



The Earl's Enchantment

by

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Chapter One

Adrian Knighton, Earl of Holworth, hated the twenty first century. Adding to his ire, as a ghost trapped within his own castle, he had limited options regarding his current domain.

He glared at the latest inhabitant who'd entered the Holworth Castle...well...Bookshop. Adrian snorted. *A bookshop b'God.* That the venerable Holworth Castle, which had protected the Dorset countryside for centuries, was now a receptacle for lurid novels and dusty tomes vexed him to no end. Peasants of any kind could simply wander in whenever they wanted, which they did with alarming frequency.

Take this latest peasant, for instance. Back in his day, Adrian thought indignantly, a man dressed in such dishabille would have been expelled from the Holworth keep on his arse. A torn shirt, filthy shoes, and his hair...Adrian had once seen a book on mammals in North America, and for the life of him, he couldn't understand why an Englishman would want his hair to stick up like a porcupine.

It was simply unbearable and entirely unacceptable...except for *her*.

Just when Adrian had been at the end of his tether, seething and raging over his imprisonment for the past two centuries, *she* had appeared one bright June morning. The bell hanging in the doorway of the shop had given a silvery tinkle, causing Adrian to growl under his breath. Then, as he'd glanced over at the entryway, his customary ill temper deserted him.

A woman stood framed by the ancient timber of the doorway, and as sunlight flooded around her, she acquired an almost heavenly glow. She stepped inside and the glow faded, but Adrian remained entranced. The quiet dignity she displayed as she approached the counter and took on her new post calmed his spirits. Apparently, she had taken quite a chance, starting a new life in a foreign country, but Adrian never saw her waver in her decision.

It was not that she was a dazzling beauty, at least not according to the taste of the modern society Adrian now found himself in. Her wavy chestnut hair fell below her shoulders without any of the fluffing and layering Adrian detested. A dimple on each side of her lush mouth crowned the lower part of her face, while a pair of elegantly arched eyebrows framed the top part. Her face was fresh and unpainted, and her eyes the shade of the wild grass which sprang up around the castle. As to the fact she was an American, well, not everyone could be perfect, Adrian reasoned to himself. He was an English lord—his ghostly state be damned—and therefore could make allowances.

But more than that, she was not afraid of him, not the tiniest bit. True, she had jumped a bit when he had first revealed his presence, but that was to be expected. No hysterics had followed; indeed, she had collected herself quickly and launched into a lively interrogation. He liked that...all curiosity and no fear, rather like himself. Indeed, she seemed to regard his company more in the light of an adventure, and whenever she could sneak in a bit of conversation, she would eagerly pump him for information about the England of his day. Except, of course, when they weren't engaging in yet another spirited quarrel...

"Jane Austen was the finest novelist of your day!" Caitlin's eyes snapped with defiance, daring him to contradict her.

Adrian sniffed, taking his time before

replying. "I will admit that she had talent," he paused as he heard Caitlin mutter something under her breath about arrogant ghosts. "I, however, greatly prefer Sir Walter Scott."

"Scott was a hack compared to Jane Austen," Caitlin hissed. Adrian noted with interest that her eyes had darkened until they almost appeared brown.

They had to cut short their conversation as the peasant with the porcupine hair approached the till, several shiny magazines clutched in his hands. Adrian sighed inwardly. Did no one, aside from Caitlin, of course, appreciate the written word in this modern age? In his day—Adrian knew the phrase made him sound like a grouch, but he couldn't help it given the state of affairs—he would enjoy many blissful hours at Hatchard's during the season. Hatchard's at No. 190 Piccadilly...Adrian remembered the newspapers fanned out across the mahogany tables, the fire lighting up the interior of the store, the rustling of skirts as patrons darted in and out...what a life it had been.

Dismissing the old memories, he turned his back on the offending porcupine man and glided over to where she was hunched over a desk and small bits of paper.

"Adrian, is that you?" she whispered, apparently feeling the cool breeze that ever preceded him. She absent-mindedly smoothed back the wispy tendrils of hair that drifted around her face.

"Yes, I'm here now," he whispered back. Devil take it; he would gladly relinquish his soul if just once, he could regain human form and take her in his arms.

"Still sulking over our earlier row?" One side of Caitlin's mouth quirked up and her dimple winked at him from its corner.

"Harrumph," he muttered. "Earls do not sulk. Only womanly sorts of people mope about, airing their grievances to the world." He eyed the

wretched serf with the torn shirt. Now *he* looked like just the sort to sit and sulk, especially considering the way he slouched; it made Adrian positively itch to stab something, preferably his sword, between the wretch's shoulder bones. Adrian rolled his eyes as he watched the slovenly fellow surreptitiously check his receipt for errors.

Not wanting Caitlin to witness this insult to her sales skill, he promptly added, "Besides, when one is in the right, one hardly has need to be in a huff."

His distraction worked as Caitlin sighed and shook her head at him. "Kindly don't start up again, if you please," Caitlin said primly. "I have a bit of a headache this morning, and I doubt that bickering with you will improve it."

"I have never had a headache," Adrian declared, knowing that he sounded every inch the arrogant aristocratic lord.

"Of course you wouldn't," Caitlin said dryly, "You were probably too busy causing headaches for other people to ever have one yourself."

"Quite right," Adrian said, very pleased with her assessment. It was the truth, after all; as the lord of Holworth, his duty had been to administer the estate and keep its operations running smoothly. With so many tenants to provide for, he rarely wasted much time worrying about tempering his orders.

"No mischief today, please. It's the end of this particular quarter, at least according to Mrs. Monroe's rather unusual calendar, so we'll be checking inventory." She arched an eyebrow and waved an admonishing finger in his direction.

"I'm offended," he said in his most dignified, aristocratic tone. "Just because I'm a ghost does not mean I am more predisposed to mischief than any other man."

"I'm happy to hear it," she hissed back. Porcupine Head turned to stare, and Caitlin simply raised her eyebrow as high as it could go and returned the stare until he turned away.

Then, she continued, “Though I must say you seem more prone to mischief than other ghosts I’ve read about.”

Adrian sniffed. “I will have you know that the Holworth line has a long, distinguished heritage in British history.”

Caitlin raised one hand in surrender. “Okay, okay.”

“And,” he couldn’t resist adding, “My forename also has a renowned association. Did you know that ten saints have held the name Adrian?”

“So now you’re a saint?” Caitlin asked dryly.

“I’m a saintly ghost,” Adrian said. He nodded as he watched her eyes crinkle in the corners as a smile spread across her face.

“I truly believe that.”

Adrian huffed as a customer approached, and their conversation had to be postponed. Wretched peasants—truth be told, it galled him that his Caitlin had to wait upon such fellows. His Caitlin; he couldn’t remember when he had first thought of her as his. He only knew that somehow, as incredible as it seemed, it felt right.

In two hundred years, no woman had ever affected him as she did. Whenever she was in the store, he was constantly aware of where she was and what she was doing. Every evening as she left, he hovered close to the window, watching until she disappeared into the shadows. That time was rapidly approaching, and Adrian contented himself with observing his spirited lady as she cheerfully rang up one sale after another.

Finally, the sun went down, and the last of the customers made their purchases and exited the store. Adrian barely refrained from kicking the door closed behind them.

“Oh, Caitlin, I am so sorry, but I have to leave.” The castle’s, well, *bookshop*’s proprietor hustled over to the register. Her wavy, ash-colored hair was loosely pulled back, her rhinestone-specked glasses perched precariously at the crown

of her head. "I know we're supposed to take inventory of the art, biography, and fiction sections for the next two days, but my father is in hospital, and I must get to him right away."

"Of course, Mrs. Monroe, I'll take care of everything."

Mrs. Monroe sighed and rubbed a pale hand against her forehead, a pronounced tic dancing a rhythm over her right eye. "Well, feel free to close up early tomorrow and the next day."

Adrian felt a wave of elation wash over him as he listened to the conversation. He would have her all to himself tonight and perhaps the next night as well. The exhilaration dimmed somewhat as he remembered the limitations that came with his ghostly status. Any attempts at traditional seduction were impossible, so he supposed he would have to settle for enjoying her company. Lately, though, he had felt a mounting frustration that he couldn't pull her close to him or even brush her hair with his fingers. Life after death, he mused, could be positively frustrating, at times devilishly so. The important thing, though, and he would just have to keep reminding himself of this, was that they would have the whole night without any annoying peasants.

He hummed an old country ditty as he glided around the store.

"Good Lord," he heard Caitlin say in a musing voice. "How on earth am I going to sort everything in two days?"

"Not to worry," Adrian assured her, floating over to where she stood by several towering stacks of books. "I can count very quickly, and you can record the numbers. We'll simply go shelf by shelf, then progress to the backroom." Crossing his arms, he looked around the store. "And we should start immediately; no sense in delaying the inevitable. If we combine our efforts and exert ourselves, we can easily accomplish such a task."

Caitlin beamed. "I like that. We'll have our own little supernatural team."

After several hours of sorting through books and making notations on the store's master list, they elected to pause for a few minutes. Adrian eyed their progress. Yes, no doubt about it, they were making excellent time. Caitlin called for a break, disappearing into the curtained off area behind the register, then reemerging with a cup of tea.

A few minutes of contented silence passed by as Caitlin sipped her tea and Adrian mutely contemplated her. Finally, he spoke. "You know, sweeting, in my day, it would be quite scandalous for the two of us to be alone this away."

Caitlin raised her eyebrows and smiled teasingly in his direction. "Really, my ghostly lord? And why would that be?"

"Because a man and woman alone together could engage in all sorts of mischief," Adrian said gravely. And what mischief he would indulge in with his sweet Caitlin, given the chance.

"You mean more mischief than sorting through hundreds of books together?" Caitlin asked, an innocent expression pasted on her face.

"Very funny, sweet Caitlin." He lowered his voice until it became a rough rasp. "No, I would be a great threat to your reputation if we were left to our own devices in my century."

"And what would you do that would cause you to be such a threat?" Caitlin asked, clearly entranced by the rough texture of his voice and the words he intoned.

Bending down beside her, he placed his lips near one delicate ear. "I would seduce you, of course." No sense in diluting the truth. Had they both been present in Adrian's day, he would have moved heaven and earth to secure her for himself.

Caitlin shivered. An antique clock on the shelf above them chimed the hour, and they both jumped. The spell, one worked by the air of intimacy and unrelieved desire, was broken.

"We should get back to work," Caitlin said. "We still have some boxes in the very back of the

storage area to sort through." She rose to her feet, two spots of red blooming across her cheeks.

Adrian watched her go, his arms crossed against his non-corporeal body. Damn, damn, damn! If only he could materialize. He heard Caitlin rummaging through the boxes in the back but elected to stay where he was. Drifting around the store, he came to a stop in front of a rumpled calendar.

October 30th—so tomorrow would be the witching day, and more impressively, the 200th anniversary of his ghostly status. Nothing to celebrate there, Adrian thought grumpily.

"Adrian!" He jolted away from the calendar as he heard Caitlin call for him. Speeding to the back room, he saw her propping against the wall a life-sized painting encased in a faded gilt frame. What he could see of the painting, which wasn't much given Caitlin's place in front of it, somehow looked familiar, and Adrian sensed a memory niggling in the recesses of his mind.

"You gave me a scare, sweeting," he said. "Luckily, I am already dead or you may have provoked a heart attack."

She looked away from the painting and arched her eyebrows. "I didn't know it was possible to scare a ghost."

"Of course it is possible," he said, punctuating his comment with a snort. "Now what is it you were screeching about?"

"I never screech," she said, with a small sniff, "Though occasionally I do shriek, yell, and shout."

"Semantics," he said.

"Anyway," she said, impatience threaded through her voice, "Look at what I found." She finally stepped out of the way, and Adrian was brought face to face with his own image.

Dash it, but he had actually begun to forget what he looked like. He eyed the stranger in the painting. "Not bad, I must say. From what I can remember, it is actually a rather good likeness."

"So it is you," Caitlin said in an awed voice.

She sighed. "I was wondering...and thought it might be..." For a moment, they stared in silence at the man forever captured on the canvas.

Finally, Adrian cleared his throat. "So you have been wondering about me?" He cursed inwardly. He had meant it to come out as a statement, not a question.

Caitlin blushed, the dusky color highlighting her sculpted cheekbones. Her eyelashes fluttered downward, shielding her expressive eyes. "It's difficult not to," she finally said, not looking toward him.

A smile crossed Adrian's lips. It was a relief to know he was not the only one who felt this otherworldly connection.

She smiled uncertainly in his direction. "Well, good night, Adrian." She started to turn toward the door, then paused. "Thank you for everything." Without another word, she hastened out into the darkness of the pre-dawn hours.

Adrian hovered in the window, watching her progress as far as he could. "Good night, Caitlin," he said quietly, as she disappeared from sight. Then, turning his back on the window, he silently melted back into the shadows of his castle.

Chapter Two

Shortly after dawn the next morning, Caitlin skipped toward the entrance to the bookshop, humming a little ditty as she went, and abruptly caught herself. It was the third time this week she had found herself caught up in an almost childish abandon. Refusing to analyze the reasons for that newly found jubilation, she fumbled in her trusty corduroy bag for the wrought iron key then jammed it into the lock.

Poking her head through the door as she tried to dislodge the key—apparently, the lock did not like to give up its counterpart—she called, “Adrian, I’m here.”

A cool rush of air breezed against her body, prompting a wide smile to spread across her face. “It’s a beautiful morning...come and see.” She sighed blissfully as she leaned against the doorjamb, casting her gaze across the landscape of the English countryside spread before her. A low mist, a remnant from the previous night, hung over the verdant fields. A profusion of bluebells and forget-me-nots clustered in the front yard of the castle, the dew drops on their petals casting small prisms. Despite all the scrimping and the saving she endured each week—it was entirely unfair that the dollar fared so poorly against the pound—such a picturesque view was well worth the sacrifice.

From her small yet functional flat, located over the Merry Whistle pub, Caitlin could see the chalk-land of Dorset, with its rolling hills and low-lying streams. When her shifts started later in the

day, she would perch in her rickety wooden chair and peer out as she consumed her porridge, mentally recording every detail of the landscape before her. She could always count on viewing dazzling clusters of amethyst colored flowers, gently bending to and fro according to the wind's whim.

The lovely English landscape never failed to relieve her of her melancholy thoughts. A ward of the state since she was ten years old, her parents having died in a late-night car crash, Caitlin had finally found her freedom through a scholarship to a state university. She had always possessed a passion for history and literature, and in her dreams, she would often imagine herself living in England and pursuing her twin passions. When she got really crazy, she'd pretend she was one of the heroines in a Regency romance novel, waiting for her own Mr. Darcy to sweep her away. Then, the whole wretched fiasco with Jonathan had happened, and Caitlin had finally found the courage to live her dreams.

"Lovely, isn't it, Caitlin?" The low rumble of Adrian's voice sent little shivers straight down Caitlin's spine and pulled her out of her reverie.

"Yes, it is," she said, allowing her head to fall back against the doorway. Her lips curved up into a contented smile. Then, remembering their purpose, she reluctantly turned her head away and nudged the door to close it. "So, where did we leave off?"

"We've finished the biography section and most of the fiction section. I recommend that we start today with the art and architecture section. Indeed, I have already made some preliminary counts."

Caitlin hugged her upper arms. It was a strange sensation to have a helpmate, another being who actively shared in her responsibilities, though he was not obligated or even expected to. With a wistful smile, Caitlin collected her ledger book and focused her mind on the work ahead.

Several hours later, Caitlin was busily rummaging through boxes and cataloging their finds. The art and architecture section had taken longer than expected. With a sigh, Caitlin privately mused she would be ecstatic if she never again saw another treatise on Hogarth.

"Oh," Caitlin said, sucking in her breath as she pulled out a dusty wedding planner. "This looks just like the one that I used to have."

"You were engaged?" Adrian sounded disgruntled by that idea, and Caitlin wondered what he was thinking. Did he truly care that she had once been involved with another man?

"It was a long time ago," she said, propping her chin up on one hand as she flipped through the book with the other. "Actually, it's why I quit working on my MA and left the U.S. I wanted to finally start living my dreams and leave the whole fiasco behind." What a disaster the entire situation had been. She shook her head as she paused on the page for the guest list.

In a gentle voice, Adrian asked, "What happened, Caitlin?"

She bit her lip as she thought over her response. "Well, I'd like to say the ending was something incredibly tragic and romantic, like he died saving me from a terrible death or something..."

"That would really be the only acceptable reason for a gentleman to end an engagement," Adrian said. "So the knave did not die horribly, then?" She shook her head again. "What a pity."

"The whole thing's a pity, if you ask me. He seemed so charming, like a prince out of a fairy tale, promising eternal love and devotion." Her forehead crinkled as she looked down at the planner. "Actually, he said a lot of beautiful things."

"Words, words, words," Adrian said. "Words mean nothing without action."

Caitlin nodded in agreement. "Jonathan swept me up into this whole happily ever after

thing. I was so caught up with the flowers and the romantic dinners that I guess I never realized it was just a big show.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Then he changed his mind, that’s all.” She sighed. “And after I bought the dress, posted the announcement online, and reserved the church.” Scowling, she tightened her fingers around the planner as a particularly bothersome memory resurfaced. “And after I’d told everyone I knew.”

Caitlin could fairly hear the air crackle with Adrian’s displeasure. “Someone should have called out that scoundrel.” He breezed around the room, small papers wafting behind him. “I fought a few duels in my day, you know, and every one of them was in defense of a lady’s honor.” The breeze swirled around the room. “I would run him through with my sword.” The air settled as he apparently stopped his lunging and parrying. “Though, perhaps that would be too quick.”

“Yes, it did sound too rather quick to me,” Caitlin said. She giggled as she pictured her fiancé coming face to face with an enraged, nineteenth-century ghost. “I bet you would kick his butt.”

“It would be undignified for a gentleman to kick someone in the arse,” he said, sounding offended.

“It’s just an expression,” she hastened to tell him. “Basically, it just means that you would vanquish your opponent.”

“Of course I would,” he said arrogantly. “I have never lost a duel. Now, what was I saying before? Oh, right, a lengthy battle.” Sounding reflective, he continued, “I suppose I would leave the skewering for last. First, some stinging blows. Yes, that sounds good to me. And perhaps if the occasion really warranted it, a hard kick to the buttocks.”

Caitlin threw back her head and laughed at the image, then smiled affectionately toward the corner where Adrian’s voice issued from. “You really would do it, wouldn’t you?”

“Do what?”

“The skewering and the dueling...”

“Of course I would, Caitlin. In point of fact, I would consider it an honor to fight for you.”

Caitlin blushed. He would fight for her. No one had ever expressed such a sentiment to her.

“I don't know what's wrong with the men in this century,” Adrian continued. “In my day, a gentleman would never make such a commitment unless he fully intended to carry through with his intentions.”

Caitlin bit back a laugh. “You sound like a grouchy old man.”

“Indeed I am...very old and very grouchy.” He sounded like he was smiling, and Caitlin wished she could see his face. “How did you happen to find your way here?”

“After the engagement ended, I decided to follow through on some old dreams I had forgotten. I've always wanted to live in England, so I took a chance and responded to an ad posted in a publication for American expatriates in England. Also, I'm a history buff, so I figured I could do some first-hand research.”

Luckily, the bookshop's proprietor was not a very conventional woman. Within hours after Caitlin had sent her e-mail response to the posting from the *American Expatriate* e-zine, she had received back a welcoming message from Mrs. Monroe, practically daring her to drop everything and cross the ocean. And she had, leaving behind all the stale memories and vowing to finally embrace her dream.

She missed her studies, it was true. History was her primary passion, and she could immerse herself for hours in historical accounts of bygone eras, especially nineteenth century England with its rakes and debutantes and distinct code of conduct. In truth, she often felt out of step with her own time.

“You are a brave woman, are you not, Caitlin?” His tone was distinctly admiring, and

Caitlin felt a rush of pride, and something deeper, more elemental. She realized with a small shock that she had come to cherish these communications with her ghostly companion and couldn't imagine life without his company. Since her engagement had ended, she had deliberately refrained from opening herself up to anyone, even in friendship. And yet, somehow, this rather arrogant, rather endearing ghost had broken through all her barriers.

"And what about you, Adrian? Have you ever been engaged?"

"No." A long pause ensued, and Caitlin began to wonder if he was going to expand on his terse declaration. Finally, just as she was going to rise from the floor, which she now realized was starting to freeze her bum, he spoke again. "I never had the chance."

Caitlin sank back down. A frozen bum was worth the price of learning more about her mysterious friend. "Tell me more," she said softly. She heard him heave a long sigh, and a cold sensation drifted near her.

"Actually, it would be more accurate if I said I never found the right woman. Before I could, I was trapped in that damned portrait for the first hundred years and then in this castle for the rest of my supernatural life."

Caitlin bit her lip but finally couldn't resist asking, "What happened to you, Adrian? Who made you into a ghost?"

He cleared his throat several times then coughed. "Let us just say it was a woman with whom I was rather intimately acquainted."

"Oh," Caitlin said in a knowing voice.

Adrian groaned. "Ladies should not know of such things."

Caitlin rolled her eyes. "Well, this lady does, and she wants to know the whole story, Adrian, so keep talking."

"A mouthy thing, aren't you?" She could hear him snicker as she growled at him. "Fine, I'll tell

you all of it, though I warn you, it's not the happiest of tales." She could hear him fidgeting for several seconds before speaking again. "I had always devoted excessive care to choosing my paramours. With Lady Beaumont, however, I cast caution to the wind. And, like you, I was forced to learn of the masks people wear to conceal their true natures."

Hardly realizing what she was doing, Caitlin leaned forward, holding her breath.

"It was the beginning of October, 1807. I had just returned from my service with the Navy, and after the bloody conflict at Copenhagen, I was eager to immerse myself back into my old life."

Caitlin nodded understandingly. Much of her studies had focused on the Napoleonic Wars, and the Battle of Copenhagen was one she had chosen for an early research paper. She remembered seeing paintings of the battle, with immense fires billowing over the city and the British battleships looming in the background. Still, she had never expected to actually meet a survivor; life indeed moved in mysterious ways.

Continuing on with his narrative, Adrian said, "Lady Beaumont was the widow of an old friend; she was fashionable, charming—attractive. In short, everything I was looking for."

"Her mask," Caitlin murmured.

"Yes, and unfortunately I did not see her true visage until it was too late. For a brief time, the matter of only a few weeks, she made me happy. One day, though, I paid her an impromptu visit and was horrified to see her inflicting a rather vile punishment on one of the servants."

"A vile punishment," Caitlin asked. She frowned and narrowed her eyes. Had she just seen a flash of color from where Adrian's voice was emanating? Impossible—she must be getting carried away by the story.

Clearing his throat, Adrian said, "She caused the young woman's face to become infected with a number of running boils, and worse than that,

stripped the wench of her voice.” After a brief pause, he continued, “Elizabeth’s ancestors were Celtic, and some of their powers had descended down to her. Unfortunately, she chose to abuse that power instead of using it to help others. For her people, October 31st, or November Eve as they termed it, was the one night when the ordinary barriers between our world and the spirit world weakened. And that was the night she decided to wreak her revenge.”

“But why would she do it?” Caitlin asked, mystified.

“To save face,” he said bluntly. “It turned out she had been expecting a proposal, though she had protested vehemently at the beginning that all she wanted was companionship.” He clucked his tongue. “Unfortunately, she had begun spreading the word among her cronies that she was due to become the Countess of Holworth.” He chuckled dryly. “Apparently, that had been her intention from the beginning. After what I saw, though, such a possibility could never exist, and she knew it.”

“Of course not,” Caitlin said, now squinting in his direction. For a second, she thought she saw again, a blur of color emanating from Adrian’s location. Without warning, the painting popped into her head. The man in the painting, well, Adrian, looked like one of the cover models from the Regency romances she feverishly read each night. She usually flipped the book over to peruse the blurb on the back, but truth be told, it was the man on the cover who drew her attention. She reasoned since she could not have a man of her own—after the wedding debacle, she had sworn off romance—she may as well have her fantasies.

One model in particular, she figured his name was probably Stud Studly, he was that good-looking, had stood out to her. Chocolate brown eyes, wavy brown hair brushed back neatly, broad shoulders—she had thought he was the ideal vision of masculinity until she had seen the

portrait.

And Adrian was definitely the ideal representation of each and every one of her fantasies. His eyes were what had initially drawn her attention, such a direct, piercing gaze, as though he could see right through his viewer. Truth be told, his body had also attracted her very appreciative stare, with his broad shoulders and imposing height. If he were drawn to scale, he would probably tower over most other men, a man of truly impressive proportions.

There it was again, a vague silhouette. Closing her eyes, she slowly massaged her eyelids, then slowly allowed her eyes to flutter open. Now she was certain; whatever the reason for it, she could most definitely make out the outline of a masculine figure.

"What the devil are you doing?" Adrian asked in a nonplussed voice.

"I can see you," Caitlin said, wonder laced through her voice. "Adrian, I can see you." There he was, just like in the portrait. Over six feet of rugged masculinity stood framed against the counter. She caught her breath; the personification of tall, dark, and handsome was right in front of her. He was way, way better than any cover model she had ever seen. She groaned as she realized that for the rest of her life, every other man would pale in comparison to this deeply masculine image.

"It must mean the barriers are weakening already," Adrian said. "Just like the eve she transformed me into this shadow." He looked down at his body then slowly inspected each hand, seemingly captivated by the sight of his own image.

Caitlin shook her head in mystification. "But how could she do it? It's not like you were some helpless maid."

"No," he said, "I wasn't." He dropped his hands to his sides, his eyes narrowing as he continued. "She dragged in that poor creature she

had been tormenting the day I realized her secret, and swore she would wreak her revenge on an innocent woman if I didn't submit to her enchantment. So I was cursed to spend 100 years trapped in that damn painting and then freed from the portrait to remain a ghost for the rest of my eternal life." He shrugged. "She would really have tortured that innocent girl. What else could I do?"

Easy, Caitlin thought. He could have turned tail and run. Instead, he had sacrificed his own happiness and his life for a stranger.

"I think you're an incredible man," she said, fighting back a rush of emotion that left her eyes stinging with unshed tears. She turned her face away. What was wrong with her? She hadn't cried with Jonathan, not even after all the wrenching scenes he had put her through. Clearing her throat, she remarked gruffly, "Time to get back to work." Without waiting for a reply, she plunged into the backroom, grateful for the opportunity to immerse herself in categorizing the inventory.

Several hours later, Caitlin rubbed her back wearily. Finally, just one small box left. She sneezed as a puff of dust was released from the box. Peering in, she saw it contained only one battered, antique tome. "Oh," she breathed then promptly had to hold back a sneeze. The title, *Potions and Magicks of the Ancient World*, was intriguing enough, but what really slammed into her consciousness was the faded signature at the bottom—Lady Elizabeth Beaumont.

Barely allowing herself to breathe, she opened the book with shaky hands. As she flipped through the first few pages, a piece of string knotted in several places fell out. Opening the book to the spot where the string had emerged, Caitlin sighed. There it was—the original spell Lady Beaumont must have used, and more importantly, the reversal spell. Not bothering to read the spidery text scrawled underneath the spells, she slammed the book shut. Rushing out

to the front room, the words tumbled out as she explained her incredible find to Adrian.

"We can end this now, tonight, Adrian."

"Caitlin, I do not want you to take any risks." He crossed his arms and looked down his nose at her. "In fact, I command it."

Caitlin snorted. "You can't intimidate me, you know." Crossing over to where he stood, six feet of imposing masculinity that apparently was not accustomed to brooking resistance, she softened her voice, saying, "Adrian, I can do this. The spell is easy enough. I just have to go through a series of steps. It looks like I merely say the incantation as I stand in front of the portrait and then unravel the knot." She looked beseechingly into his eyes, rich brown eyes that she was seeing now for the first time. Reaching out her hand, she brushed the air where she could see his large hand clenched at his side. "Please trust me."

Their eyes locked, and for an instant, Caitlin was convinced she could feel the warmth of his hand in her own. With the barest of nods, he stepped back so Caitlin could cross over to the portrait.

Flipping through the pages with impatient fingers, she once again found the spells. A frown creased her forehead as she saw the spidery text underneath the spell. Peering closer, the hair on the back of her neck lifted as she scanned the text.

"Oh no," she said, the book slipping out of her hands. She bent over double as the full impact of the words hit her, the shock feeling like a swift blow to her solar plexus. Of course there was a catch. There was always a catch, and she should have known better than to raise both their hopes in vain.

"Caitlin, talk to me. What's wrong?"

"The spell," she whispered, feeling like the breath literally had been knocked out of her. Swallowing hard, she explained, "It says we only get one chance. If I perform the spell successfully,

you will become corporeal once again, though you will have to return to your own time. But if the slightest aspect of the spell is off, if I simply mispronounce a word or hesitate at the wrong time, you'll die. That is, you won't be a ghost anymore; you'll simply be dead."

"Caitlin—"

"No," she cried out, "I couldn't live with myself if I destroyed you. Nothing else matters to me now. My family is gone, my friends deserted me after the engagement ended; you are the steadiest, best man I have ever known. I don't care if you're a ghost. I...I'll find a way to work around it." Caitlin dug her teeth into her lower lip. She would *not* lose him. She had lost so much in her life already.

Snatching up the book, she rushed over to the dormant fireplace. Fingers shaking, she poked at the logs and looked around wildly for a lighter or matches or anything to get the damn fire going. Drat it, Mrs. Monroe was an inveterate smoker. Where was her stash of "rainy day" cigarettes and matches?

"Caitlin, what are you doing?"

"I'm destroying the book," Caitlin said, her voice muffled as she dug through the shelves under the register. She felt a breeze rush by, then Adrian's now familiar form crystallized in front of her.

"Sweeting, do you know why I so readily agreed to let you do the spell in the first place?" Caitlin shook her head. "Because the risks, in my mind were negligible, compared to the thought of living for eternity without you."

Caitlin inhaled deeply, letting his words sink into her mind, and if she was completely honest with herself, into her heart.

"But—" Caitlin began.

"No," Adrian said firmly. "No hesitation, no regrets."

Seeing his jaw tighten, Caitlin felt some of his resolution coursing through her body, straightening her body and giving her the courage

she needed. She closed her eyes briefly, savoring the moment.

"So only one question remains," Adrian said, with an inquiring lilt to his voice. "Will you return to my own time with me?"

Caitlin's eyes snapped open as her jaw dropped. He was kidding, right? Not only did she get the man of her dreams, but she would also get to travel through time and maybe for once, feel like she actually belonged somewhere. Her decision made, she said, "Take me back to your home, Adrian."

"I caution you, it's not as romantic as it appears in the books." He rubbed a hand under his chin. "Mine is a working estate. I haven't the time to gad about London for months, attending balls and operas."

Caitlin rolled her eyes. She had never been the social butterfly; unlike many of her peers, Caitlin had never even set foot in a nightclub, and she was certain she wasn't missing anything. "I don't care about any of that stuff," she said earnestly, locking eyes with him. "Yes, I love reading those romances, and yes, I love the history, but what I want most of all is to share my life with the man I love." She snapped her mouth shut. Where had that bit about love come from? Looking into his eyes, though, she knew she had spoken the truth.

"You love me, then?" Adrian said, a slow smile crinkling the corners of his eyes.

No turning back now. "Yes," she said simply. Before she could nudge him, gently of course, to declare how he felt about her, the chiming of the clock interrupted. Caitlin's breath caught in her throat. It was show time. She allowed herself one last lingering look at Adrian then poured all her energy into reviewing the spell.

Breathing a silent prayer for help under her breath, she began.

Sara Freeze

Chapter Three

Opening the book, Caitlin found the words to the spell and slowly, carefully, sounded them out. "Let what was done be now undone. In the name of Bridget, so must it be." She repeated the incantation three times in a steady voice, surprised by how strongly the words came out. Then, digging her teeth into her lower lip, she set the book down and carefully untangled the silky cloth.

Loose papers fluttered through the air as the painting seemed to expand outward. All the colors appeared to bleed together for one electrifying second, and a blinding light emanated from within the portrait. Caitlin bit back a scream as she threw an arm across her face to shield her eyes.

Abruptly, the wind ceased and the light faded altogether. Caitlin lifted her arm away and gaped at the sight that met her poor beleaguered eyes: Adrian alive and in the flesh. Without stopping to ponder the incredible events of the evening, Caitlin leapt forward and was swept up by Adrian's welcoming arms.

"For months, love, I've been waiting for this," he whispered hoarsely.

"So have I," she said, wrapping her arms tightly around him. Closing her eyes, she lost herself in his heated kisses. Every nerve in her body was responding to his closeness, and she savored the sensation of his well-muscled arms holding her against his body.

Feeling a sudden pressure pulling her toward the wall, Caitlin opened her eyes. The man in the portrait had vanished, leaving only the outlines of the drawing room in the frame. With a shock, she realized the portrait was exerting a kind of pressure.

"The requirements of the spell," Adrian reminded her. "I must return to my own time, and you must come along with me."

After pressing one more intense kiss to her

lips, Adrian slowly lead her toward the portrait. Caitlin never hesitated; deep in the core of her being, she knew that she belonged with Adrian. Caitlin gasped as she felt a slippery sensation wash over her as she stepped into the painting, and for one terrifying second, she reeled as her entire sense of reality was turned upside down.

Then, it was over, and Caitlin blinked slowly as she looked up at Adrian. They were now inside the portrait; actually, Caitlin realized, awe-struck, the portrait had disappeared altogether, and she was in a real nineteenth century drawing room. "We did it," she said in a whisper, afraid that if she spoke too loudly, the spell might be broken. "We're really here."

"Yes, we're here now, and I don't intend ever to let you go." Adrian brought one of her hands to his lips, as his velvety brown eyes gazed into her own. Caitlin just barely refrained from pinching herself, still dazed to discover that every dream, every fantasy she had ever had was now right in front of her.

Giving his hand a squeeze, she let go as an awareness of her surroundings began to sink in. "Oh, my," she said, sucking in her breath. She stared in awe at the Sevres China, the settees, the silk-covered walls. It was just as she had always dreamed when she immersed herself in her favorite books. Every reference book about Regency England that she had ever gobbled up had now come to life. She could actually touch the mahogany arm of the Grecian chaise-lounge across from her or handle the silver tea service perched on a sideboard.

She half closed her eyes as he came up behind her and enclosed her in his strong arms. "Oh, Adrian, it's just how I always imagined it to be."

"You shall be my lady," he said, brushing a gentle kiss to her left ear, then letting his lips drift down to her neck.

Caitlin sighed, every muscle relaxed and

pliant. Adrian's hand traced a lazy pattern over her arm, raising goose-bumps along her skin. The sound of raised voices rudely interrupted the moment, and Adrian muttered a curse under his breath as he released her and stepped back.

"I'm in here, Mrs. Dobbs."

"Oh, Lord Holworth, I am sorry to bother you, but—" The white-haired woman, the housekeeper, Caitlin guessed, judging by the keys dangling from her person, sputtered to a stop as she saw he was not alone.

Caitlin blushed as she looked down at herself. Luckily, she was wearing her favorite woolen dress that day—heaven knew how Regency people would react to a woman in jeans—but it was nowhere close to the style of Adrian's day.

"Mrs. Dobbs, this is Miss Sellenger," Adrian said, anchoring one hand to the small of Caitlin's back, as he guided her forward. "My fiancée."

Mrs. Dobbs gasped, luckily drowning out Caitlin's equally flabbergasted intake of breath. Just as quickly, though, the matronly housekeeper covered her surprise, dipping into a formal curtsy. "Miss Sellenger, it is truly a pleasure to have you here."

Impulsively, Caitlin reached out and touched her arm. "Please, there is no need to curtsy. The pleasure is all mine." She paused, hesitant. Was it unusual for her to address a housekeeper like that in this time period?

Mrs. Dobbs rose, her brows furrowed. "You have an unusual accent, my dear. Are you not from England, then?"

"No," Caitlin said, then hesitated. What exactly was she supposed to say? That she was from the 21st century United States, but she had fallen in love with a ghost, successfully executed a spell, and been transported back two hundred years? She may as well go and check herself into bedlam.

Luckily, Adrian was quicker on his feet than she was. "Caitlin is from the United States, Mrs.

Dobbs. I met her recently in London while I was engaged in business affairs of the estate.” He raised one of Caitlin’s hands to his lips, his lips quirked in a slight smile. “I was one of her first conquests, and I decided to offer for her before I lost her to some young buck.”

Ha! A conquest—like she could ever subjugate such a powerful man to her will. Biting back a retort, Caitlin gave Mrs. Dobbs her most reassuring smile. “I realize it is very sudden, but...” she shrugged her shoulders.

Mrs. Dobbs beamed at them. “Nothing sudden about it. The heart wants what it wants, and there’s no using in fighting it.” She stepped back and glanced over Caitlin, her expression puckered. “The styles over in America certainly are quite different.”

Caitlin again felt a fiery blush spread up her neck and wash across her face and restrained the urge to pluck at the fabric of her dress. She was supposed to be the fiancée of an earl, and she no doubt looked like some nineteenth century street urchin.

“Yes, they are. However, with Caitlin in your capable hands, I am sure you can transform her into a proper English miss,” Adrian said, propelling Caitlin forward and gesturing for Mrs. Dobbs to follow. “And while you’re doing that, I will be engaged in obtaining a special license.”

“Come along, my dear,” Mrs. Dobbs said, tucking Caitlin’s arm under her own with a motherly gesture. “We’ll dress you in a serviceable gown and then ride into town to see the Mantua maker.”

Mantua maker—what in the world was that? Caitlin mentally flipped through her reference books. Oh, right, a Mantua maker was like a seamstress. Boy, life in the nineteenth century sure was going to be complicated. But, as she glanced over a shoulder and saw Adrian staring soulfully back at her, she mused any confusion or inconveniences would totally be worth it.

The next day was a blur consisting of a hasty though sumptuous breakfast, a tour of the formidable Holworth House and grounds—the bluebell woods, Caitlin was convinced, would be her favorite spot on the estate—and best of all, a shopping spree with Mrs. Dobbs.

Hours later, as Caitlin reclined by the fireplace in the small yet stylish sitting-room, she reflected it was not such a bad thing to be Cinderella. At Madame Aldaine's, she had watched in awe as the dressmaker brought out one beautiful gown after another. An array of gloves and bonnets, cashmere shawls and silk sashes, pelisses and spencers, had been presented for her inspection.

And the dresses...Caitlin had often gawked at the fashion plates she found in her books, but nothing compared to seeing the exquisite craftsmanship in person. Madame Aldaine had been apologetic at only being able to offer a few simple, ready-made dresses; to Caitlin, though, each dress was a special treat. She now had a pink and white calico morning dress, several afternoon dresses of cotton and muslin, and a promenade dress.

It was still a bit of a puzzle regarding shifts, stays, stockings, and garters. In her own century, she favored the department store selection of plain cotton underwear. However, she found if she kept her mouth shut and allowed her maid, Jane, to guide her, eventually everything wound up in the right place.

"There you are, sweeting," Adrian said, entering the room and directly crossing over to her. "Everything is being accomplished in due speed. I have procured a special license, and we are to be married tomorrow morning at the Church of St. Simon by the cliffs." A small frown puckered his forehead.

"What is it, Adrian?" Caitlin asked, taken back by the somber set of his face. Tentatively, she inquired, "Have you changed your mind?" She

held her breath, trying to steel herself for the worst.

Adrian's eyes narrowed. "How could you ask such a thing?" Bending over, he seized her hands and tugged her to her feet. Pulling her close to him, so close that she could feel the steady thumping of his heart, he asked thickly, "Do you consider me so bird-witted that I would change my mind in the space of one afternoon?" Before she could answer, he pressed a searing kiss to her lips.

Panting slightly, Caitlin pressed one hand to her mouth. With a start of surprise, she realized that she had wounded him. Placing her hands on his chest in supplication, she said, "Forgive me, Adrian. I forgot who I was talking to."

"It was my fault for worrying you." Adrian sighed, running one large hand through his hair. "Nothing has been confirmed, but—" he hesitated, plainly unsure of whether to continue.

"Tell me," Caitlin said.

"Mrs. Dobbs believes that she saw Elizabeth in the village, as the two of you were returning from the shops."

"Oh, no," Caitlin said, rubbing a hand across her neck.

Adrian reached over and clasped her hands in both of his. "I promise you, Caitlin, whatever I have to do, everything will be all right."

Taking comfort from the warm pressure of his strong hands, Caitlin resolved to forget about Elizabeth. With Adrian by her side, she knew she could overcome any obstacle in her path.

Chapter Four

Clad in an airy dress of white silk trimmed with expensive Brussels lace; Caitlin trembled as Adrian slid the slender ring onto her finger and uttered his vows in a deep and authoritative voice, "With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Caitlin barely heard the rest of the ceremony; she remained captivated by the intense look in Adrian's eyes as he had uttered his vows. Mrs. Dobbs sat in the front row, along with other loyal members of the Holworth staff.

Finally, the ceremony ended; and laughing merrily, Adrian and Caitlin exited the tiny church nestled near the cliffs which overlooked Ringstead Bay. Abruptly, they halted just outside the weathered door of the chapel.

Standing directly in their path was a tall, regal woman with fair hair and a strikingly pale face. Caitlin stifled a gasp as she saw the scorn in the woman's golden eyes. Every instinct in her body alerted her to the woman's identity, Lady Elizabeth Rigby, the witch responsible for Adrian's curse. Instinctively, she drew closer to Adrian, wanting both to protect him and to be protected.

"So, Lord Holworth, you have taken yourself a bride." A slow, cold smile spread across her pale face. "Too bad you shall have to become a widower so quickly."

"Stay away from my bride, Elizabeth."

Several of the Holworth staff members

advanced toward Elizabeth, only to be swept back like leaves caught in a powerful surge of wind.

“You have no power over me, Holworth. I am the one who shall be making all the decisions here.” Slowly, she ran her gaze up and down Caitlin’s garb, a sneer spreading across her face as she finished her inspection.

Leaves rustled along the ground, slowly gathering power as a miniature tornado funnel formed along the ground. Caitlin felt her skirts billowing around her as she was irresistibly drawn toward the funnel. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise as out of the funnel, a gruesome visage emerged, its arms extended out toward Caitlin.

“No!” Adrian shouted, his hands clamping like two vises around her arms. “I love her! Do you hear me, Elizabeth? I love *her*! You cannot have her.” Thrusting Caitlin behind him, he addressed the wind, “Take me and do what you will, but you leave the woman I love out of it.”

Abruptly the spinning of the mini cyclone halted, and then reversed its direction. Caitlin watched in fascinated horror as the wind caught at Elizabeth’s skirts, slowly dragging her into the center of the funnel.

Elizabeth shrieked, her hands fluttering wildly through the air. “What are you doing? No! It’s not me you want...it’s her. Stop!” She seemed to shrink into herself then slowly fade away until all that was left of the tempest was a few leaves skittering across the grass.

Caitlin covered her face with her hands. As evil as Elizabeth’s actions were, she would not have wished such a fate upon anyone.

Mrs. Dobbs drew abreast of Adrian and his bride. Clucking her tongue, she remarked, “A very stupid woman, indeed. Everyone with a modicum of intelligence knows that love is a much more powerful force than magic. The old magicks were never meant to be used for evil purposes anyway; Lady Beaumont should have known what she was

risking.” With a respectful curtsy to Lord and Lady Holworth, she took her leave.

Adrian and Caitlin remained, looking out over the cliffs. Caitlin leaned her head against her new husband's broad chest, comforted by the steady thump of his heartbeat. “It's all over now,” she said, surprised by the shaky tenor of her voice.

“Yes, sweeting. It's just you and me now.” Adrian pressed a tender kiss to the top of Caitlin's head.

“Thank goodness,” Caitlin said, closing her eyes. “Now I just have to figure out my new life here, with you.”

Adrian gently tipped her head up and smiled slowly down at Caitlin. “Your new life is all here before you. Everything you see is all yours,” he said simply. “Everything I am and everything I possess—just as long as you'll be mine.”

Leaning back against his chest, she tilted her head upwards and pressed a tender kiss under his chin. “Always,” she said simply, “I shall always be with you.”