

The Stolen Twin

By Michele Pariza Wacek

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DEDICATION

To my mom, who I know is smiling down at me right now (and probably saying to my grandparents “it’s about time”) and my dad (who has already told me “it’s about time”). Thank you both for believing in me and encouraging me.

Chapter 1

My life has been dominated by two dreams.

In the first, I see my twin sister Cat at seven, the last time I ever saw her. She is all pink and golden – hair hanging in yellow ringlets, dancing blue eyes, rosy cheeks. She is beautiful, my sister. Light, sweet, charming. My opposite.

My father is pulling her as she sits in a little red wagon, laughing and waving. They're in a wild, grassy field. Birds are twittering, crickets chirping. A butterfly flits by. Gently swaying grasses and colorful wildflowers brush against her, stroking her soft skin, loving her. She laughs and caresses their long, flowing stems.

But there is more in this field than plants, insects and birds. Fairies live here too – although they usually hide when people walk by with their heavy crushing footsteps, unnatural smells and callous voices. My father, plowing through with bent back and plodding footsteps, sends them cringing and scurrying away as well.

But then they hear the tinkling sound of my sister's laughter.

Peeking from behind brown-eyed Susan's and pebbles, they see Cat in the wagon, clutching a dandelion in her fist, rubbing the yellow petals against her face. She astonishes them, seduces them, hypnotizes them. They've never seen anything like her before. Gradually, they creep out and move closer. Cat virtually sparkles in the sunlight, bright and shining. As she catches sight of the fairies, she laughs and blows them kisses.

The fairies, now completely under her spell, swarm over to her, nuzzling her face, soft arms, slender neck. She smiles, touching them back – fingers grazing over delicate wings not much more substantial than a cobweb.

More fairies emerge as my father guides her deeper into the field. The grasses become thicker, taller. The fairies cling to the blades, reaching their tiny hands out to caress Cat as she drifts by.

Finally, the queen herself comes forward, tall and majestic. She wears a dress made from white tulips and daffodils, sparkling with dew-drops. Her long, silky, golden hair is entwined with white daisies. Large

green eyes peer out from under her mass of hair. Her face is cold, all sharp angles and pale skin, but beautiful.

“This is the one,” the queen says, her voice like breaking glass.

Cat looks up, fairies tangled in her hair. She blinks as her gaze meets that of the queen’s. They stare at each other, each mesmerized by the other. Then, slowly, the queen reaches down and gathers my sister into her arms. The fairies dart out of the way, hovering above them like a cloud of gnats. The queen turns, Cat cuddled in her arms, and they disappear, vanishing into the thick grass.

My father pulls the wagon a few seconds longer before realizing something is wrong. Seeing Cat missing, he drops to the ground and begins searching fruitlessly through the grass. “Cat,” he yells over and over. “Cat, come back. Come back!”

Nothing answers him, not even a chirp from a bird. He cries her name over and over, begging her to come back, while the fairies croon over their newest prize.

My second dream is completely opposite - much like the difference between Cat and me. It begins with me and my parents in the car. We’re going to Milwaukee to visit my grandparents, but suddenly my parents take a detour. We drive down an old country road filled with potholes and thirsty cracks. My chest begins to take on a familiar heaviness.

We’re at a church, a white country church with a tall steeple and an elaborate stained glass etching of Mary and Jesus in the manger. A bell rings, deep and melodious. I’m having trouble breathing.

We walk to the graveyard behind the church, my parents in front of me, talking quietly, ignoring me (as usual). The bell continues to ring, the sound growing louder, echoing in the stillness. I stumble, trying desperately to breathe, to draw air through lungs now shrunken into a tight ball of twine. I need my inhaler, but don’t know where it is.

My parents continue to ignore me. I gasp and start to fall, but now I’m floating, floating, toward the graveyard. All I can hear is the tolling of the bell. I can’t breathe at all. My lungs burn, a bright fireball in my chest. This is it, I realize. This is the end. This is where I die.

I wake then, gasping and reaching for my inhaler. As uncomfortable as it is, I prefer it to the hot tears and heavy sick feeling that follows the fairy dream. Cat is the chosen one. I’m the disappointment.

These were the dreams that dominated my life. If I had other ones, I never remembered them. Only these two. I never told a soul about my dreams – they were my penance, my burden, my personal hell.

Until the day Cat came back, turning my life into something worse than any nightmare I ever could have imagined.

Chapter 2

I was busy admiring my gun when the voice of Brandi, my roommate, floated toward me.

“Kit, a Halloween party generally takes place in October.”

“Almost ready.”

I holstered the gun and took one last look in the mirror. Not bad for something thrown together in an afternoon. A short brown cashmere skirt, fringed leather vest, white shirt, tall brown high-heeled boots and cowboy hat. The perfect cowgirl. None of the browns matched, but that just added to the overall ragtag charm.

My hair I left loose – it hung like a black curtain almost down to the middle of my back. Normally, I wore only blush and lipstick to add color to my pale complexion, but tonight I went all out, dabbing on eye shadow and liner. My dark brown eyes were such a contradiction to my colorless skin, I often felt like a waif out of a Dickens’ novel.

I took one final glance, then scooped up my purse. Yes, I definitely liked this costume. Especially the gun.

I found Brandi in her immaculate bedroom, poking at her hair. The rich, musky scent of her expensive perfume drifted toward me. Her eyes met mine in the mirror. “You make me sick.”

I did a little pirouette. “I didn’t think I looked that good.”

She rolled her eyes. “Like I believe that.” She adjusted the pale gold scarves on her harem outfit.

“I thought you wanted to get going.”

“I do. The cab will be in here in a sec.”

“Cab? The party is two blocks from here.”

“Two long blocks. It’s windy and I don’t want my costume blowing away.”

Typical Brandi. Rich and liked to flaunt it. “Is Martha coming?”

Brandi snorted. “The mole? Hello. Are we talking about the same person here? It’s past her bedtime.”

Martha was our third roommate, nicknamed “the mole” by Brandi because she lived in the downstairs bedroom. Our original roommate, Martha’s cousin Elena, had moved out of her sorority house and into

our apartment for the sole purpose of seeing her boyfriend more. After three weeks, she decided she would rather live with her boyfriend than us. Because she didn't want her parents to know, we kept her name on the answering machine. As a consolation prize, she offered us Martha.

"She's really very nice, very sweet, no trouble at all," Elena had insisted. "She's a little strange, but harmless, really."

"Harmless?" Brandi had replied. "You make her sound like a would-be serial killer."

Elena laughed nervously. "No, no. I didn't mean it like that. She – just – she has a little trouble finding people to live with her. Nothing else. She's really quite sweet."

Brandi rolled her eyes at the second time the word "sweet" fell from Elena's mauve-colored lips. A former beauty queen, Elena had a tendency to call everyone sweet.

In the end, what we wanted didn't really matter. Elena needed someone to take over her share of the rent and Martha needed a place to stay. So three days later, we found ourselves living with our new roommate. Our new, very odd roommate.

"It IS Halloween," I said. "You'd think she might have something to do."

Brandi rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I think I saw her wearing some sort of costume today. She had on all black and her face was dead white. Oh, that's right. That's the way she always looks." She swept her purse off the rose-colored bedspread. "We're out of here."

As usual, Brandi looked fabulously seductive in her harem outfit. The thin, silky material strained at her ample breasts, yet still managed to minimize her rounded hips and thighs. Her dark brown hair glowing with blond highlights was piled on top of her head, emphasizing her high cheekbones, pouty lips and huge hazel eyes. I know my thinness bothered her, but in my opinion, I had nothing on her. Men spent more time gazing at her curves than they ever did mine.

She looked sideways at me from under her lashes. "I like your gun."

"Thanks. I do too."

"Planning to do away with Tommy?"

"If only."

We both laughed. Brandi shook her head. "Yeah, I know if I had the quarterback and captain of Riverview's winning football team

drooling over me, the first thing I would do is reach for his gun. Oops, I meant my gun.”

“Yeah, I bet you did.”

She opened the door to the apartment, letting in a gust of cold wind. “Girl, you need your head examined. You do know that, don’t you?”

I shrugged. “Don’t do commitments. He wanted to get serious. I wanted to have fun. Had no choice.”

She shut the door behind us and locked it. “Fun. You’re talking to the queen of fun. You’re a complete idiot.”

“And that’s why you broke up with Ted, is it? Or maybe it’s Fred? Gee, I can’t remember the last one.”

“Don’t get cute, sister. We’re comparing a bunch of losers to the football god.”

I rolled my eyes. She shook her head again, her smile exasperated.

We hurried to the cab, the wind sporting a knife-edge that turned it from crisp to cold. The air smelled of dead and dying things – leaves, plants, insects – and a touch of snow. I shivered. I hated fall. It felt like death to me. Cold, rotting death.

A hint of moisture brushed my cheek. Brandi licked her lips. “Crap. It’s probably going to rain.”

“It always rains on Halloween. You know that. Besides, what do you care? We’re in a cab.”

She settled in the car. “And you doubted.”

“Never again.”

Brandi smiled and told the driver our destination. I sat back as she straightened her outfit. “How do I look?”

“Hot enough to kill.”

“Perfect.” Her eyes narrowed. “Chuck better be there.”

“I’m sure Chuck and Violet both will be there.”

She glared at me. “Don’t even go there.”

I merely smiled and looked out the window.

By the time we arrived, the frat house was packed. An INXS song boomed throughout the house -- apparently it was an eighties Halloween party. Beer and shots flowed freely, mixed with the scent of cigarettes, perfume, sweat and the faint, but unmistakable sweet aroma of pot. I headed for the keg.

A few beers later, someone I barely knew dragged me into a strange drinking game. I appeared to be the loser since I ended up consuming shot after shot. Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore and decided to stumble off to the bathroom. I lurched to my feet, swaying, the world tipping, and wobbled across the room and into the hallway.

A line. Of course there would be a line. There would always be a line at a party like this. I groaned, wishing I hadn't waited until using the bathroom had become something of an emergency. At least it was quieter in the hall - the brown paneled, stained walls muffling everything but the thudding bass and drums of AC/DC's "Shook Me All Night Long."

A woman wearing an angel costume stood in front of me, her wings brushing my face. Clumsily I knocked them away.

The woman turned. "Sorry," she said and smiled.

I smiled back. "No problem."

Someone in a sexy witch costume stumbled into me, giggling, her breath stinking of Jack Daniels and tequila. "Oops," she said and started to hiccup. I stepped closer to the angel. The witch collapsed against the wall. "I have to pee so bad," she hiccupped.

The angel continued to study me, her eyes a clear sky blue. Golden wavy curls framed a face made up of delicate features and creamy skin. She looked like a porcelain doll.

"That angel costume suits you," I said, unable to drag my eyes away from her almost unworldly beauty. She reminded me of someone, but I couldn't think of who.

She raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow. "Angel?"

I blinked. No, not an angel. It was a fairy costume, pink and fluffy. "Oh, you're right. Fairy. Pretty cool."

Behind me, the witch groaned and slid to the brown tiled floor. "I don't feel so well," she mumbled between hiccups.

The fairy tilted her head and smoothed her dress. Even under the dim hallway lights, it sparkled. "Yes, it is."

She seemed so familiar, especially the soft, fluid way she moved. The hiccups behind me turned to retching. I smelled the faint odor of vomit. People started yelling about taking care of another sick one. I stumbled closer to the fairy, trying to focus my blurry vision. "What's your name?"

She tossed her hair. “Cat.”

I staggered, nearly falling. “Cat? My sister’s name was Cat.”

Cat smiled again, showing white, even teeth. “Short for Catherine I’ll bet.”

“No, short for Catalina. Can you believe it? Is that even a name? It always sounded like a car to me.”

“Really? I’m a Catalina too.” Her smile widened.

The world unexpectedly tilted sharply to the left. I put my hand against the wall. “No way. Actually, now’d you say it, you look a little like her. Actually, you look a lot like her. At least I think she’d look like that, I mean you, now. I haven’t seen her for awhile.”

She cocked her head. “Why not?”

“She’s been gone, kidnapped. When I was seven. She was seven too, we were twins.” A part of me couldn’t believe the words tumbling out of my mouth. I so rarely talked about my past, but somehow it felt right telling her.

She reached up and twisted a lock of hair around her finger. “Maybe she was kidnapped by the fairies.”

I gasped, the corners of my vision turning black. “Why ... how ... why would you say that?”

She leaned forward, almost touching me, her blue eyes so clear, so direct. “It’s the dreams, isn’t it, Kitrina? The dreams of the fairy queen. And the dreams of the church. Where you die.”

The alcohol in my system turned to ice. My brain went numb. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. “My name,” I stuttered, the only thing I could grab onto in this sea of unreality spinning around me. “How did you know my name?” Even my fingers were cold and unresponsive. Blackness roared in my ears. I blinked to steady myself, but all I could see was the blue of her eyes, like an anchor in an ocean of madness.

Ignoring my question, she leaned even closer, so close I could breathe in her scent. She smelled wild, free, a combination of fresh-cut grasses, wildflowers and the bitter cold wind of Halloween night. So different from the smoke, liquor and sweat of the party. “Listen to me, Kitrina. There’s danger here, lurking in the shadows. It hasn’t seen you yet, but it will. Tonight. It’ll seize you in its jaws and never let you go, unless you can stop it. You must be strong, stronger than you’ve ever been in your entire life, if you are to prevail. And prevail you must, for

there's more here at stake than you can possibly imagine. The innocent depend on you. You must save the innocent, because by saving the innocent you save yourself. It's the only way you can set yourself free."

She drifted back. Her pink dress shimmered in the half-light, twinkling like a thousand stars. The wings fluttered, suddenly looking real. Living and breathing, their touch as soft and insubstantial as cobwebs. Actually, the dress seemed alive too, alive and glowing and winking at me in the dimness.

She smiled, her face golden and glowing. "Don't be afraid, Kit. I'll take care of you. I'll always take care of you."

Blackness swamped me. I closed my eyes, thrust back to a time when I was six, taking swimming lessons at the YMCA, before my sickness, before Cat disappeared. Cat, as usual, had jumped in, fearless and tough. But I had hung back, terrified of the water, at the loss of control. The teacher tried to reason with me, but that just made it worse. I shook my head and flattened myself against the wall. The idea of water covering me, holding me down, keeping me from breathing, petrified me. That fear was so strong I could taste it in my mouth, coppery and thick, mixed with the sharp chemical scent of chlorine. Cat, seeing my plight, hoisted her tiny body out of the pool and ran to my side, nearly slipping on the slick surface. She took my hand and squeezed it. "Don't be afraid, Kit," she said in her authoritative voice, so odd in a six-year-old, yet somehow so comforting. "I'll take care of you. I'll always take care of you."

But she didn't take care of me. A year later she had disappeared, vanished, kidnapped by the fairies, leaving me almost dead in a sterile hospital room, never to fully recover. Not in body or in soul.

Tears pressed against my lids. I opened my eyes in anguish, searching for her. But she had disappeared, along with everyone else. I was completely alone in the hallway.

Chapter 3

The bathroom door stood open. Empty. I tottered in, shutting the door behind me and collapsing against it. Silence. Not even the stereo. My ears rang in the stillness. What the hell was going on?

My chest tightened, my breathing short and choppy. Fumbling, I reached into my purse for my inhaler. Take slow, deep breaths, I thought, sucking on the plastic instrument. Slow, deep breaths. Finally, my airways relaxed. Air rushed into my lungs, so sweet it hurt. I closed my eyes and would have toppled to the floor if the pain in my bladder hadn't reminded me why I started this trip down the rabbit's hole in the first place.

Could it really have been Cat out there, alive and well, after almost fifteen years? No. Not possible. Yet she knew things even Cat wouldn't know.

Dreaming of fairies. Dreaming of churches. Dreaming of dying.

I shook my head, trying to clear it. Everything was blurred and unreal, yet my drunkenness seemed to be draining away. Quickly. Frighteningly quickly. I needed another drink and fast.

Maybe Cat really had been kidnapped by the fairies, and now a fairy herself after years of living with them, she had returned to warn me.

But warn me of what? Impending danger? Death? I've lived with that my entire life. And what about this innocent thing? Saving the innocent? Right. I couldn't even save myself.

It's the only way you can set yourself free.

Sighing, I flushed the toilet and straightened my clothes. The place stunk of vomit, beer and urine. Stepping around piles of wet and suspicious-looking wads of paper towels, I twisted the faucet and glanced into the cracked mirror. Positively ashen. Oh God, I couldn't deal with this.

Someone banged on the door. "Excuse me, this bathroom is to share. It's not for your own private use."

Another voice piped in. "The bushes outside are adequate for puking, you know."

I washed my hands in the rusted and chipped sink, washed the tears off my face, dried off, dropped my paper towel on the floor to join its brethren, and opened the door.

Obviously I had suffered some sort of alcohol hallucination. That was the only rational explanation. The girl in the fairy costume probably had resembled Cat to some degree, thus triggering me to imagine the rest.

Outside, the stereo blared Tears for Fears' "Shout" mixed in with the dull roar of slurred voices. People were packed in the narrow hallway. A woman in a cat outfit with streaked black eye makeup gave me a dirty look before shoving past me into the bathroom. I blinked and tottered down the hallway, picking my way over and around the gaggle of bodies littering the area. Where had all these people come from? Or maybe a better question would be where had they all been a few minutes ago?

My head spun. It was the alcohol. Just the alcohol. Never mind that I now felt completely, stone-cold sober. Never mind that I may have just seen my sister for the first time in fifteen years. Never mind that she looked like a real fairy. Never mind that she even sounded like a real fairy with her cryptic messages. I closed my eyes. Alcoholic hallucination, I chanted under my breath. Only an alcoholic hallucination.

I crashed into a wide male back. "Sorry," I said, attempting to step aside when I smelled it. That unmistakable combination of Irish Spring soap and clean sweat.

Tommy.

Oh no. I tried to back up before he saw me and promptly bumped into someone behind me. The person pushed back and I fell into Tommy again. I tried sidestepping away, but Tommy had already turned around, a beer in each hand.

"Kit," he exclaimed, throwing one arm around my neck, his southern accent even more pronounced than usual. Beer sloshed down the front of my shirt, the wet cold jolting me out of my haze. "Where the hell you've been? I've been look'n all over for you."

"Been around," I said vaguely. Yeah, been talking to a fairy who resembled my kidnapped sister. Sure, I've been around. I decided not to think about it anymore. I studied Tommy instead.

He was so gorgeous. Thick, wavy dark blond hair that curled around his neck, dark green eyes with startling long lashes, high cheekbones and a full, sensuous mouth (not to mention his lean, muscular athletic body without a trace of fat). University of Riverview's star quarterback, breaker of several national records, rumored to win the Heisman Trophy this year. Despite his college successes, I thought him to be a bit too small for the NFL. The NFL, however, didn't appear to agree with me as he had already spoken to scouts.

In addition to his physical prowess, Tommy even had a brain, maintaining a solid B average. I privately referred to him as my Golden Boy, although due to our recent breakup, he wasn't mine anymore.

His gaze lingered on my body. "Cool costume. You look incredible."

I pulled away, feeling the familiar shivers tingle across my skin. Damn him. If he weren't so good in bed, this breakup would be a lot easier. "Just keep in mind I'm armed." I showed him my gun with a flourish.

His eyes widened. "An armed woman. I think all my fantasies are coming true, right now."

"Oh, you fantasize about having your dick shot off?"

He choked. "Well, actually, no. My fantasy doesn't involve a gun going off."

"I see." I made a point of looking him up and down. "So, what's this depressed existentialist thing you got going?" He wore black jeans, a black shirt and had a black cape tied around his neck.

He tried to look hurt. "Whad'ya mean? I'm Dracula."

I plucked one of his beers from his hand and drank. Christ that tasted good. Maybe I could get some of my numbness back. I still felt shaky and vulnerable. "I'll let you in on a little secret. Dracula has fangs."

"Can't drink with fangs."

"You're supposed to drink blood, not beer."

He grinned, wildly and lustfully. "Is that an invitation?"

I tossed my hair back. "Hardly. Virgins are what you're after."

He pondered this. "The blood of virgins. This definitely has some possibilities."

I finished his beer. His nearness both disturbed and excited me. “Well, before you set off on that virgin quest, Count, did you happen to notice someone wearing a pink fairy costume around here?”

He frowned. “Fairy costume? How non-PC.”

The music switched to a Duran, Duran song. I rolled my eyes. “Not that kind of fairy. A real fairy, you know, like in fairy tales? Wings and magic and everything.”

“Oh, like Tinkerbell and shit.”

Someone squeezed past me, forcing me to step closer to Tommy. “Something like that.”

He thought for a moment. “No, no Tinkerbells.”

“How about Tinkerbells wearing pink dresses?”

“Nope, none of them either.”

I sighed, deciding I had better get out of this conversation and over to the bar. Fast. “Okay, thanks anyway.”

He grabbed my arm as I started to turn away. “Kit, wait a sec. I was hoping we could talk.”

Not fast enough. I closed my eyes. “We’ve already talked.”

His hand slid up to my neck, fingers brushing against my bare skin. I began to have trouble breathing. “I still don’t know what I did wrong. Or why you don’t want to see me anymore.”

“Nothing. We just want different things, that’s all.”

He leaned closer, his breath faintly misty and warm against my cheek. My stomach felt hot and twisty, like a nest of serpents had moved in and taken control. His hand kept rubbing my neck, slowly, sensuously, sending delicious tingles down my body. “What’s so different about what we want?”

The serpents squirmed about. My mouth felt dry and hot. “I told you. You want a relationship. I want to have fun.”

“I want to have fun, too.”

I opened my eyes. His face was so close it was out of focus. The want, the need to have him lead me out of here and take me to his apartment was so powerful it almost overwhelmed me. Not just for the sex, but for the connection to another human being. I felt so empty, so alone. So utterly and completely alone. I saw now how detached I was from the human race. Sure, I had plenty of friends, acquaintances mostly, but no one I could really talk to, really connect with. After

Cat, after almost dying, I never allowed myself that luxury. I couldn't. I didn't want to hurt anyone the way I had been hurt. I refused to get involved. But now I could painfully, agonizingly, feel what I missed, and how desperately I wanted that bond.

But I knew I never could. It wasn't meant for me.

I tried to lean back, tried not to show the devastation in my eyes. "You want to get serious, too."

"I told you we can go slower. We can go as slow as you want."

Like the beer he splashed down my neck earlier, that one sentence shocked my senses, broke through the enchantment he had been weaving around me. It didn't matter how slow we went, the ending would be the same. I wasn't normal. I would never be normal. He was the Golden Boy with a Golden Future. I had no future. I could not, would not, let myself drag him down.

I backed out of his grasp. "You win. We can talk, but later. Right now a beer's calling my name."

He stepped forward. "I'll get it."

I waved him back, deftly stepping into the crowd. "My name, my beer. Now's not the time to talk anyway. We're supposed to be having fun."

"But, Kit," he called, looking so plaintive, so forlorn. I hardened my heart and gave him a cheery wave, trying to put as many people between us as fast as possible. He started toward me, but then one of his teammates grabbed him by the neck. I slunk into the crowd.

He would get over it, get over me, soon enough. There was no shortage of golden girls with golden futures who would be more than happy to console him. He could have his pick. He would be fine. Never mind how hollow, how ill I felt to think of him with another girl. This was for the best. I knew it.

"Hey, Kit. Wow, you look fab. Have you checked out Brandi?"

The fresh, wholesome, all-American and apple-pie face of Elena beamed up at me. "What?" I said, inwardly giving myself a shake. Enough about Tommy. Time to focus on the present.

She grabbed my arm and swung me around. "See? Brandi." She pointed.

My mouth dropped open. "Oh, God."

All hips and scarves, Brandi swayed seductively to a song I didn't recognize, although I suspected it wasn't from the eighties. It looked like some sort of snake dance – actually more of a cross between a snake dance, belly dance and striptease. She had managed to capture the attention of more than a dozen drooling and panting boys, but she had eyes for only one – Chuck.

“What's Violet think of all this?” I asked, as Brandi wrapped one of her scarves around Chuck's neck.

“Well, I'm no psych major, but I don't think she's a happy camper right now. What's your diagnosis?” Elena nodded to the side, her words slightly slurred. Violet stood by herself, eyes glued to the Brandi and Chuck Show. She appeared to be turning as violet as her name.

“Yeah, no happy camper there. That's my official diagnosis anyway.”

Brandi blew Chuck a kiss as she swung her hips for the next salivating guy. “She's gonna get him back,” Elena said.

“Think so?”

Chuck clapped his hand to his heart and mock staggered back. Brandi tossed her head, one gleaming lock twirled in its own dance, and whirled away.

We looked at each other. “Oh, yeah,” we both said at the same time.

Elena noticed my empty hands. “Where's your poison?”

“On my way to refill.”

Elena's gray-green eyes widened. “What? You've been reduced to getting your own beer? I don't believe it. Why haven't you snared some unsuspecting guy to fetch it for you?”

“Because they've all been snared by Brandi.”

Elena giggled as she swallowed and ended up in a coughing fit. I pounded her helpfully on the back while Gloria Gaynor belted “I Will Survive” out of the speakers, which I knew wasn't from the eighties. Brandi switched to “tough yet sexy girl” and started acting out the beginning of the song for Chuck. I wondered if she had promised the DJ a little something special at the end of the night – these songs seemed a bit too perfect for chance. Not to mention from the wrong decade.

“Come on, I’ll get my snared guy to bring you a beer,” Elena said when she could talk. “At least I will unless he’s fallen under Brandi’s spell.”

“So far, so good,” I said as Brad picked his way through the crowd toward us. “At least for the moment.”

Elena gave me a dirty look. Her curly, copper-colored hair had been replaced by a black, straight-haired wig that didn’t work at all with her skin tone. She wore a black leotard covered with some sort of silky material, high heels, and a sign that said “Do you believe in life after love?” When she turned to plant a passionate kiss on Brad’s lips, I saw the sign that hung on her back. “Gypsies, tramps and thieves.”

“Hey, Cher. You look fantastic for being a hundred and fifty years old.”

She turned back to me and smirked. “The power of plastic surgery.”

“Hey, we leavin’ or something? What’d I do to deserve that?” Brad asked.

“Please get Kit a beer. There’s someone I have to introduce her to,” Elena said.

Inwardly I groaned. Another setup. Exactly what I didn’t need.

“Elena,” I started to say, but she pounced before I could get another word out.

“He’s cute and he’s sweet. Perfect for consoling. Although, I haven’t figured out exactly why you need to be consoled, but that’s a discussion for another day.”

“Thanks, I think.”

Brad shook his head. “Definitely gone. Don’t want to be anywhere near this.”

“Just bring Kit back a beer,” Elena said.

“Elena, really,” I said as the crowd swallowed Brad up. “I think I need a little alone time right now. You know, find myself and all that shit.”

Elena snorted. “You? Right. Like I can see you sitting around smoking pot and listening to Nirvana or Pink Floyd and discussing the finer points of the meaning of life.”

“Nirvana or Pink Floyd? We’re talking two distinctly different drug trips here.”

Elena rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Let’s go meet David.” She took my arm and led me across the room. I thought again about protesting, but then I saw Tommy doing shots with a group of beefy guys and changed my mind. Maybe if I started seeing someone new, he would move on faster. Certainly worth a try.

“Hello, David,” Elena cooed, tucking her hand in the arm of a werewolf. “I’ve brought you a special treat.”

“Special treat?” I started to sputter, but then the werewolf turned around and I forgot my ire.

Large turquoise blue eyes, high cheekbones, dark blond hair curling against his forehead and under his collar. I sucked in my breath. At least Elena had the cuteness part right.

He held his hand out. “You must be Kit.”

“And you must be David.” His hand felt cool and dry. “So, what nasty things has Elena been saying about me?”

“I never,” Elena said indignantly.

“Believe me, it was all good.” He still held my hand, eyes gazing into mine. I deliberately broke the grasp and leaned closer to him.

“Don’t believe a word of it.” I smiled my most enigmatic smile.

He grinned back. “So, should I believe the nasty things then?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but something in his eyes stopped me. Maybe it was the angle, or a reflection of the light, but they suddenly looked like monster eyes – cruel and calculating, gleaming at me with a kind of hunger.

There’s danger here, lurking in the shadows. It hasn’t seen you yet, but it will. Tonight. It will seize you in its jaws and never let you go.

The room went eerily silent, exactly the way it had right after the fairy disappeared. My blood froze, my breathing stopped. My lungs felt like a huge icy hand was clutching them, squeezing the life out. Panic was like icicles exploding inside me, frozen particles imbedding themselves in my internal organs.

Never let you go.

“Kit, are you okay?”

I blinked. The room swayed, came back into focus, smelling of sweat and smoke, sounding of laughter, voices and Michael Jackson. Normal. Completely normal. For the second time that night, I felt as if

I had fallen into Lewis Carroll's LSD-induced nightmare misleadingly named "Wonderland."

David was staring at me with more than a hint of concern. My breathing hitched in my chest and I coughed. "I'm fine." I dug into my purse for my inhaler. "Just a little asthma attack, that's all."

What was going on with me? Why would I have imagined David a monster?

Why would I have imagined seeing my sister again, tonight of all nights?

And why would she be warning me against some undefined danger?

Alcoholic hallucination. That was the explanation. My breathing returned to normal and my insides thawed out. Alcoholic hallucination. Nothing else.

I put back my inhaler and smiled. "So, now what were you asking me?"