

The Matchmaker's Curse

by

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Prologue

Wilhelmina de Torqueville had made her peace with God, but that did not mean she was not afraid. When they opened the door to her cell, and she knew it was time, her heart hammered wildly, and her body broke out in a cold sweat. She rose unsteadily from the patch of damp, moldy straw on which she'd spent the sleepless night. Her once-fine gown was torn and filthy, stinking of mildew and old sweat, and her hair hung lank and greasy around her face.

The guards seized her roughly, yanking her arms behind her back and binding them brutally tight. The cords bit deep into her flesh and she stifled a cry. No potion or powder or charm could lessen the agony she was about to suffer; but she would try as best she could not to let her tormentors see her pain.

The other doomed women in her cell cowered in the corners, one of them even burrowing into the straw as though that would hide her from the guards' view. Wilhelmina's heart ached with pity for them; at least *she* was guilty of the crime of which she was accused. She knew for a fact that these others were not.

Wilhelmina tried to keep what dignity she could as the guards dragged her out of the cell. She tried to keep her feet under herself and walk of her own power, but her knees felt weak from fear and lack of sleep, and the guards were eager to hurt and humiliate her. Her steps faltered when she saw the stake and the wood piled at its base. The guards used that excuse to shove her brutally forward so that she lost her balance and fell face-first into the mud, unable to stop herself with her bound hands.

The spectacle of witches burning had become almost commonplace these days and did not garner as much public attention as it once had. The onlookers jeered and hurled rotten food at her, but it was little more than a formality. A turnip missed the side of her head and banged noisily off the helmet of one of the guards. He glared at the crowd, and the rain of rubbish ceased.

As they tied her to the stake, hand and foot, Wilhelmina scanned the crowd that had come to watch her death, looking for one familiar face. And then, she saw him, standing toward the back, so tall he towered above everyone around him.

Roland. Her husband. Her betrayer.

When he saw her looking at him, he crossed himself feverishly, avoiding her eyes. The pain of his betrayal was far worse than the pain she would soon suffer in the flames. At least he had not brought little Amelie with him, to see her mother die. Wilhelmina's heart ached, and she feared for her child more even than she feared for herself. For Amelie was destined to follow in her mother's footsteps, part of an ancient heritage that could not be denied. Wilhelmina prayed to the God in whose name she was about to die that her daughter would be safe, that Roland would not turn on her as he had on his wife, that she would never know the pain of being betrayed by the one whom she most loved.

Wilhelmina blinked away tears, aware that the priest was exhorting her to confess, as he had many times in the past weeks. If she confessed, they would do her the great mercy of hanging her before consigning her to the flames. But though she was guilty of the witchcraft of which they accused her, she knew in her heart that her craft was not a sin against God. And that God had a purpose in setting this trial before her.

The priest looked genuinely saddened by her lack of response. He bowed his head and moved away, making room for

the guards and their torches.

Wilhelmina drew a deep breath into her lungs, retreating into herself until she tapped the energy in her core. She prepared her death-spell as the torches were thrust into the wood at her feet. The temptation to use this most powerful of all her spells to punish Roland was almost unbearable. But there was Amelie to think of, who was to be denied a mother to teach her her craft, and who would be even more vulnerable than Wilhelmina herself had been.

Amelie must never make the mistake that her mother had, must never let a man get close enough to hold the kind of power over her that Roland had held.

As she began to cough from the billowing smoke, as the heat intensified, Wilhelmina mustered her power to protect her daughter and her daughter's daughters from the depredations of men. When the flames violated her body, they would release that power. And never again would a woman descended of Wilhelmina de Torqueville sell herself body and soul in marriage.

Chapter 1

Laurel Grant was not the kind of woman Sammi was used to feeling much sympathy for. Five foot five, a hundred and fifteen pounds at the most. Smooth, creamy complexion. Thick blonde hair that was natural, except for a few highlights here and there. Sculpted cheekbones and brow, rosebud lips. Blue eyes framed by absurdly long eyelashes. It just wasn't fair that one woman should have so many advantages all to herself! And she wasn't even some bubble-head that Sammi could look down her nose at and feel superior to. The nerve of some people!

Sammi smiled despite her chagrin, reminding herself that Laurel was here because her life wasn't all that perfect after all. "You must be Laurel," she said, holding out her hand. "I'm Sammi."

Laurel smiled back—her teeth were, of course, completely straight and snow-white—and shook Sammi's hand. "Pleased to meet you," she said.

"Come on in." Sammi opened the door wider, and Laurel took a tentative step inside. "My office is upstairs, in my apartment."

Laurel took a glance around the downstairs, seeing the huge living room that would have served well in a dormitory, as well as the two kitchens that flanked it.

Sammi laughed at the puzzled expression on her face. "This house is a child of the sixties," Sammi explained as she led the way toward the stairs. "It was built by a commune, and they had somewhere between twelve and fifteen people living in this one house. They needed two kitchens to feed that many mouths."

"It's huge!" Laurel said.

"Uh-huh. Had to be, to house that many people. Of course, it's quite an oddity these days." They emerged from the staircase onto the second floor balcony, which looked down on the living room below. "The neighbors call this place 'Hippie House,'" Sammi continued, and Laurel smiled at that.

"And is the whole thing yours?"

"I own the house, but I've broken it into four apartments. I certainly don't need all this space for myself. My apartment is over here."

Laurel followed Sammi through one of the doors that opened off the balcony. The door led to Sammi's sitting room, where she

did all her business. She'd decorated the room with meticulous care, wanting to set the perfect balance of competent professionalism and powerful mysticism.

Against one wall sat her desk, the flat-screen monitor and black ergonomic chair looking every bit fixtures of the twenty-first century. Against another wall were her bookcases, custom-made, displaying everything from modern-day paperback novels to heavy, hand-illuminated manuscripts passed down through her family through the generations. In deference to the most ancient of the manuscripts, she kept the lights in the room low, and the drapes closed. Of course, the dimness also added an aura of mystery to the room, which her clients always appreciated.

The most striking display in the room, however, was Sammi's collection of antique glassware, which held her potions and tonics. The bottles and vials and tubes—ranging in size from tiny to substantial, and in color from clear, to crimson, to obsidian—were arrayed on a set of black-lacquered shelves.

"Please have a seat," Sammi said, indicating the brown velour couch that rested under two wrought-iron wall sconces.

Laurel looked around the room first, eyeing the manuscripts, and the sconces, and finally the certificate on the wall that proclaimed Sammi's status as a licensed clinical social worker. That last seemed to draw her particular attention, but after examining the certificate, she finally took her seat on the couch.

Sammi's own chair was of chocolate-brown wicker with caramel-colored cushions. She kicked off her shoes as she sat, tucking her bare feet under her skirt. The casual pose often made new clients feel more comfortable around her. Laurel, however, still looked brittle and nervous. Almost ready to bolt.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" Sammi asked.

Laurel smiled and shook her head. "No, thank you. I'm fine."

"Well, let's get started then shall we?" Laurel stiffened in her seat, eyes going a little wide. Sammi could even see a thin veneer of perspiration beading on her brow. "Relax, Laurel. I'm not going to start chanting mumbo-jumbo or stirring a cauldron or anything."

Laurel laughed nervously. "Sorry. I've just . . . never done anything like this before. I feel pretty foolish."

"Lots of people feel foolish when they come to me the first time. I don't mind. I'll do the best I can to help you, in whatever way you feel comfortable. If it's a potion, fine. If it's just talking, that's fine too. But the best way to start out is to tell me why you feel the need to consult a witch."

Laurel nodded briskly, her shoulders relaxing ever so slightly. "Okay." She rubbed her hands together, looking at the floor instead of at Sammi. "A friend of mine from work suggested I should see you." More nervous laughter. "I guess I'm getting kind of desperate." She looked startled at her own words. "I'm sorry. That sounded terrible, but I meant no offense."

"None taken," Sammi assured her. "I'm used to people's skepticism, so you're not going to hurt my feelings. Just tell me why your friend sent you to me."

"Last year, I broke up with the man I'd been dating ever since I got out of college."

Sammi heard a distinct undertone of pain in Laurel's voice. Obviously, she hadn't gotten over him yet. Sammi wondered if she knew that.

"It was kind of a messy breakup," Laurel continued. "He'd been promising to marry me for a long time, always having some

new condition he had to meet before he would be 'ready.' I finally got tired of waiting and basically told him to marry me or else." Her laugh was bitter. "He chose 'or else,' of course."

"Sounds like good riddance to me," Sammi said, and Laurel looked up sharply, shoulders stiffening. Nope, definitely not over him yet. "How long were you together?"

"A little over five years."

"Hmm. Long time. You can't expect to get over a man you've been with for five years overnight."

Laurel looked even more indignant. "I am so over him it's not even funny."

"Uh-huh. And you're coming to see me . . . why?"

She blushed, making herself look even more precious and delicate. Sammi had to fight down a surge of unfair dislike. It wasn't Laurel's fault that she was so pretty. "Well, uh . . ." She squirmed uncomfortably. "I haven't really been on a serious date since we broke up."

Sammi's eyes widened at that. Laurel was the kind of woman who habitually had men falling at her feet! Especially a certain kind of man, the shallow, childish kind who only cared for a woman's appearance. Kind of like Jason. Sammi groaned internally when she realized that Jace would probably be getting home from work when Laurel was leaving, and he would *definitely* notice her.

"It's not that men haven't asked me out," Laurel hastened to explain, catching the surprise on Sammi's face. "It's just that none of them seem to be my type."

That's because no one who's not the jerk you just broke up with is going to be your type right now. But Laurel wasn't ready to hear that, so Sammi kept her opinion to herself for the

moment. "Tell me something about your type."

Laurel smiled faintly. "I'm not sure what I can tell you. I don't have a laundry list of features I'm looking for. I just know that the guys I know right now aren't it."

"And your ex-boyfriend? Was he your type?"

Her eyes turned wistful. "I don't think so. I think that was our problem. I really loved him, but we were just so different. Opposites attract, I know. But they also drive each other nuts." Tears glittered in her eyes but did not fall. "If I had it all to do over again, I would never let that relationship get started."

Sammi breathed a quiet sigh. Laurel was here seeking a magical solution, hoping Sammi could give her some kind of charm or potion that would help her find her Mr. Right. The problem was that no magic would help her until she got Mr. Wrong out of her system.

"I'm going to tell you something you don't want to hear," Sammi warned. Laurel sat up straighter, shoulders squaring and lips pressed tightly together. "You're not ready to date anyone else yet. It takes time to get over a nasty breakup, and you need to have patience with it."

Laurel seemed to realize how uptight she looked, sitting ramrod straight on that comfortable couch. Her posture eased slightly. "I thought maybe you could . . . help me get over it. You know, give me a charm. Or something." Her cheeks were becoming pink again, and she began playing with a loose string that dangled from her blouse.

Sammi smiled gently. "I'm a witch, not a miracle worker. For some things, there's just no shortcut, and I'm afraid this is one of them."

"My friend, Trudy Clark, the one who sent me to you . . .

She had a lot of trouble getting back on her feet after her divorce. You gave her a charm, and she met a new man within like a month.”

Sammi untucked her feet and leaned forward in her chair, the wicker squeaking with her movement. “Look, I remember Trudy. She was ready to move on; she just had this hangup about her kids, didn’t want them to think she was replacing their father. The charm I gave her was just a placebo. It helped her give herself permission to look at other men.”

“Oh.”

“I saw you looking at my license.” Laurel turned slightly in her chair to glance once more at the framed license. “I started my career as a therapist, and I’ve kept up my license. Sometimes when witchcraft won’t do the trick, therapy will. Only I charge a lot less than a therapist.” She grinned, and Laurel grinned back.

“And you’re not covered under my insurance plan.”

Sammi chuckled, liking Laurel better when she wasn’t taking herself quite so seriously. “No. Anyway, the gist of this is, I can’t give you a charm or a potion to suddenly make you ready to move on in your life. What I *can* do is give you a sympathetic ear, and even the occasional advice, if you want it.”

Laurel made a face. “I don’t know that I can stand any more advice. My friends at work keep trying to set me up, and keep telling me I should date everything that breathes. My mom keeps telling me I should give Hank another chance. I think she loved him more than *I* did. My sister tells me good riddance, who needs men anyway. But then, she’s been divorced three times already so she has kind of a bad attitude.”

Sammi shook her head. “I’m talking about *practical* advice.” Years of working with the lovelorn had made her preternaturally

perceptive, and she decided to show off those powers of perception. “For instance, I would advise you to move out of the apartment you and your ex used to live in.”

Laurel looked absolutely stunned. “H-how . . . How could you possibly have known that?”

“I’m a witch, remember? I looked in my crystal ball.” She kept a solemn expression on her face for about fifteen seconds, then allowed herself a smile.

Laurel rolled her eyes and relaxed back into the cushions of the couch, chuckling and looking more at ease than she had since she’d walked in the door. “You had me going there for a moment. But really, how did you know?”

She shrugged. “Just instinct. It’s usually the man who moves out when things go wrong. And a woman who’s having trouble starting over tends to stay put. Nothing overly mysterious, really.”

“I’ve thought of moving out . . . It’s always seemed like too much trouble, somehow.”

“It might help you get a new perspective, though.”

Laurel sighed. “Not the best time to go apartment hunting. It’s tough when the students are all in town.”

Sammi knew that was true, having been a student here once upon a time long ago. By the end of the summer, it was hard to find a decent apartment anywhere. Of course, Sammi did know of an apartment that just happened to be vacant right now. An apartment that she preferred not to rent to students. “This is just a thought,” she said, “but one of the apartments in Hippie House is vacant. Now, this is a very unusual house, as you’ve already seen. We all share the two kitchens and the living room downstairs, and we only have the one front door so we basically

all have each others' keys. But this way you actually get to know your neighbors, in a way you don't in a regular apartment building."

Laurel frowned uncertainly. "I don't know . . . It *is* a bit odd. And I'm not really so sure I want to move, anyway."

"Well there's no pressure. I'll show you the apartment, if you like. That way you'll at least know there's somewhere you can move to, if you decide you want to."

Laurel looked decidedly uncomfortable with the whole idea, but allowed Sammi to show her the apartment anyway. When Sammi mentioned casually that the other two tenants in Hippie House were bachelors, Laurel looked distinctly more interested.

The four apartments in Hippie House were all identical, each consisting of a sitting room, a large bedroom with a fireplace and a skylight, and a private bathroom. The floors were well-tended hardwood, and the massive banks of windows let in lots of sunlight. The walk-in closets were almost large enough to qualify as an additional room.

Laurel tried to remain noncommittal as she explored; but Sammi could see at once that it was love at first sight.

Jason Dunhill had looks to die for, the classic tall, dark, and handsome. He worked as a personal trainer, and as such was about as image-conscious as a movie-star. He was an expert at applying self-tanner, so his skin was always a beautiful, golden brown—no streaks, and no yellow, and no skin cancer. His dark brown hair was thick and coarse-textured, which meant it always stayed exactly where he put it. Green eyes of a shade that made some people suspect he wore tinted contacts, although Sammi knew for a fact that he didn't. And his body was, of course,

impeccable, nicely built without being bulky.

Unfortunately, he was also thirty years old with the attitude of a randy teenager. He had come home from work just in time to get a glimpse of Laurel leaving, and he had instantly gone into his tomcat-on-the-prowl act, giving Laurel an unsubtle once-over and making it disgustingly clear he liked what he saw. Laurel had been oblivious—too much on her mind, and besides, she probably elicited that behavior from men all the time. But Sammi was embarrassed to put a client through that kind of harassment, even if the client hadn't noticed. Now, Sammi was counting slowly backward from one hundred to avoid a possible murder.

Jason grinned up at her from his seat on the couch, green eyes twinkling with amusement as he enjoyed her chagrin. "What's the matter, Sam? You look like you've just drunk a big ole glass of sour milk."

Sammi sat on the love-seat that was parallel to the couch, perching on the end of the seat in case she needed to make a hasty escape before she resorted to violence. "I've told you before, Jace: I don't want you ogling my clients. I spend a lot of time counseling women with broken hearts; I don't need you coming along and trying to break them all over again!"

Jason rolled his eyes. "I hardly think I broke that chick's heart by looking at her! Besides, she was gorgeous. If I'd seen her on the street I would have looked, so why shouldn't I look when I see her here?"

Sammi felt her face heating up. "Do you *ever* consider anyone's feelings?" If she'd known Jason was this much of a sexist, womanizing asshole, she never would have rented him an apartment in Hippie House. But her intuition had failed her entirely where he was concerned, and while she'd tried to get rid

of him by setting him up a couple of times, he'd been about as interested in the women she'd introduced him to as a child was in eating spinach.

"What is your problem, Sam? All I did was look at a pretty woman, and you're acting like I committed a federal crime. Lighten up!" He wasn't looking so amused anymore. In fact, his jaw had set in that stubborn way she was so familiar with, and his eyes had narrowed dangerously. He was capable of throwing quite a temper tantrum, and if she didn't watch it, she'd soon be treated to one.

Sammi sighed and rubbed her face, trying to rub some of the tension from her facial muscles. Much as she hated to admit it, Jason was right. Damned if she was going to give up her grievance, though.

"Look, Laurel is thinking about renting the empty apartment. She just had her heart broken by a man she was with for five years. She doesn't need the complication of a man like you sniffing at her skirts day in and day out."

He shook his head in disbelief. "Sam, will you listen to yourself for a moment? I just looked at her, for Christ's sake! And even if I'd started panting like a dog and slobbering all over her, it would be none of your business. You're my landlady, not my mom. So knock it off!"

Sammi swallowed back another snappish comment. What was it about Jason that got under her skin so easily? It was hellishly difficult for them to be in the same room together for more than five or ten minutes without getting into one of these little sparring matches of theirs; and Jason usually won, which annoyed her even more.

Deciding that she would make even more of an ass of herself

if she stuck around, Sammi made a silent and, she hoped, dignified exit.