business lease to the workers and a guy named Scott Dennison is heading up the store now,” Jimmy said. “Since Scott’s the head and Joe can’t stand Brett, Brett is gone.”

She paused. Holy shit. “Gone? As in forever?”

“You guessed it. Run right out of town.” Jimmy polished off the last pickle spear. “He was embarrassed that people found out he’d been cheating the business for the last two years, and both Joe and Scott called him on it. He’s history.”

Relief washed over her. Gone. The man who’d tormented her was completely gone. Good. “I like that -- not that he’d been cheating, but that he’s out of here. Scott will be good for the store.” And not having to run into Brett was a load off her mind.

“I know.” He faced her in the booth. “One more thing. I wanted to show you something when they were gone.” He rolled his sleeve up. “It’s been a bitch to hide this from you, but I’ve had your name inked onto my wrist so you’re always with me.”

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She stared at the letters. He'd added her name in her handwriting onto his skin -- now included in the art all over his body.

"I love you, Karey." He threaded his free arm around her. "I want to marry you. We'll pick out a ring and date." He paused. "I should formally ask you before I assume you'll agree. Will you marry me?"

She stared into his eyes and didn't need to think this through. She'd been brought out of her shell because of him. She might be young -- younger than him -- and lacking his experience, but she knew who she wanted and why. "I love you, Jimmy. Yes, I will marry you. You're my forever."

"Mine, too." He kissed her. "I won the lottery. Thank God you took part in that spell. The magic worked."

She laughed. "It did."

She snuggled up to him and stared at the tattoo on his wrist. She'd wanted someone to respect and love her. Someone to take care of her and rescue her from her situation. He'd done that and more.

The spell had seemed ridiculous at the time and impossible at first, but it worked. She'd found her dream man, covered in tattoos and with a heart of gold. How could she argue her good fortune?

She'd found perfect magic with her summoned bad boy.