

A Gold Spring



by Sorchia DuBois

*Witches, magic, and romance in a short
fantasy story.*



Episode 1: *A Cherry Tomato*

 cherry tomato.

That's what I want.

I've craved it for the entire cold, dark winter. The subtle pop as the marble-sized, red globe separates from the calyx. The delectable crunch between the teeth and the sweet explosion of tangy, blood-warm juice. A fresh-picked, sun-warmed, red, ripe cherry tomato.

But Spring is late and my spindly plants need more light. The sky today—as nearly every day of my exile—threatens a cold rain. I mound mud around the delicate stems, patting gently.

Solanum lycopersicum of the variety *cerasiforme* cultivated by the Aztecs in the fifth century and brought to Europe by Hernán Cortés in 1521—unless Christopher Columbus beat him to it nearly twenty years earlier—valued for soups and sauces, elegant in salads, and a distant relative of the deadly nightshade—belladonna—the witch's herb. Hairy stem and dog-toothed leaves prickle my palm, their pungent odor a greeting and a warning.

A flutter in my belly reminds me I've crouched in the garden for far too long. I sit back on the soggy ground, lift my shirt, and inspect my distended abdomen. A tiny foot-shaped bulge blossoms beside my flattened, stretched navel. She doesn't like being cramped and she's not shy about letting me know.

With a rolling undulation from one side of my belly to the other, she curls into a comfortable ball. I caress the firm mound where she nestles just out of reach, moving my hand over her indistinct outline.

"Not long now," I whisper to her.





"It will be alright," I whisper to myself.

A chilly wind fingers the back of my neck. The fine hair on my arms prickles and a buzz in my head drowns out the cawing crows. Between one breath and the next, a vision rises from the garden mud. Beyond my control, these visions have visited me often in recent months-- horrifying replays of devastation and death.

The phantasm twists it's tendrils in my hair before I can run, unfurls fronds of color and light and fear, holds me in a sticky embrace. All I can do is clutch the ragged tufts of last year's grass and hold on.

Episode 2: Burning

Flames fill the castle windows, acrid smoke streams from the turrets. Heat flushes my face, glitters in the crystals sewn into my gown, scorches me through the gauzy fabric. Soft ash filters onto my face and embers bounce across the gravel path between the castle keep and the gates.

Maddock is somewhere inside. I gather my skirts and trot toward the massive doors of the castle keep. We'll live or die together. The crystal slippers slide on gravel when a sharp warning cry rings out from above

"Run for the forest, Allium." Maddock stands atop the gate tower, a shadow against the moon-bright sky. "Run. I'll find you."

A gentle push on my back, a warm caress on my cheek—half fancied and half magic—and he is gone.

Despite his plea, I linger, mired in indecision.

Inside my head, Lucia's mocking voice repeats Maddock's words.

"Run, Allium. I'll find you. I'll find you both."





Like a strand of spider silk, Lucia's spell falls from the heights of the burning tower. Instinctively, my fingers coil above the pure, sweet atom of life in my belly. I wrap the spark in a satin shield, but Lucia's magic is potent. I can't hold the protective glamour for long. Escape is my only choice now.

Out the castle gates I fly. Magic snaps at my heels, loosed by a foe beyond my craft.

The broad road leading to the forest glimmers red, reflecting the fire. My discarded silver slippers flash as they tumble into rushing stream beside the road. I run for the dark, cool shadow of the forest. Gravel bites my bare feet. The train of the crystallized gown streams behind me, catching on stones and twigs. Not losing a step, I rip the delicate fabric and fling it aside. I run until my knees wobble and my breaths come in gasps.

At last, sheltering branches spread over head at the forest's edge but I am spent.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to the tiny life huddled inside me.

Episode 3: Coils of Enchantment

Fast on my heels, Lucia's enchantment coils into the form of a snake, its head poised to strike. It looms above me, blots out the moon, blots out the stars, blots out my last fragment of hope.

I fill my lungs, pull strength from the fertile earth beneath me, from the clear clean air of Highmoor Province, from the rushing water of Whispering River, from the raging fire inside the doomed castle.

In a fractured second, I weave a curse of my own and bind it with the magic of my ancestors, with the hatred of a hundred generations, with the essence of a thousand souls who cry for vengeance. One final blaze before the eternal cold of death. One killing strike before darkness descends.





The laws of the Universe say such a curse will be visited back on me ten times but I don't care. I will be the handmaiden of Hecate who makes sure Lucia pays. My child and I will not die alone.

"Goodbye, Maddock, my love," I whisper.

In the distance, the castle shimmers with heat. No trace of Maddock reaches me through the ether. He may be dead already. My heart speaks to the sleeping spirit within my womb.

"Goodbye sweet child. I might have named you Melody or Petunia or Lavender or Pearl or any of a thousand family names for victims of Lucia's dark magic. If the Universe grants us a new life, perhaps we will meet there."

A tingle of ice on my neck, a tremor in time, a subtle shift of energy rocks the ground, shudders in the murky, smoke-thick air. The curse perches on my tongue, but the will to speak withers into dust and blows away on a wintry gust.

The memory of ensorcelled paralysis pins me to the cold, hard ground. Trapped in the nightmare, my fingernails dig into the garden mud.

Episode 4: Down, down, down

From outside the vision, I watch myself fall. Feel again the vibration of Earth and air. Steel gray clouds boil in a tumultuous sky and smoky wind tears my hair. I can't breathe. Can't move. But Lucia is not the author of this numbing spell.

Her threatening hex twists its venomous head toward the castle. With an impotent sigh, it crumbles into black ash. It filters through my hair, coats my upturned face, but the malice it once held is dead.

In the distance, the castle blazes to phosphorescent blue lightening, each stone





etched into stark relief by an iridescent indigo flash. A pulse of energy, a thunderous blast, and New Castle Highmoor winks out leaving a black hole in the night.

Gone. Dissolved in the ether.

With light-blind eyes and bated breath, I wait, hope and dread in equal portions.

Did Maddock escaped? Or was Lucia victorious? My knees bleeding and my

heart pounding, I stagger toward the ghostly spiral of ozone marking the spot

the castle once stood. Shrubs loom from the darkness. Frightened night birds flutter across the path, call from the trees. What do they see that I do not?

Neither lover nor foe waits in the darkness. I blink like an owl in a flower-strewn meadow beneath a sky suddenly clear and calm and filled with stars and a westerly waning moon.

“Allium!” His cry echoes far away, far away, far away. The vision fades to black.

With a racking gasp, I return to the garden. Dream images sift into the air like dandelion seeds in a spring breeze. The cold mud has seeped through my skirt and the hard stems of dead weeds cut into my hands. The earthy, pungent scent of dirt and tomato leaves penetrates the lingering odor of smoke.

Episode 5: Everything Changed

Twice, Lucia blasted the Darkmore and La Croix families nearly into oblivion. I was very young the first time, the memory a blur of panic and fear and grief. A thousand years later, Maddock and I intended to lay old ghosts to rest.

We hoped the formal dinner to celebrate our marriage would be a first step toward healing the rifts between our two families. Time, we hoped, had eroded their ancient fears. Intoxicated by our own joy, we invited everyone: La Croixs and Darkmores, those who survived Lucia’s atrocity which fractured our families centuries be-





fore and the young ones who knew of such things only in legend.

My stately Celtic Darkmore relatives mixed with Maddock's New World La Croix family in an oddly familiar blend. I was only a child when Lucia destroyed Old Castle Highmoor and blew the alliance apart, but I remember peeping over the banister from the upper level of the old castle on a throng much like this one just before my world turned topsy-turvy.

New Castle Highmoor, erected on the ruins of the old castle, was a symbol of a new beginning. Nearly a thousand guests overflowed from the sumptuous drawing room of New Castle Highmoor to the elegant ballroom to the spacious veranda even spilled out into the verdant gardens. In the foyer, Maddock and I greeted each and every one.

Giggling cousins in brightly colored gowns cascaded down the steps into the garden, a bubbling tributary from the main concourse of matronly aunts wearing their finest brocades and portly uncles whose interests lay closer to the Scotch bottles and comfortable chairs in the drawing room. All afternoon and into the evening, they came. Some drove modern cars or opted for traditional horse drawn carriages—equally impressive to manage in this secluded region. Others dispensed with pretense and materialized from dramatically boiling clouds of smoke or, more festive, alighted from gauzy spheres of purple magic.

Many extended a blessing for an abundance of children to their greetings and a private smile passed between Maddock and me. Our secret would be common knowledge soon enough but for now it was a sweet and intimate bond only we shared.

On that night months ago, I listened to a thousand versions of "may you have a long life and much happiness", grasped a thousand hands in welcome, noted fear flickering behind a thousand smiles. A millennium had not erased the terror associated with this valley.

In our families, old habits die hard.





Episode 6: Fashionably Late

Fashionably late, Aunt Clarissa, the matriarch of my family, stepped regally from an elegant silver and gray coach drawn by four matched gray mares. Her burgundy brocade gown emphasized the gleaming green eyes and ivory skin for which we Darkmores are known. An onyx and diamond comb adorned her once blonde hair, now streaked with glittering strands of silver. Escorted by a young footman in sable livery, she ascended the seven steps to the broad veranda of Castle Highmoor and into the foyer like the queen she was. She extended a stiff hand to Maddock.

“A pleasure to welcome you to our home, Aunt,” he murmured his voice dripping with charm. His blue eyes twinkled as he solemnly raised her pale claw to his lips. “You’re by far the classiest dame here.”

She snatched her hand away, but not before a blush rose on her pallid cheeks. “‘Classy dame’ is not an acceptable term for a powerful sorceress such as myself. I’ll forgive it in light of the general festivities. But I’ll thank you not to call me ‘Aunt’, young man. At least, not in front of all these people. You’ll give them the impression I condone this union.”

I hugged her tight, despite her protestations. “They’ll never suspect a thing. It’s only been a millennium since the Darkmores and the La Croixs broke bread together. I doubt most of them know who is who.”

“Oh, they know. Watch them eye each other like hungry wolves. What’s the old saying—keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Lucia’s curse may have kept us separated in space, but even she can’t control everything.” Aunt Clarissa wriggled from my embrace and smoothed the brocade gown back in to place with perfectly manicured fingers. A satisfied smile curled her tinted lips. “And you two needn’t look so smug. Your little secret won’t be a secret for long. You’re not the first couple to achieve such a thing. Now, point me in the direction of Aurora La Croix. It’s been a thousand years since I laid eyes on her and I doubt



she's aged as well as I."

Aunt Clarissa cocked an elegant and knowing eyebrow at us as she swept into the drawing room where raven-tressed Aurora La Croix sipped blood-red wine amidst an admiring throng of La Croix cousins.

"I'm never sure if she likes me or if she is simply humoring her favorite niece," Maddock whispered. His lips close to my ear sent a delicious tremor down my neck.

"If anyone else called her 'a classy dame' she'd turn him into a fly and fill the room with spiders. She likes you, alright. But you are exceptionally ignorant in courtly manners. I blame America." I smoothed the collar of his velvet jacket, ran my hands down his arms, enjoyed the feel of taut muscles beneath the garment.

Black magic simmered in his cool, blue eyes. "Touch me like that again, and I'll be forced to carry you upstairs, courtly manners be damned."

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled his face to mine. "Scandalous. What will Aunt Clarissa say?"

Episode 7: Goblets of Fine, Old Wine

Goblets of very fine and very old wine delivered by a young and slightly inebriated La Croix cousin put an end to any thoughts of a clandestine rendezvous upstairs. At last, the long road leading from the forest to the castle lay empty and it was time to toast and mingle among our disparate relations. The murmur of voices grew to a cheerful din as copious amounts of wine and Scotch flowed from crystal carafes. Our duties as host and hostess called. The moon peeped in the western windows of New Castle Highmoor before our circuits brought us back together on the veranda.





"I've spent the better part the evening either tracing my lineage back to satisfy your relatives or tracing yours to satisfy mine. I should put it in a scroll; Morgan begat Duncan and Duncan begat Caedmon and so on and so forth." Maddock sat his empty goblet on a handy tray and secured a full one in its place. "Do you ever wish we were normal human beings with short life spans and limited imaginations? At least it would spare us the intrigue of ancient curses and temperamental witches."

"If we were normal, we'd have been dead before we had a chance to meet again. I would remember you as a petulant pre-pubescent brat who thought it was funny to set the hair of elderly aunts on fire."

"And I would remember you as the little snitch who told on me. It was difficult to concentrate on Aunt Clarissa's lecture when her hair was still smoking. It's my last fond memory of the Time Before."

"Lucky for you Lucia stole the spotlight, or Aunt Clarissa would have thought up a proper punishment."

A chill ran the length of my spine, prickling the hair on my arms and my neck. The festive lights, the chatter of conversation, the smell of a sumptuous dinner, and the subtle electromagnetic pull of the earth mirrored perfectly the night of Lucia's Curse.





Episode 8: Hijinks in the Castle

Hideous cold and blinding flashes of icy blue light blur into one when I try to recall what happened the night Lucia divided the long history of the Darkmore and La Croix families into two parts: The Time Before and The Time After.

I couldn't sleep. Noise from the party below, rose to the bedrooms and I resented being sent to bed so early. When I heard Maddock and several of the older boys creeping through the upper hallway, I supposed they were up to something interesting. I pulled on my stockings and purloined the shawl of my sleeping nanny. The young conspirators didn't hear me follow them to the very edge of the stairway overlooking the foyer.

The marriage of Lucia Darkmore and Avery La Croix had been magnificent and the festivities would continue for days but children weren't allowed out of the upper portion of the castle without an attendant. Below us, the dinner bell rang and guests filtered across the foyer into the dining room for a late supper. Scents of roast beef and succulent ducks started my stomach grumbling though I'd stuffed myself at the children's meal earlier.

Maddock and his fellows snickered nearby and I crept closer. From Maddock's outstretched fingers a green spark kindled. With a flick of his finger, he sent it spinning toward the crowd below. I peeped over the edge of the banister and was as delighted as the boys to see the spark alight in fusty Aunt Beatrix's ornate hairstyle. It smoldered at the very top of a mound of blue-tinted hair. A snap of Maddock's fingers extinguished the spark leaving a spiral of smoke twirling from the unsuspecting head. The boys dissolved in muffled giggles and so did I.

Maddock twisted to face me and put his finger to his lips.

"Be quiet, Darkmore child," he whispered. "Go back to bed."

Needless to say, I had no intention of abandoning such an interesting enterprise. I shook my head and made a face at him.

"If you must stay, be quiet or we'll all be in for it," he warned, his eyebrows knitted ferociously above piercing blue eyes.

He turned back to his friends. I sidled closer and dangled my bare feet over the edge, enjoying the entertainment. So intense was our concentration on the scene below and the hapless victims of Maddock's masterful prank that we didn't hear Aunt Clarissa approach. She descended on us like an avenging goddess.



Episode 9: Icy Curses

Aunt Clarissa always called me her favorite, but that didn't matter. She'd caught me conspiring with La Croixs. All the stories I'd heard of such things flashed across my mind. None of them ended well.

"Allium," she said, eyeing me with a glittering green eye. "Which of these boys set Aunt Marzipan's hair on fire? The poor thing is crying her eyes out from embarrassment in the drawing room."

Maddock made a face like a thundercloud, but Aunt Clarissa was more intimidating by far. Wide eyed and afraid, I pointed a trembling finger at him.

I stood nearby as Aunt Clarissa gave Maddock and the other boys a thorough dressing down, unaware of the smudge of smoke spiraling from her own tall hairdo. Maddock glared at me, but had enough sense to show respect to Aunt Clarissa. Below us, all the guests were just starting dinner—Lucia and Avery's first dinner as man and wife.

Midway through Aunt Clarissa's tirade, a terrible roar erupted from the dining room followed by a shocked silence. What began as an unearthly low moan rose to a high pitched scream. I stuffed my fingers in my ears but the wail continued. The castle shook from stone foundation to turrets. An avalanche of people poured from the dining room and still the wail rose higher.

My arms prickled with sudden cold. Hoarfrost blossomed on the tile floor and crept up the wall and up the steps. The crystal chandelier shattered, showering shards of glass and ice on the running throng below. People clutched their throats and froze solid as I watched.

Aunt Clarissa snatched me up in a blinding flash but I lost sight of Maddock in the confusion. I woke shivering on the musty, dank floor of a cavern. Before I could gather my wits, Aunt Clarissa, her clothing disheveled and her hair flying, pushed sweet smelling incense toward me and I drifted into a deep and enchanted sleep.

Episode 10: Jagged Rocks and Jolting Reality

I awoke hours later to a world which bore little resemblance to the one I remembered. The steady drip, drip, drip of cold water on my head from jagged rocks on the cavern roof roused me from a muddled dream. I lay snuggled in Aunt Clarissa's ermine cloak on the dusty floor of a cave. A warm fire crackled and the smell of broth set my mouth watering. I rubbed my eyes and tried to remember what happened.

Aunt Clarissa, ever composed, handed me a steaming bowl of broth, and matter-of-factly told the tale. She was never one to treat children like children. She saw no reason to



mince words.

“Zander Darkmore made the mistake of seating Avery La Croix on his right side.” Aunt Clarissa pressed her lips together firmly. “Zander raised his glass to toast the marriage of his youngest daughter Lucia to the son of his oldest enemy and Avery stabbed him in the heart. Lucia, drenched in our father’s blood, must have realized Avery planned this betrayal from the start.”

“But Avery and Lucia were married.” I wiped broth from my chin with the back of my hand, but Aunt Clarissa handed me a napkin.

“We will observe good manners no matter our present circumstances.” She snapped. “Yes, they were married and with the union, Avery and the La Croixs gained access to the Darkmore spells and plots. They especially wanted control of the Darkmore’s collection of time crystals—something they’d been after for a very long time. No doubt Avery thought Lucia’s love for him kept him safe from the vengeance of the Darkmores. He was always an arrogant little prick.”

Aunt Clarissa raised the bowl of hot broth to her lips. The steam enticed color into her pale cheeks, but to my young eyes she seemed to have aged a century since I’d watched her discipline Maddock in the upper hallway of Old Castle Highmore.

“Mother says *prick* is a bad word.” At the mention of my mother, a shadow of grief brought my first tears. I searched the shadows of the lonely cavern for any trace of my parents, but I already knew the truth.

“Your mother is . . . was correct. But at times, my dear, one must dispense with propriety in favor of truth. At any rate, Avery soon learned he had underestimated Lucia’s affection for our father. Her favorite spells always had to do with crystals and ice and she conjured a freezing curse. No doubt Avery died instantly but I hope he had time to realize his mistake.”

“Aunt Lucia killed him—her own husband?”

“Froze him where he stood, his dagger still dripping with Father’s blood. I think her heart froze as well or she went mad for she turned her wrath on the entire wedding party—La Croixs and Darkmores alike.”


“But we escaped. Surely others managed to get out. Perhaps Mother and Father . . .”

Aunt Clarissa sat her bowl aside and pulled me close, patting my hair and squeezing me tight. “It was luck I was in the upper hallway when it happened. I managed to transport you and a few others. When I returned I found stragglers, badly injured, just outside the gates but the entire castle was encased in ice. As I gathered those scarred victims together Lucia emerged on the tallest tower. She blasted the castle into a million sparkling shards of ice—along with everyone trapped inside.”

“What about Aunt Lucia?”

“We’ll not call her *Aunt* Lucia anymore, Allium. My sister is gone. One cannot do





what she has done without consequence. Whether she is dead or not, I do not know.”

Episode 11: Kinship Will Out

In the ensuing years, Aunt Clarissa and I discovered many of our kin whose wits had not been so muddled with wine or so shocked with disbelief that they could not escape the carnage of Old Highmoor Castle. Still and all, better than two thirds of both the Darkmores and the La Croixs perished that night. The survivors scattered to the four winds, animosities forgotten in the struggle to stay alive without the strength of numbers in a hostile, witch-hating world.

Slowly but surely, Aunt Clarissa gathered the Darkmore survivors together in an organized but widely-scattered family once again. Lucia’s curse spun a web of fear and mistrust. We did not meet in large numbers; we did not seek out the La Croix survivors who, like the Darkmores, gradually reconnected; we concealed our true natures; and we did not returned to Highmoor Province, the scene of the massacre.

I didn’t meet a La Croix in person again for over nine hundred years when Maddock approached Aunt Clarissa and me in broad daylight at a Parisian bistro. Though he’d grown from a mischievous scrawny boy to a tall, devilishly attractive man, his sparkling blue eyes, raven-black hair, and the shimmer of magic marked him as a La Croix.

I can’t say exactly when I fell in love with him, or if I’d been in love with him for all those long centuries since the Time Before. At first, I didn’t dare tell Aunt Clarissa, but Maddock said he wouldn’t add intrigue to an already overly-dramatic family history. So he formally asked for my hand while I stood by feeling like a hunk of meat on the chopping block. Aunt Clarissa knew I would do as I pleased—she expected no less of me, in fact—but she seemed to appreciate the gesture.

Maddock and I dreamed we could salvage the old alliance and begin anew. We returned to Highmoor Province and built New Castle Highmoor. After months of planning, we sent invitations to Darkmores who lived in every corner of Europe and La Croixs who tended to congregate in the West. To our relief, replies were quick and abundant.

The culmination of our efforts at last came to pass. I looked across the throng of guests, listened to scattered bits of conversation. Accents and inflections, manners and gestures—familiar but now remote images in a half-forgotten dream. I recall how happy I felt and how confident in the future.

“To think,” I squeezed Maddock’s hand, “this all started because we chose to visit the same restaurant on the same day.”



Maddock, knowing my thoughts better than I, kissed my cheek. “It was fate, my dear. Even if I hadn’t recognized Aunt Clarissa, I would have known who you were. Your green eyes marked you as a Darkmore as did your imperial manner. I watched you both for the longest time, getting up my courage to speak.”

“She knew you were there. She went on point exactly like Uncle Osran’s spaniels and told me a La Croix was watching us. All I felt was a prickle on the back of my neck, but Aunt Clarissa . . . “

He chuckled and sipped his wine. “We’ve all been looking over our shoulders for a thousand years, jumping at shadows, expecting Lucia to pop out of a trap and finish us off. Look at them. They’re putting on a brave front, but they’re frightened out of their wits to be here together.”

The older members of our families hid behind ceremony and manners. A flutter of oriental fans, a tilt of perfectly coifed hair, an elegant eyebrow lifted here, a polite smile there. But I felt their wariness. Some wore iron rings and bracelets—pure protection and grounding. I sniffed the scents of amaranth and asphodel, benzoin and burdock root used as protective perfumes. Many a gown sparkled with amethyst and hematite. The entire gathering glowed with protective witchery. They did not intend to be caught unawares again.

The younger guests eyed each other furtively and drank copious amounts of liquor. To them, the legend was a bed time story. Finding themselves so close to the reality of the event made them nervous.

That’s all it is, I told myself.

Just a residual tremor, a memory of horrible deeds—nothing more.

Episode 12: Lodestone

High above the castle, a waning moon rose in the indigo sky. The silver bell announced dinner, but Maddock and I trailed behind the chattering laughing crowd as they moved toward the grand dining room.

Maddock pressed a small smooth object into my hand. “I found it along the shore this morning. It reminded me of you.”

“A witch stone.” A cold, black sphere perched on my palm, perfectly round with a hole completely through the center. I held the bauble to my eye, winking at him through the chink. “But you know many witches besides me.”

He wrapped my fingers around the orb. “It’s a lodestone, a natural magnet. At least one element finds it absolutely irresistible. You draw me to you like this stone draws iron.”

“Then this stone will ensure you always find your way to me—no matter what.”

“No matter what.” He kissed me chastely as befits an occasion when a number of





skeptical relatives look on, but the strength of his hands, the warmth of his arms, the smell of the sea in his black hair, and the taste of his lips promised something more once dinner was over and our guests departed.

His hand in mine, we followed the crowd into the dining room.

Episode 13: Magic of the Darker Sort

Stately stewards carried in the main course on silver platters—a savory roast seasoned with rosemary and thyme. The sumptuous fragrance drew oohs and ahhs from the assemblage. Cutlery clinked on the fine china, crystal goblets glittered, and the hall filled with laughter.

Conversation bubbled throughout the room, ebullient as the champagne. Even the older relatives seemed to relax. Though the La Croixs sat on one side of the table and the Darkmores on the other, they chatted across the steaming plates and sparkling glasses as if the two families had forgotten centuries of uneasy alliances before Lucia blasted them apart.

With a flourish, the steward refilled Maddock’s glass with champagne and mine with sparkling apple juice. Maddock touched my glass with his and nodded toward the gabbling, laughing crowd.

“Am I mistaken, or does this seem to be working?”

“As Lord of the Manor, it’s impossible for you to be mistaken. You are automatically correct in word and action by weight of tradition.”

He nodded in the self-satisfied manner that could infuriate or amuse. “I’m going to like this.”

He leaned closer and I closed my eyes in anticipation of a sweet kiss that never came.

The air grew stifling hot. Conversation silenced. A buzz intensified from a mosquito’s whine to an ear-splitting shriek. Goblets crashed to the floor and chairs scraped on the wooden floor as guests leapt to their feet.

Maddock was the first to realize what was happening. He kicked his chair aside and pulled me up with him. He drug me to the door, pushed me out.

“Get out of the castle? Hurry!” No time for even a kiss.

He bolted back to the dining room. Those closer to the exit were already running. I gathered as many together as I could and spread a protective spell around us. A hot gale blasted through the foyer from the dining room, pushing the castle doors wide open. I shepherded my charges through the foyer, afraid to look back. The massive oaken staircase burst into flames. Waves of heat rose to the heights of New Castle Highmoor, tinkling the crystals of the chandelier.





By the time we crossed the foyer and scrambled down the steps of the veranda into the courtyard, smoke billowed from the turrets and flames licked the windows. I sent them scurrying toward gates but I couldn't make myself go with them.

Lucia had returned to Castle Highmoor and this time she intended to finish us all. Her screech echoed from the stone walls and the fortified gates. If Maddock hadn't appeared atop the gate tower, I would have run back inside—would have tried to help.

Eight months later, I sit alone in the garden mud and wish I had.

















