

Chapter One

Blackthorne Manor
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
September 1882

MORGANA'S ATTENTION drifted from her current activity, one she preferred to end sooner rather than later. She had to meet with James, go over the household accounts with Betty, and double-check security with Takoda. There was the afternoon with Mrs. Fairfax and a quick trip to Market Street. There were those rumors of an Englishman asking uncomfortable questions about her and no doubt on his way to Philadelphia.

"Morgana."

And then there was David Helston.

She accepted his kiss, arching her body against his as he entered her. His hand was too hot and sweaty as it gripped her hip.

It hadn't always been like this between them. In the year they'd been sleeping together, it was only within the last couple of months that David made love to her with such clumsy barbarism.

Or maybe it was her, she mused.

She didn't call his name; she never did. Doing so would've required more concentration than she felt necessary.

Waiting rather impatiently for him to finish, Morgana continued her mental list of things to do once they were done. Oh, God, she hoped he didn't want to spend the morning in bed. She was entirely too busy for that.

And completely uninterested.

His teeth clamped down on her shoulder, causing her to wince. *What the devil?* She sighed and wrapped her legs around his hips. Why bite her shoulder? Why not her neck? Or—heaven forbid—her breasts?

Her life was never easy.

"Morgana!" he cried as he shuddered in release.

Luckily, the only consequence from their actions would be her need to bathe. One of the few things that survived the Blackthornes' trip from their beloved Scotland and persecution in the mid-1700s was the herbs used to prevent pregnancy. Her wise ancestors wouldn't forget something that important.

Morgana was not about to have David's child. Even if she could have children.

He moved off her with a satisfied groan, flopping on the bed next to her. *Good, only the once today, then.*

Taking her cue, she rose up on an elbow and kissed him softly. His mouth opened under hers and he kissed her back between pants. With Robert, her late husband, Morgana never had this problem. When they'd made love, it was different. Sweeter, better, caring.

Then again, she'd loved him.

David was a means to an end. Okay, two means to an end, though she was pretty sure pleasuring herself was a far better way to climax than letting him fumble with her body. And since she doubted she was going to go blind after all this time, it seemed the best choice given her options.

Except she needed David.

Even as she broke the kiss, she calculated her next move on the chessboard upon which he unknowingly played. Her hand drifted over his chest and she let a slow smile play across her lips.

Bastard. He really thought he held the upper hand. This was her game, and as queen, she was the strongest piece on the board. Underestimating her was foolhardy. David was worse than that. He was arrogant and foolish. A dangerous combination.

"I have to go," she sighed as his hand drifted up her thigh. "I've neglected my own household for too long. They know I'm in today and have already made me promise to meet with them."

David nodded, but his hand didn't stop its upward path.

Oh, for a tingle, a hint of moisture, a tease of desire.

Nothing.

With another sigh she knew he'd take for reluctance, Morgana rose and hurriedly pulled on her dressing gown. She didn't ring for a servant to help David dress, but held out his shirt herself. She hoped he'd take the unspoken hint to leave before the sun fully rose and people ventured out for the day. She held sway with a good many of the neighborhood elders, but there only needed to be one.

She waited while he pulled on his trousers and waistcoat, smoothed the cuffs, and turned in the mirror. For God's sake, he was only going a few blocks. Keeping her face neutral, Morgana waited while he slipped on his socks and shoes and took one last look in the mirror.

Coming up behind him, she wrapped her hands around his waist and turned him to face her. She kissed him one last time, letting the moment drag on until she was sure it conveyed her unwillingness to let him go rather than her inability to stand his touch any longer.

Leading him down the hallway and to the back door, she smiled up at him. Opening the servants' entrance, she

stepped with him onto the stoop. Her fingers fluttered over his cheek and she kissed him quickly.

“I’ll see you this afternoon for the ritual, don’t forget.”

Without waiting for his agreement—he had no choice anyway—she closed the door. She heard his grunt of frustration and his heavy tread on the flagstones.

With luck, she had enough time for a long pleasurable bath before beginning her daily meetings.

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“And Allen?” Morgana asked as they stood in her garden so as not to be overheard.

“Inside with the others,” Takoda replied.

Damn. That was her best lead. Someone was selling ingredients to the locals; she just couldn’t figure out whom. She knew who sought the ingredients. With Allen inside, and not where her information claimed this mysterious seller to be, her one lead was gone.

Though her evidence was shaky and her support amongst the Circle eroding, she couldn’t let it pass. No matter what she did, she’d have to play carefully.

The chessboard she’d meticulously crafted still had several moves pending. Power was a strong motivating factor for those who had little. Power and influence, even stronger.

“And the Englishman?”

“He’s in town.” Takoda nodded.

His dark eyes looked across the carefully tended garden as if he could see beyond the walls that enclosed her home. Probably could, too. Takoda was the last of his line, a Lakota-Sioux shaman whose wife and four children had been mercilessly murdered over a decade ago. He had found the murderers and had dealt his revenge swiftly. He had not, however, finished his mourning. Morgana doubted he ever would.

She'd rescued him from the lynch mob who already had the rope around his neck. Her magick was strong and, behind her will, nearly unstoppable. Still, there'd been a great many in that town in western Kansas and it wasn't her magically enabled powers of persuasion that made them release him.

It was the money she'd tossed to the ground.

"I haven't discovered what he's after, milady," he shook his head.

Morgana suppressed a smile at his formality. Even after all they'd been through, Takoda refused to call her by her familiar name. It had too much power over her, he claimed, and he was not her master, but she his. No one was the shaman's master, but he didn't see it that way, and Morgana was not going to argue with him.

"Information, I'd wager." She looked toward the house where her Circle gathered for their monthly rite. It was the new moon, a time of renewal amongst their people. Mostly, it was a chance for her to gauge everyone's magicks.

"He's after more than my family's history," she added, "no matter what his story might be. You say he's a Harrington?" She knew the answer. She'd had him tracked since the moment he landed in Nova Scotia several weeks ago. He wasn't subtle, but she suspected that was on purpose. "I recall them being one of the families in the Old World. Not Masters, but powerful in their own right."

"I don't think he's here to cultivate a friendship."

"Probably not," Morgana agreed. "Nevertheless, have Angus and Betty direct him here. I wish to speak with him."

"As you wish," Takoda said. He bowed his head, the closest he ever got to a sign of submission despite his words, and left to do her bidding.

With a deep breath, she crossed the gardens and entered the house. Noise from their preparations echoed down the hallway. Smoothing her face into an implacable smile, she unpinned her hat and entered the drawing room.

David was already there, which didn't surprise her. Allen Dinshaw, her only lead, lounged against a wall with a glass of her port. Twenty-three others gathered, nine of whom stood around David and hung onto his every word.

Morgana surveyed them for a moment, taking in the dynamics, the guilty start when one of those in David's group noticed her.

"Good afternoon," she greeted, sweeping into the room in a calculated entrance.

Immediate silence descended on those gathered as every eye settled on her. No matter what David attempted, no matter what he planned, she was the one who held everyone's attention and respect. She planned to keep it that way, despite David's obvious attempts to subvert her power.

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Impatient for the rite to begin, and for the mysterious Harrington to finally make his way to her door, the afternoon dragged for Morgana. They gathered in the parlor, waiting for the sun to set. Taking her place at the center of the circle, she swept her gaze over everyone. Nodding, she began.

"As is our tradition, carried through generations of the Blackthorne line, we gather on the eve of the new moon, that the magick of all present is renewed and strengthened in conjunction with that of my master line."

There was a knock on the door. Irritation flashed through her, but she stopped. Could it be that Harrington found his way here so quickly? Interesting. Either her loyal servants found him more rapidly than she thought, or he was better than she'd believed.

"Lucien Harrington," Jacobs, her butler, intoned, "the Earl of Granville."

Smiling, Morgana swept out of the circle, stepping into the foyer, and greeted her guest. His timing was off, but as the magicker she knew him to be, not suspect.

“Welcome, Lord Granville,” she said, offering a slight curtsy.

He was tall, with dark blond hair, dark blue eyes, and a sharp nose over which he looked down at her. Her eyes traveled over his face, down his body, clothed in immaculately tailored Savile Row, back to his face. Arousal pooled hot in her belly.

She’d never wanted any man. Yet Morgana wanted Lord Granville. Her skin prickled at his nearness, her womb clenched with want.

Forcing her mind off his body, she studied his face. Briefly, want flashed in his eyes and she smiled a truly wicked smile at him. It was gone as fast as it’d shone and she returned to studying him. There was grief hidden deep in his eyes, along with suspicion and weariness. Tilting her head, she wondered what caused those emotions. Suspicion she could easily understand. It’d been more than a hundred and thirty years since their families had any contact. Though, since he’d sought her out, she should be more suspicious of him.

“Mistress Blackthorne,” he bowed over her offered hand. Flicking a glance behind her, he said, “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“Not at all,” Morgana smiled. She could all but feel David’s displeasure. Suppressing a giddy smile, she took Lord Granville’s arm and led him into the parlor. “We’re about to begin the New Moon Ritual. Do you still practice it in England?”

Looking up at him with guileless eyes, she waited for his confusion, gratified when it sparked briefly in those bottomless depths. Damn them all. She could be as gracious as she liked, but in the end, resentment bubbled to the surface.

They'd abandoned her ancestors to indentured servitude and hadn't bothered to contact any of them since.

"I'm afraid we lost that custom when we lost the valuable Blackthorne line."

Morgana raised her eyebrow at him as they entered the parlor. Wasn't he the diplomat?

"Would you care to join the ritual, Lord Granville?"

He bowed again and smiled. "It would be my pleasure, Mrs. Blackthorne."

Retaking her place in the center of the circle, she cast one last look at Lord Granville and closed her eyes. Incanting the words, "I share my strength as master with those amongst this circle. Allow the earth and the sky, and all the elements to bind with your magicks. Terra, aer, unda, ignis, nemus."

She locked eyes with Lord Granville, wanting to measure his magickal strength, already knowing he'd be very powerful. And she was correct. As the magick rushed through her, her eyes once more closed, savoring the power she felt emanating from Granville.