

CASSANDRA'S CURSE



STELLA MOORE

BLUSHING BOOKS

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PROLOGUE



A storm was coming.

The locals rushed about, making the necessary preparations. Boats were docked and tied securely, children ushered into the relative safety of their homes. Nobody seemed to notice the two women standing alone on the beach, circling one another. Or the power that they each wore like a second skin shimmering around them.

One of the women raised her hand, fingers open to the sky in supplication, and a bolt of lightning slashed between the two, scorching the sand. The air came alive with electricity, but her counterpart simply smiled.

“Parlor tricks,” she said dismissively. “Haven’t you anything better for me, dear Iliana?”

“I haven’t come to impress you, Cassandra,” the first said, “I’ve come to destroy you.” Her voice carried over the storm, amplified by grief and magic.

Cassandra laughed, her head thrown back with her long, black hair falling in waves to her waist. “Destroy me? Please. I’ve had power longer than you’ve been alive, little one. And you think you will defeat me?” She flicked a wrist and Iliana flew through the air,

her body slamming against the rocks overlooking the roiling sea. Cassandra strolled across the beach, lazily making her way to the spot where her opponent struggled to her feet.

"I've already won," Iliana said with a dark laugh, and for the first time, Cassandra felt the bite of fear. "The man you just left? The one who's seed is still inside of you? He gave you something tonight. A token of his affection."

Cassandra ran a delicate finger down the length of gold around her neck. "What of it?" she asked, annoyed now by the game they were playing.

"I cursed it weeks ago, and I sold it to him at the market yesterday." Cassandra felt true terror when Iliana laughed again, the sound echoing with madness. "I disguised myself so he wouldn't know it was me, the woman he scorned to be with you. And now the bauble you so proudly wear will be your prison for eternity." Iliana tilted her head to the side, studying Cassandra. "Oh, you'll be allowed out from time to time. But you will always be at the mercy of a man, and I pray they are as callous with you as you have been with everyone who has ever had the misfortune to cross your path."

The gold began to burn and Cassandra screamed, pulling at the necklace. But she couldn't break the hold of the dark magic it had been imbued with. "You can't do this! Iliana, stop!"

"It's too late!" Iliana screamed, the storm whipping around her, sending her blonde hair flying, pulling at her clothes like a desperate lover. She began to chant in an ancient and mostly forgotten tongue, the pupils of her eyes widening until there was only a sliver of pale grey ringing the black.

Cassandra fell to the ground, pain unlike any she'd ever known engulfing her body. She looked up as Iliana approached her, and the last thing she saw before she fell into the dark was madness.

CHAPTER 1



Stepping out of the hot Alabama sun into the blissfully cool interior of the shop, Wyatt Hartnett took a moment to enjoy man's greatest invention: central air conditioning. Looking around, he zeroed in on the short, stocky man behind the counter and walked directly to him.

"Mr. Lampros?" The man glanced up for a second, then returned to the silver he was polishing. Unfazed, Wyatt plowed ahead. "My name is Wyatt Hartnett. My mother, Jeannie, shops here often?"

The store owner's wide, bored face transformed when Wyatt mentioned his mother. "Yes!" he said with a thick accent Wyatt couldn't quite place. "Miss Jeannie is one of our best customers. She talks about you often. How can I help you?"

Wyatt grinned at the man. "Mama's birthday is Saturday and I want to get her something special. Anything she's been eyeing lately?"

Mr. Lampros put away the silver and gestured towards the end of the display case. Wyatt moved down the counter, stopping once again across the glass from the shop owner.

"Miss Jeannie has admired this many times," Mr. Lampros said,

pulling a necklace from the case. "It's a very old piece. I've never seen anything like it in all my years."

Wyatt lifted the chain, allowing the stone to dangle freely. It was an opal, nearly as big as a baby's fist, surrounded by crystals that shimmered even in the dim light of the store. It was beautiful, and it was exactly something his mother would love. "How much?" Wyatt asked, holding his breath. The number Mr. Lampros gave him nearly made him choke.

"Ah, any way we can knock that down a bit?" he asked as casually as he could while having what he was pretty sure was a mild heart attack.

"Well, since Miss Jeannie is one of our best customers and it is her birthday, I will give you a small discount." The man's eyes sparkled with excitement and they spent the next half hour going back and forth until they finally settled on a number Wyatt could live with. With the necklace in tow and his wallet significantly lighter, he headed home.

Sitting at the pretty kitchen table his mother had nagged him into buying, he took the necklace box out of the shopping bag so that he could transfer it to the gift bag he'd stopped and picked up on the way home. He was hopeless at wrapping presents, a fact of life his mama had long ago learned to accept. As he was lifting the box out, a piece of paper fell out of the bag and landed on the table. Setting the box aside, he picked the paper up to examine it.

"What the hell?" he wondered out loud, studying the strange paper. It looked old, almost ancient, and it was folded neatly into quarters. Unfolding it, he blinked when his eyesight seemed to shimmy before the words on the paper came into focus. Gripped by a curiosity that was almost beyond him, he read the words out loud.

*"In this stone, you will see
A beautiful woman waits for thee.
Recite these words and set her free
Forever your slave, bound to be"*

As soon as the last word left his lips, the paper caught fire and turned to ash in his hand. The box holding the necklace began to rock back and forth on the table, and a bright green glow beamed out of the cracks. Around him, the house trembled, and he gripped the table for support. The box sprang open and the room filled with that same brilliant green light, temporarily blinding him.

When the light dimmed again, there was a woman kneeling on the floor of his kitchen. Wyatt jumped up, nearly tripping over his chair. Stunned, his breath heaving in his chest, he stared down at the woman. Long, jet black hair fell in soft waves down her back. Her skin was a pale gold that shimmered even in the harsh fluorescent lights of his kitchen. When she looked up, her eyes were a deep brown, nearly black, and full of an emotion that bordered on hate.

“What the fuck,” Wyatt whispered. “Who are you?”

“I am Cassandra,” she replied in a voice as smooth as Swiss chocolate. “I am here to serve you.”

“Like, uh, like a genie?” This was the most bizarre conversation of his life. He stared down at her, not entirely certain he wasn’t hallucinating.

She rolled her eyes in a time-honored gesture of exasperation. “I am not a Jinn. I am Cassandra, daughter of Alexander and Sirena, blessed by the gods with gifts of magic, and your humble servant.” She sneered a little at the last part, and Wyatt’s fear began to give way to intense curiosity.

“I’m supposed to believe you’re what? A witch?”

“An enchantress. And yes. Were you not the one who released me from the stone?”

“Well yeah, but—would you stand up please?” As much as he enjoyed the sight of her on her knees in front of him, it made for an awkward conversation.

She rose fluidly and Wyatt realized with a jolt that she was completely, gloriously naked. He quickly looked up at the ceiling. “Could you, ah, put some clothes on?”

He heard her distinctly female chuckle and then a soft *whoosh* sound. He glanced back down and saw that she was dressed, though not exactly in the current fashion. The tight bodice and full skirt of the dress she wore were reminiscent of something that might have been worn during the Civil War.

“How long have you been, um, trapped?” he asked.

She tilted her head to the side, as though considering the question. “What year is it?”

“Two thousand eighteen.”

Her eyes went wide for a moment. “Well. All told, about seven hundred years. The last time I was freed was one hundred fifty-five years ago. There was a great and bloody war then. Is there still war?”

“Yeah, and it’s still great and bloody, but not so much here. I need to sit down.” He stumbled forward and slid onto one of his kitchen chairs. “Tell me, again, what’s going on here.”

She began to pace the small kitchen, slowly walking up and down the tiled floors. He couldn’t help but admire the way her hips moved under the dress. “Many years ago, there was another enchantress. She was envious of my power, and sought to destroy me. She managed to trap me in the amulet with a curse. Only a man can release me, and I am bound to do his bidding until he returns me to the amulet. I am your slave,” she added bitterly.

Sympathy stirred in his heart. “You’re not my slave,” he protested.

She shrugged one slender shoulder. “Whether you wish it to be or not, that is the nature of the spell. Whatever you command of me, I must give.”

“Even your body?” The question slipped out and he could have kicked himself when her eyes went blank.

Cassandra inclined her head regally. “Yes. If you wish.”

“I don’t. And I wouldn’t. How do you break the spell?”

She shook her head. “I am not allowed to say, or the spell becomes permanent.”

Wyatt frowned. "Even if I order you to tell me?"

Her face showed the first signs of distress since she'd appeared out of thin air. "Please do not ask. Even if I have no choice, if I tell anyone how the spell can be broken, I will seal my fate for eternity. I will do anything you ask, but please do not ask this of me."

"Hey." He pushed to his feet and wrapped his arms around her. "Don't worry. I'll figure it out one way or another, but I promise I won't ask you about it again."

"Thank you." She pulled away and opened her mouth as though she wanted to speak, but quickly closed it again.

"What is it?" Wyatt asked gently.

"I was just wondering if I might have something to eat?"

"Oh. Of course. I'm an idiot," he said with a nervous laugh. "A hundred and fifty years locked away in a magic necklace. Of course you're hungry. What kind of food do you like?"

"Do you have any fruit?" she asked, hope shining in her eyes.

"I think I have some grapes. Maybe an orange or two. I'll go to the store later and get you some things. I don't cook a lot, since I live alone." He went to the refrigerator and pulled out a bundle of grapes, rinsing them in the sink. He gestured to the kitchen table and she carefully perched on one of the chairs. Placing the grapes on a plate, he set them in front of her and watched as she daintily picked one from the bundle and popped it in her mouth. Her eyes closed and she let out a small moan of satisfaction. He wondered if it was the same sound she'd make as he pleased her.

He banished the thought as soon as it entered his mind. She was in his care, and he would absolutely not take advantage of the situation they'd found themselves in.

When his phone vibrated in his pocket, she jumped and looked over at him with a startled expression. "It's okay, it's just my phone. Uh, to talk to people. Hang on." He pulled the phone from his pocket, groaning when he saw his mother's name on the screen. As much as he adored his mother, he wasn't really prepared to talk to her at the moment, with a seven-hundred-year-old witch eating

grapes at his kitchen table. But he knew not answering would create more questions, so he hit the button.

“Hey mama,” he answered.

“Hi baby! Just wanted to call and see how the job went this afternoon.”

He’d completely forgotten about it, even though it was the reason he’d been able to purchase the necklace for her. “It went great, actually. We finished off the bathroom and now they’re talking about remodeling the kitchen. And considering the kitchen is the size of your apartment, it would be a pretty lucrative gig.”

“Excellent!” The excitement in his mother’s voice made him smile. His number one fan, as always. “I’ll see you for dinner on Saturday?”

“Uh.” He glanced over at Cassandra, who was watching him curiously. “Yeah. I’ll meet you around seven.”

“I can’t wait. I miss my baby! Love you, Wyatt.”

“Love you too, mama.”

“Your mother lives in that tiny box?” Cassandra asked, fascination stamped all over her gorgeous face.

Wyatt laughed. “No, she lives in an apartment a few miles from here. She has her own phone,” he wiggled his cell, “and we talk to each other through them.”

Her expression turned sulky. “Is everyone an enchantress now?”

“No, but I suppose it’s a bit like magic. As a matter of fact,” he tapped a search into the phone and handed it over to her.

“How do the clothes fit in the box? I do not understand.”

“They don’t. It’s just pictures, like with a camera. You go to a store to get the actual clothes, or someone can send them to you.”

Her nose wrinkled. “These clothes are very strange. Why does everything have holes in it? Can these women not afford new clothes?”

He chuckled at her obvious displeasure. “They’re made that way on purpose. I don’t really know why. Here,” he scrolled through the

results until he saw something she might be more comfortable in. "Try this."

She tilted her head in consideration, then nodded. "Yes, I like this." With a flick of her wrist, she was draped in the long, flowing material of a floral printed maxi dress. The material clung to her curves in a way that nearly made him drool just looking at her.

"Perfect," he managed, hoping she didn't notice the lust that strained his voice.

A heavy, awkward silence fell between them. "I, ah, guess I should figure out what to do with you," he eventually said. "Do you live in the amulet thing?"

Cassandra shook her head. "Only if I've been banished. There's another spell for that, but you have to ask the amulet for it. You won't be able to release me again if you banish me."

"Shit. I guess you're staying here for a while, at least until I figure out how to break the curse." He laughed and scrubbed a hand over his face. "I can't believe I'm actually saying this. I don't even believe in shit like this."

"Why would you not believe in this... shit?" The way she said "shit" reminded him of a child learning a new word and he winced. "Have you not seen it with your own eyes, Master?"

"Wyatt."

"I'm sorry?" The confusion in her eyes was really too adorable for words.

"My name is Wyatt. You don't have to call me Master. I'd actually appreciate it if you didn't."

She smiled, and he thought he saw real appreciation in the gesture. "Wyatt, then."

"Thanks. And yeah, I know I saw it, I just can't quite believe it. But here you are, so let's get you settled." He held a hand out to help her stand, and she slipped her slender hand into his. He tried to ignore the zing of electricity he felt when her hand touched his, but when he saw her frown, he wondered if she felt it as well.

Wyatt dropped her hand and gestured to the doorway of the

kitchen. “There’s a spare bedroom just off the living room. I haven’t done much with it, but it’s yours for as long as you need it.” He walked past her, leading the way to a room full of half unpacked boxes and various pieces of furniture.

Cassandra walked in and stood in the middle of the room, her hands on her hips. “May I make a few changes?” she asked with a smile.

Wyatt shrugged. “Sure. I don’t have much, but—oh.”

He watched as she closed her eyes and the air around her began to vibrate. Then there was a flash of light and the room simply transformed. The boxes and mismatched furniture disappeared and in their place was a bedroom suite in a deep, gleaming mahogany, covered in a tasteful floral duvet. He had to admire her taste—and her style.

“Cool,” he said, looking around with an approving nod. “Just one question. Where’s all my stuff?”

She smiled coyly. “Somewhere safe. I can retrieve whatever you need when necessary.”

“You know what? I don’t even want to know.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “How come you can create all of this but you couldn’t whip yourself up some food earlier?”

“I didn’t create it out of thin air, I simply altered what was already there. I could do the same with the food, but I would not be able to simply ‘whip it up’ as you said.”

“Fair enough.” Wyatt pulled his phone out of his pocket again and winced when he saw the time. “Listen, I hate to do this, but I’ve got a meeting with a new client to get to. Can you keep yourself entertained for an hour or so?”

She tilted her head, and he got the distinct impression she was sizing him up. “Is this a request or an order?” she asked after a brief silence.

“Well, I’d appreciate if you didn’t go wandering around. You could get hurt. We can talk about the ordering you around thing when I get home.”

"Then I will stay. Do you have books?"

"Ah, not many. But I have something better." Turning, he led the way out of the bedroom to the living room. After showing her how to work the television (and explaining that the people inside weren't cursed), he left for his meeting and said a little prayer to whatever God who might be listening in that he wasn't making a huge mistake leaving her to her own devices.