

Strange Brew

"You have to meet her. She's fabulous!" Myra said.
"Genevieve is the best fortune-teller around."

Fortune-teller? Who invited a scam artist to the party? Fiona Church wondered. "The arm is attached, you know," she grumbled. Feeling like a child about to get a whipping, she allowed her friend and partner, Myra Marchbanks to steer her through the guests attending *A Little Red Magic's* grand opening celebration. "Why are you so excited?"

Without stopping, Myra glanced over her shoulder and rolled her green eyes. "Duh. How often do I open a love spell shop with two of my best buds?"

Fiona smiled. Her friends had been her most valuable asset over the last two months. The grin slipped into a frown. Her fingernails dug into her palms. Friends were her only asset since Brett had left her broke and looking like a fool.

This is my night. Nothing will spoil it. Shoulders back, she lifted her chin and forced a smile. She rolled her eyes at the cluster of Suits flirting with one of her partners, Tookie Wilson, whose gypsy-style drew men in droves.

Myra tugged Fiona past a display rack. Her skirt constricted around her calves. She jerked to a stop. "Love-O-

Matic" kits tumbled to the floor sounding like a bongo concerto. Heads whirled toward the sound. Blood rushed to her cheeks. "I am such a klutz." She punctuated each word with a yank of her skirt. Crimson silk ripped; more kits toppled. She cringed.

Myra tossed her blond braid over her shoulder and knelt to gather boxes and restock the shelf. "Calm down, Fi. This business will be a success."

The reminder of her failed design firm grated on her nerves. She narrowed her eyes and opened her mouth.

"I'm sorry," Myra blurted. "My tongue got in the way of my eye teeth, and I couldn't see what I was saying."

Fiona gnawed her bottom lip to squelch the retort burning her throat. She couldn't stay mad at her weird friend. "Thanks for cleaning up my disasters."

Myra hugged her then resumed elbow-tugging her across the shop, her clogs slapping against the tile. Fiona groaned and sought inspiration among the rhinestone stars decorating the midnight blue ceiling.

The guests returned to their conversations, watercress sandwiches and Pinot Grigio. Kyra Marchbanks, Myra's twin and bookkeeper for A Little Red Magic, had picked the menu. If it had been up to Fiona, they would've served barbequed weenies, chips and Corona. Some wedges of lime would've been nice, too.

She watched Kyra shove her long, brown bangs away from her face. She and Myra were polar opposites. Kyra looked like what she was—an accountant out of her element—her nervous smile aimed at a group of professional women-clones as she pointed to their priciest love spell.

A black corkscrew curl fell forward into Fiona's line of vision. She shoved it back and inhaled, hoping the spicy scent of Love Power Candles would calm her.

Dread prickled the back of her neck.

This is ridiculous. Tookie's sun-and-moon paint scheme and the myriad twinkling lights looked incredible. They had a great turnout, despite being located in a seedy mall, between a holy-roller church and a head shop.

This should be the happiest night of my life. I've finally recovered. Thoughts of her thieving ex-fiancé sent anger burning through her. She squelched it. Brett—or whatever his real name is—was just a bad memory.

So why are the Vultures of Doom circling above me?

"She's over here." Myra led Fiona toward the cash register.

She surveyed the crowd but saw no crystal balls or silk turbans, no one to fit the image of a fortune-teller.

"Here she is." Myra released Fiona's arm. "This is

Genevieve Rose. She reads palms. We should invite her to the store for Sweetheart Day next month."

The gleam in her friend's eyes scared Fiona. "I don't think that's what Hallmark had in mind when they invented that holiday," she muttered.

"Hallmark didn't invent it. A candy maker in Ohio did when he and some friends took gifts to shut-ins."

"Okay, Encyclopedia Myr-anica. Now you know why I refuse to play Trivial Pursuit with you."

She ignored Myra's giggle and looked down to see a woman dressed in a classy suit that almost matched the blue rinse in her hair. The glasses perched on the end of the woman's nose magnified wrinkles and aquamarine eyes. She didn't fit Fiona's image of a charlatan. She looked like a school teacher. Or maybe a blue leprechaun.

Fiona swallowed a burst of nervous laughter and held out her hand. Genevieve clasped it. Spiritual awareness rippled through Fiona, raising the hair on her arms. She tried to pull away, but the old woman held on and turned her hand to study the lines crisscrossing her palm.

I'm sick of con artists, Fiona thought. She glared at Myra, who flashed an uncertain smile. "I'm not interested, thank you."

"Nonsense, dear. I'm not here to scam anyone. If you don't

believe what I tell you, just chalk it up to harmless fun.”

Curiosity supplanted Fiona’s skepticism, but she refused to give the woman any personal information on which to feed.

“Relax, Dearie. I’m not going to steal your secrets.”

Fiona jerked her gaze from their hands to the woman’s eyes. That mystical force smacked her again. Chills tingled her spine.

Genevieve smiled. “Strong life line.”

“So I’m not going to die tomorrow?”

Genevieve flashed a lemon-sucking scowl.

“Sorry.” That grimace would make an excellent caricature, Fiona thought, picturing the drawing in her sketchbook.

Genevieve’s lips relaxed. “You have an artistic streak. You’re very talented, but don’t take your art seriously.”

This is getting weird.

“Isn’t she fabulous?” Myra whispered.

Spooky is more like it. At one time, art and her design company had been her life—until she’d hired Brett—the con man. He’d stolen all of her fantasies—her successful business, her dreams of a husband and family.

“You’ll have two children, both boys.”

Hard to have kids by yourself, she thought. After kissing a lot of toads in her life, she'd given up on finding Prince Charming. Two weeks ago, after her date with the biggest toad of all, she'd promised not to settle for less than perfection.

She was destined for a lifetime of loneliness.

"You've suffered disappointments, but your dream man is right under your nose." Genevieve chuckled. "Don't look so surprised. This is what I do for a living."

Fiona hadn't realized her jaw had dropped. She snapped it shut. "Did Myra..."

"No one has told me anything about you. I have some psychic ability."

A booming laugh echoed behind her, reawakening the Vultures of Doom. Fiona cringed. If this was Genevieve's idea of a joke, she could take a flying leap. Glancing with longing at the red velvet drape with the "Employees Only" sign attached, Fiona resisted the urge to hide from Todd, the King of Toads. She couldn't believe she'd ever accepted a date with such a chauvinist. And now, two weeks later, the moron still wouldn't take no for an answer.

She had to get this over with. Fiona mumbled a thank you to the fortune teller and spun toward Todd as he hovered over Tookie, his gaze fixated on her breasts.

Tookie's eyes narrowed. Fiona anticipated the firestorm to come. All conversation ceased. The volume of the instrumental version of *Black Magic Woman* pouring from the ceiling speakers seemed to lull.

"They've never learned the art of communication," Tookie said, pointing to her chest. "You'll have to make eye contact if you want to talk to me."

Todd's gaze remained locked to her cleavage. Tookie whirled away from him, her long, black tresses fanning out behind her. He glared at her backside before lumbering toward Fiona, his smile encompassing the lower half of his face. His leer traveled the length of her body, making her feel like a *Better Than Sex* Cake at a Chocoholics convention. He removed his UVA Cavalier's cap to reveal thin yellow hair plastered to the top of his head.

"Hey, Babe! The store looks great."

"Toad—I mean Todd—I told you not to come."

"I came to buy a potion to make you my love slave."

"When chauvinist pigs fly," she muttered, surprised to see Genevieve's scowl was back and aimed at Todd.

"After the party, let's get a drink, maybe go dancing."

Good idea. With her two left feet, she might be able to put him in the hospital. "I'm not interested."

"Aw, c'mon Babe," he whined. Instant turn-off.

A warm hand touched her shoulder. "The lady said she's not interested."

The molasses of that drawl detonated something deep inside, but Fiona refused to analyze it. She glanced over her shoulder and smiled at her best friend, Zach Ballard. He looked ready to kill just like he had the night they met ten years ago when he'd pulled her away from The Octopus at the senior dance.

"Who are you?" Todd demanded.

"Her husband." Zach slipped his arm around her shoulders, filling Fiona with a strange sense of contentment. Her eyes slid shut of their own volition. She leaned closer, relishing the squeeze of Zach's fingers and his musky scent. *Relishing? Zach?*

"Husband!" Todd said.

Fiona's eyes popped open. She glanced up at Zach. The fire in his eyes filled her with unexpected warmth. Summer highlights in his light brown hair had begun to fade, but his tan was still the color of honey. Her fingers itched with the desire to touch him. *No, this can't be happening. Not with her best friend.*

He puffed out his cheeks. "Fifi, have you been flirting again?"

"No, I swore I'd never do that after you put that last guy

in the hospital. I couldn't stand to be responsible for another man's...dysfunction."

Todd glared at her, turned and stalked out.

A chuckle rumbled from Zach's chest. He hugged her close and kissed her cheek. "My God! Who knew those puppy dog brown eyes could hide so much mischief? You look gorgeous, you evil woman."

Zach was always complimenting her, trying to build up her self-esteem, but he didn't understand that she'd long ago accepted what she was, tall, skinny and flat-chested.

He released her. Chills rippled up her spine.

"Under your nose." Genevieve winked before wandering away.

Zach's my dream man? Heat singed Fiona's ears. The most handsome man in Tidewater, Virginia couldn't want her. Could he?

"What was that about?" Zach asked, startling her. He reached out and tugged one of her corkscrew curls in front of her face, then released it. It snapped back into place like a black Slinky.

N-nothing." She normally could tell Zach anything. But not this. Not these wild thoughts invading her brain and scorching her body.