HARLEQUIN®

RETURN OF THE LIGHT

Maggie Shayne

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Аннотация

Dori Stewart's six-figure Manhattan job has vanished, and her lover and friends have vanished with it. She's scraping by as a waitress and awaiting the day she can return to New York in triumph. Maybe a ritual on the winter solstice can renew her wavering faith. What she needs is just the right candle…and Jason Farrar, an old boyfriend, by her side.

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Prologue

The candles were the only light in the room. They glowed from every quarter, painting the faces of the men and women in a golden light. Incense smoke hung in the air; sandalwood and myrrh, mingling with the seasonal aromas of pine boughs, holly and ivy.

In the center, she stood with her arms upward and outward, head tipped back as the High Priest knelt before her, completing the fivefold kiss by pressing his lips briefly to her feet.

She opened her eyes and spoke to the gathered assembly, spoke the words of the Goddess according to Leland, who said they were given to him by an Italian Witch named Maddalena more than a hundred years ago; and to Gardner, who adapted them from Leland, adding his own touches; and to Valiente, who made them beautiful and must have been truly inspired; and according to Dori, Lady Starfire, who had made them her own.

"Hear my words and know me! I shall be called by myriad names. I am the Maiden of the Moon, I am Mother Earth. And I am the Crone, who holds the keys of life and rest. I am an unknowable mystery and yet known to every soul!"

She lowered her arms to her sides, moving her most penetrating gaze from one face to the next, meeting their eyes so they would feel touched by the Goddess.

"Hear my words and know me! Whenever the full moon rises,

come to me. Gather in some secret place, such as this…"

Not much of a secret place, though. Not really. Her penthouse apartment in Manhattan. Still, it served the purpose.

"And adore the spirit of your Goddess, who is Queen of all Witches."

Speaking the words of the Goddess felt a little phony tonight. Something was wrong; something was off. Dori wasn't sure what. And yet she felt that spirit wasn't speaking through her, hadn't in quite some time now. The Charge had become rote, recited from memory. And while those standing in a circle around her seemed awestruck and mesmerized when she met their eyes with her own, she didn't feel the magic.

"I shall teach you the mysteries of Nature, and the ways of Magick!"

Not much nature, here. Not in the apartment, aside from her plants and her cat.

"All that is hidden shall be revealed. Even the secluded soul shall be pierced by my light."

She didn't really teach anymore. The priestesses she had trained did that, ran their own covens, taught bright-eyed beginners, organized social functions and rituals and performed weddings and funerals. But in this particular branch of the Pagan community, she was queen. The ranking elder, the most honored Witch in town, and a coveted special guest at many a Pagan function. She was even respected and a bit famous in non-Pagan circles, having successfully worked with the police on several

missing persons cases. The press loved that kind of crap. It was a damn good thing she saw no reason to be secretive about her beliefs. They wouldn't have stayed secret long.

"I do not demand sacrifice, for I am the mother of all living!"

She moved around the circle now, speaking to each individual.

"Create and heal!" she told one. "Be strong yet gentle," she said, touching the cheek of another. "Be noble yet reverent," she instructed a third. "Bring forth and replenish."

She returned to the center. "And just as the moon moves through her cycles, waxing and waning and beginning again, and just as seasons flow from birth in the spring to life in the summer, to aging in the fall and apparent death in the winter, so shall you —in both worlds.

"And you will say these words—I will love all, and harm none. For the free will of all, and with harm to none, as I will, it now is done. So mote it be!"

And with that, she moved to the seat of honor that had been placed in the North quarter of the circle and sat down to enjoy the rest of the Winter Solstice Ritual the priestesses had planned. She'd done her part, ensuring those gathered that the Goddess was indeed present to join in their rites. She sat and watched the elaborate procedure unfold. There were songs to celebrate the return of the light. There was a dance performed in its honor. The freestanding silver candelabras she had bought for ritual use really made it special, she thought. Each held seven candles—she'd spent a fortune on them, but it was well worth it. Some of

the less-experienced priestesses still had to read their parts, and the light was extremely helpful.

The entire group began the circle dance, which usually generated such a rush of energy that Dori tingled from head to toe. Tonight it felt off.

Something was up this Winter Solstice. All week long, she'd been thinking that once again, she'd come through the darkest season without experiencing any real darkness at all. Her life was perfect. Tonight, though, she felt the sword of Damocles dangling overhead. Every nerve in her body was tensed as if expecting a blow.

She broke her train of thought long enough to wince when one enthusiastic dancer bumped into the altar. That was a Tiffany chalice, for Goddess's sake!

Luckily it didn't fall off, just wobbled dangerously.

The dancing grew faster and faster, until the High Priestess shouted, "Release!" Then all the dancers in the room went still, relaxing their bodies to let go of the energy they had raised, while the woman in the center lifted her hands to send the magic off to its goal. Its goal tonight was to bring back the light, to help it grow within every one of them and help them through their own dark times, whatever they might be.

The ritual was finished and the circle taken up as Dori rose again, lifting her arms in silence to bid farewell to the Goddess, then lowering them and crossing them over her chest, bowing her head.

As those gathered rushed into the next room, where snacks were piled high and wine was chilling, she quickly cleared her altar, lovingly wrapping each tool in silk cloth and tucking each back into the trunk in the corner. The Tiffany chalice. The crystal-tipped wand she'd had custom-made by an artisan in Greenwich Village. The statues of Pan and Diana, replicas of ancient artifacts. She'd bought them in the gift shop at the Met. The dagger, with its double-edged silver blade and onyx handle, slid neatly into its sheath. It was worth a small fortune. She was especially careful with the giant quartz crystal ball on its elaborate pewter stand. She rarely had time to use the thing, but it looked great on the altar.

She didn't relax until every item was safely tucked in the trunk and she had turned the key.

"Thanks so much for letting us use your flat, Lady Starfire." The voice was Sara's—could be no one else's, with that beautiful accent. She was new in town, but very highly regarded in the community. Had come straight from England with the equivalent of a Witch's pedigree—a long and distinguished lineage.

When Dori turned to face her, it was to see her dropping into a curtsy, her head bent low.

"We're not so formal, here, Sara. Ritual's over. It's okay to call me Dori. And I've never been all that comfortable with the genuflecting." She glanced into the next room, where there had to be at least forty people eating, talking, laughing. Someone had put John Denver and the Muppets on the stereo—which was sure

to start an earnest debate about playing Christmas music at a Solstice party among those not yet far enough along their path to realize they were all celebrating the same thing.

Dori almost cried when she thought of the potential crumbs and spills on her carpet.

"I simply couldn't believe we had so many who wished to attend!" Sara went on. "Our open circles have only brought in eighteen to twenty people, up to now."

"I know."

"There just wasn't room in the back room of my shop," she went on. "And I couldn't bear to turn anyone away."

"I know," Dori said again, fixing the beautiful blond Witch with a serious look. "It's okay. Really, Sara."

The other woman sighed in relief. A little too much relief. So Dori quickly added, "And next time, you'll know in advance that you need a bigger place, so you'll have time to make other arrangements."

"Right." She nodded hard. "Absolutely. And we'll leave the place spotless, I swear."

"The cleaning service will take care of that."

Sara smiled. "Will you join us for the refreshments?"

Dori glanced into the dining room, at the smiling faces, young and old, dark and light, round and narrow. She didn't want to join them. They tended to fawn and fuss and treat her like a celebrity and she wasn't up to it tonight. Something was terribly wrong. But if she didn't take part, they'd be disappointed, so she lifted

her chin and walked into the dining room.

Several of those present bowed in her direction when she did. One quickly vacated a chair and another brought her a glass of wine.

Dori sighed, sipped her wine, smiled a little. Every High Priestess in this room had been taught by her. Every coven had sprung from the little one that had begun around her coffee table when she'd first come to Manhattan from tiny Crescent Cove, Vermont, ten years ago. She'd really done a good thing here, she thought. Her Witches were busy, politically active, constantly working to educate the public about the Craft and debunk the widespread misconceptions that caused so many Wiccans so many problems. They provided services for the Pagan community, raised money for the homeless, organized Pagan Pride events and voter-registration drives.

Yes. She'd done a good thing. And the Goddess had rewarded her. Her life was perfect. And she was sitting here in her penthouse apartment, petrified, waiting for the ax to fall.

In the morning, it did.

She showered and dressed for success in a burgundy Pierre Atonia suit—slender skirt, a little on the short side, tailored jacket that accentuated her narrow waist, matching designer pumps. She left a brief note for the cleaning service, asking them to spend extra time on the dining room carpet, and she took a taxi to work just as she always did.

But when she stepped out of the elevator into the reception

area of Mason-Walcott Publishing, a grim-faced man was waiting for her.

"Ms. Stewart?" he asked. He didn't smile.

He was tall and dressed all in black. His face was pale and bony, his eyes deep set. He could have been the pop-culture version of the Grim Reaper, she thought. And a shiver went up her spine. Everything in her told her this was it, the thing she'd been feeling in the air.

"Yes?"

"I'm Martin Black, VP in charge of personnel."

She lifted her eyebrows. "Of Mason-Walcott?"

"Of Beckenridge."

Beckenridge. One of the largest publishers in the biz—and notoriously right-wing conservative.

"And you're here because…?"

"Because Beckenridge just took over Mason-Walcott."

She looked past him to see if co-workers were lurking, ready to laugh at her falling for such a lame joke. But her stomach had clenched into a knot that told her this was for real.

"I'm afraid we're…not going to be needing you."

She blinked twice, and for the first time she noticed the big cardboard box on the counter that separated the receptionist's desk from the rest of the area. It held her belongings.

She shifted her gaze back to Mr. Black's. "You're firing me?"

"Technically, we're laying you off. We took the liberty of clearing out your office. Everything's right here."

She nearly gaped. “May I ask the reason?”

He shrugged. “Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters. I’m not even convinced it’s legal!”

“Oh, it’s legal. The position of editorial executive director is being eliminated, to be sure it’s legal.”

“But that’s not the real reason, is it?”

He shrugged. “Would you really want to stay, Ms. Stewart? Our titles fly in the face of everything you so openly believe in and practice.” He handed her an envelope. “A month’s severance. It’s more than generous. Good luck, Ms. Stewart.”

He scooped her box of belongings off the counter and shoved it into her chest, leaving her no choice but to take it or let it fall to the floor. Then he clasped her elbow, turning her toward the elevator, and reached past her to push the button.

“You can’t do this,” she said. Useless, but all she could come up with.

“I just did.” The doors opened. He nudged her inside and stood there until they closed again. “Goodbye, Ms. Stewart. Have a nice life.”

Chapter One

A few days before Winter Solstice, one year later…

"Hey, Dori, hon, you gonna get over here and fill this coffee cup, or do I have to climb over the counter and get it myself?"

"Keep your pants on, Bill." Dori set down the tray full of dirty plates, grabbed the coffeepot and hurried to fill the man's cup. Mort's Diner, in Crescent Cove, Vermont, was decorated to the max for the holiday season: wreath on the door, fake green garland looped everywhere, cinnamon-and candy-cane-scented candles burned and holiday music played constantly.

Jason was there, sitting in a corner booth, enjoying a sandwich and a cup of cocoa. Watching her. He was there a lot, more often than seemed reasonable. Then again, she didn't suppose there was much work for the police chief of a small, quiet town like this. Hell, maybe it was vain of her to think he came around just to watch her waiting tables. It had been more than a decade, after all, since he'd held her. Since he'd kissed her.

There was nothing between them anymore.

Dori sighed in relief when she heard the jingle bells over the door and saw Sally walk in. After setting the coffeepot back on the burner, she reached behind her to tug her apron loose as Sally came behind the counter.

"You're an hour late. Again," Dori said.

"I'm sorry, Doreen. Little Amy had a doctor's appointment

and I only just got her back home." She pulled her apron around her and tied it in place.

There was always a reason. Always. And it usually had to do with the woman's small army of children. "Whatever. I'm out of here." Dori tossed the apron down, snatched her coat off the rack and went into the back room to collect her sorry excuse for a paycheck from the owner.

But she paused near the door as she heard Bill say, "Damn. You'd think she'd have come down off that high horse by now, wouldn't you?"

Dori stood still, listening.

"It was a hard fall," Sally said. "Going from a penthouse in Manhattan to her uncle's log cabin on the lakeshore. From a high-powered job to slinging hash for lousy tippers like you. Hell, she probably used to earn more in a month than she's made here in… how long has it been now since Dori came running back here with her tail between her legs?"

Bill didn't answer. The grown-up version of the boy who'd been her summer fling as a teenager—for several consecutive summers—answered, instead. "Eleven months, three weeks and two days."

"Think she's gonna stay for good this time?" Bill asked.

"Wish to hell I knew," Jason said. And there was something in his voice—something kind of pained.

Dori moved to the swinging door, peered through its porthole-shaped glass. He was still at his table in the corner, staring at the

sheet of pink notebook paper he held in one hand. It was old, had been folded so long the creases were darker colored. It looked worn thin. As she stared at it, wondering, he lifted his gaze, and Dori backed away from the door.

"She belongs here," Sally was saying. "Don't you worry, Jason. She's gonna realize that by-and-by."

Now, why was she saying that? As if Jason had any stake in what Dori decided to do with her life. She'd broken things off with Jason ten years ago—in a Dear John letter….

Written on pink notebook paper.

Something knotted in her belly. She told herself she was being ridiculous, snatched her paycheck from the slotted mail holder on the wall and decided to go out the back door rather than walking through the front of the diner again.

Tugging the hood of her parka up over her head, she trudged through the snow to her car and rolled her eyes when she realized she would have to spend a few minutes brushing snow off it before she could go anywhere.

She missed her Mercedes—the remote starter, the heated leather seats, the warm, snow-free garage where she used to keep it parked. But she pulled her mittens from her pockets and thrust her hands into them. She opened the door to start the engine, grabbed the snow brush and slammed the door hard enough to knock some of the snow off. Then she began brushing. A thin layer of ice lay beneath the two inches of snow, and that required scraping. She hated scraping ice.

An old woman walked past the parking lot, waved at her and called, “Cold enough for you?”

“Plenty,” Dori replied.

“Ah, but cold means clear. It’s done snowing. The stars are going to be beautiful tonight,” the old woman said. And she continued on her way.

Fifteen minutes later, Dori had made a hole on the windshield just big enough to see where she was going, and she was heading out of Crescent Cove proper and toward Uncle Gerald’s cabin on the shore of Lake Champlain.

The lake was moody today, dark and choppy except in the spots where it was beginning to freeze over. She drove into the curving driveway, past the big wooden sign with the image of a green sea serpent and the words Champ Tours: $20.00. She made a mental note to take the sign down. She’d dry-docked the boat and closed up the souvenir shop two months ago. No point leaving the sign up all winter.

Champ—Lake Champlain’s answer to the Loch Ness Monster—had been her uncle’s bread and butter for as long as she could remember. She used to come out here every summer as a teen and work for him as a tour guide, retelling the Champ legends until she knew them all by heart, taking people around the lake until she knew it by heart, as well. And spending every free moment with local boy-next-door Jason Farrar.

He’d been her first lover. It had been innocent and clumsy and wonderful. She would never forget that night. But at the end

of her last summer here, she'd left him with nothing except that stupid note, telling him she would never be back, and to look her up in Manhattan if he wanted to. He never had.

She'd meant what she'd written in the note. She had never intended to come back here. She wouldn't have believed in a million years that she would be forced to revive the old business long after her uncle had retired to Boca Raton. But she'd had no choice. Goddess knew she couldn't survive on the pittance they paid her waiting tables at the diner.

Yeah, Goddess knew all right. She just didn't particularly care.

Sighing, Dori shut the car off and got out, hoping she wouldn't have to scrape the car off again in the morning.

She unlocked the front door and went inside, flipped on the lights, heeled off her boots, shrugged off her coat, tugged off her mittens. She went to the wall to turn up the thermostat, then padded into the living room and sank onto the sofa.

On the opposite wall was a tiny plaque. It depicted a Goddess in silver silhouette against a deep blue background, standing in the curve of an upturned crescent moon. Her arms were raised the way Dori's used to be in the midst of a circle when she was drawing down the moon. The plaque was the one ritual item she hadn't been forced to sell.

But she had found that out here in Crescent Cove, there was little use for her elaborate, expensive ritual tools. She was probably the only Wiccan within a hundred miles. She practiced alone.

That wasn't quite true. She didn't really practice at all, unless you counted all the spells she'd cast, all the magic she'd done to get her old life back. Nothing had worked. Nothing. And for about the millionth time she found herself wondering if any of it had ever been real.

She looked up at the Goddess on the wall opposite her and wondered why she kept the plaque hanging there. Did she even believe anymore?

JASON WALKED around the cabin toward the front door, but he stopped when he caught a glimpse through the side window of the woman he'd loved for as long as he could remember. She was standing, staring up at something on the wall. A single tear rolled down her cheek.

He couldn't take his eyes away. Why was she crying?

Hell, he hadn't been able to make much sense of Dori Stewart since she'd dumped him and headed off to the big city to make her fortune. She'd barely spoken two words to him since she'd been back. And he wasn't altogether sure that was a bad thing.

He still wanted her. Just as badly as he always had. But he wasn't ready to risk his heart again. She'd damn near crippled him when she'd walked away. He'd been seeing wedding bells, a house and kids in their future, and she'd apparently thought of him as little more than a summer sidekick. He wasn't going to let himself go through that again. So he'd stayed away from her, waiting to see what she planned to do, just about as long as he

could stand to. For nearly a whole year he'd limited himself to a few words of greeting when they met in the diner, told himself to keep his distance for his own sanity, even while torturing himself by sitting in a booth every day, watching her.

He had asked her out once when she'd first come back to town. She'd shot him down cold. It was then he'd decided he owed it to himself to get over her. But getting over Dori Stewart was easier decided than done.

As he watched, she lowered her head, swiped an impatient hand at her tears and turned to walk out of his line of vision.

Jason went the rest of the way to the door, knocked twice, then stood there waiting.

It only took her a second to come to the door. She asked who it was, and when he told her, he heard locks turning.

Hell, she'd been living in the city too damn long.

She opened the door and stood there, looking out at him. "What is it?"

Friendly, she wasn't. Then again, he'd already ascertained that she wasn't in the best of moods. He offered a friendly smile. "I'd prefer to tell you from in there where it's warm. Save you letting all the heat out."

She met his eyes, but opened the door wider to let him in. He stomped the snow off his boots and came inside, and she closed the door behind him.

He liked the way she looked. He hadn't when she'd first come back. Her copper hair had been too tamed, too trimmed, too

styled. Her skin had been as pale as porcelain and she'd been skinny as a rail.

A summer on the lake had improved things a whole lot. Put some color in her cheeks. She'd let her hair grow out just as it pleased, and she might have put on a few pounds, too. She was starting to look as though she belonged out here—even if she wasn't acting that way just yet.

"So what can I do for you, Chief Farrar?" she asked.

"Kind of formal, don't you think? Given our history?"

She shrugged. "It's been a long time."

"So long you can't even call me Jason anymore?"

She met his eyes, and he saw something flicker. Regret, maybe. Interest, perhaps, he hoped. Her tone softened, as did her face. He thought a little of the stiffness left her body.

"What can I do for you, Jason?"

"A cup of coffee would do for starters. If it's fresh."

"I stopped serving people at five, but you're welcome to help yourself."

"I'll take it." He tugged off his boots and then sock-footed his way across the kitchen, draping his coat over the back of a chair on the way. Then he took two mugs from the little wooden tree and filled them. He set them on the table, grabbed the cream from the fridge and sat down.

She sat down, as well. He poured cream into his cup, then passed it to her.

"Nope. I drink it black."

"You didn't used to."

She frowned.

"Two sugars and a good long stream of half-and-half. But only if no real cream was at hand. I remember."

She studied him for a long moment, her green eyes wide and searching. "I can't believe you remember that."

"I remember everything, Dori." He shrugged and sipped his coffee.

It seemed to take her a moment to stop staring at him and find something to say again. He took that as a positive sign and told himself that was because he was a pathetic sap.

"What are you doing here, Jason?"

"It's an official visit. You didn't think I was here to ask you out again, did you?"

She shrugged. "It crossed my mind."

"I'm not into masochism, Dori. You made it clear the first time that you didn't have any interest in starting anything up with me."

"With anyone," she corrected.

"Right. Because you would only be here long enough to decide which big-city offer to accept, and then you'd be out of here so fast we'd see nothing but a copper-red streak."

"Is that what I said?" She averted her eyes and drank her coffee instead of looking at him. He'd hit a nerve, he thought.

"That's what you said. 'Course, that was damn close to a year ago."

She sighed. "I get where you're going with this. I'm still here,

right? So did you come to rub it in? Gloat a little that the snotty city snob got knocked down a peg?"

He swore softly, and that drew her eyes back to his again. He said, "Hey, it's me. Jason. Do you remember anything at all about me?"

She frowned for a moment, then nodded twice. "You're right. You'd never gloat over my failed life. You're not that kind. Never were."

"Well, thank goodness you remember at least that much. I'll tell you, Dori, city living made you cynical. Gave you a hard edge you didn't used to have."

"That's probably true."

He hadn't come here to insult her, but he thought he just had. "I was only asking about your still being here because it makes me wonder if maybe your plans have changed." He hoped to God she would say they had, but the misery in her eyes told him different even before she did.

Dori lowered her head. "My plans haven't changed. But what I plan to do and what I can do are turning out to be further apart than I imagined."

He held her gaze for a long moment. "So you still plan to take some big-time job and hightail it back to the city at the first opportunity?"

"I sent out a dozen more résumés last week."

He sighed. "Are you sure you don't belong out here, Dori? Hell, nobody tells those Champ stories the way you do."

She tilted her head to one side, averted her eyes. “You said you were here on official business?”

Jason sighed. If she was determined to freeze him out, there wasn’t much he could do about it. “Yeah. Wanted to ask if you could help me out on a case.”

She looked up at him fast. “Jesus, how do you know about that? No one out here knows about that!”

He was taken by surprise. “About what?”

“Look, Jason, I don’t do that kind of work anymore, okay?”

He had no idea what she was talking about, but suddenly he wanted to. So he narrowed his eyes and watched her as carefully as he would watch an ex-con in town for the weekend, and he took a shot in the dark. “Why not? You did it in New York, didn’t you?”

She lowered her head. “It’s different in New York,” she said. “A psychic or even a Witch helping the police find a missing person is so common there it doesn’t even make the news every time anymore. Out here it would be the biggest headline to hit town in a decade.”

He blinked three times. A Witch. She did say Witch, didn’t she?

“You, uh, helped the police find some missing people.”

“Helped. Past tense. Like I said, I don’t do it anymore.”

“And you used…uh…Witchcraft to do it?”

She shrugged. “I used whatever I could. The cards, the runes. My instincts.”

"You're…psychic?"

"Everyone's psychic." She sipped her coffee. "Some people learn how to hone it, how to use it. I'm one of them."

"So you were successful?"

She nodded, but she was looking at him oddly now. "You didn't know any of this, did you?"

"I didn't have a clue. So you went off to the big city and came back a Witch, huh?"

She closed her eyes, irritated it seemed. "If you weren't aware of my history, then why were you asking for my help with a case?"

"I just need an extra pair of eyes. Some kids have been borrowing boats and taking them out on the lake to party. It's not safe—especially this time of year. I was hoping you'd keep a lookout and give me a call if you see anything suspicious."

She closed her eyes. "Oh."

"So tell me more about this…Witch thing."

She drew a deep breath, then shook her head. "No."

"No? Come on, Dori, you can't just leave me hanging like that."

"Yes, I can. It's not something I want to become public knowledge. Not out here—people wouldn't understand."

"What, you think I'm completely ignorant? I know what Wicca is. That is what we're talking about here, right?"

She nodded slowly.

"And as for not letting it get around, you know me better than

that, don't you?"

"Do I?"

"You did once. You knew me well enough to make love to me, Dori. Or did you forget that, too?"

"Jason…"

"Knew me well enough to let me believe we had something special, then left me in the dust, wondering what truck had just run me down."

She lowered her eyes.

"You trusted me then, didn't you, Dori?"

"People change."

"You sure as hell proved that." He sighed. "But I'm the same guy I was back then. A little older. A little wiser, maybe. But you can still trust me."

She sighed. "I haven't changed as much as you think I have," she said softly. "I couldn't be who I was. Not here. Not in this town."

"It wasn't the town holding you back, Dori. That was all you."

She sighed. "Maybe. Maybe I was just afraid."

"Maybe you still are."

She was quiet a moment, seeming to think things over. "I was thinking about reserving a table at the Holiday Craft Fair. Doing tarot readings for people."

He lifted his brows. "Yeah?"

"I wasn't sure what the reaction would be, though."

He shrugged. "As a rule, the word psychic doesn't stir up the

same feelings as the word Witch."

"I could really use the extra money."

"So do it. Give folks a little credit, Dori. Just 'cause this isn't a major metropolitan city doesn't mean we're all ignorant here. This is Vermont, for goodness' sake. Most open-minded state in the union."

She lifted her head. He saw a light in her eyes for the first time. Maybe she was a little excited about the idea of cracking the door of that broom closet where she'd been hiding, letting a bit of light shine in. He hoped so.

"Meanwhile, keep an eye out for those kids. Okay? They haven't done any harm so far, but that lake is no place for a bunch of rowdy teenagers."

"I'll keep an eye out."

He finished his coffee, got up from the table. "It was good talking to you again," he said. "It's been way too long."

"We've talked. At the diner."

He set his cup in the sink and went to the door, stomped into his boots. "I barely get a word in at the diner. They keep you too busy. Or maybe it's that you've been actively avoiding me."

She brought his coat from the back of his chair and handed it to him. "I guess I've been feeling guilty. About the way we left things."

"The way you left things," he corrected. "The way you left, period."

She pursed her lips, lowered her head. "I'm sorry I hurt you,

Jason. It's long overdue, but—"

"But you're not sorry you left?"

"I had to leave. For me."

He nodded, looking a little sad. "I hope you found whatever it was you needed. I hope it was worth what you gave up to get it. 'Night, Dori."

Chapter Two

Jason didn't ask her out again, even though she'd been convinced it had been on his mind when he'd first come over. He would probably never ask her out again, now that he knew the truth about her. He just gave her the wisdom of his sound advice and left her with an unanswerable question niggling and gnawing at her brain.

Had she found whatever it was she had needed in New York? And had it been worth what she had given up?

She hadn't thought she'd given up anything, beyond a summer fling with a great guy and a part-time job with her beloved uncle. But now she wondered. Could it have been more? What was Jason thinking about their relationship back then? That it could be something…more? How could she weigh what she had given up when he'd never told her what that might be?

She knew what she had found in leaving. She'd found the freedom to practice her religion. A handful of other women to practice it with. A succession of willing teachers, each a master of some occult discipline; the cards, the runes, healing, meditation. She'd studied and learned and taught. Become a master in her own right. A leader of the community. A true High Priestess of the Craft.

And while she was at it, she'd worked her way up through the ranks at Mason-Walcott Publishing. First as an editorial

assistant, then an associate editor, full editor, senior editor and, finally, as editorial executive director, with a clear path ahead to publisher. She'd been out and open about who she was at work, at home. Everywhere she went. She'd become the most in-your-face Wiccan she knew, with a Spiral Goddess on her desk and a huge pentacle hanging from a chain around her neck—to match the smaller ones on her ears, to match the middle-sized ones on her fingers.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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