

HEART OF STONE-SIN CITY KILTS

by January Bain

EXCERPT

The audience burst into huge applause, cheering and whistling. I hadn't even recovered from the shock of watching all that pumping man flesh exhibiting the kind of strength that makes a woman's knees weak when he changed direction. This guy really could bear a person away to the ends of the earth if he wanted to.

"I've been entranced by the magic of snow falling at midnight on the moors of the Highlands since I was a lad learning magic at the knee of my great-grandfather." The stage lighting changed, revealing a starry Van Gogh sky with swirling stars and a pregnant moonscape. The mystical backdrop set off a sense of otherworldliness to his skin, anointing it with a bluish glow. The moment of ancient timelessness caused the audience to fall into rapt silence, their faces keen with interest.

"Let winter come." He lifted his hands to the sky, standing in front of the mystical moon backdrop, as if praying. From his palms, crystals of pure white snow began to flow upward then slowly drift down to the stage, turning into a shower of golden stars around his feet. But instead of stopping in a couple of seconds like I'd seen other illusionists' work do, it continued to flow from his hands until the air began to almost vibrate with an infinity of snowflakes glowing like diamonds in the haze of the bluish light. It collected around his feet until a flurry of glittery stars anointed the stage.

Ohs and ahs escaped the audience's rounded mouths as the man directed the weather. How in the hell is he doing that? Before I could figure it out, he started a new trick.

"For my next act I need a volunteer." He prowled to the side of the stage and looked down at the row I was sitting in, right up front and center. Don't. You. Dare.

"Would the bonny lass with the lovely blonde hair and wee frown in the enchanting red dress please join me up on stage?" He gave a wicked smile that demonstrated his excellent dentistry and held out one huge hand with the super-bulging biceps toward me, beckoning me with his mesmerizing green eyes. I hesitated. "Or are you afraid of being hypnotized, thasgaidh?"

Hell no. Game on. And touché for the use of another Gaelic endearment term.

I smiled sweetly and rose, taking his hand. He swept me onto the stage in one graceful movement, my feet leaving the ground, his touch coursing through me like an electrical current.

“A chair for the lovely Esme Luceres,” he called out. An assistant scurried to do his bidding, bringing one forward.

“How did you know my name?” I asked with a scowl, tugging my hand free of his.

“Magic, Esme. Magic is in the air tonight. Trust me, and the world will offer up its riches.”

I snorted. “Yeah, right.”

Not to be dissuaded, he gestured at the chair and I plunked myself down. This could prove interesting. Like anyone could hypnotize me. Spookier entities than Lachlan had tried and failed in my Ghoststompers, Inc. business. All duly recorded for posterity.

“This is a special pendulum made from the golden mask of a long dead deity that was purported to live in Atlantis, the fabled isle, before it sank into the sea never to be seen again. It has hidden powers that open a channel into the brain, promising enlightenment and ancient wisdom.” He held the large golden disk up for the audience to observe, the odd marks that were engraved into the surface looking like rune symbols. “Do you like to dance?”

Ah-ha. “No.” I shook my head so hard I nearly gave myself a concussion. “I never dance, no time for it. And I’ve got two left feet,” I admitted.

“Keep your eye on the coin as it flows back and forth, Esme. See the past...let it come forward and bring forth its power. Back and forth, back and forth. Relax, relax...”

I duly tracked the gleaming coin with my eyes, finding it rather soothing. Something to focus on while this charlatan played his silly game.

“That’s right. Back and forth...”