

CHAPTER ONE

Peter Gabler's confident stride slowed as he approached the "Hub of the Center of the Universe." He scowled. How like Bostonians to inflate their own pretensions. He was a proud down-easter himself, like his ships, and it went against his grain to come calling, hat in hand, at this elite center of an elite town of an elite state. Still, he had to go where the money was. Dreams were worth a high price--even groveling.

But he didn't have to like it.

He paused across from the State House on the lofty heights of Beacon Hill, tamping down his brief insecurity, to survey the neat, brick-lined sidewalks and ancient cobbled streets. No modern electric lighting conveniences here; gas lights were remnants of a gentler time. A time when the best Brahmin families still owned most of the expensive houses, a time when the Irish, the Italians and others of even lower status seldom ventured into this sacred domain of the wealthy, much less dared to purchase property.

Turning away from the sparkling gold dome and the proud columned portico of the State House, Peter continued his walk, appraising his pocket watch yet again. He was still ten minutes early, and he didn't want to appear too eager. He dawdled along the route he'd mapped out, begrudgingly admitting to a curiosity about the rich. Given the high price they paid to live here, in social and monetary coin, he'd expected more than neat rows of townhouses, some with lacy ironwork, others flat-fronted and plain except for their fine shutters and tinted window panes. Doubtless even these edifices, which were spacious only by going upward instead of outward, cost more than his first ship. Still, he'd gladly trade this refined bastion for his plain clapboard house in Maine. Here, one could barely see the genteel flow of the Charles River. At home, spray crashed onto the rocky point below. Gulls cried continually, as much a part of the landscape as the huge trees and clean air.

Still mourning his need to be here, he exited Mt. Vernon street and made a left on Walnut. He walked half a block before he saw his destination. He froze in his tracks. This immense new house, with its vast lawn and ornate embellishments, shouted extravagance in an area where wealth was the only entree. Swallowing, intimidated despite himself, he pulled the advertisement from his pea coat pocket to check the address again. He glanced at the brass plate on the tall wrought-iron fence surrounding the monstrosity. This was it.

Peter pulled out his pocket watch. Two more minutes. He snapped it closed and stuck it back in his pocket. To prepare himself for the most important interview of his life, Peter re-read the brief advertisement.

"To persons of good character, free feline to stable home. Chosen applicants will be given \$10,000 to begin new business. Interview mandatory. Acceptance sole prerogative of current owner, but each applicant must agree to take exemplary care of the cat for so long as the animal lives."

The article ended with the name and address of the owner, along with a number for one of those new-fangled gadgets called a telephone, stating that applicants should set an appointment.

Peter had followed the instructions to the letter, but no matter how many times he read the enigmatic words, he could not understand why anyone, even a wealthy eccentric, would put such a high price upon the life of a cat. Cats were nasty, smelly, cranky animals who shed more hairs than affection. He'd always detested them. They made him sneeze. Give him a large dog, a loyal, useful animal who came when called and could be trained to stay off the furniture.

He folded the paper neatly and stuck it back in his pocket. Then, setting his captain's cap at a jaunty angle on his thick, wavy black hair, he shoved open the wrought iron swinging gate and walked toward the huge house.

As he drew closer, he could appreciate the talent of the architect, if not the taste of the owner. While the white gingerbread trim curling at every eave and brimming from every roof peak was too frilly for his taste, he had to admire the deep red brick, the two octagonal turrets

balancing the house, and the widow's walk on the top of the roof. The view of the harbor must be glorious from there, he reflected.

He was approaching the steps that led to the wrap-around porch when a low growl made him freeze. Slowly, carefully, he turned his head--and came eye to eye with a tiger. The huge cat crouched on all four haunches, poised to spring, its fangs bared in a snarl. Out of the corner of his eye, Peter gauged the distance to the front door. If he jumped and ran like hell, he could make it....

He tensed on the balls of his feet. The tiger did likewise, but the front door slammed back on its hinges and a tall, slim woman with red-gold hair hurried out, saying something in a vaguely-Russian sounding language to the great cat. The tiger's tail quit switching. It made a yowl of almost human disappointment. Finally it sprang up the three steps in one leap and shot through the door the woman held open.

Peter felt it brush his arm as it moved. He never would have made it to safety before the cat was on him. Shoving his cap back, Peter wiped his sweaty brow on a clean kerchief, his hands trembling.

The woman soon came back out, saying contritely, "Forgive me, sir. Sheba has been declawed, but she does like to play. I keep her penned up when I know someone is coming, but she snuck out."

Play? Sticking his kerchief back in his pocket, Peter retorted, "I do not think 'play' is what she had in mind." He bowed slightly. "Peter Gabler, at your service. I have an appointment with Mrs. Gisella Lowell."

The woman nodded. "I am Gisella. Won't you come in?" She stepped back.

He entered, wondering why she was answering her own door, and why she invited him to call her by her first name. He paused in the immense foyer, staring at the ornate stained woodwork of the stairs that angled in perfect squares three stories above his head, leading to a balcony overlook on each floor. More ornately-carved stained woodwork adorned the ceilings and baseboards. In fact, the dark stain would have been overpowering if not for the relatively

simple decor. No bric-a-brac in every nook and cranny here, no lace antimacassars, or elaborate stained glass as was so much the rage in this modern year of 1889.

An exquisite oriental rug centered the parquet flooring in the entry. Graceful arches led to adjacent rooms that held tasteful furniture in the Chippendale and Sheraton styles rather than the Empire or Rococo he would have expected from a woman who had married into money.

Mrs. Lowell swept a graceful hand toward the salon off the entry. "Won't you come in?"

Even as he followed, he stared, for this woman seemed both younger and more approachable than the eccentric widow he'd expected. Her lovely red-gold hair was pulled back by an emerald comb, and her eyes were a strange hazel that changed color with her background. He wished he could peg her age. Her skin was almost totally smooth, and she had no gray hairs. However, she was the mother of a grown daughter, or at least had been before that young lady suddenly disappeared, so she had to be in her forties or fifties. She looked far younger.

As she walked into the salon, her graceful hips swayed under the simple flow of the tunic-like dress she wore. It was the strangest fabric he'd ever seen, a spring green watered silk so fine that as she moved under the modern electric lights, it shimmered with every shade of green between forest and chartreuse. Again, she surprised him. Her dress was no more subject to the strict mores of her time than was her taste in furnishings. No corsets or bustles for this fine figure of a woman. She wore what she pleased, be hanged to the gossips.

For this, he had to admire her. By all accounts, she was an upstart, like he was. Down at the docks, with the exception of her own employees, she was not well-liked. The general consensus seemed to be that she'd bewitched poor Alexander Lowell when he went on a trip to Eastern Europe. She'd slowly taken over the elegant Brahmin's life, wheedling him into tearing down the aging Federal-style mansion on this hilltop and building this modern new house. It was the scandal of Beacon Hill. No matter how many modern conveniences they put into this behemoth, like the telephone, electric lighting, even a mysterious elevator that supposedly led to one of the towers, where she allowed no one else to visit, this house would remain as much an anomaly as its owner. An interloper in a place that clung to tradition.

For the moment, he squelched his natural curiosity. The interview that would decide his fate was about to begin.

Mrs. Lowell sat down in a graceful Sheraton chair, waving him to the opposite one.

"Now, Captain Gabler. I was impressed by your background."

He froze in the respectful act of removing his cap. "You had me investigated, ma'am?"

She arched one well-shaped auburn eyebrow. "But of course. As you have, no doubt, asked about me."

Cradling his cap on his knees, Peter smiled wryly. Astute, as well as beautiful. But then, from all accounts the fisheries and the import-export shipping businesses she'd helped her husband run thrived even more under her sole directorship. He nodded his shining dark head.

"Do you believe the rumors they whisper about me?"

This was even more direct. He cleared his throat, wondering how to respond tactfully. The uglier rumors, Peter had dismissed with total scorn.

Mrs. Lowell still stared at him with those unblinking hazel eyes that reminded him of a cat's. In the mellow sunlight, they looked golden.

He hedged, "Ah, I believe that you are a brave woman, thriving in a man's world, and that your policies of paid sick leave and vacation for your workers were bound to stir up controversy in this vastly competitive field."

She sniffed. "Your flattery does not impress me, sir. Do you believe I'm a witch?"

He quit twiddling with his hat and met her eyes, his own as gray blue, equally deep and unexplored, as the sea he loved. "No, ma'am, I do not. Nor do I believe that you poisoned your husband or had your daughter killed."

No matter what the rumors down at the docks, Gisella Lowell was no more a practitioner of witchcraft than he was. Eccentric? Obviously, and not only in her choice of dress, but he could scarcely condemn her for that when he was a bit odd himself. As to the mysterious, abrupt disappearance of her only child, lovely twenty-year old Katarina, Peter was certain there was some sensible explanation. Belike the young heiress had run away with a fortune-hunter.

Besides, her history was none of his business and, frankly, little of his concern.

She digested his response for a moment, and then said abruptly, "Tell me, Mr. Gabler, since we are being so frank--do you believe in witchcraft?"

Though he suspected she wouldn't like his answer, he had to be honest. He'd never stooped to lying in business, and he would not begin now, even if it cost him his last hope. "No, I do not."

Her lips curved slightly, whether in scorn, or amusement, he could not tell.

"Do you like cats?"

His heart sank to his boots. But he shook his head firmly.

The smile deepened. "I thought not. That's why Sheba wanted to attack you. Animals sense things, you know. Unlike people, they trust their instincts. But, I am impressed by your honesty. Now, tell me--what do you want the money for?"

This was easier. "To build a ship."

"But you've sailed many successful voyages, and should have little trouble raising funds from more traditional sources. From what I hear, you've been at sea all your life, and you made the Atlantic crossing in a record twelve days with your medium clipper. Is this not true?"

He nodded, gall rising to his throat, a bitter burning at the backs of his eyes. That last voyage around the Horn would have paid off his investors, and he would have finally, at the young age of thirty, been sole owner of one of the fastest ships on the waves. "Aye. But she went down around the Horn a year ago, taking all I owned with her. Ten of my men died."

"But your insurance--can you not use it to build a new ship?"

Huskily, he admitted, "My ex-business partner took care of those matters to leave me free to run the crew and ship. He told me he'd paid the premium, but...." He trailed off, unable to continue.

Her hazel eyes softened. "A pity. But why will no one finance your new venture?"

Nervously, he twiddled his cap between his fingers, wondering how to put this. Here was a woman who embraced everything new; he was an anachronism, a young man clinging to the

romance of sail in an age of steam. But there was no easy way to put it. He took a deep breath and said in a rush, "Most people want to build steamships. They say the era of the clipper is dead. Takes too large a crew, too much maintenance, too little cargo space."

"You don't agree?"

"No." He did not elaborate, but his conviction rang in the elegant room.

"I see. Well, if you are selected, the money is yours to do with as you please, though I do tend to agree that sailing ships are not as efficient as steamers. But that is neither here nor there. My only stipulation is that you must remain in Boston until November first. I have a lovely little townhome I can let you use, free of rent, for the next two months."

It was early September. The architect helping design the plans for the new ship lived in Boston, but Peter didn't expect the process to require two months. And as for living on Beacon Hill...He mastered a shudder with difficulty and said cautiously, "You are selecting me, then?"

"The choice is not mine." Rising, the widow clapped her hands and called something in that language Peter didn't understand.

Heavy feet tromped down the stairs. Lighter ones came from every direction, and soon the salon was filled with cats. Cats of every description, from a black panther, to a cougar, to the tiger, to the more traditional house cats of every hue and size.

The three great cats eyed him with predatory interest, but at Mrs. Lowell's hushed comment, they padded over to opposite corners of the room. They plopped down and watched, yawning, baring formidable fangs. The four house cats circled Peter's chair, yowling.

Peter sneezed.

Three of them sprang back, startled, but the fourth crouched directly in front of Peter, watching with that feline intensity that had always unsettled him. This cat was small, solid black, with huge gold eyes accented by the gold and diamond collar it wore.

For a timeless instant, Peter was transfixed by that gaze. The cat seemed to appraise him with an agenda of its own. What did it look for? A comfortable lap? A gentle touch? Someone

who would feed it and water it, and take care of it? But no, even as he stared back into those luminous eyes, Peter couldn't shake the eerie sensation that the cat looked deeper.

Who he was. What he wanted. How he went about getting it. Things no cat should ever care about.

With one lithe spring, the cat jumped up on his lap.

Peter almost fell out of his chair. He crinkled his nose, trying to stop the urge to sneeze before it began, but strangely, now that the other cats had backed away, his nose didn't tickle. It was almost as if he weren't allergic to this particular cat.

Ridiculous. Black fur was just as itchy. But the soft warmth on his lap began to seep into him, easing his discomfort. Compelled, he stroked the velvety fur.

Mrs. Lowell watched intently. When the cat began to purr at his touch, she sighed. A wistful sound, sadness and satisfaction mixed. "You have been selected."

Did he hear aright? His hands froze on the soft fur. It almost seemed as if the cat itself had more choice over who her new owner would be than the widow. Nonsense. Peter watched curiously, feeling as if he'd entered not just an expensive world he'd never aspired to, but a fantastic domain where anything could, and would, happen.

He shifted his long legs. His hand moved, brushing the velvet fur backward. The cat stiffened on his lap, jumped down, walked over to a couch and sprang up. It circled around until it found the perfect spot, and then it lay down, curled in a ball, golden eyes fixated on him.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Lowell went to a tall cabinet against the wall and removed a slim red book. Moving silently, gracefully, like the cats around her, she brought the book to him.

Her familiars? came Peter's quick thought, but he squelched it and accepted the tome she held out. The expensive leather was lavishly gilded in a strange curlicue pattern, and a gilded cat's face, two emerald eyes winking at him, centered the book. The pages were likewise gilded.

"Open it. These rules must be followed religiously, or any bargain between us will be abrogated," the widow said solemnly, as if she offered her own personal copy of the ten commandments. Rules he would break at his peril.

Gingerly, he thumbed the book open to the title page. It read, "*The Care and Feeding of the Modern Feline.*"

He turned the next page and read the five simple rules.

1. Never stroke her fur backward.
2. Let her sleep with you, eat with you, walk with you.
3. Talk to her and she'll talk back.
4. Give her independence and she will be loyal.
5. Love your cat, and she will love you.

Filled with a growing unease he could not account for, Peter turned the page, but the last ten heavy vellum pages in the book were blank. He closed the book. Rule one, he'd already broken, and the cat had made its displeasure immediately known.

Both pairs of golden eyes watched him steadily. The woman blinked no more often than the cat. Mrs. Lowell asked, "And can you abide faithfully by these rules?"

"I can't say I'm wild about sleeping with an animal, any animal--"

"These rules are not open to negotiation."

The gentle reprimand gave him little choice. He nodded. "As you will."

"And you will cherish her, as long as you both live?"

The similarity of the demand to a more sacred vow chilled him, but again, he reluctantly nodded. "Am I expected to take her to sea with me?"

"She loves the sea." Then, taking pity on his confusion, she stood and offered her hand. "You will grow to care for her in time. I promise."

He bowed over her hand. "Thank you for your trust in me."

"My banker will deposit the agreed-upon sum in your account." Mrs. Lowell turned her head to look at the cat still lying on the couch. She sat down next to it and spoke softly in that musical language. The cat crawled up her lap, setting its forepaws on her shoulder, and tucked its head under her neck, purring.

The hypnotic hazel eyes filled with tears.

Moved for some reason he did not understand, Peter stepped away to give the leave-taking privacy. He walked around the beautifully-appointed room, careful to skirt the snoozing cats in each corner, and paused to admire the lovely mantel, glancing up at the picture above. He froze.

A tall, gorgeous young woman stood in partial profile, blue-black hair flowing down over her back past her hips, tossing in the breeze coming off the Charles river, where she stood on a grassy embankment. In the painting, the harbor looked tiny, as if the ships spread at her feet were under her dominion. Her dress was emerald green, nipped in at a tiny waist, frills of jet-flecked lace at her generous bosom. She held a wide emerald and black hat in one hand, the breeze catching the strings as if to snatch the proper covering away from a face and form that needed none. Her skin was ivory pale, finely-textured, her black brows winging away from her huge golden eyes in reckless disregard for fashion or propriety.

He sensed the widow moving next to him, but still he stared up at the smiling young woman. The fierce strength and individuality in that face drew him more than its uncommon beauty, for the painter had captured the girl's vitality. He felt as if he could reach out and touch warm, living skin instead of cold canvas.

"My daughter is....was lovely, was she not?" came the widow's husky question.

"Was?" Still, he couldn't tear his eyes away from that wild face.

"She is....ill. Incognito. For a time." She cleared her husky voice. "Cat is ready for you to take her home." She thrust a piece of paper and a key into his limp fingers.

Finally, he tore his gaze away. "Cat? Is that all you call her?" Surely a more exotic name was needed. Sable, or Dusky, or something.

"Cat is what she prefers."

He shrugged. "As you wish." He walked over to the cat and picked it up.

It spat at him.

Startled, he dropped it back on the couch.

The widow shook her head. "Remember rule number four."

He wracked his brain. Oh, the one about independence. "She'd rather walk?"

"Always. On her own t-four feet."

He looked about. "Do you have a leash?"

"You will not need it. She will follow you."

Doubtfully, he watched over his shoulder as he walked toward the entrance. The cat switched a last mournful look between its former owner and its new one, but it padded after him, whiskers trembling slightly.

At the front door, Peter paused. "But what do I feed her? The book says nothing of that."

"Whatever you eat will be fine."

Peter couldn't quell a scowl at that response. His parents had been conservative Swedes who immigrated to Maine, working dawn until dusk trapping lobsters to save enough money to buy their first boat. Those early years were a vague memory to Peter, but the lesson of reward versus work had been a salutary one. "A penny saved is a penny earned," they had often said, quoting that great American patriot Ben Franklin.

Feed a cat human food? Nonsense.

But Peter merely tipped his cap to the widow and walked down the steps, pacing his strides to the cat's.

At the gate, he paused to look back.

The widow held onto a front porch post as if she needed support to stand. Even from here, Peter could see the tears in her eyes.

Touched despite himself, he snatched off his hat and turned it between his fingers.

"Ma'am, ah, that is....visit us any time you please. And....I promise to take exemplary care of your cat."

She smiled and straightened, looking stronger. "Thank you, Mr. Gabler. I can see we both made the right choice."

Thinking she referred to his decision to apply, Peter smiled, his first genuine smile of the afternoon.

The widow blinked.

So did the cat.

Peter replaced his cap and held the front wrought-iron gate wide. The cat padded through, sending one last look over its shoulder at Mrs. Lowell. She waved.

Peter led the way up the street, feeling awkward, but his stride was as bold as ever. The cat followed obediently, its long tail swishing as it walked. Peter had the odd feeling that the swaying tail was the cat's version of a lady's swinging hips.

The feeling he'd been denying grew stronger. Finally, he stopped, stuck one hand on his hip, pushed his cap back with a finger and stared down at the cat. "So, Cat. Did I choose you, or did you choose me?"

The cat looked back at him with slanted, mysterious eyes.

Amazingly, he heard a soft, musical voice, slightly accented, reply, "We chose each other."

Startled, Peter looked around to see if any of the passers-by had heard the voice. Several people looked at him curiously. Embarrassed at his foolishness, Peter walked on. The cat kept pace, but Peter couldn't shake the feeling that he followed instead of led this fiendish feline.

Somehow, she would forever change his life.

For better?

Or worse?

CHAPTER TWO

"Let her eat with you, walk with you, sleep with you."

At the next corner, Peter pulled the scrap of paper from his pocket to look at the address again. Cat had trotted several paces ahead, and she stopped, looking back at him. She gave an impatient yowl and dashed around the corner. Panicked, Peter crushed the paper back in his pocket and hurried after Cat. All he needed was to lose the cursed creature before he ever received the money. He rounded the corner, his heart pounding, but there the feline sat, calmly licking her paws to bathe her face.

Waiting. She looked at him as if to say, *My, for such a tall, strong man, you're slow.*

Impatiently, Peter shoved the fanciful thought away. No matter how unusually expressive this creature was, it was still a cat, small c, and not the capital kind, in any sense of the word. It would do as it was told. Peter drew even with the animal and gave it a stern look. "Bad cat! Stay close to me."

The cat ignored him, continuing to lick her paws.

Haughtily, Peter walked on, wishing he'd brought a map. He snapped his fingers at the cat, expecting it to follow, but when he turned his head, the cat was still ignoring him. Peter stopped, glaring at the animal.

She stopped licking, set both paws on the ground, neatly aligned, and glared back, whiskers flickering. And then, so fast that Peter blinked and missed it, the cat gathered itself on her haunches, leaped forward in a graceful arc, landed on all fours and streaked off in a black blur.

Again, Peter was forced to run, but this time, he cursed a blue streak, not caring who heard him. He caught up with Cat at the next turn, following as the animal dashed through a wrought iron fence, up a pretty brick walkway lined with flowers. Peter checked the address on the small gate and froze. This was the house! How had the animal known?

Cat plopped down on the stoop of the tall, narrow townhouse, sighing heavily.

Strangely, Peter blushed, feeling inadequate. The inane succession of emotions he'd felt in the past couple of hours had strained his patience beyond bearing. He was accustomed to giving orders, not taking them. Leading, not following. And choosing the company he kept in his rare leisure hours very carefully. These indignities could not continue. Time to show this animal who was captain here.

Shoving the gate open so hard that it slammed against the fence, Peter followed this creature from hell for what he told himself was the last time. He'd lock the critter up while he did his business down at the docks. He hadn't promised the widow to take the cat with him everywhere, only on his next voyage, he appeased his conscience.

The key fit perfectly in the heavy brass lock on the glossy black door. As soon as he got the door open, the cat shot inside. More warily, Peter followed. The decor here was even plainer than in the mansion. Simple chairs and a sturdy wooden table centered the small dining room that had a plain wrought iron light fixture above. Tasteful cream lace curtains hung in the bow window and in the opposite, equally plain living room. Tall, narrow stairs led to the next landing, but first Peter explored the rest of the downstairs. The kitchen and pantry had all the modern conveniences....He went still, gasping in shock.

The cat had jumped up on the counter, knocked over the milk bottle that had obviously just been delivered, and was in the process of helping itself to the milk pooling on the counter.

Peter reached out to swat the animal, remembered his promise and picked it up instead, roaring, "Enough! Bad cat!"

He opened the pantry door, thinking to confine the animal while he cleaned up the mess, but the cat spat at him and squirmed free, streaking up the steps to the next floor.

Sighing heavily, Peter cleaned up the mess.

For several hours, cat and man were content with their own company. Peter had called his hotel to have his bags delivered, and when they arrived, it was almost dark. Flipping on lights, Peter went upstairs to put his things away. The small townhouse only had two bedrooms.

The first was tiny, with a narrow bed under a sloping wall. He'd hit his head every time he got up. He closed that door and opened the second. This room was much larger, but it was already occupied.

Cat sat in the middle of the wide bed, eyes glowing green in the darkness.

Unnerved for a reason he could not define, Peter snapped on the overhead light. "Shoo! Scat! This is my room."

The long, graceful tail switched, but otherwise the animal didn't move.

Grinding his teeth together, Peter unpacked his few possessions and put them away in the large wardrobe against one wall. *Be patient*, he told himself. *It'll take some time for you to get used to her*. When he was done unpacking, Peter held the door wide, invitingly. "Hungry? Let's go eat."

The cat stayed put. With an almost human sounding sigh, she rested her head on her front paws and looked depressed.

Shrugging, Peter went downstairs, made himself a simple supper of cold ham and fruit from the groceries he'd had delivered, and spread his ship plans out on the dining room table.

Tingling awareness made him lift his head. The swinging doors opened and the cat jumped through, her legs lowering to the ground after obviously pushing the doors open. She sat on her haunches to watch him hungrily.

Surprised, Peter put his glass of milk down on the table. He'd never thought cats intelligent enough to figure out how to open doors, but he was beginning to realize that, like her former owner, this cat was not ordinary. He went to the cupboard where he'd stowed the tins of cat food. He opened one with his pocket knife. He gagged at the scent. For sure he wouldn't eat this stuff. Still, he scooped the food on a small plate, set it on the floor and went back to eating.

Ignoring the offering, the cat sat where she was, still watching him. Her nose wrinkled.

Peter tried to eat, but that unblinking stare unnerved him. He shoved his half-empty plate back and struggled with the impulse. *Oh, to hell with it*. He could show Cat who was boss later. The poor thing obviously missed its former home. Wouldn't hurt to spoil it a bit for one night.

Peter made a clicking sound with his tongue and set his plate on the floor. The cat bounded over to the plate and crouched over it, eating the ham daintily. Peter expected her to sniff at and discard the orange sections, but to his surprise, Cat ate those too. A cat who liked fruit? Peter was still scratching his head when Cat's sudden tension alerted him.

Arching in that distinctive feline question mark that sounded an alarm, the cat peered beneath the squatty legs of a high cupboard against the wall. She hissed.

Peter bent beneath the table to look.

A large rat shuffled under the cupboard and poked a sharp nose out. Whiskers flickering, its eyes glowed red. Automatically, Peter stood and looked around for a broom, but couldn't find one. Then he remembered. High time the cat was treated like one.

Pointing at the rat, Peter commanded, "Get him, Cat!"

The rat darted out, running for a small hole in a piece of baseboard.

Peter watched the cat, expecting it to explode in a flurry of movement, and dash after the rat.

Indeed, the cat moved....she spat and climbed the closest object--Peter's pants' leg.

"Ow!" Needlelike claws stabbed Peter's leg to the thigh, and then his arm, and finally his shoulder as the cat clung there, still spitting down at the rat. Peter tried to pull Cat loose, but she scratched his hand. Meanwhile, the rat bolted into the hole and disappeared.

Disgusted, Peter shoved the swinging door open and ceded the battle to the rat. Sitting down on the couch in the living room, Peter tried to pull the cat away from his shoulder to the back of the sofa. He was about to use force, he hanged to gentleness, but as he touched the soft black body, he felt its trembling. Cursing inwardly, Peter awkwardly patted the haunches. Slowly, he felt the little animal relax. The cat jumped off Peter's shoulder to the back of the couch. In this position, they were almost eye to eye.

Peter scowled at the cat. "What kind of cat are you? Most cats love to hunt rats."

With a final shudder, Cat heaved a sigh and plopped down. That soft voice that was growing familiar said, "I despise the smelly, ugly things."

Peter started back, looking around to see where the voice had come from, but no one was there. He rubbed his forehead, thinking he'd had a rough day. The strain of trying to raise the money for his lifelong dream was getting to him. Rising, he said wearily, "Maybe we'll both feel better after a good night's sleep. I have an important appointment tomorrow."

Trudging upstairs, Peter closed the bedroom door behind him. The cat would have to make do with the couch because he'd awaken with cat hairs all over him.

The minute his head touched the pillow, he was asleep. In his dream, a familiar image grew. Boston spread out below in all its proper, prissy splendor while he stood above the city on a high hill. He was tired, for his meeting with the matriarch of the Coupland family had not gone well. She'd denied him the rest of the funding he needed to finish building his ship. He climbed up into the hills for solace. He stuck his hands in his pockets.

Suddenly, they were full of gold. Tens of thousands of dollars worth of gold. Yet, oddly, the gold had no weight, as if once he won it, it would free him instead of pin him down.

Peter stared at the glittering bounty in his hands. Somehow, he knew he had to figure out the source of the wealth, and he also knew that his benefactor was not in the expected place. But where?

He looked around suspiciously. He was alone, but he heard laughter. Feminine, vivacious laughter so lovely that it drew him higher. At the top of the next hill, with Boston tiny in the distance, he saw a girl with long raven hair, her black and green floppy hat in one hand as she twirled, laughing. Then she plopped down, her green skirts and jet-flecked lacy frills flaring around her like leaves adorning an exotic flower. Slanted golden eyes lifted to his. Her smile faded. She waited quietly, as if she'd been expecting him.

Mesmerized by her beauty, Peter walked toward her, feeling a strange pull that he'd never known in the presence of any woman. He was almost close enough to touch her when he whispered, "What is your name?"

She cocked her head on one side in a strangely familiar gesture. "When you want me, I will be there."

Peter was reaching out to touch her when she disappeared....

Thrashing about in bed, Peter knocked into something. A piercing yowl made him start awake. He heard a slight thump and turned on the light.

He squinted into the darkness beyond the pool of light and saw the familiar eyes glowing green in the gloom. "Cat?" he muttered sleepily. "How did you get in here?" Peter looked at the bedroom door. It was open. He was quite certain he'd closed it. And he'd apparently knocked the cat off the bed, so she must have been sleeping with him. How did she open the door?

Peter sat up and stuffed the pillows behind his head. The covers fell to his waist. He always slept in the nude. Chilled by the vivid dream, Peter needed comfort. Sighing in defeat, he patted the bed beside him. He had promised, after all, and since the animal didn't make him sneeze, it might as well sleep with him. He'd just have to change the sheets more often.

"Come on up."

Cat didn't need asking twice. In one lithe leap, she landed beside him. However, she stayed on the very edge of the wide bed, her eyes running over his bare chest.

Peter reached out and picked the cat up. She stiffened, but when he set her on his lap and began to stroke her fur--the right direction--she relaxed. "You're a queer one, Cat. You've been spoiled, I guess, but since I owe you a lot, I'll try to be lenient. There's something....compelling about you. Still, independence is very well, but you have to learn you don't own me--I own you."

The cat yawned. Her little head dipped as if she was too tired to pay attention. Snapping off the light, Peter set the cat on the pillow opposite his and settled down to sleep. For some odd reason, he felt comforted by the small presence. His sleep for the rest of the night was deep and dreamless.

The next morning, when Peter opened his eyes, a golden stare transfixed him. He'd seen those eyes before. Where? Tentatively, he reached out, but instead of touching the long black hair of his vision, he touched short, velvety fur. He jolted awake and bolted to a sitting position.

Dammit, what was wrong with him? He'd never been troubled by dreams or regrets for what could have been. He'd always been too busy trying to better himself and serve his investors and crew fairly. The life of a sea captain did not allow for close ties. Few women were suited to that life. While Peter had never been so profligate as to have a woman in every port, he'd certainly had his share. Throwing back the covers, still confused as to why he was so haunted by that lovely girl in the painting, Peter began to dress.

He stepped into his underdrawers and, with a supple wriggle of his hips, pulled them up.

The cat sat on the bed, watching him. She licked her lips.

A blush tinged Peter's cheekbones. Telling himself he was ridiculous, Peter nevertheless turned his back to finish dressing. When he was done attiring himself in the new suit he'd bought for this occasion, he turned to the cat and asked, "How do I look? Would you give me twenty thousand dollars?"

The little black head bobbed.

"I only hope Mrs. Coupland agrees." Turning smartly on his heel, Peter exited the room, unaware that Cat stiffened, her eyes widening in alarm.

As he went downstairs, Peter vowed to quit talking to this animal; he was beginning to imagine that she talked back. Still, when Peter had collected his plans and gone to the front door, he said over his shoulder, "I'll be back in a few hours. Be good."

He closed and locked the front door, wincing at the pitiful yowl that followed. A black nose shoved aside the living room curtains. Still yowling, Cat watched him leave.

Twenty minutes later, Peter entered the Coupland shipping office, his heart tapping at his ribs. While the money from the deal with the cat would certainly help, it was not enough to give him a majority share in the new vessel. He'd heard that Tituba Coupland, the wealthiest woman in Boston and the current manager of the vast Coupland shipping enterprises, sometimes invested in other ventures, offering quite generous terms.

While he waited, Peter tried to avoid twitching with the stiff suit, but as time dragged on, he grew uncomfortable. Discreetly, he tried to check his pocket watch without the mustachioed,

side-burned and natty male secretary noticing. Still, the man's lips thinned when Peter looked at the watch and slipped it back in his pocket. The woman had kept him waiting over an hour.

Finally, the box on the secretary's desk buzzed shrilly. When the secretary pressed the button, a cold voice said, "You may send in Captain Gabler now."

The secretary nodded at him. "Go in."

Peter had expected someone else to exit the private sanctum, but when he went in, the office was empty of everyone save a regal black haired woman sitting behind a huge Louis XV inlaid desk. The knowledge that this woman had kept him cooling his heels for an hour despite the fact that she had no other visitors ate at Peter, but he hid his annoyance behind a wooden smile and a deep bow. "Thank you for seeing me, Madam."

A slender white hand with curving, red-varnished nails waved him into a chair. Peter was surprised at how long her nails were. Few society women sported such a manicure, since it was considered slatternly by most, but with her deep red, lush mouth and voluptuous bosom, the nails looked somehow right on Mrs. Coupland. The woman appraised him through inscrutable green eyes, as if searching for his strengths--and his weaknesses.

Determined to show neither, Peter looked about the office. A huge picture window boasted an impressive view of the harbor, but that was a sight Peter had seen many times. The plush Victorian sofa against one wall had a Sheraton table in front of it, and a Tiffany lamp beside a matching chair. Behind the couch was a painting of his hostess.

From the style of her dress, it had been painted years ago, but she looked no different today. She was beautiful, with perfectly balanced features and an hourglass shape, but there was something cold about her petulant mouth and challenging stare. She held a small black and brown puppy, while another gamboled at her feet, but either the artist was indifferent, or she was indifferent to the artist. The painting was flat, cold and lifeless, unlike the painting of the vibrant girl he couldn't get out of his mind.

A bookcase next to the seating arrangement held the obligatory classics, but the top shelf flaunted slimmer volumes with the look of frequent use. Peter squinted to read the titles. Why

was such a wealthy, influential woman interested in Cotton Mather's "The Wonders of the Invisible World," or the Egyptian "The Book of the Dead," or even "The History of Magic?"

That long, sulky mouth moved in a smile. "You think my choice of reading material odd?"

Peter shrugged. "It is none of my concern, ma'am."

"A careful answer from a careful man. But you err, sir. If we are to be in business together, we should know much about one another." Mrs. Coupland stood, rounded her desk and offered him her well-shaped hand.

Peter shook it. A chill started at his palm and ran up his arm, but when she released him, the strange feeling went away.

"Now then. If I tell you something of myself, you must do the same for me. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Curiosity grew. Were all women in Boston so strong and direct? Or only wealthy, eccentric widows? The woman was dressed in a maroon silk gown full of the furbelows and frills Peter despised, but they accented her awesome presence and hinted of the complexity of her character.

"I am named after my late, unfortunate ancestor Tituba. One of the witches burned at the Salem witch trials. That's why you see the books here. I have always been interested in my heritage. Understand a person's roots, and you will understand how and when they will blossom, and what harvest you can reap from them." She nodded at him to tell his own background.

"I am the son of Swedish immigrants," Peter said reluctantly. "I was born by the sea, I live by the sea, and I will die by the sea. There is nothing else for me."

"But I understand your last ship sank in the Cape Horn gray beards. And you were without insurance as well."

She used the sailing term for the treacherous waves in the "Roaring Forties," the southern point of the latitudes where the westerly winds made rounding the capes hazardous. But her critical comment made Peter's eyes narrow. "I will not be so again. I've fired my former business partner."

She nodded and went back to her chair, her hips swaying slightly. "Very well then. Do you have a design to show me?"

Heaving a slight sigh of relief, Peter spread his plans out on the desk and moved next to her. His nose quivered at her scent. The odd, musky perfume sent a tingle through his groin that he tried to ignore. However, over the next hour, the feeling grew as she often brushed the side of a shapely breast against his arm as he pointed.

Still, Peter tried to maintain mental and physical distance as he explained the innovations he and the designer had devised. "...she'll be almost three thousand tons, with a steel hull much stronger and lighter than wood, yet rigid enough for the width and length of a flat bottom that offers greater strength and stability. She'll not go down around the cape this time. She'll ride the surge like a bucking bronco. And bark-rigged, with steel halyards, we can carry sails enough to make her faster than any sailing vessel afloat, yet they'll be large enough to require a smaller crew. And finally," Peter flipped a page and showed a drawing that would be like a disgraceful ink blot to every die-hard clipper captain.

However, Peter had long ago learned that idealism and practicality had to share the same suit, if not the same hat. He pointed at the ugly screw. "She'll have an auxiliary steam-driven propellor, designed on a chain drive to be raised and lowered behind a trap door as needed so as not to cause drag. She'll not need any tugboats to pull her in and out of harbor, and even when she's becalmed, we'll be able to make some headway."

"Hmmm, most impressive. But it's been my experience that designs that try to straddle two worlds end up conquering neither." She watched him quietly, obviously expecting a heated rebuttal. She shifted her body slightly closer.

Those green eyes were magnetic, drawing him into a verdant arbor where ivy clustered on cloistered walls. *Come inside, learn my secrets*, she seemed to be saying.

Peter's gaze dropped to that lush red mouth. His lips tingled, and the ache in his groin made him grow hard. His head lowered toward that stunning, ageless face.

The exterior office door opened quietly. Assured footsteps approached in concert with deep, baying barks that sounded close by.

The secretary's voice protested, "Now see here, madam, you can't just barge in like that--"

The inner office door opened and closed, cutting off the words.

Snapping back to a standing position, Peter looked at the intruder. Steady hazel eyes appraised him. Peter blushed. What was Gisella Lowell doing here? More to the point, why did he feel guilty?

After the one glance, Gisella ignored him. "You're really growing desperate, Titty. You cannot even wait for darkness any more?"

Titty? Peter blinked at the derogatory term tossed at the head of the wealthiest woman in Boston. From her stiffening posture, Mrs. Coupland didn't appreciate the sobriquet.

Slender, shapely hands spread flat on Peter's plans, the curving nails blood red in the sunlight. Her touch possessive, as if she already owned the impressive vessel--and its captain-- Mrs. Coupland stood to her full, regal height. "You came to me, did you not? It is you who is desperate, and well you should be. Your little sessions in your tower haven't worked, have they? Nor will they--even after you've enlisted this handsome young man. I'm stronger. Always have been. Always shall be."

Peter's head jerked from side to side as he watched the women's expressions. His parents had never argued in front of him, and this was the first time he'd witnessed the full fury of two angry females. He finally understood the origins of the term 'cat fight.' But why did they fight over him like cats fighting over scraps? What did they want of him?

Gisella retorted, "Not for long. Soon enough, you shall face two of us--"

Mrs. Coupland tossed back her head in a throaty laugh. Peter watched that long white throat work and was both fascinated and repelled as she said, still chuckling, "Your daughter will never return to you, but even if she does, I shall face you both gladly, just as I did before. Now what do you want?"

Coughing slightly, Gisella drew a long, elegant envelope from her bag and placed it on the table. "I know you'll be busy on All Hallow's Eve, but I'm having a party to celebrate the return of my daughter, and I thought you might wish to be present."

The remnants of the smile faded. Green eyes narrowed to slits. "I shall be delighted to attend, you lily-livered bitch."

Peter's head reared back in shock.

Mrs. Coupland turned to him with a contrite smile. "Excuse me, young man. But you've unfortunately been privy to a rivalry of long standing. Mrs. Lowell is not a graceful loser."

Coughing harder, Gisella turned toward the door. "Peter, I should like a chat with you when you have a moment. Good day to you both." The door closed and her quiet, dignified footsteps receded.

Uncomfortably, Peter cleared his throat. "Ah, well, if you've no further questions, madam, I shall go about--"

"But I do." Mrs. Coupland approached him, that luscious mouth quirked in a tempting smile. "Do you not want to kiss me?"

For some odd reason, Gisella's presence had cleared Peter's head. The hypnotic stare, the curvaceous body, even the heady scent of this strange woman now left Peter cold. Pretending deafness, he sidestepped when she would have pinned him against the book case, rounded her and went to the desk to roll up his plans. "Ah, when you reach a decision about funding my venture, ma'am, you can reach me at--"

"I know where you live, Peter."

Slowly, he turned to face her. "You do?" How in the hell could she know that since he'd only moved in yesterday?

"And I know that you've adopted a small black cat that used to belong to that....witch. Tell me--do you like cats?"

Peter was growing a bit irritated at continually being quizzed on this subject, but he shook his head.

"Of course not. They never would have selected you otherwise. She bribed you, didn't she? To get you to take the creature. What name did she call the cat?"

"Cat." Peter's voice was curt, for this woman was prying too closely into his private affairs for his liking.

That long white throat worked in delightful laughter again. "Cat? Oh, how lovely. Subtlety is not one of Gisella's failings." Her smile faded as those enigmatic green eyes fixed on something outside her huge picture window.

Peter turned to look, but saw nothing.

"Excuse me, won't you?" She walked out a side door, shut it and disappeared.

Moments later, Peter heard excited, deep barks.

Mrs. Coupland soon came back with a self-satisfied air. She nodded regally. "I do not need to contact you later. I know an honest man when I meet one. I shall be happy to fund half of your venture. I will have my attorney draw up the documents."

All the strange feelings Peter had been subject to since entering this room lifted away under the sheer awesome power of relief. "I cannot tell you how grateful I am, ma'am. I shall not disappoint you."

The barks outside had grown more threatening, interspersed with growls.

That lush mouth curved again. "No, you shan't. I shall see to it." She walked him to the door. "So, what do you think of Boston?"

Peter shrugged as they exited the red brick building. "It's very--" He drew off with a gasp.

Across the street, Cat cowered in a tree.

At the base, two huge Rottweilers stood on powerful hindquarters, their front paws clawing at the bark as they tried to climb the tree to get at the cat. They snapped and growled, jumping, jaws baring huge fangs. One managed to claw its way to the first branch and lunge upward. He was only five feet away from Cat now.

The feline scampered higher, but the branch bent under her slight weight. She had nowhere else to go.

Angry that Cat had followed him but fearful of her safety, Peter started to rush forward. He hesitated. The dogs were close to two hundred pounds apiece, and he didn't even have a broom. Vaguely he sensed Mrs. Coupland's watchfulness, but he was too busy frantically looking about for a weapon to wonder why. Seeing the little animal so threatened brought home to him how important Cat had become to him. He was about to move forward and kick the dogs away, regardless of his own safety, when two police officers hurried up the street, obviously drawn by the commotion.

They took in the scene with one glance, relaxing a bit when they saw that the only entity in peril was a cat. They each pulled a stick and stalked forward. "Here now, ye bloody beasties, 'oo's let ye loose?" the older one demanded. When the dog at the foot of the tree snapped at him, he popped it in the snout with the stick.

To Peter's intense relief, the Rottweiler whimpered and backed away. The other officer looked about, spied Mrs. Coupland and called across the street, "Ye've been warned, ma'am. Keep these beasties penned up or they'll be put down. We'll have no more attacks on my beat."

Sighing, Mrs. Coupland clapped her hands.

Immediately the second dog stopped growling. Turning his head, he looked at his owner. With a last yip of defiance, he clambered down from the tree and trotted over to Mrs. Coupland. The second dog followed.

They sat at her feet, tails wagging, as she patted each powerful head. "I'm sorry, officers. I don't know how they got out."

Peter glared at her. What a good liar she was, he reflected grimly. The officers apparently thought the same, for they scowled suspiciously until she opened her office door. She waved blithely back, and took her hounds inside. The door closed quietly.

Chilled for a reason he didn't understand, but profoundly relieved, Peter walked to the foot of the tree. He held out his arms. "Come along, Cat."

Whiskers quivering, Cat stayed put.

"Is this your animal, sir?" asked the older officer.

"Yes." Why wouldn't she come down?

"I'd not let her loose around here. Those dogs are dangerous. They've killed other dogs, cats, even attacked a child once."

"Why aren't they put down, then?"

Swinging his club back at his waist, the officer harrumped. "Some people got more money than sense, is all I ken. Good day to ye, sir." The two Irish officers walked off.

When they were alone, Cat looked about several more times, side to side. She stared down at him, her golden eyes huge and reproachful. She still quivered, obviously terrified.

Peter swallowed harshly. "Come on, Cat. Here, kitty, kitty, kitty." She ignored him, still peering about. In a black streak, she darted down the tree, leaping past Peter's outstretched arms, and ran for home.

Feeling tired when he should have been invigorated, and depressed when he should have been glad, Peter followed, prey to new doubts. How could he ally himself with that woman? Mrs. Coupland let those dogs out quite deliberately. The malicious act troubled him, especially given the easy way she'd lied about it. She must have seen Cat at the window.

Why did she hate Cat? And why did she despise Gisella Lowell? Peter's steps dragged. He was on the verge of achieving his heart's desire, but for some reason the elation did not come. Instead, guilt weighed him down. He felt as if he'd failed both Gisella Lowell and Cat.

Why that should bother him so, he didn't know.

His head ached. He longed for the snap of canvas above his head, the sweep of a limitless blue horizon, and salt spray in his face. But he resolutely ignored the harbor's siren call and set himself to the task at hand.

One, find and comfort Cat.

Two, talk to Mrs. Lowell and discover what in tarnation was going on.

Twenty minutes later, he found a louvered window half open and an empty townhouse. His heart beating a panicked tattoo, Peter locked the townhouse and hurried toward Mrs. Lowell's. No matter how he told himself that his life would be simpler minus one cat, fear gnawed at him. He had to find the critter and tell her he was sorry. He should have beat those hounds off with his bare hands if he'd had to.

Let her be there, let her be there....the mantra kept time with his clicking heels. He virtually ran, but the distance of the few blocks seemed to lengthen with each step.

CHAPTER THREE

Talk to her and she'll talk back.

Trying to stay calm, Peter tapped at Mrs. Lowell's front door. When a whole ten seconds passed, he pounded harder. Eons seemed to lag, but in less than a minute, Mrs. Lowell peeked out the door.

"What do you want, young man?" Her voice would have made an iceberg envious.

"I...that is...Cat. She ran off. She...." He swallowed, unable to continue under that hostile stare.

The door opened another crack. "Perhaps you are not the right person for her after all. You may leave if you wish, especially since you find her so distasteful to live with. I will still see that the money is deposited into your account. I do not doubt that Mrs. Coupland will fund your venture, so you don't need us any longer anyway."

But I do. The thought popped into his head unbidden, but undeniable. Something about Cat drew him in an inexplicable way he could barely contemplate, much less understand. However, he couldn't face the ramifications of his feelings at the moment, for one need overrode all else. "Please, ma'am. I must see Cat. To be sure she's all right."

Another eon passed. Mrs. Lowell turned partly away and said something in that strange tongue. A moment later, she opened the door.

Peter noted that she was pale, but icily composed. Without a word, she waved him into the salon. There, Peter almost dropped in his tracks with relief, for Cat was curled on a sofa cushion.

Her pretty pink nose quivered as he drew near, but when he reached out to touch her, she slapped at him and hissed. He drew his hand away and sat down in the same chair he'd occupied an age earlier. Had it truly only been yesterday? He felt as if his entire world had turned topsy-turvy in the space of the past twenty-four hours. He watched the furry little creature intently,

trying to understand how she'd become so important to him so quickly. Ignoring him, she licked her paws and cleaned her face. Her graceful movements, the gleam of midnight hair, the slanted golden eyes reminded him of someone....

Gasping, he spun in his chair and looked at the portrait above the fireplace. The smiling girl there was the same girl he'd seen in his dream. The same girl who'd beckoned him and then disappeared, leaving him aching with need. Peter turned back around and glanced at Cat.

Slowly, her raised paw lowered. Propping both her little feet neatly together, Cat stared inscrutably back. Daring him? Luring him? How? And where? Realizing it was important to understand what the feline communicated, Peter closed his eyes, dismissed the rational part of his brain and let instinct guide him.

Two faces appeared in his mind and slowly superimposed on one another. Cat's whiskers disappeared. The nose lengthened to a regal tilt. Her soft hair began to smooth away, becoming ivory skin over well-shaped cheekbones. Only the eyes, slanting, mysterious, remained the same. The same eyes that haunted his dreams; the same eyes looking down at him from the portrait.

Jumping to his feet so fast that he overturned the chair, Peter forced the image away. He was tired. Depressed even, subject to fanciful notions. And yet, when he looked back at Cat, she seemed almost....disappointed. Sighing heavily, she plopped down, curled her tail over her body and pretended to go to sleep.

Mrs. Lowell shook her head at his confusion. "Sometimes our imaginations speak truer than our minds. Tell me--why did you not fight the dogs?"

Peter froze in the act of lifting the chair to set it upright. "How did you know that?"

"Did you kiss that....woman?"

Slowly, Peter set all four chair legs on the carpet. "Forgive me, ma'am, but I do not see that my personal life is any of your concern."

"Oh no? If you become involved with that....woman, what do you think will happen to Cat?"

Peter clenched the chair back tightly. "I will not let anything happen to her." His quiet voice rang in the tall, airy room.

Mrs. Lowell walked up to him to stare deeply into his eyes. He let her look, hiding nothing, even though he felt stripped bare under the power of her gaze.

Some of her hostility faded. She moved back and fell more than sat down on the couch next to Cat. Pulling a handkerchief from her pocket, she coughed into it. Cat sat up in obvious alarm and hurried over to rub repeatedly against the widow's arm, as if trying to comfort her.

As the widow coughed, blood dotted the fine embroidered linen. A new realization struck Peter like a blow between the eyes. Mrs. Lowell was ill. Perhaps even dying. No wonder she was so determined to see her pets settled in good homes. Yet, while that part of the mystery made abrupt sense, Peter still wondered why she and Mrs. Coupland were such bitter enemies, and what Cat had to do with their rivalry.

Sure as sunrise, Cat was involved somehow. And Mrs. Lowell had chosen him to help in that battle, which is why he'd disappointed her by appearing susceptible to Mrs. Coupland's allure. When the coughing grew louder, shaking the slim shoulders, Peter went to the sideboard and poured a glass of water. He took it to the widow, knelt, and held the glass to her lips, supporting her wobbly head so she could drink.

After she took a few sips, the coughing eased. Wheezing, she sat back. "I would have preferred that you not know yet," she said between breaths. "But....I have consumption. The doctors don't believe I'll survive the year." The effort she'd expended in the explanation seemed to exhaust her, for she sat back weakly.

Cat was frantic now, rubbing and turning, turning and rubbing. She kept looking up at Peter, yowling with piercing demand. *Do something*, that soft voice begged in his head. *Help her.*

Feeling helpless, he sprinkled a dab of water on his own clean kerchief and wiped the sweat away from Mrs. Lowell's brow. "Ma'am, should I get your doctor?"

"There's nothing he can do." The widow caught his wrist, her grip surprising him with its strength. "Peter, promise me you won't accept money from....Mrs. Coupland. Indebt yourself to her once, and she will enslave you for life. Don't take my word for it--ask around the docks." She released him and leaned back, heaving a deep, exhausted breath.

Awkwardly, Peter patted her hand. "I must admit, something about her bothers me. I believe she released her dogs deliberately, to attack Cat."

"She did."

"But why? What harm can one little cat do her?"

Her breath still ragged enough to make the lace at her bodice flutter, she replied obliquely, "When you are ready, you will understand."

Peter waited, but she didn't elaborate.

Finally, she looked away and said softly, "You would not believe me, anyway. But did you know that, according to ancient beliefs, a black cat brings good fortune and much gold upon the household where it resides?"

Stunned, Peter sank back down in the chair he'd turned upright. His dream of finding gold in his pockets came back to him with vivid clarity. Somehow his own good fortune was tied both to Cat and to the girl in the portrait.

At the look on his face, Mrs. Lowell smiled slightly. "I've said enough for now. All I ask is that you trust your instincts. A wise man is always guided by his heart."

Peter eased away, uncomfortable with that advice. He'd spent a lifetime learning to trust his head and doubt his heart. But a chill slithered up his spine, freezing him in place to listen as she continued with greater strength.

"Tell me, how old do you think Mrs. Coupland is?"

He shrugged. "Forty-five or thereabouts."

"She's sixty-eight years old."

Startled, Peter dropped the kerchief he moved to put back in his pocket. "You jest."

She shook her head. "I will leave it to your imagination to wonder how she achieves that youth."

The words were out before he could stop them. "And you, ma'am? How old are you?"

Cat stiffened. Peter looked at her. Her tail switched back and forth, and Peter had the strangest feeling that she understood and listened intently to the entire conversation. A strong feeling emanated from her that he was presumptuous to ask such a bold question.

But Mrs. Lowell smiled. "You *are* beginning to understand. I am fifty-nine."

Peter contemplated that in silence. Jamming the kerchief back in his pocket, he rose, unable to withstand any more revelations just now. He already had too many things to think about.

Mrs. Lowell stood with him, looking stronger. "Before you leave, I must know one thing- do you want Cat to go with you? Are you willing to fully abide by the terms of our agreement?"

Truth welled to his lips like a spring all the purer because it had only recently been tapped. "Yes. I want her." Now what did he mean by that? he asked himself.

Mrs. Lowell seemed to understand, for a smile stretched her lovely mouth. "And what if she's attacked again?"

"If she stays where she belongs, she won't be," Peter said, with a cautionary glance at Cat. Her little nose lifted in the air as she stared back, unrepentant. Peter sighed and admitted, "I will do whatever necessary to keep her safe."

Those penetrating hazel eyes probed past the facade of skin, to bone, to mind, deep into his heart. Oddly, he stood very still and accepted the invasion, somehow knowing that she had both the right and the skill to plumb his deepest thoughts and hopes. Elation thrilled him when she gave a satisfied nod.

"If Cat wishes it, you may take her home now."

Holding his breath, Peter looked at Cat. She glanced between her former owner and her new one and hesitated. In one lithe leap, she jumped off the couch to rub against Peter's trouser leg, purring.

At sea, time was marked by bells, tides and maps. In port, it was marked by gas lights, milk deliveries--and the internal clock of Peter's new friend. Nightly, Cat went to sleep on the pillow next to his. When dawn stroked the sky, she invariably awoke him by licking his face with a rough tongue. Peter would glance at his pocket watch, and it always read six thirty.

There were some advantages, it seemed, to owning a pet. Peter had always been a slow riser, and sometimes his mate at sea had to wake him twice. Not so with Cat. Gently, but persistently, she would rub her soft body against him, purring, or lick his cheek until, yawning, he got up. It was a much more pleasant way to awaken. And sometimes, when she kissed him, on that blurred plateau between the dale of sleep and the mountain of awareness, he could almost believe that she was the girl in the painting. Like a woman, Cat was soft, and warm. But when he reached out to kiss her, she dissolved in his arms, back into a feline who could enrich his days and warm his nights but never share his heart or his body.

In the bright autumn sun, he'd tell himself that he was being ridiculous. So what if the girl in the painting had golden eyes? Or that her hair was the same color as Cat's? Or even that Cat's former owner could possibly be a witch?

Cat was an unusual little animal, that was all.

She was extremely smart for a cat.

True, she was intuitive to his feelings, and would only eat people food. Many spoiled pets were that way. Strangely, she was fastidious, even for a cat. She seldom spilled so much as a crumb, and then she bathed it away from her face.

Routine had always ruled Peter's life, and when the days and nights with Cat followed a pattern, he began to relax. To cherish the warm little body that liked to sit beside him while he worked on finalizing his plans. To pet her, and pamper her. Even her habit of escaping to follow him wherever he went stopped bothering him. As October dawned brisk and bright, he began to accept Cat as the best companion he'd ever had. In the peaceful moments of their quieter time he surprised himself wishing, wishing....well, it could not be.

Finally, he began to accept the soft voice as real. Somehow, this amazing animal communicated with him through his mind. With every day that passed, the soft voice grew more insistent, and more loquacious. He grew to expect its musical accompaniment to their walks, and their meals. Often, he had to bite his tongue to keep from answering back.

Then, one day over breakfast, that seductive, slightly-accented voice said, "I have been to sea many times, you know. I used to travel with my father."

Peter no longer had the urge to look around for the source of the voice. No one shared the kitchen with him but Cat. And Cat sat in a chair at the table, her little head cocked to the side as if to gauge his reaction. Peter buttered his toast to keep from asking her where she'd travelled.

The voice continued, "But steam is such a nasty, smelly way to travel across the gift of the ocean God gave us. On a sailing ship, you feel like a giant bird, wings spread to the draft of wind and tide. Convenience, even efficiency, should never mean the death of something so beautiful as a tall ship."

Stunned, Peter dropped the toast. A flush warmed his high cheekbones. No one, not even his own crewmen, had ever expressed his own feelings so perfectly. Maybe he was crazy, maybe he was desperate, but whatever spirit that inhabited this neat little feline was a kindred to his own. "What type of ship did you sail on?" He cleared his throat, unable to believe he was actually talking to an animal.

What might have been a smile curled that dainty little face. "A schooner, a medium clipper, even an old-style frigate."

Now that he'd done the unthinkable, Peter was flooded with questions and interest. "And where did you sail?"

"All over. Once I even travelled with him around the Horn. It was one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life."

"You weren't afraid?"

"No." The little shoulders almost shrugged. "I'm a strong believer in destiny. Those who don't dare, can't live."

Peter's world narrowed to two golden eyes. Longing made him tremble so that he had to clasp the table edge to steady himself. How he wished...

Cat set her paws on the table to look at him even more intently. "Peter, I--"

A loud knock made Peter start and return to himself. Sighing with mingled regret and relief, he rose to open the door. Tituba Coupland, dressed in sable and diamonds, gave him a smile that shivered down his spine and tingled in his groin. My, she was a beautiful woman. That musky scent she wore was the headiest he'd ever smelled, and he was not fond of perfume. Odd.

"Good morning, Captain Gabler. I wanted to see you myself and give you the papers my attorney drew up. May I come in?"

Flushing, collecting himself, Peter opened the door. "Certainly, ma'am. But did you not get my note?"

"What note?" She blinked at him, her green eyes clear and fresh as spring. And equally inviting.

"Please be seated." Peter led her into the small salon and waved her into a chair.

Cat padded in and crouched in the doorway, her eyes slitting. She hissed slightly.

Mrs. Coupland's smile widened. "What a lovely little creature."

"You didn't think so upon my visit to your office." Peter kept a careful distance from her. He seemed to think more clearly when he couldn't smell her perfume.

Huge green eyes blinked at him in shock. That voluptuous mouth, red and luscious as ripe cherries, pouted. "Hades and Vulcan got out on their own. They're truly not vicious. They were just being playful." She held her elegant, red-tipped fingers out toward Cat. "Kitty, kitty, kitty. Come see me, little darling."

Cat's head lowered on her shoulders. She growled, her tail switching with displeasure.

Peter frowned. He didn't particularly care for the woman, either, but he'd not have his pets being rude to guests. "Cat, behave!"

Cat relaxed slightly, but her eyes never left Mrs. Coupland.

"Never mind, Captain. I am more of a dog person anyway, to be honest. Tell me--might I have a cup of tea?"

Peter bolted to his feet. "Certainly. Excuse my manners." He hurried out.

When he returned with a laden tray ten minutes later, Cat and Mrs. Coupland sat exactly in the same place, their gazes locked.

Peter's discomfort grew, but he went through the ritual of pouring tea and ignored the creepy feeling that he was an unwilling mediator in a titanic battle of wills.

Mrs. Coupland sipped her tea and grimaced slightly. "I'm sorry, but I prefer milk with mine."

Setting his own cup down with a clatter, Peter jumped up. "I'm sorry. I seldom partake of tea. I'll be right back."

When he returned, poured a dollop of milk into Mrs. Coupland's cup and sat down, Cat curled about his legs, mewling frantically. When he moved to pick up his cup, she placed both paws on his knee and stared up at him, making an unearthly yowl.

Her cry was so loud that Peter set his cup down to clap his hands over his ears. "What's the matter with you, Cat?" Cat quieted and sat at his feet, her gaze glued to his cup.

Mrs. Coupland sipped her tea, unconcerned. Peter relaxed. "Now, about my note--"

"I think I remember now," Mrs. Coupland interrupted. "Some nonsense about how you no longer needed my funding."

"Yes, well, it was true." To his relief, Peter had finally heard from an old college friend who'd agreed to give him the rest of the money. And so Peter had gladly sent a polite thanks, but no thanks, to Mrs. Coupland's office. While he might distrust his instincts about such arcane things as spells and witches, he did rely on his instincts about people.

Tituba Coupland was not to be trusted.

With the elegant grace of an offended queen, Mrs. Coupland set her cup down. "I'm disappointed. I am truly impressed by your innovative vessel." She glanced at his cup and back into his eyes, her brows arched slightly, as if to say, *Do you refuse to drink with me as well?*

Clearing his throat in embarrassment, Peter picked up his cup. Immediately, Cat started yowling again. Glaring at his pet, Peter raised the cup to his lips.

Cat leaped into his lap and clawed the back of his hand.

Grunting in pain, Peter dropped the cup. Hot tea spilled on his lap. With an unearthly yowl that sounded remarkably like Cat's, Peter leaped up. He brushed at the front of his pants with his napkin. Cat went flying, but she nimbly landed on her feet.

Even in his pain, from the corner of his eye, Peter saw Mrs. Coupland hide a smile. His dislike of her grew. When the stinging pain had faded enough for him to compose himself, Peter picked up the broken cup pieces and laid them carefully on the tray. Quietly he said, "If that is all, ma'am, I fear I have another engagement."

Spring green eyes blinked in shock at his dismissal. Slowly, they turned putrid, like life rotting to feed the things of darkness....

Transfixed, Peter stared at the richest woman in Boston. A veil seemed to be torn from his eyes. Flawless skin took on wrinkles, sagging at the jowls. Lush black hair was streaked with gray. Pearly teeth grew long and pointed.

Unable to stop himself, Peter backed a step.

And then, in the blink of an eye, Mrs. Coupland smiled, safe in her lovely shell again. She stood. "I will keep you no longer, then. Thank you for your time, Captain. I am certain we shall meet again." With a swirl of sable and a glint of diamonds, she was gone.

Though he listened intently, Peter could not hear her footsteps retreating. Sighing with relief, he collapsed back in his chair. Shivering, Cat jumped up and curled on his lap. Absently, wondering what on earth he'd seen, or not seen of the true nature of the woman who'd just left, Peter asked without thinking, "Why did you make me spill my cup?"

"She put a potion in your tea." Cat still shivered, so he stroked her fur--the right way.

"What kind of potion?"

"Most likely a love potion. To weaken you and make you desert me....Do you understand now, Peter, why I don't want to be alone? She wants to kill me."

His throat tight, Peter patted her, holding her safe in the curve of his arm. And somehow, despite the fact that he was a reasonable man in a reasonable age, he had to fly in the face of all he'd clung to. He, too, shivered as he recalled the ghastly image that Mrs. Coupland had betrayed in her anger at being dismissed. The ugly crone was her true entity--body and soul. "She's a witch, isn't she." The comment was not a question.

Cat turned her head to look up at him. A smile tinted the lovely, musical voice. "I thought you did not believe in witchcraft?"

"I've never liked cats, either."

She propped her paws on his shoulder to look deep into his eyes. "Is this an admission that you....like me?"

Tenderly, he rubbed her favorite spot behind her ear. She nudged against his hand, purring. "Yes, little one. And crazy though I may be, I'm beginning to understand. Mrs. Lowell is a good witch, isn't she? The arch enemy of Mrs. Coupland."

Cat nodded against his hand.

"Are you her familiar?"

She quit rubbing and jumped down. "It seems you are still not ready for the whole truth."

"Please, wait."

At the door, she stopped, her proud little back still turned away from him. "Yes?"

"Why did you not warn me of the potion while she was here?"

"She understands every word I say, and I'd rather she didn't know that I can talk to you."

Cat glided up the stairs.

Sighing, Peter checked his pocket watch. He'd be late to his meeting with the ship's designer if he didn't leave. "Cat, you'd best come with me."

A quiet voice responded from the top of the stairs. "I'll go to my....former owner's house. I shall be fine. I'll see you back here this evening."

Peter hesitated, but he finally, reluctantly, walked out.

Somehow, he knew he'd let her down again.

But the final revelation that hovered just beyond his conscious mind was more than he could bear. For, in cherishing Cat, he lost all hope of winning the girl in the portrait. He didn't know how the two were linked, but in his heart he knew he could never have both....

That night, behind the filmy barriers of sleep, dreams again betrayed him. This time, he peered through a gauzy curtain at a brilliant masquerade ball, spectator but not participant. Boston Brahmins danced in Mrs. Lowell's gleaming ballroom, gay in costumes of every color and guise.

A full moon squatted on the velvet tablecloth of the Halloween night sky. It looked as tasty to Peter as a huge, succulent orange. He wanted to slice it up, suck it dry, consume it to fortify himself. In some strange way, he understood that the moon would be his salvation.

If he could only accept its power....

Restless, Peter tapped his evening slippers to the Strauss waltz. He longed to dance, but the one partner he yearned for was not there. And where was Cat? He felt an urgency to find her, but somehow, he couldn't move.

Tituba Coupland glided toward him. She was dressed like a forest nymph, green leaves beaded with brilliants barely covering her lovely bosom. Green chiffon floated down from the form-fitting sheath of leaves, baring her long, supple legs. At her shoulders, a cape had been cleverly stitched to look like branches supporting a lush sweep of moss feathers that tossed behind her as she walked.

Ripping the gauze veil aside, she beckoned to him.

That scent she exuded filled his head like tendrils of smoky musk twining about him, drawing him to her. He took one hesitant step, aware on some deep level that the choice was his.

Abruptly, Cat was there. Peter took two more steps, staring at the lovely woman, so perfect under the brilliant lights--too perfect. Then he looked at Cat, the quiet, graceful, intelligent little feline who'd somehow wrapped about his heart. His steps slowed, stopped.

Torn, he peered between the two creatures. Finally, in a movement that felt easy because it was so right, he held his arms out to Cat.

She jumped into them, preening under the bright light of the moon still shining down over Peter's shoulder. Mrs. Coupland leaned toward him, showing her generous cleavage, and her scent became so overpowering that he could barely breathe. Instinctively fighting her power, Peter looked down at the soft warmth in his arms. Through the fog of arousal, wise, elongated gold eyes shined like a lighthouse in the gloom, leading Peter home.

The brilliant illumination seeped through his self-imposed blindfold. Truth beamed into his heart and mind. *Trust your instincts*, Mrs. Lowell had said.

Mrs. Coupland faded into the background like so much woodwork. "Katarina," Peter whispered.

Cat was the girl in the portrait.

Immediately, between one blink and the next, the cat in his arms transformed into long legs, silky black hair, a full bosom and a smile that did indeed welcome him home. Like Cat, the girl in the portrait had golden eyes that beamed at him in the darkness. Riches had always been his for the taking. All he had to do was reach for them.

She held her hands out to him. "See? I was always there. I will come to you, when you believe."

The music segued to a stop, as if even Strauss wanted to witness something wonderful. Hungry to touch this woman his heart had recognized long before his head, Peter reached out. Their fingertips brushed together.

Glass shattered, spraying them like broken dreams. Razor-sharp shards pelted Katarina, cutting her throat and arms. With a cry of pain, she backed up, slipping on the crushed glass.

Peter lurched forward to save her, but he was too late.

The hell hounds burst through the broken window panes, jowls agape, slavering at the scent of blood. One dog savagely caught Peter's arm, shaking it, dragging him away from his heart's desire.

The other leaped for Kat's throat. Its teeth sank deep, tearing at the vulnerable white skin.

Kat went down, blood from her gashed neck spurting warmly over Peter.

Peter's own pain faded. He kicked, he pounded at the Rottweiler with his free hand, but he couldn't shake the cursed beast, for it outweighed him by two stone. Peter was forced to watch as Kat's struggles faltered and then stopped.

Blackness swam before Peter's gaze. Feeling in his arm was numb, and he realized the hound's sharp teeth had cut his artery. Weakly now, he tried to free himself, but his arm felt as if it was about to be severed from his body.

But he could still hear.

Hideous growling, smacking noises.

And an equally ugly sound.

Laughter.

Tituba Coupland's laughter...

Screaming, Peter awoke. His heart thudded against his ribs. He reached out in the darkness for Cat, but she wasn't there.

Panicked, Peter snapped on the light. He drew a deep breath of relief. Cat sat before the window, gazing mournfully out at the new moon.

His heartbeat slowing, Peter lay back, mentally calculating. Indeed, the moon would be full on Halloween night, some two weeks hence.

Chilled, he pulled the covers over his shoulders, telling himself it was just a dream. He'd heard too many tales of witches of late. He was just unnerved. That was all.

But even as he stared out at the moon cavorting across the sky with a glittering banner of stars, Peter knew on a bone-deep level that his dream was a warning.

Should he listen to his reason?

Or, he sighed, should he listen to his heart?

CHAPTER FOUR

Give her independence, and she will be loyal.

Fortune, it seemed, for once smiled on Captain Peter Gabler. The new vessel was literally forming ship shape and Bristol fashion. Financing was now complete. However, the imminent culmination of one dream made Peter's others all the more unsettling. How the proud little feline had become so important to him, Peter still did not know. But as Halloween grew nigh and the moon fatter with every night that passed, Peter was certain of one thing: if Cat wasn't there to share the fortune he'd make with his new vessel, his victory would be pyrrhic.

Gold lurked in her eyes. Treasure beyond price, for these riches no one could touch--and no one but he could hoard. Her purrs soothed his pains; her company filled his loneliness; her conversation stimulated his mind. She was unique--and irreplaceable. If he lost her, the seven seas could not sweep him away to forgetfulness.

While acceptance of these facts grew in Peter's quiet moments, his fears loomed in equal proportion. He had to keep Cat safe. Tituba Coupland wanted her dead, but she'd have to kill Peter Gabler to get to Cat. Witch or not, Tituba was not the first, and probably would not be the last powerful person Peter Gabler had fought, perhaps literally, tooth and nail.

Despite his best efforts not to betray his concerns, Cat seemed to read his thoughts. At first she tried to reassure him. "I shall be fine walking over to M....Mrs. Lowell's house," she said three days before Halloween.

"Nevertheless, I shall walk with you." Peter held the door for Cat.

She stalked through it, haughty as only a cat can be. "I'm touched at your concern, but they won't dare try anything in broad daylight."

"You mean like they wouldn't try to chase you up a tree?"

Cat's easy stride paused. Slitted golden eyes glared up at him. "It didn't work, did it?"

Not through any action on my part. Peter was still guilty about his momentary cowardice. When the time came again, as it would, he wouldn't hesitate. But he only replied, "No, but there's no sense in giving them easy opportunities."

Doggedly, despite her prickly independence, he tailed her to Mrs. Lowell's and watched her go safely through the door. Waving, he walked down to his meeting with the attorneys near the State House.

Upon exiting some hours later, the glow he felt at the completed first payment to a famous Maine ship yard almost warmed him enough to chase the chills away. In the late afternoon light of a crisp October day, witches, familiars and evil spells seemed figments of his imagination. However, when he saw Tituba Coupland driving past in her elegant barouche, her two hell hounds sitting opposite, his pleasure was spoiled.

He stared at her, wondering how anyone could be so evil, yet so lovely.

She turned her head, saw him and said something to her driver. The carriage halted. She beckoned him with a black-gloved hand.

He walked down the hill toward her but stopped a goodly distance away. Too far away for her perfume to waft in his direction. He tipped his billed cap. "Good day, madam."

A perfect black eyebrow formed a question mark on that exquisite ivory forehead. "Madam, is it? Really, captain, I thought we were better acquainted than that."

Peter waited politely, neither demurring nor agreeing.

The black brow lowered and met its match. "I wonder if you might meet me for a late supper tomorrow night? At my home on Joy Street?"

Refusal trembled on Peter's lips. Both Rottweilers watched him with that intent hunger of natural born predators. Peter bit back the denial. It would behoove him to get to know these dogs on their own territory, so perhaps he shouldn't turn down the invitation.

Her eyes narrowed and she said coldly, "It is not wise to make an enemy of me, my dearest captain." She tickled one of her hounds beneath its huge chin. It drooled on her lacy glove, but she didn't seem to mind.

Pulling his cap down to shade his disgust, Peter answered, "May I send word to you tomorrow morning?"

"I did not realize your....consequence was so....large." That avid gaze travelled to the front of his pants.

To his embarrassment, Peter felt himself harden. He'd been in Boston too long, away from his lady friends in Maine. With an effort, he kept still, pretending this beautiful woman's discreet lust didn't affect him. "Well, actually, I have to find a costume for the masquerade ball at Mrs. Lowell's." He watched her closely.

"Ah, I see." That was an excuse that apparently satisfied her, for she nodded her shining dark head.

Peter wondered why she so obviously wanted him at the party, but she gave him no time for questions of his own.

"Very well then. I shall wait until noon to hear from you. You may go, driver." The barouche lurched forward.

Thoughtfully, Peter turned toward home. He stopped. Home? A temporary abode, certainly. But Cat made the strange, elegant townhouse home.

Indeed, as soon as he fetched his pet, they strolled home. Sunset painted the clouds, forming a burst of color and form that even that strange new painter would envy. Now what was that fellow's name? Peter had seen the artist's work once on a visit to Europe, and he'd never forgotten those vivid strokes. Van Gogh, that was it. Peter had liked the style so much that he'd purchased one of the paintings. It hung in a dim hallway in his Maine home. No doubt it would never be valuable, but Peter acquired things not for their cost, not even for their beauty, but for their depth and intrinsic appeal.

Which is why Cat, and that strange girl in the picture, tugged at him so. Peter unlocked the townhouse door, but Cat dallied on the stoop, her head tilted back as she watched the impressionistic pantheon of light and dark playing out over the hill sloping down to the river. "I wish," she sighed. Her head drooped.

He sat down on the stoop and picked her up to cradle her close. Poignant longing shook him, but for what, he could not say. Save that, enjoyable as her company was, he wanted more....

Again, Cat proved her uncanny ability to empathize with him. "This used to be my favorite time of year. Not too hot, not too cold, the world most vivid when it's about to slumber for the winter."

Odd sentiments for a cat, but Peter had long since stopped wondering how a feline could be so wise to the ways of humans. "Used to be?"

"Last Halloween my life changed. And not for the better."

Peter's stroking hand froze in the velvety fur. "What happened?"

She jumped out of his lap. "You'll know soon enough." She nosed open the door and went inside.

Peter sensed her need for privacy, so he sat on the stoop until the sun went down in a last fiery blaze of glory. Then, sighing, he stood and went in. He looked for Cat in the kitchen. She wasn't there. He checked the living room. Nothing. He went upstairs to his room, but she wasn't there, either. Finally, his heart pounding with fear, he checked the tiny water closet.

She leaped off the commode he'd been astonished to learn that she used. "Can I not have a moment to myself?"

Feeling like an intruder, he murmured an apology and closed the door.

That night, their dinner was eaten in silence. Something weighed on her, and not just fear of the dogs. She was tense, irritable, and grew more so with every day nearer to Halloween. He'd questioned her several times as to what was wrong, what sad association she had with the time of all souls, but she always turned away from him.

She picked at her food, hopped down off the chair and streaked off to a corner. Sighing, Peter quelled the urge to go after her. Instead, he decided to have a bath. The exterior doors were locked. She'd be safe enough by herself for all of an hour.

Humming, he lounged back in the huge copper tub, scrubbing his hairy chest and muscular arms with pine-scented soap. A draft of cold air was his only warning. He looked up, his arms raised as he lathered his thick black hair.

The door creaked open the rest of the way. Peter hadn't bothered to turn on the lights in the hall, so at first he could see nothing in the darkness. He blinked, his arms sagging down, wishing he'd brought a weapon. He was about to stand and go find Cat when he saw her eyes glowing at him in the blackness.

He lounged against the tub. "Hello, little one. Have I given you independence enough?"

No answer. Just those uncanny eyes, glowing green in the darkness. They stared at him with a piercing longing that flustered him. He was torn between need to cover himself with a towel and a peculiar urge to haul her into the tub with him. His cheeks reddened. He'd definitely better bed a woman, and soon. Yet even as he castigated himself for an idiot, the heavy curtain he'd dropped between reason and longing began to lift.

There, in the black of night, with an almost full moon beckoning outside, Peter Gabler let emotion dictate truth. His nostrils flared as the image he'd struggled against grew large in his mind. Her supple little shape elongated into an equally supple, graceful shape, but black fur became ivory skin, curving claws long-fingered, graceful hands.

Peter felt himself grow hard in the water. For, peering into Cat's ageless eyes, he knew he saw more than a feline's intensity. Something drew him to this little animal, something stronger than rationality. On some instinctive level, he recognized in Cat his spiritual, if not his physical, mate. With her stubborn independence, her love of the sea, her intelligence, and her thirsting for knowledge and beauty, she was all he'd ever wanted in a woman.

And she was a cat.

He moaned with longing and despair, biting the back of his hand to quiet the sound.

But his eyes had adjusted enough to the darkness for him to see Cat's back arch. She gave a low, keening growl that grew in intensity to a yowl of desperate longing.

It was the loneliest sound Peter had ever heard.

"Cat," he pleaded huskily, reaching out to her.

With a spin and a patter of paws, she was gone.

Hastily finishing his ablutions, Peter threw on his breeches and bolted after her. He called, searching, but she didn't answer. He finally found her hiding under the bed in the second bedroom. He knelt and reached out for her. "Come to bed, Cat."

She batted at his hand. "Go away!"

He sat back on his heels. "What have I done?"

No answer, and then a small, cold voice whispered, "Nothing. It's hopeless. You'll never believe....and even if you do, you won't be able to find the spell in time. I....might as well learn to like mice."

The hairs raised on the back of Peter's neck. "What do you want of me?"

"Solitude." But the musical voice broke. Cat turned her back on him. The despair emanating from her in waves almost made him cry as well.

Helplessly, he stood and left the room to seek his lonely bed. Hours passed, and still she didn't come. His arms crossed behind his head, Peter stared out at the moon. It was almost full. Cat's moodiness was linked to the phases of this orange harvest moon. Three more nights until Halloween. Peter had seldom celebrated the holiday with his friends, even as a child. He'd been too busy tending to his body's needs to consider the possibility that on this one night, when living souls reveled, enslaved souls could also rise.

And so, as an adult, he was learning a lesson that every child knew: Halloween was a night when magic made all things possible.

Believe....

As if the thought had conjured her, there she stood. Watching. Waiting.

"Cat," Peter whispered, sitting up in bed and holding out his arms.

Mewling like a hungry kitten, Cat jumped into his arms. "Promise me, Peter," she said softly. "No matter what, you'll keep me with you."

He stroked her velvety head. "I promise."

She suffered his touch for a moment, then moved to the edge of the bed, sat up, and stared at the moon.

Glad she'd come back to him, where she belonged, he dozed off, watching the moon bathe her in healing light. And sleepily, he knew that, whatever the outcome, this night he'd never believed in would transform him--and Cat--ever after.

The horizon stretched forever, sparkling like a gay ballroom where waves frolicked with fluffy clouds. But the music was a joyful sound only nature could devise: roaring wind, pounding waves and exultant heart beats thrumming in tune.

Peter's new ship bounded over every mighty crest like a thoroughbred, gliding down the slough with barely a quiver. Raw power, all the more impressive in its sleek, bridled vigor, vibrated in the huge wheel beneath his hands. Peter pressed his stubbled jaw to the smooth cheek below his, and clasped his hands next to the smaller, feminine hands. Gold wedding bands glowed on each left hand.

"Did you ever feel anything so wonderful?" he shouted over the roar of slapping waves and crackling canvas. The sleek clipper seemed to fly across the sea, her miles of canvas puffed by the brisk breeze.

"She's beautiful, Peter," his wife shouted back. "At this rate, we'll set a record around the Horn."

Peter dropped a possessive hand over his wife's distended abdomen. "And be home in plenty of time." The baby kicked against his touch.

"Mother says I'm having a girl. Do you mind?"

"Mind? Give me a lovely, black-haired daughter, half as beautiful as yourself, and my joy will be complete."

"And if I want to teach her the arts?"

The old Cavinistic denial tugged at Peter; a stronger instinct pushed back. His habitual restlessness was gone. Oh, he still loved the sea, but he could be happy in port now for months on end. A missing part of his life, nay, a missing part of his soul, had been filled....

....on a night when the moon was full and magic ruled.

Sighing, Peter kissed the velvety cheek, remembering a furry little cheek he'd often caressed. "Teach her all you know, my love. Some gifts pass all understanding, but they are still priceless. I know that now."

A beautiful, mischievous face turned up to his. Katarina smiled at him with Cat's playful wisdom, elongated golden eyes glowing at him with Cat's intensity. "So you believe, Peter of my heart?"

Peter clutched her tighter. "I believe."

Peter snapped awake. Dawn slipped through the window, tripping in on little cats' feet. Peter reached out, but the opposite pillow was cold. He sat up, his heart thrumming with the certainty his mind had denied. "Cat," he called huskily.

No answer. Peter threw his clothes on and searched. The louvered window was open. Peter hurried over to Mrs. Lowell's and knocked briskly. She came to the door quickly, as if she'd been expecting him.

"Cat's here?"

She nodded.

"I have to see her."

She opened the door, watching him with the same quiet expectancy of her former pet.

Peter rushed into the salon, his heart pounding. Three times now he'd dreamed of the girl in the portrait, each dream ripping away another veil between his conscious and unconscious minds. If magic was real, then so was shape-shifting. All the signs had been there from the beginning. He'd just been too stubborn--and too frightened--to heed them.

Cat's tenderness toward Mrs. Lowell. Her talk of going to sea with her father. Her knowledge of the location of the townhouse. Her understanding of human foibles and human needs.

And her fear of the dogs and Tituba Coupland.

Trust your instincts. For the first, best time in his life, he did exactly that.

"Cat?" he called softly. At first he didn't see her. She wasn't in her customary place on the sofa, or under any of the chairs. Peter walked deeper into the room. Mrs. Lowell watched him intently, nibbling at the full lower lip she'd passed on to her daughter.

He felt her tension, but he was too busy searching to answer the questions in her eyes. And then he saw his 'pet.' Lying beneath the tall secretary opposite the portrait, her chin propped on her front paws, watching him mournfully.

"What do you want, Peter?"

Ten feet away, Peter stopped. He knelt before her. "I want you, Cat of my heart. Or should I say--Katarina?"

Mrs. Lowell sagged onto the sofa, her hand at her bosom.

Kat's head lifted. Golden eyes fixed on Peter's tender face, searching in that intense feline way.

No longer was her gaze inscrutable to Peter. He saw the flashes of joy, pain and hope in the golden mirror of her eyes. But she still didn't jump into his arms. She glanced at her portrait and then away, as if she couldn't bear to look at how she used to be.

"What if....what if....I'm always this way?"

"I shall love you anyway. But allow me to be your champion, Kat. I will fight Tituba and her hellhounds to the death, if need be." Peter held out his arms. "If we have one lifetime, or nine of them, we belong together."

Kat crept out into his arms, snuggling against his shoulder, purring. "I don't want you to be hurt."

Nestling her close, Peter stood. "How did it happen?"

Kat tilted her head back on Peter's shoulder. "She put a potion in my wine last Halloween night, just as Mother and I were about to combine our powers to nullify her latest incantation. By the time Mother realized my wine was poisoned, it was too late...." She trailed off, hiding her little face again.

Mrs. Lowell continued huskily, "My beautiful daughter changed into a cat before my terrified eyes. And Tituba walked away, laughing, but promising that this Halloween, her hounds would make a meal of all that was left of Katarina."

Shivering, Peter clasped Kat so close that she squirmed in protest. He loosened his clasp. "Sorry." He walked over to the portrait. "So, are you a white witch as well?"

"Yes. But apparently a very inept one."

Mrs. Lowell stood and came over to them. "We still have some time to work on that before, well, while I'm still....available."

Kat buried her face in Peter's jacket. "I detest it when you talk like that, Mother."

"Death is a natural part of life, my child. Once you are yourself again, together we can defeat Tituba. It shall be my memorial, and my legacy to you and your children."

Peter's throat clogged with emotion. "Is that why you advertised? To leave a legacy?"

"Of course. Kat will need help running my estate. Someone knowledgeable about ships and seamen. And my other respondents will hopefully be able to help as well. One quarter of my estate will give you and Kat a good start, but the true beauty of your time together will be making a new dynasty out of an old legacy."

This woman astounded Peter. No wonder she'd remained so lovely. Wisdom and kindness made the best fountain of youth in the world.

Kat lifted her head. "It's time, Mother."

Gracefully, Gisella nodded. She swept a hand toward the elevator. "Peter, since you want to help us fight Tituba, I need to show you something."

Peter's heart lurched against his ribs. The octagonal turrets had loomed large in his imagination, and he wasn't sure he was ready to learn their secrets. But he had no choice.

Setting Kat tenderly down on the sofa, Peter removed his cap and tossed it on a table, figuratively readying himself for battle.

"I'm ready, ma'am."

Gisella's lips curved. "Your taste was excellent, as usual, Kat."

A rasping sound that might have been a laugh came from Kat. "I'm glad you approve, Mother. You go ahead, Peter. I hardly slept last night." Kat yawned, showing white, sharp teeth. "I'm going to take a nap."

And so Peter completed the shortest, most important journey of his life. The journey began when he talked back to Kat, and it grew hazardous now that he'd admitted she was his soul mate trapped in a feline body. With his foray into the arcane world of magic, the safety of rational scepticism would protect him no longer. When he exited this elevator, he would not be the man who entered, and his life's happiness would depend on how skillfully he exercised the tutorial he learned here.

All these thoughts ran through Peter's head as he stepped off the small elevator into a new world. Beveled windows sent rainbows flitting about the fantastic, eight-sided room. Dried herbs and flowers of every type hung from the exposed wooden rafters criss-crossing the vaulted tower. The shelves were crowded with books on potions, spells and talismans. In the center of the room stood an enormous walnut octagonal table with sphinx-head gilded legs supporting it on a triangular base. A gauzy lace cloth fell over the table edge to the plush red carpet lining the floor. An ornately-carved wooden box sat in the center of the table.

The walls were lined with artifacts of cats throughout the ages: an Egyptian tomb painting, rubbings from Gothic cathedrals depicting demon cats, a Greek black on red pottery vase showing cats dancing with maidens. But it was the massive shield that drew Peter.

It hung in pride of place on a wall opposite the windows, where the sun sparked off its vermilion coat of arms and the gilded and silver-leaved raised design in the middle. The symbol depicted a lithe cat, standing on its back legs, an olive branch offered in one paw, a sword in the

other. The metal worker had displayed such artistry in creating the bossed design that the cat seemed ready to walk off the wall. Fascinated, Peter stepped closer, his hand reaching out.

Golden eyes glinted a warning, glowing in the feline face. Peter jumped back, his hand dropping to his side. "My God, it's alive!"

A musical laugh shivered down Peter's spine. Mrs. Lowell's soft hand touched his shoulder. "The eyes are topaz. You're merely seeing the sun's reflection."

Yes, well, Peter had seen enough strange things of late to make him back away, still facing the shield. He was taking no chances.

Mrs. Lowell smiled as she sat down at the table, waving a hand to indicate that he sit opposite. "You really hate this magic rigamarole, as my husband would say, don't you?"

Peter shrugged. "I'll accept anything if it will give me Katarina as my bride."

"Don't you wonder why we selected you?"

Peter sat opposite her. "I think I know. Kat's champion had to be a man who hated cats, who didn't believe in witchcraft--"

Gisella took up the tale. "--willing to risk his life to save her. If the stroke of midnight passes and none of these requirements are met, Kat will forever remain a cat." Gisella shook her head. "Tituba tried to make the terms of Kat's transformation back as difficult as possible. She told us the terms to torment us, never believing we'd find anyone suitable."

Praying that he would be that man, Peter stared at the shield. "Is that coat of arms your family crest?"

She nodded. "The cat was sacred to ancient religions," she told him matter-of-factly. "All this evil familiar nonsense was propagated by primitive Christians whose best notion of justice was burning people at the stake. Did you know that the only women accused of witchcraft in the Salem witch trials who survived were the ones who confessed?"

Fascinated, Peter shook his head.

"Those of character enough not to lie were the ones who were executed."

"And Tituba's ancestor? How did she survive?"

"She didn't. Not in human form."

She opened the box.

Peter peered into the shadowy contents. He was disappointed when she pulled out a yellowed clump of brittle parchment papers. No ornate, gilded cover here. But she spread the plebian square before her, unfolding it nine times until it covered the huge table top. The significance of the number nine did not escape Peter.

Realizing the words were written in Latin, Peter squinted at the spidery writing and tiny pictures of animals and plants. "What is this piece of paper?"

"The accumulated knowledge of the women of my family, handed down from daughter to daughter." She spoke reverently.

Alarmed, Peter scooted his chair back, just in case. "You use it to cast spells?"

She gave him a chastising look, as if she lectured a child. "I use it to understand the mysteries of life, and to commune with nature. I occasionally cast spells, but only when forced to combat evil."

"Like Tituba Coupland?"

She nodded. "What I tell you must not leave this room, but my daughter has selected you as her soul mate, so you should know. Agreed?"

"Yes." Peter braced himself, expecting to be regaled with tales of flying broomsticks and bubbling cauldrons.

"My husband came to Hungary precisely to find a white witch amongst the descendants of the Magyars. He was the only person in higher Boston society to realize that Tituba's power stemmed from black magic. He tried to fight her by himself, and she almost killed him. When he found me, I agreed to wed him because he gave a huge sum to my people. But the marriage that began as mercenary soon developed into love. At first, I was able to combat Tituba's spells. Her influence began to wane."

"Is black magic stronger?"

"More treacherous, more insidious. But not stronger. We were at a stalemate for many years. I was teaching Katarina my skills, so she could ally her powers with mine and we could defeat Tituba for once and all, but I became ill. I should have realized what Tituba was doing last Halloween, but by the time I tried to stop Kat from drinking the potion, it was too late. And I fear, exactly as Tituba had planned, the last year of my life has been spent trying to save my daughter. Tituba has become so powerful now that, even together, I'm not certain Kat and I can defeat her. We only have one chance."

She folded the book back up, letting him wonder.

Fearing the answer even as he asked, Peter said, "And that is?"

"We must know which spell and potion she used to transform Kat. Kat and I can't get near her house without alerting those cursed dogs. We've already tried. But I'm assuming she's invited you there, since she's tried to seduce you?" At his nod, she took a deep, relieved breath and continued, "If, by the light of the full moon on Halloween, we say the spell backwards and duplicate the potion in opposite proportions, Kat will become a woman again." She smiled as she saw the change in his expression. "I can see I have your attention now."

"Most acutely, ma'am. What can I do to help accomplish this?"

"You can go to Tituba's house. In her basement, she keeps her spell books."

"But how will I know which one?"

"The transmutation spell book is a huge black volume with a goat's head on the front and large brass hinges. It will probably be in Latin, but the illustrations should depict which spell is used to transform people into cats." She handed him the same red book she'd given him when he adopted Kat. "I took the liberty of fetching this. If you open this tome to the blank pages and sprinkle this on the spell book," she offered him a small vial of glittering powder, "the words will be duplicated in this book."

Gingerly, Peter accepted the slim volume. He stuck the book into his inner pea coat pocket and walked before the huge mirror on one wall. To his relief, the outline didn't show.

"And if she catches me?"

Gisella's eyes darkened. "See that she doesn't." She pulled an ancient-looking carved wooden cross out of the box on the table. "Wear this. If the dogs attack you, touch them with it. If their power comes from hell, as I believe it does, the cross will burn them."

The reverent way she handled the cross told Peter how valuable it was. "Where did this come from?" He slipped the cross on its plain silver chain over his neck.

"It's been passed down through the women in my family for centuries. It is to be used only in extreme circumstances, against evil. It is rumored to be carved from a sliver of the true cross."

Peter gasped, cupping the small cross in his hand. Was it his imagination, or did it seem to pulse with a life and warmth of its own? "I shall take good care of it."

Spent, Gisella leaned back in her chair and coughed into her handkerchief. "I...know you will."

Alarmed, Peter went to help her up. "Come, ma'am, you must rest."

"I don't have time to rest. Only two days to Halloween. Do you have your costume for the party?"

"I intended to go today--"

"No need for that." She went to a small closet and beckoned him. Peter went and looked inside. He stared at the full suit of armor, glinting in the gloom. He flushed, then went white. He was no knight in shining armor, though he admitted to being flattered that Gisella apparently felt otherwise.

He tried to keep his protest gentle. "Ah, I shall feel ridiculous in that."

Gisella coughed again, then put the handkerchief back in her pocket. "It's not your feelings I'm trying to spare, Peter," she said grimly. "On Halloween night, you shall need all the protection you can get."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Love your cat, and she will love you."

Later that night, Peter stared up at the most exclusive Federal-style home on the most exclusive street near the top of Beacon Hill. The harvest moon was almost full, and it smiled down on him with a benign gleam that he prayed heralded good fortune. Two more nights. The role this woman would play in Kat's destiny terrified Peter when he paused to think. So he decided not to think.

Trust your instincts. Gisella was dead right--well, exactly correct, anyway. Instincts had brought him to Kat, and instinct would bring her back in human form to him.

Pausing on the brick walkway, Peter looked up at the massive house. It was old and rather plain, save for the pediment and two fluted columns. In fact, the house looked quite respectable, far more respectable than Gisella's home. A facade as false as Tituba's charm, Peter reflected. The house loomed over him like the night's darkest shadows, symbol of the power of black magic. With a potion and a spell, Tituba could transform him, too. What would she choose? A dog? A pig? Or even a rat.

Shadows curled around his feet, lapping at his toes, but Peter closed his eyes and banished them with a luminous vision. Kat, in her true form, smiling radiantly as they walked down the wedding aisle. He would endure anything, fight anyone, even a witch and her hellhounds, to make that dream a reality.

Drawing a deep, steady breath, Peter stared steadily ahead, lifted the ram's head door knocker and banged it on the massive front door.

Earlier, he'd sent word that he'd meet Tituba for appetizers but had to politely decline the dinner invitation. Gisella had made it plain that he was not to eat or drink anything at Tituba's house, and he'd seen enough of the woman to know he had to follow that edict at all costs. As he

waited, Peter straightened his tie and patted down over his dress black frock coat. Good. The jacket was loose enough to disguise the bulge of the book in the inside pocket.

The door opened slightly. A petite maid in a mobcap and frilly apron peeked outside. "Be ye Captain Gabler?" she whispered, still holding the door partly closed.

Peter heard dogs growling. Automatically, he reached for the cross hidden on a long chain beneath his jacket, but he forced himself to relax and doff his cap instead. "Yes. Mrs. Coupland is expecting me."

The maid said, "Get back, Hades! Move, Vulcan!"

The door opened wide enough for Peter to slip inside. His feet sank into the plush carpeting he'd ever stepped on. He stared down at the design, fear gnawing his insides. Leaves, twigs and moss made a lovely medley of autumn hues, the carpet so cleverly sculpted that each leaf seemed to tremble, about to fall to the mossy forest floor.

Green velvet curtains shielded every window, and even the woodwork was dark brown. The decor offered the effect of an intimate forest grotto. Any moment now, Peter expected to see a nymph or a satyr canter into view. However, as Peter took another step and the door closed behind him, low-throated growls focused his attention on the most dangerous part of the ambience.

Both Rottweilers were planted beside the massive curving stairway, one at each carved newel post like a living gargoyle. Their bared teeth showed impressive fangs, but then Mrs. Coupland exited an arched doorway down the long vaulted hallway.

She clapped her hands. Immediately, the hounds' mouths snapped closed. They ducked their heads like repentant puppies as she chided them, "Hush, boys. Is that any way to welcome a guest?"

She sauntered toward him, all grace and beauty, her lush curves complemented by the tight red silk gown she wore. Black lace peeped at her low-cut bodice and drifted from her mutton sleeves. The gown's skirt was swept back to a slight bustle. Rubies glittered at her throat.

She was dressed to kill, Peter decided. Probably quite literally. He masked his fear behind a wide smile that he knew showed his perfect teeth and the dimple in one cheek. "Good evening, Mrs. Coupland." He bowed over her hand.

"Tituba. And I may call you Peter?"

"Of course."

Tucking her hand in his arm, she led him into the drawing room down the hall. The forest decor was repeated here, right down to the ornate wooden mantle that was carved to resemble a tree populated with birds and nocturnal creatures. One bat was poised for flight, and it looked so realistic that Peter barely avoided ducking his head.

She noted his interest. "I had the house redone a few years ago, and I wanted some unique touches that would set Coupland House apart from the hoi polloi." She sat down on a deep forest green davenport, patting the spot beside her.

Peter sat where she indicated. "You have succeeded, ma--uh, Tituba. Your home is as unique as its owner."

She touched the back of her upswept hair. "You flatter most prettily, young man. Tell me, have you found all the funding you need?"

Nodding, Peter said, "But if, after our first voyage, I still need a loan, I shall come to you first." He smiled, showing his dimple again. Subterfuge had never been one of Peter's strengths, but he'd never had so much at stake before. And it was easier to lie to someone he detested.

Long-lashed green eyes searched his, but when he didn't blink, she leaned back. "Excellent. Now tell me--what costume have you selected for the ball?"

Peter shifted in his seat. "Uh, well, the only thing I could find at the last minute was, ah...."

She leaned forward, her cleavage on bountiful display. "Yes?"

That damnable perfume was going to his head again. What on earth did she put in it? Some sort of aphrodisiac, no doubt. Peter dragged his gaze up from her breasts in time to see the

flicker of a satisfied smirk at her mouth. "Well, to be truthful, I'm embarrassed....I shall come as a knight."

She clapped her hands. "But that's marvelous!"

Vulcan and Hades bounded into the room, ears pricked forward, sharp dark eyes alert.

Scowling, she waved them off. They slunk away, tails tucked between their legs.

But Peter wavered the moment he poked his nose outside this room, they'd be waiting. How on earth was he to get to the basement unseen? He dragged himself back to the conversation.

"... you be a black knight or white knight?"

"Ah, just a knight, I guess. A most reluctant knight, I fear." That, at least, was true.

"All the best champions are. The bravest person in the world is the one who uses his might as wisely as his heart." She leaned toward him, her bodice slipping off one shoulder.

"And the bravest souls make the best champions. Will you be my champion, dear sir?"

Peter's gaze dropped to her breasts. In truth, she had a beautiful bosom a woman half her age might envy. Since she seemed to expect it, he reached out to touch one luscious breast. She leaned into his palm. When she pursed her mouth, he kissed her. Softly, sweetly, like a knight as gallant on the field of love as he would be on the field of valor. Her scent twined about his will, drawing him deeper into her spell. Peter kissed her harder, desire wrenching his gut. He might have been lost then had she not purred into his mouth.

Shock dashed over him like icy water. Kat made that sound when he touched her. If he had to risk his life to hear her make it standing within the circle of his arms in her true form, then so be it. Peter leaned back, panting slightly. "You take my breath away, Tituba. Might I have a drink of rum?"

She pouted up at him. "Rum? That's a commoner's drink."

Peter kept his smile in place. "Indeed. Or a sailor's choice. Straight, please." And rum was clear, so he could see if she put something in it.

Her hips swaying, she went over to a blank wall and pressed a hidden spring. A full bar swung outward. While she worked, her back to him, Peter stood and pretended to wander the room, touching the intricate figurines and strange art objects with apparent awe. In reality, he inched closer to the door. He peered out.

Just outside the threshold, Vulcan and Hades lifted their heads. But even from here, Peter could see a shadowy, curving staircase at the very end of the hall. Instinctively, he knew that must be the entrance to her haven. He ducked back inside and beamed a smile at his hostess just as she turned with two crystal glasses. She offered him a clear amber liquid and kept a blood-red glass of wine for herself.

Peter quirked an eyebrow. "This is rum?"

"But of course. The best available. Aged ten years in Barbados."

Peter lifted the glass and swirled the liquid, inhaling. "It smells wonderful."

Her lovely arm lifted high, the liquid in her glass sparkling under the brilliant lights. "To new business partners."

"To a new partner." Kat's lovely face swam in the liquid, giving him strength. He sipped, keeping his mouth closed. Smiling, he nodded his appreciation.

She drank deeply, waving back at the sofa. He preceded her. When his back was turned, he spit the sip back into his glass. They fenced verbally for fifteen more minutes, Peter toying with his glass. He played his little game out as long as he could, but when her eyes narrowed on the unchanging level of the liquid in his glass, he stood and raised his arm. "To sailing ships. May they live as long as beautiful women."

Accepting her due, she stood and drank with him, watching until he took a sip large enough to half empty his glass. She smiled slightly and turned to refill her own empty glass. Immediately, Peter spit the rum into a potted plant beside the couch and poured out all but a dribble of liquid from his glass. Here came the tricky part. He had to guess what she'd given him. Either a sleeping potion or a love potion. Perhaps both.

When she sat down beside him again, Peter patted a yawn. "Excuse me. Too many late nights working." *And too many nightmares about you, you witch.*

Idly, she played with her huge ruby necklace. Waiting.

Sure now, Peter yawned wider the second time. Thank God he didn't have to embrace her again. He moved to set his glass down on the table before the couch. The crystal missed the table edge and fell to the plush carpet. "Sh...sorry," Peter whispered. Then he fell sideways, his eyes closing.

Immediately, she stood and went to the door. "Quickly. Tell the footmen to get him below. I gave him enough to keep him out until tomorrow. And tell no one he was here, understood?"

The maid gave a weak assent. Then heavy footsteps approached. One pair of strong hands caught Peter's arms, the other his feet. Like a sack of grain, he was carried down the curving steps.

Peter could scarcely contain his excitement. They were taking him precisely where he wanted to be! Darkness increased behind his closed eyelids, and then a bright light flickered on. He felt himself tossed, none too gently, on a plush sofa. One of his legs dangled down.

"Leave me," Tituba commanded. The heavy footsteps retreated.

Smaller, more tender hands lifted Peter's leg up onto the couch. He felt her staring down at him. He kept his breathing even. He sensed her leaning down, and then her hands, icy cold, touched his privates. He was so shocked that he had to shield his gasp with a groan and a sleepy settling of his limbs, as if he'd shifted in his sleep.

Tituba stared down at him for what felt like hours, but when she seemed reassured that he was still asleep, she whispered, "You are as well-endowed as I thought, Captain. Pity I can't keep you." Her footsteps retreated. The light snapped off.

Peter almost sat up immediately, but he finally understood how treacherous she was. He didn't hear her come back, but suddenly the light came on again. He had not moved. This time, when the light went off, he sensed she was gone. He heard the door lock.

He opened his eyes to pitch darkness. He didn't dare turn on the light, so he contented himself with a small box of matches he'd brought in his pocket. Their flickering light led him to a candle sconce. He lit the three candles and began to search the room.

This spell chamber, or whatever a witch called her haven, was larger than Gisella's. It had the same herbs and tomes, but jars of disgusting things, some of which Peter recognized, and some of which he didn't, lurked in every shadowy corner. Eye of newt and toe of frog, no doubt.

Search as he might, Peter couldn't find a black book as Gisella had described. Then he remembered Tituba's fondness for secret compartments. Peter noted a long blank wall that seemed to have no purpose. He tapped it and finally found a hidden spring. He jumped backward as a black cavity yawned wide.

The smell made him gag, but he held his breath and ducked into the cavity. Dead creatures hung from hooks. A cat, a fox, a rat, lizards, snakes and even the head of a deer. An ornate parson's table supported by two carved demon's heads sat in the middle of the small room.

On it were a very sharp knife, a bowl and various vials, unmarked. Next to the bowl was the black book. Peter thumped the candles down, opening the book to thumb through it. When he found a cat's picture, he drew the red tome from his pocket and followed Gisella's instructions.

Nothing happened. Peter tried again, sprinkling the sparkling powder over the blank pages, lifting the candelabra high. Still, nothing.

Peter thumbed through the spell book again, but he saw no more pictures of cats. Dammit, what did he do now? He was almost out of powder. He tried one more time, but still saw nothing. Cursing to himself, Peter stuck the vial and the cat book back in his jacket. He brushed the residue of sparkling powder into his palm and tossed it into a waste can in the corner, setting crumpled paper on top of it to hide it.

Putting the black book exactly as he found it, Peter turned to leave. As he moved the candles, flickering light caught the tip of the knife. It glowed red. Peter stared at the residue in the bowl. He remembered something Gisella had mentioned about a witch's most potent spell.

"She mixes her blood with milk, catches the blood of the animal she wants to change her enemy into, and tricks her foe into drinking both--"

That was Tituba's blood.

Automatically, listening to the instincts that had brought him this far, Peter took his spotless kerchief from his pocket and cleaned out the bowl, folding the linen to protect the sample. He put it back in his pocket. He closed the hidden door behind him and began to look for a way out.

The entrance door was made of iron, and it didn't budge when he shoved hard. Far above his head, he saw a rectangular crank-type frosted glass window. Peter tied several lengths of rope together and formed a loop. He tossed the loop over the crank handle and yanked. It seemed to hold.

Scanning the room, memorizing its layout, Peter blew out the candles and felt in the darkness to put the candelabra back where he'd found it. Then he began to climb out, putting his feet flat against the heavy plaster wall. When he drew even with the window, he tried to shove it open, but his weight held the lever closed. Removing the cap he'd stuck in his pocket, supporting his weight with his legs and free arm, Peter used the cap to shield his hand. He slammed his fist with all his might against the glass.

It broke with a shattering sound. Peter held his breath, listening. He thought he heard a whuffing sound outside and heavy footsteps, but then the noise stopped. Breaking the rest of the glass, he hoisted his arms out of the narrow window. He barely fit. He wriggled, managing to brace his legs firmly enough to spider walk up the wall and force his bulky torso through.

The whuffling sound came back. Closer.

Freezing, Peter looked about. The moon had risen on the opposite side of the house, but it was bright enough for him to see an ornate, walled garden. While he hung helpless, half in, half out of the window, another noise sounded. This one made Peter squirm frantically to free himself.

One growl. Then two. Low, throaty, and hungry.

Heavy footsteps ran up, and Peter Gabler was eye to eye with the two ugliest, most dangerous dogs he'd ever come across.

Vulcan bared his fangs, salivating.

Hades tensed to spring, his ruff bristling on the back of his powerful neck, his jaws gaping to bite.

Two nights later, Nature herself seemed to beam, as if She, too, enjoyed this night when all souls revealed. The moon, a plump, succulent orange spread on a black velvet banquet table sprinkled with diamonds, looked close enough to pick. The brisk winds whipping off the water up Beacon Hill had eased to a gentle caress. The temperature was mild. Lights glowed all over Beacon Hill, but they blazed brightest from the Lowell household.

A line of carriages wrapped around Walnut Street like an exotic Oriental spice train, disgorging emperors, queens, Cleopatras, Caesars and exotic animals from across the globe. At the door stood Mrs. Lowell, dressed as a Gypsy, as if she wished to flaunt her Magyar heritage. She kept glancing at the watch pinned to her sequined costume and peering over the shoulders of her guests, as if looking for someone. Every time a knight arrived, she gasped, but drew a disappointed breath when she shook hands with him.

Almost all the guests had arrived when a black carriage drawn by six black horses careened around the corner, passing other carriages dangerously close to the sidewalk. A footman held open the ebony door. Tituba Coupland minced down, her feet clad in green velvet slippers to complement her sumptuous, revealing gown of leaves, moss and chiffon. She exuded vitality and ancient but sacred life. Last in line, she offered her hand to Gisella as she scanned the room.

"Good evening. My, have you ever seen so many knights....errant?" She smiled, her red lips matching her red nails and the spark of red deep in her eyes.

Gisella glared at her rival, lowering her voice to a menacing whisper. "Where is he, Titty?"

The smile faded. "You know I detest that nickname. What, haven't seen your little champion?"

"Not since he came to your house. What have you done with him?"

Elegant shoulders shrugged. "I really haven't the faintest notion where he is." Tituba sashayed forward, hips swaying in the revealing, embroidered gown.

"Only you could make a tree look vulgar," Gisella said. She glanced down the street one more time in both directions, sighed, and nodded at her butler to close the door.

Tituba arched an eyebrow at the crowded rooms and noisy guests. "Well, I must say you've learned a lot from me. Pity you haven't learned the most important lesson of all."

Gisella picked up Kat from a cushion near the door and cradled her close. "I was born knowing the most important things in life, Titty. Things you'll never understand."

Kat stared anxiously, her eyes huge, at the front door.

"Well, tonight will tell the tale, won't it?" Tituba patted a bored yawn. "I'm quite thirsty. Do you have any decent wine in this pomposity?"

Gisella nodded at the men serving punches and wines at a long banquet table in the salon. Tituba glided off, seeming to float in the gauzy dress.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Kat said, her voice agonized, "Mother, where could he be? Do you think she's killed him?"

"I don't know, dear one. But if he doesn't bring the book within the hour, we're lost."

Oblivious, the guests danced, and drank, and dined, whiling the minutes away to the witching hour. The ornate grandfather clock against one wall bonged the half hour. Gisella hovered near the front door, neglecting her guests. Her slender fingers fidgeted with the full folds of her skirt.

Kat wrapped herself about Gisella's legs. Across the salon, Tituba mockingly toasted Kat's picture. Then, her arm still raised, she nodded at Kat and Gisella. She glanced at the clock and smiled. Fifteen minutes to midnight.

A soft knock sounded at the door. Gisella waved her butler away and answered the door herself, Kat on her heels. Gisella sagged against the wall, propping herself up with one hand. "Thank God," she said simply. "Peter, where have you been?"

"No time to explain." Peter tried to bend to caress Kat, who'd propped her paws on his metal-plated knee, but he winced and had to straighten.

Closing the door and stepping out on the stoop with him, Gisella tipped his face plate back. Peter's face was scratched, healing scabs lining both cheekbones and his nose was bandaged.

Kat mewled pathetically. "Peter, what happened?"

"I'll be all right. The dogs attacked me as I escaped from Tituba. Without the cross, I would have been dead. I managed to climb the garden wall, but then I passed out cold for hours in an alley a block away. A garbage man found me and took me to the hospital. As soon as I could walk, I dressed in my armor and came here. Now, where is she?"

"Inside," Gisella answered. "But you're wounded--"

Peter shifted painfully. "It's just this damn armor. My shoulders and arms took the brunt of the attack. I'll be all right. No time to argue." Peter lowered his voice. "This is what we need to do." Peter handed Gisella a small, sharp knife.

A few minutes later, a new knight wearing very old armor walked stiffly into the salon. His mail was dented in many places, rusty in others, but those close enough to see the gleam of true blue eyes beneath the face plate froze in their tracks. Somehow the wounds on the knight's face only accented his purity of heart, and soul, and mind--and purpose.

So Sir Galahad must have looked when he protected the grail, or Lancelot when he saved Guinevere. This knight errant walked to the loveliest woman in the room. If he paled slightly when he got a good look at her dress, no one remarked on it.

Peter almost gagged on his nausea when he recognized the dress. So many elements of his dreams had come true that he wasn't certain any longer of the dividing line between imagination and reality, or even if there were a line. Only clinging to the warm memory of his

most recent dream of rounding the Horn with his wife gave his aching, weary body stamina enough to stay strong.

Holding Tituba's gaze, Peter stopped in front of her and bowed slightly, stifling a groan. "Happy Halloween, Tituba. Surprised to see me?"

Even standing still, her cloak whiffed behind her, as if she, too, labored under strong emotion. "Not really. I knew you'd be back. You've made your loyalties quite plain....My oleander doesn't like your notion of fertilizer, Captain." Tituba's walk was graceful as she clasped her hand on his chain-mailed arm and accepted his escort to the bar. "You were quite clever to fool me that way. Few can play dead before me and get away with it."

"I shall endeavor to act even better, tonight. May I get you another drink?" Peter asked. She nodded. He took her empty glass and gave it to a servant to refill with red wine.

Gisella said from directly behind them, "See, Titty? Faith can move mountains--or strike at the heart of evil. All we have to do is believe."

Startled, Tituba whirled. When her back was turned, quickly Peter pulled a small vial from a pouch beneath his mail and dumped something in her drink. He whirled the wine around and gave it back to the startled servant. Tituba would be suspicious if he gave her the glass. Peter turned back around, smiling beneath his visor.

When he was ready, Gisella let her gaze drop to the cross hanging outside Peter's armor.

Turning back to see what she stared at, Tituba absently accepted the wine from the servant. Hissing, she took a step back, her gaze glued to the small brown cross. Some of her wine splashed on the carpet.

Peter lifted his own glass of wine high. "To belief in magic on this night when all things are possible." He stuck the cross back beneath his breastplate.

Immediately, Tituba relaxed. "To the power of magic." She sniffed her wine, then drank it deeply. The other two did likewise.

When all the glasses were empty, Gisella invited, "Would you care to see my new statues in the garden?"

Scarcely masking her glee, Tituba set her glass down with a thump on a passing steward's tray. "I should be delighted."

Clanking awkwardly in his armor, Peter followed the other two women through the wide doors, down the veranda, to the lawn. He beckoned to Kat as he passed her. Looking frightened, she slunk down the steps after them.

Peter's heart pounded so hard that he was surprised his armor didn't echo. They all walked up a grassy knoll to an artful arrangement of statues and benches. The moon beamed down on them fondly, silvering Peter's armor and bathing Kat in its healing light.

A faint rustling sound came from the bushes a hundred feet away.

Kat jumped up on a bench, her whiskers dotted with milk. Peter hovered over her protectively, praying that good magic was stronger than bad. He wished a sword had come with the ridiculous armor, or that he'd had time to purchase a gun. Every second was a precious commodity now. Each tick of the clock moved them closer to victory, or ruin. Peter took a deep breath and watched the bushes. His wounds ached, and they would hurt more before the night ended....

Gisella sat down on another bench, her fingers drifting to the capacious pocket in her full gypsy skirt.

Her beauty luminous in the moonlight, Tituba dabbled her fingers in the small fountain between two statues. "I'm pleased to see you're being reasonable about this, Gisella. This is so much better than calling my hounds through the window as I originally intended. If you'll cease this foolish resistance, I might even call them off before Kat's dead." Regretfully, she glanced at Peter. "And I should hate to see such a handsome young man killed on some foolish, hopeless quest." Tituba clapped her hands.

The rustling became a crashing sound. Two muscular canines, burst through the bushes, their eyes glowing red in the night. The Rottweilers padded forward, growling, their ears laid back as they glared between Peter and Kat. Each had a cross-shaped brand on his forehead.

Peter picked Kat up. The dogs crept closer, their great paws almost soundless.

Tituba held up a staying hand. The dogs froze. As she turned to face Peter and Kat, her eyes, too, glowed red. "Concede all of Boston to me, or die," she said coldly.

For a timeless moment, all was quiet in the garden. Even the moon ducked behind a cloud as if it couldn't bear to watch.

The hellhounds tensed on their haunches, preparing to spring.

Peter held Kat protectively, waiting for destiny to play its hand.

Tituba smiled at him, her true nature bared with her long, pointed teeth. For an instant, Peter swore he saw her voluptuous form stoop, her long black locks thin to gray wisps. But then the moon peeked out again, and she was an avatar of evil, more frightening in her false beauty than she was in her true persona.

In a flash, Gisella had the red book out. She laid it flat on the bench beside her and opened it to the blank pages in the back.

Tituba's laughter echoed like a banshee's as her hand fell. "Your little spells are useless against me, you goody-two shoes bitch."

Both dogs leaped for Kat, their teeth snapping.

Peter lifted Kat up into the tree beside them. Without a particle of hesitation, he moved between Kat and the dogs. He held out his chain-mailed arm to shove one hound away, brandishing the cross before the face of the other.

In the house, the grandfather clock began to bong. One.

Gisella chanted softly in Latin, holding the blank pages wide. The moon was now at its apex in the sky, beaming brightly on the blank pages. Slowly, silvery writing appeared.

Two. Vulcan ripped at Peter's arm, growling as he tugged, trying to move Peter aside so Hades could get at Kat. Peter resisted, but blood appeared as sharp fangs pierced the thin chain mail.

Three.

Her little face turned upward, Kat moved out on a branch to bathe her full form in the healing moonlight.

Four.

Vulcan shook his head, his powerful neck muscles flexing as he bit down harder. Peter's planted heels began to drag. Desperately, he held the cross out in his other hand to keep Hades at bay, but Tituba tossed a rock at him, hitting his hand. He dropped the cross.

Tituba laughed, the sound echoing over the garden like an evil omen. Kat yowled in despair, for the moonlight hadn't begun to change her.

Five. Hades leaped up, snapping, his teeth almost reaching Kat's little feet.

Gisella chanted louder and faster, reading the writing, her finger moving rapidly from the bottom of the right hand page toward the top.

Six. Hades jumped harder. A fang grazed Kat's foot. Blood dripped down into the frenzied hound's mouth. She moved a little higher, but any further and she'd be out of the moonlight. Tituba's laugh was as frenzied now as the snarling of her hell hounds.

Seven. Peter kicked at Vulcan's legs, trying to bend to retrieve the cross, but the armor wouldn't flex. Vulcan released his grip as he fell, but he scrambled up quickly, his jaws gaping, his saliva glistening in the moonlight.

Eight. This time, when Vulcan opened his jaws to bite, Peter rammed his fist into the dog's throat. Gagging, Vulcan moved back.

Nine. Tituba's smile faded. A strange look crossed her face. Gisella spoke so fast that her voice was one long chant. Her finger was nearing the top of the left hand page now.

Ten. Kat's eyes widened. The branch began to bend under her weight. Pearly toes formed where her paws had been. This time, when Hades snapped at her, she kicked his nose. He howled and jumped sideways. Peter rammed his hand even further down Vulcan's throat, making it impossible for the hound to bite. Catching the dog's neck in the crook of his elbow with his other arm, he began to squeeze.

Eleven. Tituba's hands were at her throat. She made an odd, choking sound and began to scream curses. Curses in Latin, curses in French, and finally, her voice changing with every word, "You stupid bitch, what have you done to....meow!"

Her tight green gown began to sag on her form. Her arms shortened, became coated with white fur. Her long face grew small, rimmed with whiskers and sharp, feral teeth.

Twelve. Kat's tail disappeared. Instead of crouching on all fours, she sat on the branch now, her black fur smoothing into soft white skin. Her back straightened. Her paws turned into long, lovely fingers.

Gisella quit reading and slammed the book closed.

For an instant, silence ruled in the garden.

The branch snapped under Kat's weight. She tossed the broken collar away like a slave breaking manacles. She landed lightly, on her feet, as graceful as her former self. When Hades recovered and lunged, she picked up the broken branch and whacked him over the nose with it. Howling, he backed off.

Meanwhile, Vulcan made a gagging sound as Peter strangled him. The red eyes began to dim.

Weakly, Gisella supported herself on the bench, as if casting the spell had taken her remaining strength. With a wisp of sadness in her wise hazel eyes, she watched Tituba's final transformation.

The green gown was piled on the lawn now, its sequins glittering in the moonlight. A small pink nose poked out of the heavy fabric. Big green eyes stared at Gisella, looking dazed.

"We mixed your blood with Kat's, Titty," Gisella said softly. "It was in your wine."

A piercing, despairing yowl rang in the garden. The white cat wriggled free of the fabric, claws bared as it leaped toward Gisella.

Hades had stiffened at the sound. He turned away from his much larger foe, his nostrils flaring as he scented the hated feline smell. Growling, he leaped for the cat. His teeth snapped down on her tail.

Howling in pain, the white cat clawed his eyes. His jaws relaxed.

Panting, Peter dropped a dazed Vulcan to the ground, cradling his bitten, bleeding arm. Vulcan's head shook as he coughed several times. He blinked, focusing on his brother chasing a

white cat over the lawn. His eyes took gleamed with feral blood lust again. Baying deeply, he galloped after the other two animals.

Gasping for air, Peter ripped off his helmet and tossed it away. He looked around for Kat, his heart pounding with fear. Cat, or Kat, he would devote his life to her, but oh, please, let it be. He didn't see her in the tree. He'd been too busy fighting Vulcan to see what happened, but he had noted the white cat running off. He saw Gisella first, white as a sheet, barely able to sit on the bench.

Peter hurried over to her. "Are you all right, ma'am?"

She nodded. "See....to....Kat." She handed him her long shawl.

Frantically, Peter searched for Katarina. Did it work? Had he helped save her, or was he too late?

Then, under the shade of the tree, an embarrassed, musical voice he'd heard many times said, "Don't look, Peter. I'm naked."

Joy rocketed through Peter's veins, blasting away his aches and pains. A world of happiness beckoned now. "Kat?" Peter had to clear his voice before he could speak plainly. He held out the shawl, keeping his eyes averted.

He heard the rustle of the shawl, and then the girl in the painting, the same girl who'd haunted his waking and sleeping hours for the past two months, the only girl he'd ever wanted for more than a night, stepped out into the bountiful moonlight.

Long black hair covered her full, barely clothed bosom. The shawl shielded her hips, but her legs were bare. They were long and perfectly shaped. Her knees trembled.

But those eyes. Those elongated golden eyes gleamed at him even in the darkness with a tinge of phosphorescent green. Peter held his hands out to her, vaguely aware of dogs growling in the distance. A sharp yowl came, and then there was silence. Peter smiled, his eyes glistening with tears. "Katarina of my heart, I pledge the rest of my life to make you happy, and keep you safe. I believe."

Sobbing, Kat threw herself against his chest. Her long hands caressed his battered face, touched his bleeding arm. "Peter, I love you. Knight of my heart, come to me at last. Hold me and never let me go." Pulling his head down, she kissed him.

Pain tore through Peter's sore arms and chest, but he welcomed it. Pain was as much an affirmation of life as the elation sprouting goosebumps all over his body. And then, as he felt, thigh to thigh, and heart to heart, the vibrant life and passion that was Katarina, even his pain faded. He kissed her deeply, his head swimming with her clean, fresh scent. He ran his hands over her velvety back and was delighted when she arched into his touch. A sound very like a purr escaped her lips.

Gisella smiled tiredly. "One settled. Three more to go." She wiped a tear away, watching the passionate embrace.

High above, the huge harvest moon smiled down on the garden and three other, very special cats....

As for Peter Gabler, he'd come home. He could sail the seven seas and seek fame and fortune, but the bond of blood and pain he'd formed this night offered riches beyond measure. Never again would he be lonely. In trusting his heart and his instincts, he'd found the perfect companion for his mind and his soul. A reformed sceptic made the truest believer, for he held magic incarnate in his arms. Katarina snuggled against him, purring louder.

On some dim level, Peter Gabler smiled.

He'd been wrong about this, too.

He could have Kat.

And Cat....