

Prelude to Magic:

*The Prequel to
Moonlight
and Illusions*

Diane Wylie

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Smashwords Edition

ath-a-na-sia [ath-uh-**ney**-zhuh] *n.* deathlessness; immortality; endless
existence

PRELUDE TO MAGIC: THE PREQUEL TO MOONLIGHT AND ILLUSIONS

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Cover design: Elaina Lee

Discover more about Diane Wylie at <http://www.dianewylie.com>

Dedication

To my husband, Ed, for your love, understanding, and support every day of our lives together. Words alone cannot express how I feel about you. You are my hero and my inspiration.

To my family and friends who cheer for me and console me when I need it. I love you all.

To anyone who has pursued a dream. Keep the faith. Dreams do come true.

Chapter One

1889

Mexico City, Mexico

“Look. See the puppet dance, amigo.” The toy-maker held the wooden controller in one hand and maneuvered his fingers to make the stringed toy hop and move. Tiny red wooden shoes clickety-clacked on the stones, and the cloth-covered arms jerked up and down.

“Look, Papa! Can I get one? Please? I promise to eat all my vegetables.”

At his wife’s nod, Stephen Elliott crouched down to watch the marionette next to his son. The happy painted smile and green hair on the toy were enough to lift anyone’s spirits, despite the sweltering temperatures. Sweat trickled down his back and his hair was damp under his wide-brimmed hat. At times like this he longed to dress as he did when he was just a cabinet maker. An open-necked shirt would be much better. He tugged at the buttoned-up collar.

Poor Ruby had even more layers on. All those petticoats under her gown had to trap the heat. But she was in good spirits, smiling at him over Calvin’s head as the boy exclaimed over the bright, colored toy.

“He would be a good friend to keep you company on our long trip home.” Stephen gave his wife a tiny nod and raised a brow.

“You must take care of it, Calvin dear. The strings can tangle easily.” Ruby, of course, saw things from a mother’s practical perspective, but she gave an answering nod of agreement.

After a few minutes of the expected bargaining, the toy maker’s brown face broke into a smile as he accepted the coins and handed Calvin the controller. Guiding the boy’s hand, the man demonstrated the figure’s actions. Finally the puppet walked away with a twitching, lurching gait under the guidance of its new owner.

The Elliott family continued through the crowded marketplace filled with the odors of fresh fish, musky leather, and the nutty smell of woven baskets. With each step the calls of the sellers enticed them to buy...at least Stephen assumed this much since he couldn’t understand Spanish.

Some tugged at his sleeve. He stopped and searched around. To his left was a tiny, wizened old woman with skin the color of a walnut.

“*Señor. Señor.* You are American illusionist?”

“At your service, Madame.” He searched for his wife and found her one stall away holding Calvin’s hand as she examined a rainbow of knitted shawls. His son walked his new puppet back and forth.

“Tonight you do magic for the governor, *sí?*”

“Yes...uh... *sí,*” he agreed, still watching his family.

Her gaze followed his. “Your *esposa?* Wife?”

“*Sí.* Mrs. Elliott.” He nodded.

“Not the one,” the gray-haired woman shook her head then her gnarled fingers took his and flipped his palm face up. Her sleight of hand rivaled his as an odd stone appeared in his open hand. It measured about an inch and a half square with rounded corners. Two rounded holes appeared like eyes and a small oblong indentation formed a mouth. The little square face was divided in half, with one side smooth and the other half engraved with a diamond pattern. The weight and feel of the stone was oddly comforting. Upon turning it over, he saw the small gray stone was smooth on the back, except for some odd markings he couldn’t decipher. Stephen met the old woman’s gaze, trying to make some sense of this. Why had she said Ruby was “not the one?” Perhaps he’d misunderstood.

“You take for good luck. Ancient Mayan charm,” she said, folding his fingers over the stone.

“Ah, yes, I read how the Mayans were an ancient civilization who settled on your country’s Yucatan peninsula. Is that correct?” He smiled. She intended to make sure he took this stone.

“Sí. Good luck. This symbol means ‘Way’ in Mayan language.”

“It means ‘good luck’ then?” Stephen turned the stone over again in his hand then checked on his family. Ruby appeared to be purchasing a bright yellow shawl.

“No, ‘Way’ mean ‘Companion Spirit.’ It bring you luck.” The old woman’s unfathomable brown eyes bored into his. “Companion Spirit is sun spirit. Only sun. ‘Way’ not for moonlight. Understand? Only sun. No moon.”

“Of course, *Señora*. I understand. The ‘Companion Spirit’ can only be in the sunlight, not in the moonlight.” Fumbling for some coins, he paid the woman. Best to keep good relations with the Mexican citizens. Ruby was looking for him now.

“Thank you. I shall treasure this greatly, *Señora*.” He slipped the stone in his pocket, tipped his hat to the odd little woman, and hurried to catch up with his family, wondering if the Mexican woman sold all the travelers passing by her table a good luck charm.

* * *

“Tonight will be your last performance before we begin our journey back to Philadelphia. Are you glad of it, my love? Or will you miss the adoration of the multitudes who come to see The Illusionist?”

Stephen checked the pockets of his black coat to make sure he had everything. Along with a piece of candy Calvin had given him were the small balls, cards, and coins he needed for the act, and the good luck piece. From their room backstage he heard the buzz of the crowd beginning to grow. Tonight could be another sellout.

Moving to his wife, he took Ruby in his arms and held her close, inhaling the light violet scent of her perfume, a gift from him while they were in France.

“I grow weary of traveling, Ruby love. Calvin has grown up these two years past. It is time he had a proper schooling...an American schooling.”

“I look forward to going home as well, husband. You need to rest after tonight. This has been hard on you, I fear. You’ve dark circles under your eyes. Didn’t you sleep well last night?” She reached up and smoothed his forehead.

“No. I kept going over every trick in my mind. I want everything to go well tonight.” Giving her a brief squeeze, careful not to wrinkle her satin gown, Stephen took a deep breath and stepped back to survey his beautiful assistant. What a perfect distraction she was on stage with her voluptuous figure, resplendent in a deep red gown and white stomacher with its low neckline. Red shoes and the red ribbons in her hair completed her ensemble.

“You are stunning, my beloved.” He gave her a gentle kiss.

“Why thank you, sir,” she responded with a playful curtsy. “Calvin is sitting with Uncle Michael tonight, so I can concentrate on helping you.”

Stephen donned his traditional red silk-lined magician’s cape and offered his arm. Why had he ever worried about accepting Thomas Marchand’s proposal to take his show on tour? The man had arranged every theater, museum, and venue to perfection, down to this final showing with the Governor of Mexico in attendance. Even his brother, Michael, had approved enough to come visit and take in the last show of his seven-country tour.

He left Ruby in the darkened wings, which were filled with various props, and stepped alone onto the stage. Stephen strode confidently to the center where a solitary table awaited for his first trick. While gas lighting existed in places like New York City and Philadelphia, torches, candles, and reflectors rimmed the stage to illuminate this room. Smoke from the lighting added to the atmosphere of mystery and helped disguise the accoutrements of his trade.

The spectators were faceless figures, barely visible to the magician. But they were out there, pulsing with life and buzzing with an undercurrent of excitement. They were like a singular, massive organism reacting as one.

“*Señors and señoritas*, my name is Stephen Elliott, The Illusionist. I come before you tonight to entertain and amaze. The laws of nature and the universe will be defied. Watch closely...”

Four blue and white teacups already sat upside down on the table. Stephen lifted each cup one by one to reveal nothing hiding underneath. With fluid and dramatic movements, he showed the audience a white ball. Placing it under the cup farthest to his left, he repeated the action for the remaining three. He slid the cups all around the table, mixing them up, then lined them up in a row again, and stopped.

Pulling his wand out of his cape, he gave each overturned cup a tap. He lifted the first cup...nothing under it...no ball. Then he lifted the second cup. Nothing. The third cup, also nothing under it. But when he lifted the last cup, all four balls came rolling out, scattering onto the floor.

The audience clapped enthusiastically.

After a moment, Stephen held up a hand for quiet. He suddenly gave a lurch, as if he were gagging, putting a hand to his mouth. Out came one white ball, then another, and another, until the balls were falling from his mouth like rain.

The people cheered. He bowed, smiling at their enthusiasm.

For the next ninety minutes, the tricks he performed became increasingly sophisticated. Sometimes Ruby assisted, and other times he did them alone.

A Mexican guitar player stepped out from stage right, positioned himself on a stool in front of the closed curtain, and settled down to strum a melody. The music emerged sweet, poignant, and low, a kind of magic in itself.

Energy surged through his muscles and bones. By the end of a performance, he needed something new, something able to astound his audience and leave them talking to each other. With luck his reputation would precede him into his own country, and he could continue this business he loved.

Ruby came up beside him, walking quietly through the dimness. Her calm and familiar presence at his side comforted and steadied him. He knew he could count on her to step on stage with a ready prop or a whispered suggestion if a trick went awry. Taking Ruby's hand, he rubbed his thumb over her knuckles.

"Are you ready, Stephen?"

"One last trick then homeward bound. The coach will be waiting in the morning to head north." He leaned over and gave her a brief kiss, full on her lush lips. She tasted of tea and honey.

"Now, Señor?" The stagehand came up on his right.

"Now," he agreed and bent to pick up a twelve-inch square box, covered with a blue velvet cloth.

Pulleys squeaked and ropes creaked as the curtain slowly opened on the set he had specially constructed for the governor's show. In the center of the stage was a small drapery-lined square alcove enclosed on three sides, its outlines slightly blurred by the dim light and smoky air.

As Stephen carried the box forward, keeping his gait smooth and his gaze on the audience, the guitar player switched to a series of chords sending a chill up his spine. He placed the covered box on the round top of a small, three-legged table.

With a flourish, he pulled off the velvet cloth to reveal a beautiful box sculpted of highly polished dark maple. Turning a small brass knob, he then opened the hinged door in the front.

The crowd grew quiet at the sight before them as the music faded away.

Inside the box was a man's head. The eyes were closed. On its head was a white turban.

Moving to the side of the alcove, Stephen raised his hand palm up, extending his fingers toward the box. "Open your eyes, Omega!" His voice bounced off the ceiling with a strange echoing quality in the momentary hush preceding the collective gasp.

Omega's dark eyes opened. The head moved back and forth.

"Give the wonderful people of Mexico City a smile, please," Stephen requested.

Obediently the corners of its mouth lifted and the head nodded. A ripple of incredulity ran through the crowd.

"Omega," the entertainer commanded. "Please recite after me. When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds..."

The disembodied head repeated the magician's recitation of the first paragraph of the U.S. Declaration of Independence with little inflection in its voice. When the last syllable drifted away, Stephen waited.

Silence.

He couldn't see his audience, so there was little he could do to detect their feelings. Did they like the new trick? His heart pounded as the silence stretched. Omega had finished and closed its eyes again. Still the silence reigned as if the people were gone. Then two people clapped hesitantly.

"Thank you, Omega!" Stephen bowed toward the box. Stepping forward, he closed the door, tapped three times on the top then opened the door again. In place of the turbaned head was a visible pile of ashes.

Gasps of surprise and muttered words in their native tongue met his ears, pleasing him.

"Thank you for your attention, *señors* and *señoritas*. This concludes tonight's show. We hope you have enjoyed our presentation of magic and mystery. Have a safe journey home to your hacienda." This time he gave a full bow to the audience, allowing his cape to billow out dramatically.

As he straightened, a commotion broke out to his right. Someone...no several people thundered up the wooden steps leading to the stage. Stephen swiveled to greet them with a smile. Anyone joining him on stage was highly unusual, but he kept calm.

Two members of the Mexican army in full uniform with guns drawn ran up and grabbed each of his arms in vise-like grips before he could move.

"Señor Stephen Elliott," the Governor of Mexico City, his honored guest, stood in front of a stunned Stephen. "You are under arrest! Usted está debajo de detención!"

"On what charge, sir?" his brother, Michael, shouted from the floor, while confusion and shock tied his own tongue.

An angry string of indecipherable Spanish was spit into Stephen's face before the governor turned toward the crowd. "I charge Mr. Stephen Elliott, also known as The Illusionist, with sorcery. Black witchcraft!"

* * *

The stone wall was cool, damp, and moldy, but he was too tired to care. Leaning back against the cell wall, Stephen tried again to figure out where he had gone wrong. He had been told the governor of Mexico City ordered his arrest. They had rushed him out of the building, into an enclosed cart, and jostled him over rough roads until the horses came to a stop.

Without any windows or light inside the prisoner's wagon, the ride lasted an eternity. Upon arriving at the prison, they dragged him out as soldiers yammered at him in a language he couldn't understand. Now he sat in a tiny cell on a dank cot. A rusting bucket stood in the corner, barely visible, but its contents were abundantly noticeable to his nose. The light from the flickering tallow candle in the corridor could not penetrate the darkness surrounding him.

A string of mumbled Spanish words came from the man in the cell to his right. The only other sounds were dripping water somewhere and an odd scratching noise.

He fingered a hole in the knee of his trousers. Someone had ripped off his cape in the melee, nearly choking him before the button holding it had torn off. Pushing a hand through his hair, Stephen grimaced when he touched the sore spot on the top of his

head. His fingertips felt wetness there. Must be blood. There had to be other small injuries and bruises on his body after the rough treatment he had unjustly received.

He had nothing to do but wait. Crossing his arms over his chest. Stephen closed his eyes then immediately opened them again as something small moved across his foot. He shuddered. A rat!

As time marched on and no one appeared to release him, Stephen gave in to his bone deep weariness, worrying about the welfare of his wife and child, as he drifted to sleep without any awareness of doing so.

Light finally penetrated Stephen's eyelids, jolting him from a fitful sleep. Confusion clouded his thoughts. *Where was this place? Another inn?* It took him a few minutes before he remembered what country he was in and why he was alone in a stinking hovel. Despondency seeped into his soul and lodged in his throat. He swallowed to release the tightness, but his mouth was dry as the Mexican soil.

A brilliant shaft of moonlight fell across the filthy cot, hitting him full in the face through the barred window. The moon hung in the sky, round and yellow, out there where people were free. Out there where Ruby and Calvin were, and he was not.

His young son had given him a bit of rock candy from the local market for safe keeping. They had planned to eat dinner after the performance, but that, of course, had not happened. Groping in his pocket, he found Cal's chunk of candy and another hard object. Drawing out the items, Stephen popped the sweet into his mouth. The sugar hit his tongue, and he sucked gratefully. A simple candy had never tasted so good.

Opening his hand, he studied the other solid object; the ancient Mayan charm the old woman had given him. The odd little face of the *Companion Spirit* looked back at him, its smooth side catching the moonlight. The tiny wizened lady had also named it the *Way*. What sort of a name was that?

"What are you, little stone...the way to find a *Companion Spirit*? I already have my life-long companion...my Ruby. Can you bring me good luck, little charm, and help me get back to her?"

The stone face just sat there looking cheerful, but blank. Stephen sighed. Getting thrown into jail for trying to amaze and entertain people didn't seem fair. The events of the night must be taking a toll on him; he was talking to a glowing stone.

Wait a minute...the stone is brighter. As he stared at it, the light grew even more luminous. The intensity changed from yellow to white. The brilliance of it seared his eyes. He shielded them with his free hand.

Then the charm grew warmer. It pulsed in his palm until the heat and blinding light made the thing impossible to hold. The moon! The old woman had told him, no moon!

Stephen threw the stone across the room, but the *Companion Spirit* did not land outside the moonbeam's reach. The light intensified. White light filled the tiny cell and penetrated his head. A stunning pain radiated through his body, and he collapsed.

* * *

"Señor Elliott. Wake up. El Señor usted tiene una visitante."

Stephen forced his eyes open. A pounding headache split his skull as if he had been imbibing the night before. The guard gave him a strange look then turned heel and left.

"Are you all right?" Michael stood on the other side of the cell door. Groaning, Stephen staggered to his feet and lurched to the bars, holding on for support.

"I've been better. How are Ruby and Calvin?"

His brother put a hand over his. The human touch helped steady Stephen.

"Upset, but all right. I wanted to see you first, before I brought her in, to make sure you hadn't been badly mistreated. Have you?" Michael's blue eyes raked him up and down.

"They were not exactly welcoming. Do you know what happened? Why did they accuse me of sorcery? Can you get me released?"

"Slow down, Stephen. Is that dried blood in your hair?"

Reflexively, Stephen touched the top of his head and remembered. "It doesn't matter. Tell me what you know."

"Omega was the problem. The governor thinks you had a real disembodied head in the cabinet. Apparently they believe strongly in witchcraft and the black arts here."

"But didn't you show them the mirrors covering Carlos' body, and the hole where he put his head?"

Michael had been downcast before and now he was even sadder. "The crowd got out of hand and smashed the Omega cabinet, table, and mirrors before I could show them." He reached through the bars and put both hands on Stephen's shoulders...something worse was coming. "They went backstage and destroyed everything. The crowd launched a full-scale riot. I had to get Ruby and Calvin out of there. I'm sorry I wasn't able to stop them. Everything is ruined."

Gone? Everything is gone? Stephen leaned his head against the cold bars. "Thank you, Michael. Thank you for protecting my family." He sighed. "All right. It doesn't matter if everything is demolished. We have enough money to buy more props. When can I get out?"

He raised his head to study Michael's face and didn't like what he saw there.

"There's another problem. Without the cabinet to show Governor Diaz how the trick works, I wanted to get Carlos to explain his role."

"But?"

"Well, Carlos ran off when the crowd got angry and I haven't been able to find him. But I will. I promise I'll get you out."

"Didn't you and Ruby explain the trick?"

Michael's expression became rueful. "I tried, but I don't speak Spanish. I don't know what he thought I was saying, but he only appeared angrier."

Stephen's head spun. Each heartbeat pressed against the back of his eyes. He rubbed his temples.

"Headache?"

When he nodded, Michael appeared sympathetic. "Your clothes are torn, too. They roughed you up, didn't they?" Then his expression changed. "Did something else

happen last night? When I asked for you, the guards reacted as if I was asking to see the devil himself. Pure fear was on their faces, I say.”

“I had an odd dream.” Stephen plunged his hand into his pants pocket. The Mayan charm was inside. He couldn’t remember retrieving it after he’d thrown it. Without thinking he pulled it out.

“You dreamt about a stone?” Michael asked.

“Certainly unusual, but true. The stone glowed.”

Michael plucked the little stone from his hand just as Stephen was about to put it away before something else happened. Immediately a rush of red-hot rage surged through his entire body with a surprising intensity. He had to clench his teeth and force himself to be still when all he wanted to do was snatch the charm back. *It is mine! Mine!* The child-like demand repeated itself inside his head, and he fairly trembled with an incomprehensible need for the thing.

Apparently oblivious to Stephen’s mood swing, his brother shrugged and dropped the Mayan artifact back into his outstretched palm. Immediately the anger dissipated and Stephen’s heartbeat resumed a normal rhythm. He rubbed a hand over his face trying to fathom the metamorphosis and carefully returned the *Companion Spirit* to its resting place in his pocket.

“Will you be all right to see Ru –”

“Stephen!” A door banged open and the rustle of skirts interrupted Michael’s question.

Ruby’s arms reached through the bars, and he went into her welcoming embrace thankfully. If ever he needed the loving touch of his wife, he needed her now. His world had been turned upside down in the space of a few hours. What had been the best experience of his life was now the worst.

“My darling! I have been frantic to see you.” She repeated Michael’s earlier action and scanned him up and down. “They’ve hurt you! The barbarians! They’ve accused you of evil and done evil upon you.”

Abruptly she swung around to his brother. “Would you mind very much going out to stay with Calvin? He’s waiting in the front room. I would not allow him to come back, and I couldn’t wait any longer to see Stephen.”

“Of course, Ruby.”

Before Michael had even reached the door, Ruby had stretched out her hand and pulled Stephen’s right hand through the bars. For a moment, she held it against her face then tenderly kissed his scraped knuckles.

“How I’ve worried about you, husband,” she said quietly.

He only nodded, his emotions so raw and powerful speech became impossible. The wild anger from moments ago had been replaced by a profound sadness, which gripped him by the throat and chest, making them constrict.

“We’ll find someone who can translate for us and put this nightmare behind us soon.” The confidence in her voice was greater than his feelings at the moment.

Stephen cleared his throat and focused his thoughts on his wife.

“Not to worry, my love. The worst is behind us now. I can, perhaps, explain the Omega trick by way of a drawing. Can you ask Michael to get some paper and pen and arrange a meeting with the governor?”

She agreed and hurried out, leaving Stephen alone again. A few minutes later the same small, mustachioed guard who had come in earlier brought him bread and a tin cup of strong, bitter coffee.

He thanked the man, but only got a frightened look in return as the guard backed away from him, leaving quickly.

As he sat chewing the stale breakfast, Stephen put his hand in his pocket and slowly drew out the little square stone. Cautiously exposing the charm to the weak daylight from the small barred window, he was ready to shove it back into its hiding place should it start to glow again. It didn't. The little happy, half-smooth, half-checkered face remained unchanged, unmoved.

What had happened last night? Was it real or was it just a dream? Had the guard heard him screaming? Was this the reason for their fear Michael spoke of? There were so many questions and so few answers.

Over the next five days, he was left alone, the only time he saw anyone was when the same guard appeared to bring him one meal a day. It normally consisted of stale bread or a corn tortilla, perhaps with a little meat or some beans. Stephen's belly growled often and loudly.

But he was little bothered by the physical discomforts of his imprisonment, suffering more from the lack of contact with his family. No visits from Michael or Ruby came to give him hope, and he was left with only his overactive imagination and the *Companion Spirit* Mayan stone for company.

Hour after hour he lay on the damp cot in the dim cell with his fingers in his pocket touching the little charm. When he took his hand away from it, despair fell like a blanket around his shoulders, threatening to overwhelm him. But the warmth and solidity of the icon soothed and comforted.

As night fell and the moon beams made their way between the clouds to fall again on Stephen's face, the temptation to expose the Mayan relic to the light seized him. He wanted a chance to see once more what sort of magic might occur. He fingered the stone in his pocket for a moment, hesitating, then pulled it out, curling his fist around it.

Creating the best magic show possible was his dream. Rebuilding the cabinet needed for Omega would be simple, and he would resurrect the trick. The people of Philadelphia would not be as superstitious as the Mexicans; of this he had no doubt. But the time had come to add something else to draw newcomers, once Omega had been debuted in his hometown. It would be a feather in his cap to be able to rig some wiring and perform levitation.

Caught up in the idea, Stephen got off the cot and stood looking around the dingy cell. He spied the only other item available, the waste bucket. Taking his magician's stance, feet splayed apart, he performed the customary sweeping motion with his arms; a dramatic gesture Ruby had suggested to display the red silk lining of the magician's cape. Now, of course, he would need to replace the cape as well.

Able to get lost in daydreams since he was a small boy, Stephen had no trouble now giving himself over to the fantasy, even though the circumstances were beyond unpleasant. No matter how many times he had performed, it always gave him a rush of excitement.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” he said in a hushed, but theatrical tone. “I, The Illusionist, will attempt to defy the powers of nature. Watch closely as I attempt to raise this...hmm...this woman...high into the air.”

He held his left hand out, palm up toward the stinking bucket. Fluttering his fingers slightly, he pretended to strain against a heavy weight as he stepped forward into the bright moonlight.

Closing his eyes, he imagined the crowd watching with rapt attention as the stage hands raised the platform holding a recumbent Ruby. He opened his fingers with the good luck charm resting in his palm.

A burning sensation traveled up his outstretched right arm across his shoulders to his left elbow. His eyes flew open. A greenish-yellow glow engulfed his left arm from shoulder to fingertips.

Stifling a cry, he attempted to lower his arm. He couldn't move it. Light shot out of each fingertip, striking the bucket. It vibrated and rocked as he watched silently, eyes watering with the pain. Slowly, shakily, the bucket lifted off the ground. One inch. Two. Five inches.

Stephen's whole body trembled now.

Crash!

The bucket came down and tipped over, spilling the effluent, which flowed over the dirt floor.

A string of Spanish curses erupted from the cells around him.

Unable to stand a moment longer, Stephen fell to his knees, below the reach of the moonlight. The glow disappeared and with it the burning pain.

Gulping air and dripping with sweat, he remained in the same position waiting for his heart to slow its wild beating. He let his head drop, unable to escape the stench soaking into the earth nearby.

Finally, gathering enough strength to move, he crawled onto the cot, sprawling on his stomach exhausted. Slowly opening his right hand again, he stared at the *Companion Spirit*. The little stone was barely visible in the dimness, but its face stared back at him, the pleasant expression unchanging.

Chapter Two

Two Months Later
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Someone knocked at the front door, but Stephen was too engrossed with his ledgers to get up. Ruby would take care of it. The woman was a tireless wonder. She had found their new house and arranged everything so quickly. All of the furniture had been purchased and was in place. All of their clothes and Calvin's toys were already unpacked.

"Thank you so much for coming, Michael," her melodious voice rang out clearly. Ruby was admitting his brother. Stephen started to rise from his seat just inside the elegant, completely stocked library off the front hall, but paused when he heard Ruby speak again.

"Stephen is busy in his workshop again and doesn't know I've asked you to come." Soft rustling noises accompanied the removal of his brother's coat and hat.

"I can't stay long, Ruby, I've had several new clients since our return from Mexico."

"Mexico!" The bitterness in his wife's voice was evident. "Mexico ruined our lives."

"What do you mean?"

"You know Stephen came home from Mexico exhausted and ill."

"Yes," Michael's voice was well-modulated and calm in the face of the agitation growing in Ruby's. "But he recovered fully, did he not?"

"He did, but he seems to relapse over and over."

Michael's professional tone gave way to confusion. "I'm sure I don't know what you've seen, Ruby. When last I saw my brother two days ago, he never looked more fit."

"No, no, Michael. I just cannot explain myself with justice. Stephen spends long hours in his workshop. He thinks I am sleeping when he comes to bed, but I see the way he looks. It just tears my heart out to see him tremble with weakness, so exhausted he can barely stand."

Hearing his wife's anguish nearly caused Stephen to leap from his hiding place to reassure her he was hale and hearty.

"At first he needed to sleep an entire day to recover from one night in the workshop," Ruby continued, clearly upset. "Gradually he has required less and less recovery time, but every session he can hardly make the trip across the lawn. I've seen him stumble and fall more than once." She paused for a moment and added, "I'm concerned for his health."

Their voices faded away as they walked to the back of the house, most likely headed to the fancy new sunroom.

Dropping the quill he had been using to make entries into the ledgers, Stephen rubbed his temples. In a way, Ruby was right. Everything had changed since Mexico.

Although he had been able to win back his freedom by drawing and pantomiming the Omega trick for Governor Diaz, the trip back to Philadelphia by stage coach had left

him humiliatingly debilitated. Since he had come of age, Stephen had never been lacking in physical strength and prided himself on his health and abilities, so the loss was hard to bear.

Pushing to his feet, he went to the sideboard, poured himself a small glass of whiskey, and gulped it down.

What should he tell his wife and brother? Could he say he had not only recovered his strength, but since the *Companion Spirit* had come into his life, he was...different?

Once they moved into their new house, complete with a separate workshop for his carpentry and magical prop-making, he had been experimenting with magic. This time, however, the tricks were not all smoke and mirrors and sleight of hand. He could perform *real* magic.

Stephen splashed another bit of whiskey into the glass and gulped down the drink. The alcohol made his eyes water as it burned a path to his stomach. He normally did not indulge in spirits, but his mind needed soothing.

Long ago he and Ruby had agreed to keep no secrets from each other and, until Mexico, they had not. How could he possibly tell her what happened when the Mayan charm was exposed to moonlight? He could hardly believe it himself. This was 1889! They were not living in the dark ages of witchcraft and sorcery. This was America, where educated and thoughtful men had shaped a new nation. How inconceivable a tiny ancient stone could do what it did, and yet...

Light footsteps approached. Ruby was coming. Quickly settling himself back at the mahogany desk, Stephen bent his head to the ledger.

"There you are, my darling."

He looked up and gave her his best, most cheerful smile. "Were you seeking me for something?"

"Yes. Your brother has arrived for a visit. I'm asking him to stay for dinner. Would you like to join us for tea in the sun room?"

His wife's guilt was as plain as the smile on her lovely face. After twelve years of marriage, he prided himself on sensing his beloved's moods and feelings, and she was culpable. Her gaze met his and slid away.

"I didn't know Michael was visiting today," he said, watching her face closely.

"Um, it was a surprise. He was calling on a client nearby," she responded

Her statement hit him a blow. She lied. Had their relationship come to this? Were her lies any worse than his secret?

As he followed the dark-haired beauty he married, Stephen briefly considered telling them both about the *Companion Spirit*, and the powers he had discovered. Then it occurred to him they might try to take the little stone away. An irrational, hot rage flooded his body at the thought. *No!* It could not, and would not happen. Plunging his hand into the pocket of his jacket, his fingers wrapped about the Mayan charm.

"Why hello, Michael. What a surprise to see you here today." Stephen was pleased to hear the control he had over his voice. Within seconds his heartbeat slowed to normal and he took a seat next to Ruby on the sofa in the cheerful sunroom, decorated in bright colors and living plants in large pots.

"I've business in the area, but I wished to see for myself how you've been faring," his brother replied, giving him an assessing look Stephen had come to know all too well of late.

"Fit as a fiddle, right sweetheart?" he responded, reaching over to give Ruby a pat on her skirt-covered knee.

She too looked him up and down. "You do appear to be well now, Stephen, but I must be honest with you. I fear for your health each night when you are out in your workshop."

For a few seconds he considered refuting her claims, but decided to let this little drama proceed.

"Ruby tells me you've been working yourself to exhaustion each night," Michael accused.

"Are you really so worried, Ruby?" Stephen took her hand in his. He was sincerely touched by her concern.

"Yes, I am." She met his gaze and held it, in her determination to bring him to task.

"If it will help ease your mind, I promise to reduce my time there. I just want to perfect a few new tricks before we go back on stage."

"Are you thinking of performing again so soon?" Michael took a sip of his tea as he settled back to continue the conversation. Stephen noticed the prominent veins and dark spots on the back of his brother's hands...the hands of an aging man.

As Michael continued to ask questions about whether they would be performing the Omega act and asked about other specific tricks, Stephen gave the answers his brother sought. He withdrew his hand from Ruby's, glancing down at the back of his own hand. The skin looked the same as always...smooth and unblemished. He raised his head to answer another question.

"Oh, I really doubt the audience in Philadelphia will react as badly to the Omega trick as the Mexicans. I made a new cabinet for Omega. It is larger so we don't have to worry about the size of the actor we use."

There were only five years difference between him and Michael. Would he have old hands in only five more years? His brother had turned forty a month ago. While growing up they had looked quite similar, but now Michael's hair was liberally sprinkled with gray.

With effort Stephen forced himself to concentrate on the conversation, and the next hour passed pleasantly enough.

Later, as he listened to Calvin reading from his school book before bed, he wondered if tonight would be the night he learned to control the power given to him through the *Companion Spirit* stone.

Stephen looked past his son to the window. The moon was round and bright tonight. A full moon was the most powerful time for magic...ancient Mayan magic.

Ruby slipped into the room quietly, but Stephen knew she was there, as he always sensed her presence. The ties between them were very strong. From the minute he knew she was the woman for him, he had given a part of himself over.

He turned his head and gave her a smile, only partially listening to the story Calvin was reading.

"P-pre-kis-ee."

"Precise, Cal," he corrected.

"Precise is the way of the..." the boy continued.

A full year of courtship and twelve wonderful years of marriage. He still remembered very well the day she and her father walked into the cabinet shop where he worked before becoming The Illusionist.

Her dark shining hair caught his eye first. He had been carrying a large pine table into the front of the shop. When he lowered it to the floor, he had locked eyes with a vision dressed in blue, which perfectly complimented her beautiful blue eyes. She had stolen his heart and possessed it still.

"Time for bed, Calvin," she said.

"Yes, Mama." The book shut with a snap. Stephen suspected his son was all too willing to stop reading. "Good night, Papa and Mama."

Ruby leaned down and kissed her son on the cheek. "I'll be upstairs in a few minutes to tuck you in. I need to speak to your father first."

When Cal had thumped his way up the stairs and into his room, Stephen rose and poked the logs in the fireplace apart to allow the fire to cool. Behind him Ruby was snuffing the candles one by one, throwing the room into increasing darkness until only one candle glowed.

When he turned, she stood in a puddle of moonlight so bright he dared not join her for fear of stimulating the stone hidden in his pocket. He took a seat on the sofa, deep in the shadows and patted the spot beside him. When she settled her skirts, he put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer and pressing a kiss on her pert little nose.

"What is it you wish to discuss, my dear?" He slid his hand down until he was able to reach around and cup her breast. The weight of it in his hand was satisfying and arousing at once. He was very, very glad Ruby avoided corsets on most days.

"Oooh. You are distracting me, husband, when we have something serious to discuss."

"Oh, yes? Would that topic include heading up to bed with me now?"

"In a few minutes—" She squeaked and batted his hand away when he gently squeezed her breast. "First I want to know if you meant what you said about spending less time in the workshop?"

"If it will ease your mind." But even as he spoke, he knew it would not hold true. The lure of magic was calling him now, second only to the desire to make love to his wife.

"Good." Ruby stood and took his hand to urge him up as well. "I know you will be honest with me." She smiled, her teeth shining in the dim candlelight. "Shall we retire to our room?"

"Most definitely," he agreed.

A few hours later he lay beside Ruby on their fine new feather bed, hearing the creak of the bed ropes as he rolled onto his side. His body was relaxed and satiated, and

he hoped his wife's was as well. Their lovemaking had seemed more intense since they had come home again. Every sensation was magnified and multiplied as if his faculties were sharper and sense of touch more receptive.

Stephen pressed his naked body against her bare back and bottom, wrapped his arms around her stomach, and pulled her close. She gave a little sigh and snuggled her face into the crook of his arm. Lifting his head, he looked out of the window beyond the bed. Clouds were gathering, blocking out the moon.

Tonight he would keep his word to Ruby. Without the light from Old Man Moon, the *Companion Spirit* had no powers to give. It would take time, patience, and plenty of trial and error, but he would harness the power of the stone. Then The Illusionist would draw people from all over the country!

Chapter Three

For months he had been working on a new act. The coin and card tricks were practiced with Calvin and Ruby as his audience. His young son was particularly fond of coin tricks, especially if he got to keep the money pulled from behind his ears. After much trial and error, Stephen fashioned a special retractable birdcage and table for the third act. He gave the hinge for the new Omega cabinet another few drops of oil so the door opened and closed without a sound.

Rag in hand; he polished the wood one last time. Tomorrow he and Jacob would begin packing up the new set of props for his first show in Philadelphia since their return from touring. With the light outside fading as the days grew shorter, Stephen took a few minutes to light the oil lamp and candles. He tossed the last few pieces of wood into the pot bellied stove to ward off the dropping temperatures. To finish reviewing the checklist tonight he would need more wood to keep the heat going for another hour or two.

Opening the door, he stepped out into the yard and glanced toward the main house. Candlelight glowed in the upstairs windows. Ruby was getting Calvin ready for bed. Stephen smiled into the darkness as he made his way to the stack of firewood near the edge of the yard. As soon as the weather turned cold enough he would teach his son how to ice skate, just as he promised. He and Ruby were pretty good skaters, and had spent many a winter day engaged in this pleasant sport. The smell of burning wood from the fireplace drifted in on a breeze.

Stephen inhaled a lungful of crisp cool air and pulled his old coat a little tighter before bending to gather up an armload of wood. The wind picked up, blowing the clouds clear of the full moon, allowing bright pale yellow light to reflect off the gold of his wedding ring.

Moonlight! Stephen's blood surged through his veins and his heart beat a little faster. Tonight the conditions would be perfect to experience with the Mayan stone again. He kept his promise to Ruby and had not stayed late in the workshop for weeks. The show was booked and everything was ready – except he still didn't have a special closing act – the one designed to leave them gasping with surprise and talking for days. The disembodied Omega head was good, but it would not compare to a *real* levitation. Perhaps tonight he could conquer the mystery of the Mayan charm. If he could harness and control its power, oh the wonders he could perform!

Eager to get started, he hurried back into the one-room workshop, stoked the fire, shed his coat, and prepared the room. He snuffed out all of the candles and turned the wick on the oil lamp down low, plunging the room into near total darkness. Winding around mirrors, cabinets, cartons of props, and cages filled with doves, Stephen made his way to the middle of the room then stretched up and grasped the window cover lever. He had arranged the construction of a special window, built into the slanted roof of the workshop ostensibly to let in daylight, but actually intended to let in magical moonlight as well.

With a bit of effort, he released the mechanism securing the panel of wood covering the window. The design should keep his young son from opening the panel at an inopportune time. Still holding the handle, Stephen slid the panel into its pocket just like the doors they had in the house. Silvery moonlight poured in through the glass panes, creating a bright square on the hard wood floor.

First, he planned a simple exercise for practice. Stephen took out three brightly painted wooden balls from a wooden box. After doing a little juggling with them just for fun, he went to a table outside the square of light and placed the red, blue, and yellow balls carefully on the table, making sure they didn't roll off.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the center of the moonlight, flipped open the top button of his shirt, and pulled out the velvet pouch hanging from a leather thong around his neck.

"Time to come and play, little *Companion Spirit*," he murmured then plunged his fingers inside the thick bag, wrapped them tightly around the square stone, and drew it out. Bracing himself for the consequences, Stephen turned his hand palm up and opened his fingers.

The silvery beam of moonlight coalesced at the stone. Almost immediately the *Companion Spirit* glowed. For a few seconds he just watched, amazed again at the unexplainable reaction to the light. When the brilliance became too intense, he had to avert his gaze. Warmth grew in the Mayan stone, but he didn't drop it. The stone never burned his skin, no matter how hot it felt. As expected, the tingling sensation grew and radiated up his arm.

Turning his head, he raised his opposite hand and pointed his finger at the red ball on the left side of the table. A concentrated beam of yellow-green light shot from his fingertip and struck the wooden ball with so much force the ball flew backwards and hit the wall. *Too strong.*

Perspiration broke out all over his body and trickled down his back. The pain was starting. *Hurry now.* He pointed at the blue ball. The light hit the ball and rolled the sphere backwards.

Concentrate. The ball stopped right on the edge of the table.

Lift. Trembling as he struggled to control the power, Stephen gradually raised his arm. The ball wobbled as it rose an inch, then two and three until it hovered six inches off the table.

Pain and heat spread down his torso to his legs. His muscles quivered and he gasped for breath.

"Enough!"

Slamming his fingers over the ancient stone, Stephen stumbled out of the moonlight, falling to his knees, panting for air. He fumbled until he got the black velvet pouch opened and dropped the *Companion Spirit* inside.

Still gulping air with the now familiar exhaustion dragging at his limbs, he crawled to the wooden bench by the stove and pulled his body onto it. He had left a pillow there for just this eventuality and lay down, stretching out as best he could to recover a bit.

I did it! I made the ball levitate!

It had taken months of periodic trials to reach this minor victory. He had to harness and tolerate the energy channeled by the stone to present an act to an audience. How much longer he would need to practice, he had no idea, but the trick would surpass all others!

"You promised me, Stephen Elliott!"

"W-wha?" Wrenching his eyes open, he gazed blearily into the angry face of his wife. Her hair hung loose around her shoulders and her Irish temper was obviously riled as she shook him by the shoulders.

Grabbing his arm, she gave it a yank and dragged him off the narrow bench. He hit the floor with a loud thump. Rolling onto his back, he splayed out both arms and legs and closed his eyes.

"Go ahead. Do your worst, woman."

Silence ensued, broken only by angry-sounding breathing coming from Ruby. Stephen began to drift off to sleep again.

"Oooh! You stubborn, bull-headed, loveable man!"

Opening his eyes reluctantly, he gazed up at the fiery woman and grinned. "It will be a good show on Saturday. Maybe we can get Calvin the Latin tutor he needs."

She looked a tad less angry after hearing this. Finally, her face relaxed. Standing next to him she held both hands out, the long, belled sleeves of her white dressing gown fell over her slender wrists.

"Come on."

Stephen took her hands and instead of rising as she expected, he pulled his wife on top of his chest. He wrapped his arms around her, kissing her neck as she giggled like a school girl. Visions of his triumph this night replayed in his head. Real levitation. He had done it once and knew he could do it again. The success made him feel wonderful...and amorous. Out here they could make all the noise they wanted without disturbing their young son. Rolling Ruby onto her back, he kissed his way into her gown. Tonight he would make her cry out with pleasure.

* * *

The first performance back in Philadelphia was a rousing success for The Illusionist. People came from miles around to see the disembodied Omega talk. His countrymen were less superstitious than the Mexicans had been, so he didn't have to repeat his trip to jail. Instead, the applause had been wonderful music to his ears. Pleasing folks in foreign countries had been good, but making people from America happy was even better. A new and exciting time had come for the Elliotts.

After the last well-wisher left backstage, Stephen, Ruby, and Michael went back to the little dressing room for a celebratory glass of wine. They had started the custom while touring in France, and it turned out to be a great way to relax after a stressful night.

"Hello, folks." Jacob waited for them with four glasses of wine already sitting on the table. The young man had not objected in the least, nor had the owners of the Walnut Street Theater, when the Elliotts moved in the furniture from their previous house. They had even donated their old bed for Jacob's third floor flat in the building.

Handing his cape to Ruby, Stephen sank into the over-stuffed sofa with a sigh. He really preferred this old furniture to the stylish new pieces, but he would never upset his wife by saying so.

"It went well tonight," Michael said, folding his lanky frame into the wing-back chair. "I must tell you, I was quite impressed by the act you did with the two chairs."

Ruby, the little tease, gave Stephen a wink. She had been the one to suggest the trick.

"Thank you. The credit belongs to my wife. This was her idea."

She gave him a glass and settled her skirts as she sat beside him. "I thought it was terrific, Stephen. Taking off your shirt was a little gift for the women in the audience, darling. We all love a muscular physique. Stretching your body out straight between the two chairs was a test of strength to impress the men in attendance." With a smile, she gave his arm a squeeze.

"You've changed since you've come back from touring, Mr. Elliott." Jacob's young face radiated enthusiasm.

"I'd have to agree with you, Jacob," Michael said. "Our magician has never looked more fit, and you were worried about his health, Ruby."

"I still think you work too hard, Stephen." Ruby's voice held a hint of a pout. She knew he would not stop working, no matter how much she fussed.

"This is my dream, sweetheart. Most men never realize their true ambition. I intend to make the most of this success while it lasts."

Michael held up his glass. "To a long and magical dream."

"Cheers!" They chorused, clinking glasses.

* * *

His performances were growing stale and Stephen knew it. Despite taking the show to various cities around the United States, the crowds had been slowly dwindling over the past few months. They needed to make a change.

Tonight was perfect for engaging in some intense practice, he decided as he crossed the back yard to the small, whitewashed workshop. A full moon smiled down on Pennsylvania, casting the shrubs and spring flowers into glowing silvery light. Even ensconced in the thick velvet pouch around his neck, he could feel the *Companion Spirit's* warmth begin to grow.

Other magicians had been performing so called "levitations," but Stephen knew they had been using wires to suspend their assistants and objects. They didn't possess what he did. Only he had the ancient Mayan artifact, which truly held the power of magic.

The corners of his mouth tugged upward as he darkened the room, opened the ceiling panel, and positioned himself facing six colored balls sitting on a table. He took out the stone and held it in the palm of one hand, exposing it to the strong moonlight.

Power surged through his body and radiated to his opposite hand. By now Stephen's tolerance to the energy had grown to where the pain was negligible. His control had also increased. Through concentration and positioning of his fingers to

guide the beams of light, he was able to get all six balls to lift off the table, and he could command them to spin one by one.

This trick was sure to impress The Illusionist's fans.

Bang!

The door to the workshop opened violently, letting in a gust of moist spring air. Stephen cut his eyes to the door finding Michael standing there, his eyes wide as he beheld the rotating balls hanging suspended in the air. "My God, Stephen! You are a sorcerer!"

"Papa!" On Michael's heels came Calvin. In a split second, the boy's eyes grew as wide as his uncle's.

The distraction of those two broke Stephen's concentration and all six balls fell clattering to the floor. Only through presence of mind did Stephen manage to prevent accidental misdirection of the power and close his fingers over the little stone. He tucked it into the pouch, breathing hard. The strong energy running through him during these sessions stimulated every cell in his body.

Michael and Calvin both stopped in the doorway with identical stunned expressions, watching him close the panel over the roof's window.

"Shut the door, Michael, and I'll explain."

Without a word, his brother closed the door and urged Calvin farther into the room.

Stephen sat on the bench, trying to gather his wits and strength. The others stood staring at him. How similar their facial structures and builds were. His son was twelve years old now, and the Elliott heritage ran strong in his blood. Except, he did have auburn hair, fair coloring, and freckles he had inherited from Ruby's family. Cal hated those freckles, but Stephen counted each one as precious gifts from his wife.

"Papa, how did you do that?" Cal was clearly excited, now he had recovered from his initial shock. He walked over to the balls and bent over, his hand outstretched toward the colorful spheres.

"Stop!" Michael ran over and pulled Cal away. "Don't touch them. You don't know what will happen!"

"It's all right, Michael. They're just ordinary balls," Stephen told him.

Cal glanced at his uncle, shrugged, and headed back to pick up and examine the balls.

Michael stomped around the room, lighting the available candles, grumbling under his breath about how the place was "too dark" and "foolish brother of mine."

With the moonlight blocked out and candlelight illuminating the room, Stephen began telling his brother and son the whole story. About ten minutes into his explanation of the levitation they had witnessed, the door to the workshop opened again. Ruby, wearing a cloak over her dressing gown came in looking worried.

"What is going on? I thought you had left, Michael? Calvin, dear, it is bed time."

"Mother, wait until you hear what Papa can do!" Cal burst out before Stephen could stop him.

Ruby frowned. "Whatever is he talking about, Stephen?"

With a sigh of resignation, Stephen began his story at the beginning again, relating the words of the Mexican peddler, his experience at the jail, and leading up to the experiments he had been conducting. For Ruby's peace of mind, or for his own, he didn't tell her how channeling the power of the stone through his body actually hurt.

They argued for hours when he finished his story. At one point, Calvin climbed onto the bench with his father, put his head in Stephen's lap, and fell asleep.

Both Michael and Ruby fought against the use of the Mayan stone to perform magic, fearing for the consequences to Stephen's health and the possibility of some unexpected accident.

"But can you not see the potential here? There is not another magician in the country, no, in the world, who can perform *real* magic. No mirrors. No smoke. No wires. *Real* levitations...and this is only the beginning!"

"Don't get so excited, darling." Ruby glanced at the sleeping boy next to her husband. "You'll wake him."

"If I can find a way to use this little stone onstage—" He held it out to them so they could see its harmless little face. "—the crowds will come, and with them will come our fortune. None of us will ever need to worry about money again."

He gazed down at his son. "My boy will not have to labor as a carpenter or anything else." Gently smoothing Calvin's copper locks, Stephen glanced again at the little *Companion Spirit* lying in his hand. It seemed so innocuous. Hardly worth all this fuss.

Michael reached out a hand. "Can I see it?"

The strange reluctance to part with the charm, for even a moment, seized him again, but Stephen dropped the stone into his brother's open palm.

For a moment or two, all Michael did was stare at the artifact, rolling it over in his hand. Then, before Stephen could move, his brother leaped to his feet from the wooden stool, threw open the ceiling panel with a loud bang, and exposed the Mayan stone to the full moonlight streaming in.

Chapter Four

"No, Michael!" Stephen and Ruby shouted at the same time.

Calvin shot to a sitting position just as his father leaped to his feet. Stephen dove at his brother, reaching for the *Companion Spirit*.

A wrestling match proceeded, something they had not done in years. The stone dropped to the floor with a ping. Stephen had Michael pinned under him as he stretched toward the little charm lying fully exposed to the moonlight.

A soft glow suffused the surface and grew in intensity.

"Get off me, Stephen!" Michael also reached for the stone, but the magician grabbed it first. A jolt of energy ran through him.

A cry of pain split the air.

Under him, Michael's whole body jerked. The energy passed through him to Michael!

Quickly rolling off his brother and out of the moonlight, Stephen found the velvet pouch around his neck and shoved the rock inside. Skirts rustled and the ceiling panel rumbled shut. Ruby closed the portal tight and looked from him to Michael and back again.

"Are you all right?" she asked, her voice shaky.

"Fine." Stephen rolled over and crawled on all fours to where his brother laid, eyes closed and limbs akimbo. "Mike! Answer me! Are you hurt?"

Both blue eyes opened and Michael gazed up at his brother. "What happened?"

"The energy from the stone went through me and then you. You should not have done what you did."

"I can see why." His tone was as dry as a lawyer's.

"Can I try it, Papa?" Cal was dancing from one foot to another, holding his hand out for the *Companion Spirit*.

"No!" Three adult voices rang out simultaneously.

* * *

May 1900

Philadelphia, PA

"Jacob, we've been working together for years. Why must I explain how I need the lighting for each trick? Can't you use your best judgment?"

The still-boyish face of his assistant became as petulant as if the clock had turned back twenty years and he was a lad instead of a grown man with two children of his own.

"Mr. Elliott," Jacob said, his tone clipped, "when I do, you always find something to change."

Standing in the middle of the stage, Stephen's stomach churned with anxiety. Tonight would be a private show for the Prince of Wales and his invited guests in the Walnut Street Theater. He had not given a private performance since the one for the Mexican governor had resulted in his imprisonment years ago. This the fact weighed on

his mind, along with his plan to use the powers of the *Companion Spirit* tonight for levitation. Unfortunately there was no way to tell if he had stored up enough of the charm's energy to complete the feat.

For years he had practiced in the moonlight, holding the Mayan stone to channel its power through him to the object. Then one day he had accidentally summoned his slippers out of his bedroom, down the stairs, and onto his feet by merely thinking about the slippers sitting under his bed. Since that time he could move objects at will with concentration. Thankfully he had been alone in the house at the time. Breaking this kind of news to his family took the right timing and careful finesse.

"Mr. Elliott?" Jacob's voice interrupted Stephen's thoughts. How long had he been just standing here like this? People would think he had gone daft. On the other hand, maybe a crazy magician would bring in even more crowds.

"I'm sorry, Jacob." He walked back to where his assistant was assembling the large tri-folding full-length mirrors. "What was your question?"

"Which mirror goes in the middle?"

Stephen picked up each plate of silvered glass, turned it over, and inspected it closely. "This one." He turned it around so Jacob could see the back. "See how translucent the silvering is? This is the one Ruby will stand behind."

What a shame he could only use the *Companion Spirit's* power to move things. If he had the power to create objects as well, it would come in very handy in this business of befuddling the mind and defying the laws of nature.

An hour later, the show was going smoothly just as they had planned. In the audience Stephen could see the Prince of Whales sitting in the center of his beautiful women wearing glittering jewels and satin gowns.

Facing the tri-fold mirror, Stephen turned his back to the audience. The lights on the stage dimmed as he gave a wave of his hand. Jacob had the lights under control tonight.

"Behold," he said, raising his hand, palm up, toward the mirrors. The crowd gasped.

"There's no one behind him!" one person said.

"Where is the woman?" another asked.

"She must be a ghost," came the answer.

He watched the same thing his audience saw. At first the blurry silhouette of a woman, in a flowing long red dress, surrounded by a halo of light, appeared as if at a distance. Gradually, she floated gracefully closer and closer, her image ethereal and ghostly while his own reflection in the mirror appeared sharp and crisp.

Stephen moved closer to the mirror and pressed one palm flat against the cool surface. Ruby's hazy figure came within a few feet and stopped. Her hand stretched beseechingly toward him. Sorrow rose up inside him. He couldn't touch her, couldn't feel the soft warmth of his beloved, only the coldness of the glass met his touch. This little scene felt *too* real. Then slowly the light surrounding her faded until she disappeared and only his image remained.

He let his head drop, put a hand on his heart, and turned back to the audience still without speaking. Raising his head, he bowed from the waist, and walked off the dim stage to the sound of steadily growing applause.

Strange how his own illusions affected him sometimes. Stephen shook off the blanket of gloom and took a deep breath.

In the wings Calvin waited, props all around him, a black coat identical to the one Stephen wore, over his arm. "It is going well, don't you think, Papa?"

Jacob hurried past them, pushing the mirrors on a squeaking dolly.

"They do seem to be enjoying everything thus far." Stephen shed his cape and coat then Calvin helped him put on the new, fully prepared coat, and the cape over it. His son stood in front of him, fastening the cape at his throat while the magician patted his pocket. "Everything is ready, son?"

"Y— Oh, look. Mother lost one of her trained birds."

Stephen turned toward the stage, but nothing appeared to be amiss. He frowned. "I don't see a lost bird. It appears to me they are all doing just fine."

The little budgies were lined up on the long perch, bobbing up and down in time to the tune his wife was playing on her flute. She was dressed now in a wide-skirted blue gown very unlike the gown she wore in the mirror trick. Her glorious hair tumbled freely down her back. Hopefully the audience would not recognize her as his lost love in the mirror.

The crowd laughed as one little green bird bobbed out of time and whistled his own tune. "Now, Georgie..." Ruby scolded.

Cal patted the front of his father's vest. "I suppose I was mistaken. You're all set now."

"Thanks, son." He gazed fondly at the boy, no...the young man in front of him who was grinning affably. Impulsively Stephen threw his arms around his son's broad shoulders for a quick embrace. "I promise to bring you into the act for longer periods next time, Cal. We'll work on your tricks next week again."

The freckled face broke into an even bigger grin. "I'd like that. Sally knows you pay me well enough, but it is our hope that I too can hold my own performances so when we marry next year, I can provide a nice home for us."

"Of course, Cal—"

Applause reached their ears.

"Time to go, Papa. Make 'em scratch their heads."

With a nod, Stephen turned toward the stage, watching Ruby carefully place her colorful birds back in the cage. Opening his arms wide, he stepped back on stage.

"Aren't Mrs. Elliott's parakeets wonderful, folks?"

Ruby curtsied to the crowd, picked up the cage, and moved toward him. She kissed him on the cheek quickly whispering, "Good luck, darling."

With a big grin, he told her not to worry and took a deep breath as he walked to center stage. After dazzling them with sleight of hand coin and card tricks, the time had come for the big finale.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, for my final act tonight, I will attempt to defy the laws of gravity and physics in an act my lovely wife does not like in the least.” Behind him, Ruby shook her head with obvious disapproval.

In the center of the stage stood a large cloth-covered object tied to a thick, knurled rope.

Stephen walked over to the free end of the rope and gave it a hard tug. Nothing happened.

“Here we have a very large, heavy object. This rope, as you can see, runs over a pulley. What you cannot see above us,” he tilted his head back and looked up, “is the heavy steel beam supporting the pulley.”

Reaching over, he grabbed the white sheet and pulled it off to reveal a black, cast iron blacksmith’s anvil.

“As everyone knows, one of these can weigh as much as eight hundred pounds or more. This one is, I believe, about that weight.” Stephen handed the sheet to Ruby. “Can I have three strong volunteers from the audience come up here, please?”

The audience stirred and five men stood. After a murmured discussion two resumed their seats and the remaining three came on stage. They were large, ruddy-complexioned men, dressed well for the occasion. Two appeared to be young—in their twenties—but one was closer to Stephen’s age, in his late forties.

The magician had them introduce themselves and gave each a turn to tug on the rope. None of the men could move the anvil alone, although one, particularly beefy man, turned beet red in the face with the effort.

“Thank you, gentlemen. No need to hurt yourselves.” Stephen chuckled. “As you can see, this is a very heavy object—one I will attempt to lift without assistance.”

The small group of musicians struck up a lively piece of music while he removed his cape and handed it to Ruby. He did the same with his black frock coat then put a hand on the velvet pouch hanging inside his shirt. Stephen’s heart skipped a beat. *The Companion Spirit is gone!*

Quickly he schooled his features back into a smile and continued to remove his vest and shirt.

“What’s wrong?” Ruby whispered, her smile now wooden and forced.

“The stone is gone,” he responded softly, unbuttoning the last button and handing her the garments.

“Where?”

“I think Cal has it. Get Michael. Go home and stop him, Ruby,” he whispered then turned toward the audience.

“Can you—”

“Yes. Go. Quickly.” With a bow to the prince, Stephen walked over to the waiting men as he saw Ruby hurrying to where Michael stood leaning against the wall watching the show. The two of them departed immediately after a brief conversation. He was left to finish the show and worry. *Everything will be fine. No good can come of worrying about Calvin right now.*

"Gentlemen, will the three of you raise the anvil, please?" he asked, loud enough for the audience to hear. "As you can see," he held out his arms and turned, showing them his half-naked torso, "I have nothing up my sleeve."

A small ripple of laughter ran through the assemblage. He bowed deeply and gave them a big, confident smile. One pretty woman in a white dress had her hand over her mouth, looking shocked at his state of undress, but he could see the amusement and, perhaps, appreciation in her eyes.

"Up a tiny bit more, please," he directed the men. They grunted and strained on the ropes. Stephen lay down on the floor and wiggled until he was directly under the huge iron object, his hands were open and relaxed at his sides.

"Lower the rope!" He saw the men hesitate apparently fearing he would be crushed. "Please, gentlemen, let it down. I assure you, I will be unharmed."

Closer and closer the flat, black bottom of the anvil came to his chest. The rope creaked and the crowd became still. The men were good people and didn't want to hurt him. The thought brought another smile to his face.

Concentrate. Don't think about Cal and the Mayan charm.

Summoning the power inside was tricky without the *Companion Spirit* in his hand. After a second or two of reaching deep, the force began to build deep inside Stephen.

Beams of light emerged from his upturned palms, directed at the anvil. The anvil stopped its downward descent. Cries of astonishment came from the three men on stage.

"No one is holding it!" One man said.

This was the most dangerous point of the trick. If anything broke his concentration now, he would be crushed. "S-step away, gentlemen," he commanded tightly.

Their footfalls on the stage told him they had obliged. The free end of the rope dangled at the edge of his field of vision. Sweat broke out all over his body as the heat inside him increased. *Rise.* Stephen lifted his hands. The anvil moved up a bit at a time then hung suspended in the air with no support. Perspiration stung his eyes.

Then, almost imperceptively, his body temperature began decreasing. The power was dissipating.

"Please t-take hold of the ropes again, gentlemen," he asked hoarsely. After a moment he added, "Ready?"

"Yessir," came a deep voice.

"Complete!" In one quick moment the magician rolled out from under the lethal object and jumped to his feet in time to watch his volunteers struggle to keep the anvil from crashing to the floor. They managed to control it only inches from the boards. It settled down with a loud thump.

After a moment of silence, someone clapped then another person followed suit until the whole room, including the prince were applauding.

But this time Stephen had no desire to bask in it. He had to find out what was happening with his son. Quickly wrapping up his parting comments, he bowed to the crowd, grabbed his clothes, and dressed as he made his way to the back door, almost

running headlong into Jacob moving in the opposite direction. His assistant would oversee the crew packing up the props.

"Have Michael and Ruby returned?"

"No, Stephen. I haven't seen them." Jacob's brows drew together. "What's wrong?"

"No time. I'll explain later!" Stephen ran out of the back door. Minutes later he had the single horse carriage rumbling down the street.

The night was clear and cool. Moonlight filtered through the trees lining the street in front of his house when he pulled to a stop. Jumping out, he skirted the house and headed straight for the workshop. Light in the windows showed someone in there.

Panic had him by the throat now. He could hardly breathe. Had Calvin used the stone? Flinging open the door, he let out a sob at the scene greeting his eyes.

Calvin lay on the floor with his head in his mother's lap. The young man's red hair contrasted starkly with his white face. Michael stood beside them.

Stephen dropped to his knees next to his son. "Send for the doctor!"

Ruby lifted her head, tears streaming down her face. "It's too late!" she screamed. "He's gone! It's your fault, Stephen. You and your magic killed him." Bending low over Calvin, she hugged his body close rocking back and forth, moaning noises coming from deep inside.

Bewildered, Stephen looked to his brother. "What is God's name happened, Michael?"

Grimly his brother related how he and Ruby had dashed home from the theater. They rushed into the house calling for Calvin. Upon receiving no answer, they went to the workshop. As they crossed the lawn a bright flash lit up the windows of the little building. Inside Cal was immobilized, standing in the moonlight with the Mayan charm in his palm, just as they had seen Stephen hold it. The young man's entire body had glowed with the same yellow-green light Stephen could channel from his fingertips.

Michael had shouldered his nephew out of the moonlight, releasing him from the force. But the power must have been too great for him to withstand.

"Cal was only able to tell his mother g-goodbye before he died," Michael said hoarsely. "His last words were, 'I'm sorry, M-mama. Don't blame Papa. I just wanted to be like him.'"

"Oh, God!" Stephen sobbed and reached to touch his son.

Ruby reacted instantly. "Don't you touch him! You have no right. My s-son is dead because of you! Get out! I don't ever want to see you again!"

Pain stabbed through Stephen's wounded heart like a knife. He backed away a few inches. "Please, Ruby. Please! Dear God. Cal!" Tears poured down his face as he watched his wife rocking their son's body as she had rocked him when he was a baby.

Stephen crawled over to her and reached out a hand. "Ruby..."

"No!" The loathing on her face was plain to see. "Get out and don't come back again. Ever!"

Never in his life had Stephen felt such waves of sorrow and hurt crash over him. He might be sick.

"Stephen—" Michael started.

He got to his feet.

“—It’s just the shock.” Michael’s voice sounded far away.

The *Companion Spirit* lay on the floor beside the dusty old apple tree prop. Stephen stumbled over, picked up the little stone and pocketed it, though he was not sure why.

Somehow he found the door.

“Don’t go,” Michael said imploringly, “she needs you.”

He looked back at Ruby to see if this was true. One last kernel of hope still lingered there in his heart.

“No. I do not. Go!” Her voice was shrill, hysterical. He accepted her words.

* * *

For hours Stephen walked blindly through the deserted streets of Philadelphia, not caring where he went. He was vaguely aware the weather had turned nasty at some point, but the cold rain just blended with the tears on his face.

He found himself staring out at a black expanse of water stretching out to his left and right. The Schuylkill River. *Throw the Companion Spirit into the liquid blackness.* The stone caused this grief. Plunging his hand into his coat pocket, he pulled it out. The pleasant little face was a mere shadow in the darkness. Running a finger over the surface, he could feel the irregularities making up the design.

Calvin was gone. *Why couldn’t he listen when I told him not to experiment with the powers of the stone?* The boy’s curiosity had killed him. *Why didn’t it kill me too?*

No answer came. Rain pattered on the leaves of the trees lining the river bank. Water trickled down Stephen’s neck, soaking his collar. Somewhere a dog barked, an impatient sort of noise, set to the river’s music.

The pad of his thumb repeatedly caressed the stone, the source of real magic powers. Its secrets could be far greater than mere levitation. Stephen was only beginning to tap its resources. Suppose it held other powers? What good would it do to throw the charm into the river now? It wouldn’t bring back his son or make his wife forgive him. Only God could do those things and Stephen was fairly certain God would not restore Calvin to life. He might, however, help with Ruby.

Stephen turned away from the river and walked back in the direction he had come. The slightest hint of dawn could be seen in the eastern sky.

Black sorrow still blanketed his soul, but running away was not the answer. Even if Ruby still rejected him, he would not abandon her, his home, or his dreams. If he kept walking, he might make it home before noon.

He put the *Companion Spirit* back into its velvet pouch. Cal’s sleight of hand to relieve him of the stone had been impressive. They would have made an unbeatable team. Sadly, this would never come to pass now. The idea made his throat tighten and tears flowed again.

Life took unforeseen turns when you least expected them, but one could never give up.

The rain stopped. A gentle breeze blew the clouds apart. Faint rays of sun filtered through the trees to touch the houses, streets, and lawns of Philadelphia.

Things would never be the same.

Chapter Five

Spring 1909

It seemed only yesterday he sat in this very same parlor keeping vigil over the body of his son. Now he had to do the same thing for his brother. Stephen's eyes burned. Michael was gone at the age of sixty. His trusted older brother and best friend...gone. How cruel life could be.

Michael had been the one to keep the Elliott family intact. If not for his brother's steadying presence and calm mediation, Ruby would have divorced him after Calvin's death. The loss of Calvin's fiancée, whom they had come to love, only added to the sadness. They had not seen Miss Sally Thornton since the day they buried Cal. He had heard the young lady had married two years later and now lived in Boston.

Stephen's parents, and Ruby's too, had passed away years before Cal's accident. All he had left now were Ruby and his magic show. It had been a struggle, even using the *Companion Spirit's* power, to keep the show fresh for so many years. He often went on tour just to find new audiences.

Where is Ruby?

The room was silent now. Two tall candlesticks on either side of the fine mahogany coffin gave off muted light. Colorful spring flowers scented the air. All of Michael's friends and former customers left, but Stephen didn't know how long they had been gone. He had been caught up in memories, both good and bad. It had been nothing short of miraculous when his learned older brother had finally shown him, a carpenter turned magician, some respect. As "The Illusionist" Stephen had gained notoriety, fame, and financial stability, something he had not ever expected to achieve making furniture.

The best days of his life happened in the early part of his career as a magician when Michael, Ruby, and Calvin traveled with him. It had been exciting, new, and full of promise. Why hadn't he appreciated those times when they happened?

When had Michael's hair turned so gray?

Michael had not gone to work that morning. One of his servants found him still in bed, lifeless. The physician told them his brother's heart had given out in his sleep. Stalwart, uncomplaining Michael...had he suffered at all? Stephen prayed he had not and, although they never spoke of it, he was glad his bachelor brother had been a part of his life for so long. He would sorely miss him and his stuffy ways.

Lord, he was tired. Swiping at the wetness on his cheek, Stephen's glance fell on the sideboard. He had made the piece of furniture himself, many years before. Without getting up, he gestured at it. The double doors opened. Pantomiming the motions with his hands, the glass decanter of whiskey and a tumbler floated out, held by unseen hands. With a pop, the stopper jerked out of the bottle and the bottle tipped. Amber liquid gurgled into the glass, the stopper jumped back in place, and the decanter eased back into the cabinet. The full glass moved toward his beckoning fingers.

"Stephen!"

His whole body jerked and the glass dropped, almost hitting the floor before he got it under control.

Ruby's long skirts made gentle swishing sounds as she came into the parlor, her footsteps muted by the thick carpet.

"Husband," her voice was soft now, "what if someone saw you performing magic off stage?"

"No one is here...except Michael...and he doesn't care." He grabbed the hovering glass and took several noisy gulps, sighing as the liquid burned a fiery trail down to his stomach.

She sat beside him on the sofa, putting a hand on his knee. Her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy. It came as no surprise she had been crying as well. The relationship between Michael and Ruby had been a close one. Sometimes Stephen felt his brother understood his wife better than he did. Since Cal's death the two had banded together on many occasions to overrule Stephen. Many a conversation between those two had resulted in the salvation of Stephen's marriage. He did not begrudge their friendship on any level...to the contrary, he was grateful for it.

"You know you will need to replenish your, uh, reserves so much the sooner, if you use magic unnecessarily. Michael would care about that." With a sigh, she put one arm around his shoulders for a hug. "I hate when you have to get in the moonlight. It frightens me."

Stephen shrugged and drained his glass. Ruby's fears were not unfounded. Each time he slid back the panel and offered up the Mayan stone to the moonlight could be his last moments on earth. But she didn't understand how the risk was part of the attraction. The thrill of standing naked in a pool of nighttime brilliance while unseen energy surged through his body made him feel powerful, special, and invincible.

Setting the glass on the side table, Stephen gathered her into his arms. Her bones seemed fragile and her body frail to his touch. "I know you don't like it, sweetheart, but the process is important. The show must go on. My public expects exciting tricks. How can I just use mirrors and sleight of hand any more?"

"Why don't you stop working, Stephen?" She glanced over at the coffin. You're fifty-five now. Can you not give fewer performances at least? We don't need the money, we have plenty."

He looked at her and was surprised to notice the tiny wrinkles around her sad blue eyes and the strands of gray in her dark hair. This made his heart even heavier. Death had a way of making one confront one's own mortality. The small annoyance at her suggestion for retirement faded, at least for the moment. She only said this because she cared for him. He was so grateful that she still did care after Cal's tragic death. For some time her feelings for him had seemed lost, so long did she grieve. She needed someone to blame, and Stephen filled the role. Something important had been lost between them the night their son had been killed using the *Companion Spirit*.

He smiled at her, his beautiful wounded angel, with sorrow in her eyes, which never faded. "Come, sweetheart," he stood and held out a hand to her, "this has been a hard day with another sure to follow."

Placing her hand in his, she let out a sigh and allowed him to help her up. Opening his arms, she walked into them and embraced him tightly around the waist. He sighed, grateful for the small pleasure.

"I wish you would stop avoiding my suggestions." Pulling back, she lifted her face to meet his gaze. "We only have each other now, and all the money we need to last us a lifetime."

He gave her no comment. Why, after all these years, didn't she understand how he felt about his career as a magician? Stephen stepped away and she released her hold. By candlelight Michael looked peaceful, almost content in death. The slight curvature to his mouth made it appear he had experienced or seen something pleasant. It didn't seem as though his brother had suffered. *Thank you, God.*

His wife stood beside him. Stephen could almost feel her hurt at his rebuff. But how could he possibly explain it to her again? Over and over, in many different words, he had attempted to make Ruby understand the pull of his craft. If Stephen Elliott were a magician no longer, who would he possibly be? Nothing. No one. He had been no one before and had no desire to sink into that kind of irrelevance again.

When he looked at Ruby, standing silently next to him, she had tears shimmering in her eyes again. Who had put them there, her brother-in-law or husband?

"Goodbye, Michael," Stephen said softly then closed the coffin's finely carved lid. Tomorrow they would bury his older brother, but as long as Stephen was alive, he would carry Michael's memory with him.

Taking Ruby's unresisting hand, he blew out the candles and led her through the silent house.

* * *

"Ruby, dearest, the carriage awaits."

Stephen adjusted his bow tie and shirt cuffs. He wore a formal black jacket for tonight, complete with a shiny, black top hat.

"Are you sure you want to go to this ball?" She stepped out of the bedroom and promptly took his breath away. At age fifty-three, Ruby Elliott was still the loveliest woman he had ever seen. The lighter gray streaks in her hair only enhanced her beauty. She had artfully woven dainty silver ribbon and tiny pearls into her upswept hairstyle. The dark green velvet gown accentuated her figure wonderfully. Although she claimed her waist had thickened throughout the years, he couldn't see it. To him her figure appeared as voluptuous and desirable as ever.

"'Tis the holiday season, my love. While we have mourned the loss of Michael for lo' these many months, life is passing us by. I long to see you laugh and dance again."

Her expression reflected her doubt. Inwardly Stephen sighed, but he gave her his most brilliant smile. "Give me a chance. I vow you will enjoy tonight."

He bowed low over her gloved hand, kissed the back of it gently, and led her down the steps. Minutes later they mounted the steps of the rented carriage.

"You didn't want to take the automobile tonight, Stephen?" Ruby asked as she pulled the blanket over her legs. "I know how much you love to drive the thing."

Sliding in beside her, Stephen grinned thinking of his beautiful new Model T machine. "Not tonight, my dear. The old-fashioned method of transportation is more romantic, do you not agree?"

"Of course." She gave his knee a pat.

The driver urged the horses forward into the crisp, cold night.

As the Elliotts walked into the building, Stephen heard the musicians playing familiar Christmas tunes. The room blazed with light. Massive chandeliers hung from the ceiling and lit sconces adorned every wall. Garlands and wreaths of pine added their scent to the perfumes of the ladies in attendance. Red and green ribbons, along with heavily ornament-laden Christmas trees, abounded.

The orchestra switched to a newly popular Viennese Waltz. Stephen held out a hand to Ruby. "Shall we dance?"

At her nod, he led her out to join the other elegantly-clothed guests, smiling a greeting to their neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Percy Robinson, who were already on the floor. He took his wife's hand and they began whirling to the haunting melody. Soon her cheeks were pink and a smile touched her lips, a rare sight of late. Peace and contentment filled his soul. He had made her happy, at least for a time.

"I love you," he said into her ear.

"And I you," she replied.

At the end of the waltz, Stephen's spirits rose, and he was happier than he had been in some time. The long period of mourning had ended and life could begin again.

Exchanging pleasantries with people they knew, the two of them found an intimate table with a view of the dance floor. He took two glasses of champagne from a passing server and gave one to Ruby.

"A toast to you, my lovely wife, and to the new year beginning soon."

The color was still high in Ruby's cheeks as they drank, and she still smiled. "I hope it will be a good year, husband."

With a nod in agreement, Stephen gazed about the glittering room. Putting a hand to his chest, he felt the reassuring lump under his vest. The *Companion Spirit* nestled in its cocoon of black velvet. Tonight, when Ruby slept, he would go to his workshop to replenish his magical energies for the Sunday afternoon show. Hopefully the moon would be shining brightly tonight.

They danced again – a minuet and another two-step waltz – then Stephen's stomach rumbled.

"Let's retire to the buffet table, shall we?" he asked.

"I was wondering how long you could wait," Ruby replied with a laugh. "You always have quite an appetite."

"Eating is always an enjoyable pastime for me." Stephen patted his stomach.

Shaking her head, the corners of Ruby's mouth lifted. "I don't know how you've managed to stay so trim. Why, you look much the same as you did thirty years ago."

"Enough talk." They both stood and he offered her his arm. "Follow me."

So many people had come out to celebrate the holidays tonight. They sparkled like jewels and talked like magpies. Stephen and Ruby fell silent as they waited their turn beside a tall folding screen used to give some order to the throngs of guests.

"Did you see them tonight?" The gossipy voice of an unseen woman asked on the other side of the screen.

"See whom?" A bored-sounding female voice responded.

"The magician and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Elliott."

Husband and wife exchanged glances, but kept silent.

"What about them?" the second woman asked. She still sounded uninterested.

"Isn't it scandalous how much older she is? Imagine taking a husband so much younger than yourself!"

Outraged, Stephen opened his mouth to protest, but Ruby put her hand up to stop him. Then she put a finger to her lips. She obviously wanted to hear more.

"Dear me, Ethel, you are mistaken. I've known both of them for years. Mr. Elliott is a year or so older than his wife, if memory serves. My husband and I went to one of his first illusionist performances in 1890. He has not aged a bit by comparison with his wife."

The first woman spoke again. "How old is Mr. Elliott, do you think?"

"Now I am not one to gossip, as you know, but I expect they are both in their fifties by now, dear. Twenty years ago we first saw him perform as 'The Illusionist.' I daresay his show has improved tremendously since then."

The line of people moved forward, but Ruby bent down to fix her shoe. Stephen, taking the hint, waved several people around them as they waited to hear more. The chatting women had moved a little further away so they had to strain to hear them.

"How can someone defy time, Sophie? He has neither the looks, nor the physique of a man in his fifties. In my opinion, Stephen Elliott is no ordinary magician. I think he dabbles in black magic, you know, sorcery. Perhaps he should be reported to the authorities—"

Her voice faded away as the line of people started moving again.

Ruby's face grew pale and her eyes flew wide. Her fingers dug into his arm. "I have lost my appetite, darling." Her voice was calm, but firm. "Shall we go home? I am not feeling well."

Stephen's mind spun, could two elderly gossips possibly cause him harm? "Certainly, my dear. Let's take our leave right away."

Forcing himself to walk and act normally proved to be difficult, especially when they had to stop repeatedly to speak to friends, neighbors, and folks who knew "The Illusionist." In his mind's eye he could envision the Philadelphia police officers coming through the door at any moment to arrest him as they had in Mexico City.

Retrieving their wraps, Stephen helped Ruby don her coat. Then a male voice behind him made his blood run cold.

Chapter Six

"Mr. Marchand, how good to see you, sir." Ruby spoke first as she looked over Stephen's shoulder.

Slowly, trying to control his temper, he turned to face the man who had arranged the trip to Mexico all those years ago. Memories of the beating he took and the cold, damp cell were as fresh as the day they threw him in prison.

In a flash the anger dissipated. The man was elderly now, a white-haired frail creature, sitting hunched in a wheelchair. Thomas Marchand. Physically only a shadow of the fine gentleman he once was, the man smiled toothlessly up at Stephen.

"Mr. Elliott, may I congratulate you on your continued success?" He held out a bony hand to Stephen, who offered a perfunctory shake so as not to insult or injure. "I was sorry to read of your brother's passing. Michael was a fine solicitor, and a very shrewd businessman too."

They exchanged polite conversation with Mr. Marchand and his nephew, who served as an escort. No explanation of Marchand's absence all these intervening years was given and none asked for.

As they said their farewells and waited for the hired carriage, Stephen doubted he would ever see Marchand alive again. The man had to be eighty or more. The resentment he had harbored for all these years was gone, and he realized how useless the emotion had been.

Once they were alone in the carriage, Ruby once again grasped his upper arm so tightly he could feel her nails through his heavy coat sleeve.

"Stephen, I have been wondering the same thing those women were speaking of. Why haven't you aged at all? You do look just as you did twenty years ago." She spoke in a low, urgent voice. "Something has happened to you, I can sense it."

He gave her hand a pat then urged her fingers loose from their death grip. "That cannot be, Ruby. Nothing has happened to me. I am just fit and healthy. You know some folks age slower than others." He kept any other comments she might misconstrue off his lips. She had been insulted by the two women's comments and lashed out at him as a consequence.

"Darling, there is no reason for concern," he continued. "You are still as beautiful as the day we met."

She hit him on the shoulder, surprisingly hard for a small lady. "I'm not worried about me, you dolt. It is you I'm concerned about."

He shrugged, but inched away from her and her sharp nails. "I admit they had me feeling a bit apprehensive with their talk of black magic, but it is just nonsense from gossipy women."

Ruby made no comment, which was a bad omen. When his wife stopped talking and began thinking, it usually meant Stephen would pay some kind of price.

As it turned out, he did have good reason for his qualms when he opened the door one week later to find Doctor Walker on the doorstep with his black bag in hand.

“Hello, Doctor Walker,” Stephen stood back and allowed the man to enter. “What brings you here today? Is Ruby suffering from some malady she has not seen fit to enlighten me on?”

Collecting the doctor’s black coat, he draped it on the coat rack in the wide foyer.

“No, Mr. Elliott. Your wife has summoned me about you.”

Stephen had no time to recover from this surprise before Ruby swept in from the kitchen, greeting the doctor warmly. “How good of you to come, Doctor Walker.”

She turned to Stephen. “I asked the doctor to come and check you over since you have been feeling a bit run down lately.”

As she made the ludicrous statement, she cocked her head ever so slightly, asking him to play along. Stephen had been out maneuvered. He gave in with a sigh.

When the physician finished with his examination thirty minutes later, Stephen put on his shirt again. The older man took a seat in one of the library’s leather wingbacks, regarding him solemnly.

“Mr. Elliott, you are in remarkable health,” the doctor declared. “By our fifties we often start to experience arthritis and other signs of aging —” He peered at Stephen over the top of his wire-rimmed spectacles. “However, you seem to be an exception to the rule. Have you no need of corrective eyeglasses either?”

Stephen shook his head and sat down in the chair opposite the doctor. “Thank you, sir, I am sure my wife will be pleased to hear this information. I am sorry you were called out here for no reason. I attribute my good health to regular physical activities and my wife’s excellent cooking.”

The man hesitated for a moment then gazed at Stephen with uncertainty in his kind old eyes.

“Is there something you wish to say, Doctor Walker?”

“I don’t know quite how to put this, Mr. Elliott. I find it most distasteful to ask, but I must or I fear there will be no end to the pressure induced on me to obtain an answer.”

“To whom and what are you referring?” Stephen was confused. He stood and shrugged into his jacket again.

“There has been, ahem, talk about you. At night.”

“Doctor Walker!”

“Please let me say this, sir.” The man’s forehead glistened with sweat. “I need to know. I can put their fears to rest.”

“Whose fears?”

“The lady’s name shall not pass my lips, sir.” The old man drew himself up, putting on a righteous air. But Stephen wasn’t fooled. The doctor was trying to deflect his own culpability for an uncomfortable situation.

“Just ask your question, Doctor. I may or may not answer it.”

With a deep breath, the physician plunged in. “What are you doing late at night in your workshop that requires you to be...um...unclothed?”

“You’ve been looking in my windows!” Stephen couldn’t help but yell. Anger reared its ugly head, flooding his body with hot rage. He jumped to his feet and began pacing, trying to think.

"N-no, I...uh...the lady," the doctor nearly fell off his chair with surprise.

How can I possibly answer the question? Dare I refuse to allay their fears? Reflexively Stephen started to reach for the stone, but remembered he had locked it in the desk drawer for the examination. He walked to the sideboard and poured out some whiskey then froze. If he drank this, word would surely get back about how the famous magician was a drunk.

"Would you like a drink?" He held the glass out to the doctor.

With a nod, the man accepted the glass and gulped it down with a gasp.

"Doctor Walker, I will say this once and once only. What a man and his wife do, in the privacy of their own home, or workshop, is no one's concern but their own."

"I—yes—certainly. Quite so, sir. I apologize for the question." Picking up his black bag, the doctor stood.

Relaxing, Stephen smiled. The poor man was mortified. Draping a companionable arm around his shoulder, the magician led the way out.

"In the future, sir, you may want to reconsider listening to neighborhood talk."

"I have to agree with you there, Mr. Elliott. I deserve to be chastised."

Apologizing again, his face still as red at the holly berries on the Christmas wreath; the physician stepped out of the library.

Ruby waited in the hall. "How is he, Doctor Walker?"

The physician's eyes darted from her face to Stephen's then to the front door. "Your husband is fine, Mrs. Elliott. There are no problems with his health, I assure you." Hurrying to the door, he spoke over his shoulder. "I'll see myself out," he mumbled and was gone.

Ruby closed the door after briefly watching the rotund doctor scurry to his carriage and drive away. Then she turned and regarded Stephen from head to toe.

Grinning, he shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned against the doorjam, waiting for her to speak. Finally she let out a sigh and came closer, wrapping her arms around him. "I still think something is amiss."

"What is amiss is how my wife has no faith in my physical abilities," he said, and reached down to lift her into his arms. All this fuss about his body made him randy as hell. In three strides he was heading up the staircase. "I intend, my dear, to demonstrate how capable I can be."

Her answer was a giggle as she draped her arms around his neck and put her head on his shoulder.

As they lay in each other's arms, perspiration on their satiated bodies cooling, Ruby expressed what had apparently been on her mind. "Why were you shouting at the doctor tonight, my love?"

"Oh, yes. We need some curtains for the workshop windows, sweetheart," he said, lifting and positioning her on her side so her rump was against his front. Both of his hands were full of her luscious breasts.

"What does that have to do with yelling at Doctor Walker?"

"Apparently someone saw me replenishing my magical abilities." He nuzzled his nose into the base of her slender neck.

“What?” Ruby violently flipped over to face him in the darkness. “Someone saw you n-naked and had the audacity to ask Doctor Walker to question you?”

Stephen put his fingers back on her breasts, loving the way they filled his hands. “So it would seem.”

“This isn’t a good omen. What if someone decides again you are performing black magic and you get put in prison...or worse?”

“You worry far too much, darling. I let the good doctor believe someone had witnessed a perfectly legal act between a husband and wife.” He cupped her face in the darkness. “An act very similar to what we just did.”

She shoved his hands away. “I see how much better this will appear. Now we will be discussed as sexual deviants who make love in a workshop in the light of a full moon.”

Stephen grinned, rolled onto his back, and closed his eyes, ready for sleep. “I quite like the image, Ruby. We should try it.”

* * *

Using his coat sleeve, Stephen rubbed the bird droppings off the shiny black fender of his Ford Model T. The auto sat gleaming in the sunlight in front of the house. Oh, how he loved this machine.

He grasped the handle and gave it a crank. Only half a turn and all four cylinders sprang to life, purring throatily. This was the sound of a real powerful driving machine. He couldn’t wait to get the vehicle out, away from the people and houses, so it could hum along at top speed.

Today was perfect for driving—clear and sunny—and it hadn’t rained in over a week. The mud holes in the road should be dried up nicely.

Jumping into the seat, he put it in gear and drove away, waving to Ruby who stood on the front porch watching.

What a glorious day! This would be a wonderful time to have whole day to take a respite from the accounting books and, truth be told, away from planning and practicing magic.

Last evening he had endured the re-energizing process so he would be fully prepared for tomorrow’s show. The almanac had said rain was coming, so he wanted to make sure he had enough magical power. After his experience with Doctor Walker, Stephen had made sure the gate to the back yard was locked, no one was lurking in the bushes, and the new curtains Ruby had made were fully drawn. Only after these precautions were completed did he fully disrobe and expose the Mayan charm and himself to the moonlight’s power. Stephen preferred to perform the process naked because his body didn’t heat up as much, cooled faster, and absorbed more energy.

He steered the shiny machine around a corner. Restoring himself totally nude had all the earmarks of a sexual pagan experience. Ruby knew the effect of his lunar encounters. Inevitably, Stephen would wake in the workshop as randy as a stallion. When he recovered and staggered up to bed, she was always there to offer comfort.

Occupied with these thoughts, Stephen prepared to turn onto a busy street, heading for the shops. A pretty little bauble might help improve his wife’s mood of late.

In front, a man driving a horse-drawn wagon full of lumber headed around the bend. A group of children lingered in front of the sweet shop on the corner, looking in the window at the colorful display. The wagon took the turn too fast. First one eight-foot length shifted then suddenly the whole stack teetered. The horse shrieked. Stephen reacted.

The woman with the children faced the horror as the event unfolded. Her expression would end up staying with Stephen for years.

Instinctively braking hard, he reached toward the falling load. Green light beams shot from his fingertips. The boards froze in mid-air feet from the children.

Slamming the auto into neutral and pulling the parking brake lever with his free hand, Stephen jumped out and focused both hands on the heavy wood. By now people were screaming. The wagon overturned with a loud grinding groan. The driver jumped clear, landing in a heap on the dirt road. Someone sprinted over to lend the driver aid.

The woman and her three children froze, staring up at the suspended load. Expressions of disbelief etched on all four faces.

"Get out of the way!" Stephen's muscles quivered under the strain.

His voice snapped her out of her stunned trance and she quickly shepherded the little ones a safe distance away.

Struggling for control, Stephen tried to ease the pine boards to the ground, but the weight was more than he had ever handled. The lumber crashed to the boardwalk in a cloud of debris, some of the wood splintering into pieces.

Thank God! Those children could have been killed!

He stood for a moment, laboring for air. The rush of air in and out of his lungs was the only sound. Everything went still. Beyond the pile of shattered wood men, women, and children stared at him. Some wore expressions of shock, others fear, and still others looked horrified.

"Who are you?" one man called out.

"How did you do that?" said another.

"It's unnatural!" a woman in a big flowered hat shrieked.

Stephen held his hands up in a gesture of surrender. Several people cried out when he moved. "It's all right, folks. I just wanted to help, that's all." He took a step backward then slowly turned to his Tin Lizzie, which was still idling behind him.

As he climbed into the driver's seat, the crowd murmured among themselves. The driver of the lumber wagon stood among them, looking dazed. Then the man pointed to Stephen.

"That's the magician, 'The Illusionist'," he yelled. "He made my wagon overturn!"

"No!" Stephen shook his head. "I didn't. You were driving too fast."

"Stop him!" Several men stepped around the lumber and began advancing, their faces now masks of anger.

Quickly putting the car in reverse, Stephen backed away at high speed, wrenched the wheel around, shifted gears, and sped away in the direction he had come.

Nausea churned in his stomach. No time to be sick. Rifling through his desk, Stephen pulled out all the money he could find. With any luck he could make it to the bank before word spread.

"Jacob, you'd best think about getting your family away!" He called to his assistant as he passed the library door carrying a pair of suitcases.

Upstairs Ruby sobbed loudly and thumped around, packing up her prized possessions.

Jacob paused in front of the open door; his freckled face altered by age and now by sorrow. "Words can't express how sorry I am this happened to you, my friend. Mary and I will be just fine. Don't you worry about us. We're taking an extended visit to see her family in Virginia. She's packing up clothing for the little ones right now." Setting down one bulging leather case, he wiped his eyes with his shirt sleeve. "Little Matthew will love taking a train ride."

Stephen forced a smile. Standing, he crammed papers and cash into his jacket pocket and crossed the room. Impulsively, he pulled Jacob into a quick hug and released him. They had been working together for twenty-two years. How quickly time passed from happy days when Calvin had been just a boy and Jacob a young lad. Stephen had lost his son and his brother, and he was about to lose a good friend and confidant as well.

"Perhaps, when this becomes a distant memory we can work together again, Jacob," Stephen forced more cheer in his voice than he felt.

A thumping and sniffing sound accompanied Ruby's arrival. "Are you absolutely sure we have to leave, husband?" Tears ran down her face unchecked. "We have good friends here." She looked at Jacob. "Please tell dear Mary goodbye for me."

"I will, Mrs. Elliott," he responded then turned away. "I'll just take these out..." He headed toward the front door, luggage in hand.

"What about my birds and the rabbits?" Pounding on the front door made Ruby cry out, alarmed. Stephen watched as Jacob opened the door, admitting the rotund figure of their neighbor, Mr. Rathbone. He waddled toward them, huffing and puffing.

"Elliott...what is this I hear? You did some m-magic trick—to a wagon? Nearly...killed...children? Men are on their way here!"

"Get your budgies, Ruby. We'll leave the rest for Jacob to take care of," Stephen said and headed for the boxes stacked in the hall. "I'm sorry, Mr. Rathbone, we'll have to talk while I work."

By the time he finished packing the Ford, settling Ruby and the birds, and preparing to leave, he had related the whole story—with a few minor alterations to maintain the stone's secrets—to his neighbor. Stephen locked the front door and hurried to the car with a red-faced Rathbone following.

"You do understand why we have to leave? I've been falsely accused before and locked up for it. I've done nothing wrong. I've saved the children from harm, that is all."

"But how did you—" the man sputtered.

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Stephen cranked the car and it rumbled to life. Ruby sat in the passenger's side, dabbing her eyes with a hankie. He climbed in and looked back at his neighbor and his fine brick Philadelphia house, wondering if he would ever see either again.

"Magic," he finally answered, touching the *Companion Spirit*, his secret talisman hidden under his shirt. "Goodbye, Mr. Rathbone."

Chapter Seven

1911

San Francisco, California

Stephen stared into the mirror. His reflection showed shaving lather covering half his jaw. The same face he had seen for years stared back at him—the same straight brown hair, the same blue eyes Ruby said held a hint of mischief, the same straight nose and squared chin. Leaning in he looked closer. *None. Not one wrinkle or one gray hair in sight. How could this be possible?*

At first he had been proud to be so young-looking. Turning fifty had been a big enough blow to his ego. But now he was even older and his appearance was still the same. Now he found it unsettling, even disturbing. To add to the mystery, he still *felt* thirty-five. He bounced a little on the balls of his feet. No, his knees didn't hurt and neither did his back. Both had bothered Michael in the years leading up to his death. Waking up and swinging out of bed wasn't a problem. Never had been. His poor wife rose slowly and actually shuffled around a bit before her joints loosened up in each morning.

The mirror didn't lie. Running the razor over the surface of his skin, he finished the job and washed off the lather.

"It's taken me a long time to adjust to your appearance without a beard, Stephen, but I think I quite like it." Ruby sat on the edge of the bed, slowly donning her stockings. Her back was hurting today. He would rub it for her later, but now he had to talk before he burst.

Dropping to his knees in front of his wife, he took her hands in his. She looked startled and tired.

"Oh, Ruby, my love. I know I've said it before, and I'll say it again. I am so sorry for dragging you out of Philadelphia."

A small wistful smile creased her face. "I know, dearest, but we had to go. We couldn't let the mob hurt you. You saw what the newspapers were saying. They labeled you a 'dangerous man' who dabbled in 'black magic.'"

Weariness overwhelmed him suddenly and he put his head in her lap, wrapping his arms around her waist. "It became an obsession with me, the stone and the magic. I didn't stop to think about how my actions were affecting you and Cal, and Michael as well. The limelight and the applause drew me like a moth to a flame...and it does still. I crave it. I want it. Badly."

The wetness from his eyes soaked into her dress. The touch of her hand brushing through his hair gave some small comfort. "I was responsible for Cal's death and for ruining our lives." The confession poured out of him like the purging of an illness. "All these years and I never once considered anyone else's needs, just my own. Can you ever forgive me?" Why he suddenly came to this conclusion he wasn't sure. The time had finally come to get it off his chest. He choked back a sob.

"I don't know if I can, husband." Ruby's voice fell on his ears with a faint and dream-like quality. "I've tried to be a good wife, have I not? I tried to tell myself it didn't matter. My husband was the famous 'Illusionist.' He was handsome and wealthy and did his best to love us. Was it really so awful he loved magic more? Maybe it is only a foolish woman who would love a husband and a son more than herself?"

Raising his head, he looked at Ruby's face. She stared straight ahead, her gaze unfocused as she continued to talk.

"How much is a woman supposed to sacrifice for her husband before it becomes too much? Her son? Her home? Her happiness? Her...self?"

"Ruby?" It took a moment, but her gaze finally connected with his and he could see her make an effort to come back to the present.

"Yes?"

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

She tilted her head, looking confused. "You never spoke this way before. It is not a wife's place to say such things."

Again he took her cold hands in his. "We are husband and wife. You could have told me."

"What difference would it have made? I reaped the benefits from your magic as well, how could I complain about it? Your passion for the show and the damnable Mayan stone is undeniable. I can see the effect it has on you, even if you cannot. Cal could see it too, and he wanted it for himself. You didn't kill him, Stephen. His desire to have what you had caused his death."

Tears were still leaking from his eyes and running down his face and neck as he gazed at her sad face.

"He wanted to be rich and famous and forever young, just like you."

Her statement, made so matter-of-factly hit him like a blow to the stomach. *Forever young? Has this happened to me?* Everything in him screamed in denial. Impossible! No one stayed young forever.

"Are you so unhappy, Ruby?" he asked quietly, unable to fully comprehend her last declaration.

She looked at him with surprise. "Does that matter? You are my husband. I would do anything for you."

Shame filled him. All these years he had devoted little time thinking about his wife's happiness. He assumed she enjoyed working with him on stage, even after they lost Calvin. Of course, she had been devastated after that fateful night. Both of them mourned the loss of their son for a long time. Ruby never really recovered her spirit and her enthusiasm for the magic had definitely waned.

"My love, I am sorely humiliated to realize how selfish I have been. Is there anything I can do to make it up to you? How can I make you happy again?" Getting up off his knees, he sat beside her on the bed and took her left hand in his. When she openly gazed from his face all the way down to his belly button, he remembered he had not finished dressing.

"You can't," she said flatly. "I have lost my son and my youth. While you have lost Cal, you have not lost your youth. Already the neighbor across the hall has taken me for your mother, not your wife. Look at yourself, Stephen. Your body is as muscular as ever; you do not suffer from joint pain or back aches like I do. There is not a gray hair on your head while mine is nearly all gray now. She shook her head. "You most certainly do not appear to be a fifty-eight year old man!"

"Ruby, there is no reason you cannot still wish for happiness, no matter what your age. You are younger than myself and will most likely out live me. Most wives do." He brought her hand up to his mouth and lightly brushed her knuckles with his lips. "As a matter of fact, I know I can make you happy in our marriage bed."

This made her smile. "This is true. Perhaps there is an advantage to having a younger husband."

He sobered as if a bucket of cold water had landed on his head. "What am I going to do, Ruby? I am truly not young. You and I both know this. What will become of me?"

"I don't know, husband, but I do know we will handle it together, as always. This fact has not changed."

Out of habit, Stephen touched the center of his chest and found only skin. A momentary panic filled him until he saw the black velvet pouch lying on the nightstand.

"After all these years the cursed stone draws you still," Ruby said, her voice small and sad.

Standing, Stephen went to the armoire and pulled out a pressed shirt, donning it. Her attitude toward his talisman honestly irritated him. Truly, she didn't understand its importance.

"I'm sorry, Ruby. I've tried for almost two years to stay away from magic." Turning to face her again, he watched her buckling her shoes. "Our money is almost gone. You and I both know we can't survive on the income I would get as a carpenter. Enough time has passed. I could perform again, if I do it here in California and change my name.

Ruby glanced his way then averted her gaze. She smoothed her chestnut-brown day dress, buttoned the cuffs of her long-sleeves, and donned her taffeta hat. "I'm going out to the market."

"Would you like me to drive you?" I plan on picking up supplies to begin making props again." Stephen put the leather thong over his head and tucked the velvet pouch into his jacket front.

She shook her head. "I prefer to walk. There is much to think about."

A few hours later Stephen made his way up the stairs to the rooms they rented in a Victorian-style house, which had been damaged in the 1906 earthquake and beautifully restored. He asked their landlady to let him use some space in the carriage house to construct new props. Already ideas for a totally new show filled his head. An escape trick, of course, and perhaps the magic bullet-catching stunt would draw in the crowds again. If Ruby was willing to train some new parakeets, he was sure they could keep the birds in the room. Surging up the stairs, two at a time, he couldn't wait to share his

thoughts with his wife. If he took her desires into consideration, he could make her happy again.

"Are you here, Ruby love?"

A cough was the only response. Stephen hurried through the small sitting room and flung open the door. A small figure lay huddled under the blankets.

"Ruby! Are you ill, dearest?"

Closing the door softly, he moved into the dim room. Outside the window, the sun descended in a fiery ball. Striking a match, he lit the gas lamp on the wall before going to the bedside.

"I'm cold," she whispered.

"We'll fix that." Stephen went to the armoire, pulled out every blanket he could find, and covered his shivering wife. Placing a hand on her soft cheek, he nearly gasped aloud.

"My Lord! You're so feverish! I'm sending for a doctor. I'll be back momentarily."

He ran back down the stairs and found Mrs. Martin, the landlady. She quickly sent her young son to bring back the local doctor then accompanied Stephen back upstairs.

"I've brought Mrs. Martin to help, sweetheart." Stephen bent over the bed, his heart pounding with panic. He had no idea how to help a sick person. Ruby had rarely been ill and she had always cared for Calvin through his childhood illnesses. If only magic could restore health.

Her slender fingers gave his a squeeze. "Thank you, my love. I'll be better soon," she said and was promptly seized by a fit of coughing.

"Here, Mr. Elliott, give her a spoon o' honey. Me mam always recommended honey for a cough," Mrs. Martin said, passing him a spoon.

With a shaking hand, Stephen dipped the spoon in the honey jar the woman held out. Slipping his arm under Ruby's head, he put the sweet stuff into her mouth. She swallowed it and subsided against the pillows, mustering a small smile.

"Here, sweetie. These might help." Mrs. Martin gave Ruby a hot water bottle and a mustard plaster for her congested chest.

"You were not sick this morning, my darling. When did you begin feeling poorly?" Stephen sat beside her on the bed after seeing the landlady out.

With a hoarse sigh, his wife rolled on her side, sniffing a bit. She raised weary, red-rimmed eyes to him. "About half way through my marketing, right by the produce stand, my bones began aching and my chest tightened. I came home right away and got into bed."

"My poor, Ruby." Stephen wiggled down to lie face to face with his wife. "You should get some sleep now."

She nodded and readily closed her eyes. For a long time he watched her chest rise and fall, listening to the small wheeze in her breathing. How he could have left her alone to go off and pursue his ambitions once more? What a selfish, selfish man he was.

A rapping at the door woke him from dreams of disappearing rabbits and shimmering ghosts. With a glance at his wife, he rose from the bed as stealthily as possible, so as not to wake her.

The tall slim man on the other side tipped his bowler. "Mr. Elliott? I'm Doctor Peterson. I understand you sent for me?"

"Yes, please come in. My wife is very ill."

The doctor made him wait in the sitting room while he examined Ruby. Unable to sit, Stephen paced the width and breadth of the cozy room many times before the physician eventually emerged from the bedroom.

"You are quite correct, Mr. Elliott, your wife is very sick. She had some abnormal sounds in her breathing, which I attribute to acute bronchitis. Keep her warm and strictly confined to bed." From his black bag, he pulled out several brown and blue-colored bottles.

Although Stephen tried very hard to pay attention to the directions the doctor gave, the words became a blur of "tincture" and "menthol" and "dissolved."

"Please, Dr. Peterson," Stephen fumbled at a table for a pencil and paper, "would you please write down the instructions? I am too distraught to remember."

"Certainly, sir." He accepted the items. "Mr. Elliott, while this illness can be quite severe, with luck Mrs. Elliott will recover. Would you have a female relative to nurse her?"

"I will be taking on the job, Doctor, so please give me thorough instructions." This crisis had come at him unexpectedly and he must bolster his confidence to handle this alone. Ruby had to recover and he had to make it happen. His insides quivered. This catastrophe fell on his shoulders alone. No sleight of hand or concealing smoke could help him now.

For the next few days, Stephen read the instructions many, many times and followed each one to the letter, getting Ruby to take her medicine as directed. Still, her cough grew worse and the fever did not abate.

Mrs. Martin came by several times a day bringing hot soup and bread for both of them.

"Ruby, please eat," Stephen begged. He held out a spoonful of broth and vegetables.

"I'm not hungry." Her voice was a mere whisper of sound.

With his other hand he brushed a damp curl from her hot forehead. "Please eat it anyway, for me."

Obligingly, she took a few spoonfuls before turning away. Despair nearly choking him, Stephen left the bowl on the table and stood looking down at his wife. Dark circles colored the skin under her eyes. She appeared so terribly pale and weak. He ran a hand through his hair in frustration. *What can I do? She's not recovering.* Fear made him want to cry, scream, or vomit.

Putting a hand on the stone's pouch out of habit, he walked to the window. Outside the sun shone brightly, as usual here in San Francisco. It didn't seem right to see the flowers bloom and hear the birds sing while his Ruby faded away before his very eyes. Why didn't he have the magic needed to get her well?

Fingering the hard lump of stone hidden in the velvet, a sudden thought hit him. He pulled out the Mayan charm. In the daylight it would not react. The rounded eyes

and small oblong mouth set in a half smooth, half textured square rock had not changed in the past twenty-two years despite frequent handling.

Carrying it in his palm to Ruby's bedside, he knelt next to the bed. Gently touching her fevered cheek, he called her name softly.

When she raised her heavy lids to meet his gaze, he pulled out his last argument. "I'll do it, Ruby. I'll get rid of the stone, for you, sweetheart. I'll throw it in the ocean." Groping under the blanket, he found her hand. "You have to fight this illness. No more magic. I'll go back to being a carpenter, if you'll please, please just try harder. I'm begging you!"

She shook her head, just a tiny motion. "No," she whispered. "Don't do it. The stone is too much a part of you now, Stephen. Besides, Cal wouldn't want you to. You must not stop doing magic. Our son loved it so."

Her eyelids slid closed, but her fingers curled around his weakly. Each breath rattled in her chest and it frightened him beyond measure. The whole thing was living nightmare. Any minute now she would rally and go back to the vital, healthy person he lived with for so many years. Perhaps he would die instead, his heart ached so badly.

"Oh, please, please, my love. Please try harder. You need to eat and drink more." Raising her hand to his lips, he kissed each knuckle and offered her a glass of water.

With obvious effort, she opened her eyes to gaze at him again and took a tiny sip. "Don't cry, darling." The corners of her mouth lifted slightly. "You are my magician. All the girls will be so jealous, my handsome one."

He sent for a different doctor. The man examined Ruby, handed Stephen the same set of medicines, and left looking grim.

After another terrible night spent forcing medicine in her mouth and listening to her awful cough, Stephen had Mrs. Martin's son bring a third doctor. This physician gave a more ominous pronouncement. Ruby's bronchitis had become pneumonia. The physician handed over the same brown and blue bottles.

"It's not helping! Don't you have something else? She's dying! You have to do something!" Stephen was beyond desperate.

"Mr. Elliott! Control yourself, sir!" Mrs. Martin pried his fingers from the doctor's lapels. "Let him go!"

Stephen let go, staggered to a chair and sank into it, his head in his hands. "I'm sorry. I-I'm just so desperate for help."

"I'm sorry too, sir," the doctor said softly. "I wish there was more I could do."

The landlady ushered the man out and returned moments later. Stephen had not moved. His last chance for a cure had just walked out the door after dashing his hopes.

"Mr. Elliott," Mrs. Martin's voice came from above him. "Go. Spend this time with your wife. She shouldn't be alone."

He nodded. Falling apart could wait. His wife needed him.

So he went back into their bedroom, the place where they had talked and made love. Bolstering his courage again, he urged Ruby to drink, to take her medicines, and to eat. Sometimes she complied and other times did not. He bathed her face and feverish body with cool water and dressed her again in a clean nightgown. In short, he

did everything both he and Mrs. Martin could think to do, but Ruby's health continued to decline.

Late one night, Stephen woke from a doze to the sound of Ruby's voice. "My sweet boy, Mama is coming to be with you," she said clearly.

Stephen's heart stuttered and nearly stopped. He wanted to yell, to beg her not to go, not to leave him here alone. While his mind begged, he kept his mouth shut and held her close, tears streaming down his face. He could never be sure if it was just her time or Ruby's decision made it happen, but she quietly passed away in his arms within a short time of uttering those words. The moment her life's spirit left her body, he knew, but he held her throughout the night, unwilling to accept the truth. Mrs. Martin came in the next morning and Stephen had no choice but to let his beloved wife go. Even the *Companion Spirit* could bring no measure of comfort to his badly broken heart.

* * *

He took her back to Philadelphia so she could lie forever next to their son. Only his former assistant, Jacob, knew of their return and came to pay his respects at the burial. There were no family members left alive. Stephen had no choice but to sneak into the city under cover of darkness like a thief or risk recognition and persecution.

They buried her on a Tuesday.

"What will you do now, Stephen?" Jacob placed his hat on his head again as they walked away from the cemetery on a bright spring day Ruby would have loved. The air smelled of dampness and green growing things.

"I honestly have no idea, my friend," Stephen responded. "Thank you so much for handling the sale of the house. I could not have faced it."

"I was pleased to help. Mary is thrilled with the furniture you gave us. She loves the pieces you made." Jacob's wire-rimmed glasses glinted in the sunlight, hiding his eyes, but his voice gave away his sorrow.

"I'm glad," he said, but honestly didn't know if he could possibly be glad about anything ever again.

The two men walked along in silence for some time, heading for one of their favorite restaurants, although Stephen had no appetite. In fact, he hadn't been hungry since before Ruby had died.

"So you sold the Model T?" Jacob asked.

"Yes, I sold or gave away everything except my clothes. They're at the hotel."

"Do you still have the stone?"

Stephen had been expecting this question. Why wouldn't Jacob be curious about the stone and its powers? He had seen its effects.

"Yes, I can't bring myself to get rid of it now." Putting a hand to his chest, he could feel the reassuring bump under his coat and shirt. "You know Ruby hated it." His throat immediately convulsed at the mention of her name and he had to swallow the lump of sorrow.

"I know. She asked me once to steal it from you and destroy it." Jacob pulled a white handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose loudly. "I couldn't do that to you. I know how much it means to you."

He stared at Jacob then, startled by this revelation. "Thank you. I wonder why Ruby didn't take it herself when you didn't."

"Oh, she did take it."

More surprises. "I never noticed it missing. How did she accomplish this?"

Arriving at the Bull and Bear, they went inside and sat down at a table by the window. Stephen took out a pair of dark glasses and put them on. Jacob nodded his understanding. If anyone recognized the magician and remembered the incident with the falling lumber several years ago, who could predict the outcome?

His friend took off his own spectacles and cleaned them with the napkin. "Do you remember the time you got hurt when that man yelled 'fire' in the middle of the act?"

"Of course." Stephen handed his menu to the waitress after ordering. "It hurt like hell to have my arm broken by the blacksmith's anvil, but the fault was mine for letting the man distract me. She took the stone then? Why did she return it before I realized the charm was gone?"

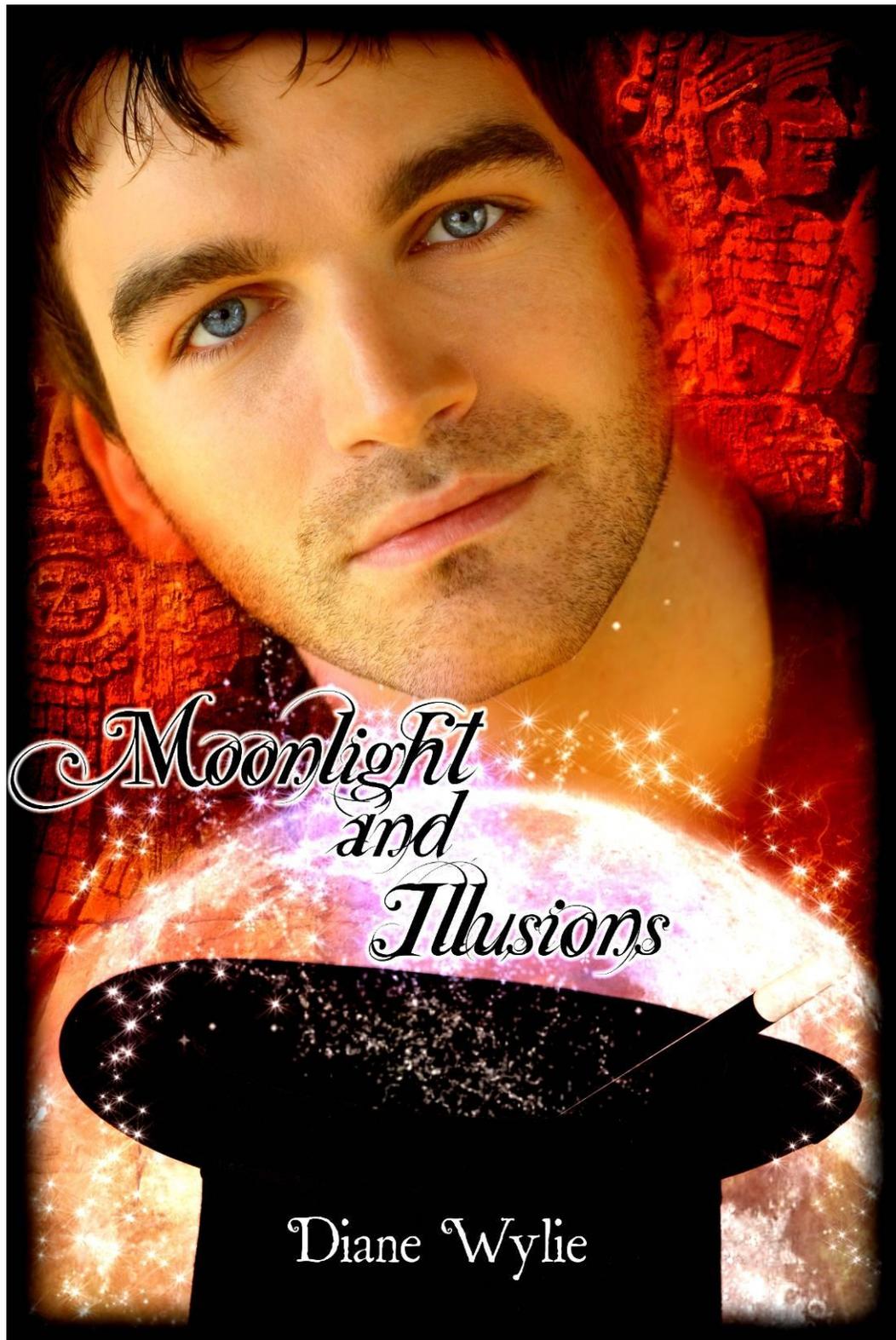
Jacob leaned closer and lowered his voice. "She had a duplicate made so you didn't notice, but when she saw how quickly your bones knitted, and how you credited that little charm, she put the real *Companion Spirit* back. She was a product of her time, Stephen. As a woman she knew that your success was her success. The stone offered magic, and magic meant the world to you."

"No, Jacob. Ruby meant the world to me and I took her for granted. She never told me about what she did, even at the end when I offered to get rid of the stone."

Their meal arrived. He tasted very little, but he had to eat to keep up his strength. Jacob knew far more than Stephen ever realized. It stunned him once again to learn the amount of love his wife had demonstrated for him. She hated the Mayan charm, and what it had done and could do. Now she had left him and he had to live with his regrets and uncertainty alone, and the agony consumed his soul.

PRELUDE TO MAGIC: THE PREQUEL TO MOONLIGHT AND ILLUSIONS

Stephen's story continues in *MOONLIGHT AND ILLUSIONS*.



Moonlight and Illusions By Diane Wylie

ISBN: 978-0-9834198-7-7

Illusionist Stephen Elliott performs dazzling magic feats to crowded theaters around the world. Then a chance encounter with an old woman and a cursed relic send his perfect life spinning out of control. He ends up cursed, on the run, and...immortal.

From her seat in the twenty-second row, Anabel Bernier recognizes with a jolt the handsome star of the magic show. World War II and the passage of time did nothing to dim the burning memory of her moonlight encounter with the charming Stephen Elliott. Will unexplained events, secrets, and powerful magic threaten their second chance at a future together?

Reviews for MOONLIGHT AND ILLUSIONS

"Diane Wylie has written another winner. From the first page Moonlight & Illusions held me riveted. I simply could not put the book down until I had devoured every word. I literally had to force myself to stop reading long enough to take a shower! Although I wasn't sure where this story was going to take me, I had no idea the trip would be so fraught with danger, adventure, and passion. Ms. Wylie's characters are not only believable, but so real you soon find yourself completely wrapped up in their lives, rooting for them throughout the book.

Ms. Wylie has obviously done her research into Mayan myths and legends. She takes a small stone and turns it into a magical object that holds secrets no one can quite figure out. Not only has she brought rich details to this story that will make you hold your breath as you wait to find out what will happen next, she puts the reader right into the surroundings with the colorful descriptions of the people and places. With brilliant dialogue, a storyline that will leave you breathless, and two people who have much more in common than they know, will make you swoon with every glance.

This is a definite must read and will go on the keeper shelf to be read again and again. Diane Wylie is one of the finest writer's I've ever read and you will not want to miss Moonlight & Illusions."

Reviewed by: Rie McGaha www.riemcgaha.com
The Pagan & The Pen Book Reviews

"I found this book to be very enjoyable. I enjoyed reading about the Mayans and magic. I enjoyed the relationship between Stephen and Anabel. I highly recommend this book to anyone who enjoys a good romance and mystery. The author did not leave you wanting."

PRELUDE TO MAGIC: THE PREQUEL TO MOONLIGHT AND ILLUSIONS

Rating: 5 stars

The Paranormal Romance Guild

Reviewed by Linda Tonis

Member of the Paranormal Romance Review Team

<http://www.paranormalromanceguild.com/reviewsdianawylie.htm>

"Ms. Wylie does a fabulous job with setting – Mexico, battle fields, hospital ships, Mayan ruins. She's a master at incorporating the reader's senses to transport them to each time and place. Moonlight and Illusions is a fun, captivating read..."

Rating: 4 stars

Long and Short Reviews

Reviewed by Water Lily

<http://www.longandshortreviews.blogspot.com/2012/02/moonlight-and-illusions-by-diane-wylie.html>

Additional Titles by Diane Wylie

Moonlight and Illusions (the continuation of this story)

Secrets and Sacrifices

Jenny's Passion

Lila's Vow

Adam's Treasure

A Soldier to Love (short story)

Praise for Diane Wylie's Other Books

*"...as I read the story, I simply could not put it down until
I had devoured every last word..."*

*~Rie McGaha from Romance Writers United (about LILA'S
VOW)*

*"...an author who displays a rare talent and leaves you
wanting more..."*

*~Marilyn Rondeau from RIO – Reviewers International
Organization (about SECRETS AND SACRIFICES)*

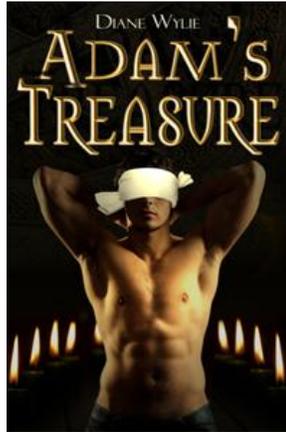
*"...Ms. Wylie gives historical romance a breath of fresh
air..."*

*~Sandra Marlow from Romance Junkies (about JENNY'S
PASSION)*

*"...Wylie expertly brings the reader back in time as she
weaves the perfect web of history, lust, and intrigue..."*

*~Jennifer Vido from Fresh Fiction (about SECRETS AND
SACRIFICES)*

Adam's Treasure by Diane Wylie



Print ISBN: 1-60154-753-6

Print ISBN 13: 9781601547538

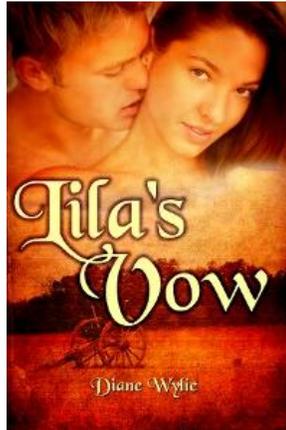
Genre: Historical Romance

Time Period: 1867 Post-War U.S.

Master of disguise, Adam Skelding, is a Pinkerton agent on assignment. His mission: Find the missing gold and stop the secretive Knights of the Golden Circle before they gain power. The future of the country depends upon it.

All Marilla Logan wanted was a way to escape from her life as a tavern wench. A dark stranger who breaks into her room offers her only chance. Swept up into a life of intrigue, she becomes ensnared in a tangled web of clues, danger, and emotion to break the code.

Lila's Vow by Diane Wylie



ISBN: 978-0-9819896-0-0

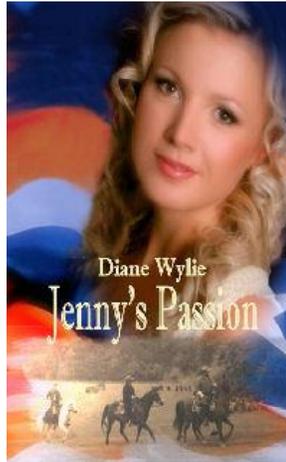
Genre: Historical Romance

Time Period: 1863 to 1865

Schoolteacher Lila Sutton finds her one true love when cavalryman Captain Jack Montgomery rides into Gettysburg. But receiving word of his death leads her to seek her own type of revenge.

Imprisoned for a year, Jack returns to an uncertain future filled with turmoil and danger, when all he wants is Lila.

Jenny's Passion by Diane Wylie



ISBN-10: 0981559247

ISBN-13: 978-0981559247

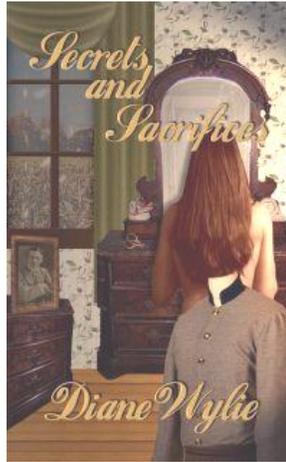
Genre: Historical Romance

Time Period: 1863 to 1865

David Reynolds joined the cavalry out of a sense of duty and adventure. As he rides into battle at Mine Run he has no idea his life is about to change forever.

The forbidden Yankee attracts Jennifer Winston like no other. She would do anything to save him...even kill.

Secrets and Sacrifices by Diane Wylie



Release Date: September 30, 2006

ISBN: 0-9785368-5-1

Genre: Historical Romance

Time Period: 1863 to 1865

The Confederate army is starving and badly in need of clothing. Add to that the mounting numbers of battle casualties, a lack of medical supplies, and army surgeon, Captain Daniel Reid, of the Twenty-Fifth Virginia, knows he has to take action, no matter the consequences.

Charlotte Garrett loses her husband and her identity when she takes on the guise of a Southern soldier. Learning to march, fight, and even spit like a man is to be expected. But what she doesn't expect to find is a situation that leads her into the arms of a new man and into big, big trouble with the North and South!

About the Author



Author, Diane Wylie, loves books that will take her on an emotional roller coaster ride. What better genre than romance to do that? She has always particularly loved romances with dashing heroes and beautiful heroines.

Diane, a graduate of Rutgers University, had wanted to be either a veterinarian or a marine biologist, but still manages to fulfill her love for science as a technical writer. She is proud to add *Moonlight and Illusions* to her list of published novels, which includes *Adam's Treasure*, *Secrets and Sacrifices*, *Jenny's Passion*, and *Lila's Vow*, along with short story, "A Soldier to Love."

The mother of two grown children, Diane makes her home in Maryland with her husband, Ed, a former racecar driver and graphic designer.

Visit Diane's website: <http://www.dianewylie.com> to learn more about her and her upcoming novels.

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