

# Winter's Maiden 2

Winter's Magic Part 2

L. STARLA

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WINTER'S MAIDEN 2

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# Prologue

*Three Years and One Month Since Alannah's Eighteenth  
Birthday*

Returning to her office, the woman settled in behind the solid oak desk and turned on the Waterford crystal lamp. She withdrew a pad and fountain pen from the drawer to her right and commenced:

*Alannah,*

*While I understand it is not customary for a mage conceived at Beltane to concern themselves with the identity of their biological father, it has come to my attention you are pursuing such knowledge. If this is indeed the case, I have some insights of great value to offer.*

Rising from her desk, she deliberated over the wording of her next paragraph while peering out through the tempered glass of her window. The street below buzzed with the city nightlife one would expect from Sydney on a Saturday night. She looked forward to joining them, but she needed to

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finish the letter. *Time to stop procrastinating.*  
Returning to her seat, she resumed writing:

*Sharing this information puts me at risk, so it will not come free. If you are willing to meet at a secure location, I am sure we can strike a suitable deal. Rest assured I mean you no harm and I guarantee a safe rendezvous. It is of no consequence to me should you choose to disregard this letter and decline my offer. However, accepting my invitation would be of much benefit to you.*

*If you decide to seek me out, please contact Patrick, my agent, to arrange a time and place. I have enclosed his business card.*

*Regards,  
Scarlett.*

She allowed the ink to dry, detached the top sheet from the pad and neatly folded the page. Her deft hands slipped it into the envelope addressed to Alannah Winters of Gaeilge Shores, South Australia. She tucked the letter into her handbag and grabbed her coat. After riding the elevator

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down ten floors, she left the office building and stepped out into the cool, early September air. She stopped at the red post box a few metres down the street and dropped the letter inside before ducking into her favourite cocktail bar.

# Chapter One

*Five Days later*

High Magus Kieran was the epitome of pompous ass. ‘Thank you, Councillor Rowan. Councillor Alannah Winters, do you have anything to report?’ He stared at her with a stern eye. Her appointment to the Fleurieu District Council of Mages still displeased him, and it continued to show in his open hostility at every meeting.

‘There has not been much activity involving the use of Aether, Your Honour, and none of it has caused any negative energy.’ As the representative for all mages attuned to Aether in her district, one of Alannah’s responsibilities was to remain open to this mana source to detect any misuse and investigate the issue. Given how few mages were even capable of channelling the divine element, she had an easy time of it.

Being one of a handful of mages in the state with this attunement had its benefits. There was no

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competition when she applied to fill the seat vacated by the late Shaun Ó Máille in August of the previous year, a few days after her twentieth birthday. But even with the community endorsements she received following her epic showdown with Tara all those years ago, the High Magus was not happy about having a Winters woman on the Council.

‘Are you certain of this?’ Kieran did not second guess the other Council members.

*He is such a chauvinistic bastard.* Clenching her fists in her lap beneath the table, she bit back the sarcastic retort on the tip of her tongue. ‘Yes, Your Honour.’

‘Very well. On to our next matter of business...’

Most mages regarded the seat of Aether with reverence because the mage in that role has a direct link to the Gods. Alannah recently learned the High Magus treated her predecessor with far more respect. Kieran had always insisted Shaun Ó Máille present his report first rather than last. Still seething, she tuned out while Kieran harped on about some bureaucratic nonsense, catching the odd buzzword here and there like commendation, sanctioning, and authority. Using mindfulness meditation, she calmed herself.

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*This is so damn boring.* Alannah had expected more focus on hunting magic criminals when she signed up for the Mages Council. It made her mourn the days of fighting her grandmother's threats. Gaeilge Shores may have been a dangerous place with Tara Winters around, but it was a hell of a lot more exciting.

A sudden nudge in her side brought Alannah's attention back to the room. She looked at Liam, the owner of the offending elbow, and met his frown as he gestured in Kieran's direction.

'Huh?'

The High Magus gave her a death glare. 'I asked, if you had an opinion on the matter, Councillor.'

'Oh. Sorry Your Honour. No, I have nothing to add.'

'I look forward to the day when you have anything at all to contribute to these meetings, Miss *Winters*.' His cronies sniggered.

Aunt Nora, representative for emotions, smiled at her with pursed lips. As one of three women on the Council, along with Monique Lane, she understood the difficulties Alannah faced in such a patriarchal system.

Kieran glanced at his watch, and turned to face his daughter, Monique, who took the minutes.

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'I would like to call the meeting closed at seven fifty.' He stood up and the room filled with the sound of chairs scraping against wooden floorboards as everyone else rose. Standing whenever the High Magus was on his feet in the Council Chambers was important etiquette.

They all waited for him to exit the room before collecting their belongings and leaving.

After saying goodbye to Ross and Nora, Liam spoke in a hushed tone as he followed Alannah outside. 'You shouldn't take your place for granted Lana. Kieran could easily step down into your seat if you keep pissing him off.'

She huffed. 'I doubt he'd be willing to give up his position of power. That said, it's not like I'm actively trying for top spot on his shit list. He's never liked me and my being on the Council is enough to make him hate me. Besides, it's not my fault bugger-all mages practice necromancy in this area.'

Pausing when they reached the car, Liam sighed. 'I know. But you could at least try to pay attention to the rest of the business.' He unlocked the car but waited for her.

'Why? It's pointless paper pushing. Where's the real action?' She slumped into the passenger seat.

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He dropped into the driver's side and shook his head. 'I warned you it wouldn't be all fun and games. I get as much admin work as a police officer, if not more sometimes.'

'The whole bloody system needs reforming. When I become High Magus, my first order of business will be to liven up those damn meetings.'

'I hate to burst your bubble, yet again, but you know that'll never happen. They would never allow a woman to head up the Council.'

'Never say never, sweetheart. I will get there or die trying. Once I get my fourth and fifth attunements, it's game on.'

They rode the remaining two blocks from the Town Hall to their seaside terrace house in silence. Council meetings were long and draining, and neither of them felt up to walking on such nights. Getting home to eat and sleep was the priority.

Shortly after earning his badge on the force, Liam had asked Alannah if she wanted to buy a house in town with him. They had been in a solid relationship for years by that point, so it made sense and she had been keen to move into her own place. While Alannah had drawn up an extensive list of requirements, Liam only voiced two criteria: a place in town close to work and easy access to the ocean. Even with all his responsibilities to the Council and

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the police force, her boyfriend lived and breathed the surf. It took them a while to find somewhere suitable, so it was like a dream come true when this place became available almost a year ago.

Liam groaned at the sight of his brother's Jag as they pulled into the driveway. She could not blame him. Alannah understood Liam's moods and anyone's company, other than her own, was the last thing he wanted to deal with when exhausted. But she did not mind. Spending time with her best friend and cousin, Brendan, was exactly what she needed to lift her spirits.



'Dagnammit!' Brendan jumped at the sound of the front door slamming, cursing as he dropped a serving spoon on his foot. He had almost finished laying everything out on the dining table for dinner. *At least I wasn't holding a plate!*

Liam stormed into the open-plan living area and threw his keys at the kitchen bench. 'Don't you have a home of your own?'

'Well hello to you too, bro.' Brendan still lived with his parents on their country estate, and while the privacy of the guest house was great for taking chicks home, on school nights he much preferred the convenience of a place to crash in town, especially one Alannah lived in. Pushing past

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the grumpy sack, he placed the rogue piece of cutlery in the dishwasher and grabbed a replacement from the drawer. 'And is that any way to talk to your chef?'

After casting a cursory glance at the plastic containers on the table, Liam turned his scowling face back to Brendan. 'Unless you're now moonlighting as a Chinese chef at the local take-away, I doubt you can claim any credit.'

He smacked Liam hard on the shoulder blade. 'Well, you're welcome.' Turning aside from his ungrateful brother, he grinned at Alannah and drew her into a hug. 'Hey, gorgeous, how's life?'

When they stepped out of the embrace, she gave him one of her award-winning smiles. 'Mostly good. Although I came close to dying of boredom and frustration in that meeting. I need a drink. You guys want one?' She approached the bar fridge.

'I can't. I have an early start tomorrow,' Liam complained.

Brendan returned to the table and took a seat. 'I'll have a pale ale, thanks, Lana.' He also had work the next day, but a couple of beers wouldn't be a problem for his job as school counsellor.

Alannah handed Brendan the drink in a stubby holder and sat across from him. Reaching forward, she clinked the tip of her own bottle with

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his. 'Cheers.' Tilting her chin and lifting her gaze skyward, she took a huge swig of her drink.

*Damn, that woman makes drinking beer look sexy.*

Returning her attention to him, she smiled again. 'So, how's work and stuff treating you?'

'Same old, same old. Work's not bad, but the ol' social life could use some more excitement.' He took the opportunity to check her out while she filled her plate. He liked Alannah's new habit of wearing her long black hair in a half ponytail. It reminded him of Katie McGrath as Morgana.

Sitting back, she gave him an impish grin. 'Social life, or sex life?'

'Both, but you're right, I do need to get laid soon. How's tomorrow night looking for you?'

She snorted before turning on the smoulder. 'I'll check my calendar.'

Liam growled as he pointed his chopsticks at Brendan. 'I know the flirting is part of your stupid game, but please spare me. I'm not in the mood to put up with your bullshit.'

Brendan had gone to serious lengths to assure his brother there was nothing going on with him and Alannah, after messing up and almost kissing her four years ago. He even managed to convince Alannah he was not interested in a

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relationship with her. As much as it pained him, especially when Alannah first expressed interest, it was for the best. He reasoned he would end up hurting her. Not to mention getting a major arse whooping from Liam — almost one-hundred kilos of pure muscle with perfect aim when rapid firing lightning bolts — not someone whose bad books you wanted to be in.

He narrowed his eyes at Liam. 'Right, 'cause your mood is the only one that matters. I was trying to cheer up Lana.' As an enchanter attuned to emotions, Brendan could tell Alannah felt miserable. He could sense it through his empathic link.

Rising from his chair, Liam pressed a kiss to the crown of Alannah's head before grabbing his plate. 'I'm sorry, gorgeous, but I'm exhausted. I'll take this to bed and see you there later.'

'Okay, night.' She stood to peck him on the lips, and he deepened the kiss in a possessive display obviously intended for Brendan's benefit.

The tension in the room lifted and Alannah heaved a huge sigh as though breathing freely for the first time in hours.

'What got up his arse and died?' Brendan asked.

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'Well aside from his mundane work being relentless, High Magus Kieran got snarky with me tonight. I know these things get to him. And I didn't help matters when I zoned out again.'

He laughed. 'I don't envy you, Lana. Those meetings sound like a big waste of time.'

She went quiet for a few minutes and toyed with her food. Biting her lip, she gazed up at him. 'Maybe you should look at renting a place in town. As much as I love having you here, the frequency of your visits is wearing at Liam's patience. He can't relax when you're here this often.'

'That man can't relax properly full stop.' He sucked a noodle into his mouth and sighed. 'But you're right. I'll start searching this weekend.'

Stretching her arm across the table, she placed a hand over his. The warmth of her touch sent a jolt of pleasure through his nerves. 'Hey, you are still welcome here and I'll drop in to see you. If you have your own place, we could both escape Liam's moods.'

'I know. I guess it's time I grew up and cut the apron strings.'

Humour returned to Alannah's visage. 'Just don't grow up too much. I love your carefree attitude.'

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A hearty laugh escaped his throat. 'Trust me, that'll never happen. I'm a playboy for life, remember?'

'Right.' Her fingers were still resting on the back of his hand, and he perceived their rough pads brushing against his skin. Hours of sewing every week for years had produced callouses on the tips of her otherwise soft hands. The sensation was strangely erotic.

Flipping his wrist, he grabbed her hand as he stared into her eyes and probed her mind. Brendan knew he should not invade her private thoughts, not only for the immorality of it, but because knowing the truth would be futile either way. But he could not help himself.

She grinned, but there were no thoughts suggesting she wanted him. Only the usual '*I'm not gonna let him win.*' Over the past few years Alannah had become a lot better at Sleazy Chicken, a flirtatious game they started playing at the age of six, although he still won most times.

Rising to his feet, Brendan pulled her up against his chest and planted soft kisses along her arm, running from her hand towards her neck. He watched her face for signs of blushing. There was no hint of colour in her cheeks as she gave him bedroom eyes that made his blood rush. It was just

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as well he was able to magically control his erections; else he might give away his true feelings.

Closing in on her shoulder, he could no longer see her face when she drew an audible breath. 'Stop. You win.'

A wicked grin formed on his face when he stepped back to look at her. 'The reigning champion keeps his crown.'

'You will have to give it up to me one day.'

'Oh, I promise I'll give it to you one day, Lana. I'll give it to you real hard.' He winked at her, seized his beer, and chugged down the rest of the bottle.



After tiptoeing across the bedroom floor, avoiding the squeaky floorboards, Alannah slipped into bed alongside Liam's sleeping form. He looked handsome beyond compare when asleep, the stress and fatigue gone from around his eyes.

Liam must have sensed her presence, despite her best efforts to avoid disturbing his sleep, because he snuggled in closer to her. He groaned the moment their bodies connected, and his eyes flittered open. The bright moon peeking through a slit in the curtains was the only light illuminating the room, but it was enough to reveal the features of his face. He smiled. 'Hey gorgeous.'

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'Sorry for waking you.' Although Alannah was secretly glad she had, still feeling horny after the game of Sleazy Chicken.

'You're the one person who doesn't ever need to apologise for that.' His deep voice was raspy from sleep, and it heightened her arousal. 'I love you, Lana. You are the most incredible woman to walk this earth and I feel blessed to call you mine.'

Her heart melted at his words. Rendered speechless, she inhaled sharply and claimed his mouth with a heated kiss. Before long she straddled Liam's naked body, grinding against his pelvis. Her hands skated along his muscular arms as she immersed herself in the addictive sweet and salty taste of his mouth.

After making out for ten minutes, Liam rolled them sideways and fell back asleep. Alannah sighed - another typical weeknight, with Liam exhausted after work and mage commitments. She would be calling on her rabbit again soon.



Brendan beelined through the front bar of Doyle Dougherty's, the only pub in Gaelge Shores, and found his mates in a booth. It was Friday, the night following his dinner at Alannah's. Ben and Nick were arm wrestling, giving the girls around them a

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show of bulging tatted muscles. Connor had an arm wrapped around Amy, whispering sweet nothings in her ear. Bailey and Caleb were showing each other memes and sharing metalcore music on their smartphones. And Cara sat in Jacob's lap, sucking his face off. *Yup, business as usual. Except someone was missing.*

Bailey looked up as Brendan approached. 'Hey, Brendo. How ya doin', man?' He extended his hand out for a fist bump.

'Okay, I guess. What's up with you all? And where's Bianca?' He slid down next to Caleb, an endarkened fae and the only member of their group to have more piercings than Brendan. Caleb gave him a silent nod before vaping some sweet-smelling herbal stuff.

Jacob came up for air a moment later, giving Brendan an impish grin. 'Didn't you hear? Bianca has a dark cabaret band now. They're rehearsing tonight.' The red-headed boggart had become his best mate in the years following the death of Lachlan Munroe. The goofy goblin had been Jacob's closest friend at school and losing him in their battle with Tara Winters had been heartbreaking for all his crew. The passing of Austin Pearce, Brendan's previous bestie, also contributed to their growing

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bond. Although Austin was dead to Brendan when he date-raped Alannah.

'Yeah, they are gearing up for a regular spot at some cabaret lounge in Adelaide,' added Bailey.

'Oh? This is all news to me.' *How am I the last to hear about all this?*

Nick, the punkish orc, tittered. 'I guess you guys are always too busy boning to talk about her side hustle.'

While true to some extent, it was not like they *never* talked. But it had been a few months since he had invited Bianca to his bed. He did not want to give her the wrong impression, even if she was the best lay he could get in town. Commitment was a dirty word to Brendan in most cases. Leaning back into the seat, he sighed. 'I guess I'll have to hook up with a human tonight.' Brendan did not mind human girls, but they did lack the magical talents of a nymph like Bianca.

'Well Chelsea's had her eye on you since you arrived.' Ben directed his head of long, caramel coloured hair towards the table of girls a few metres away. The weredingo's attention shifting to that group of girls did not surprise Brendan. Ben's reputation as a man-whore was almost as notorious as Brendan's.

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Brendan shook his head. 'Been there, done that too many times. I need a challenge. I want more excitement in my life.'

'What about her?' Ben's gaze travelled to the door where a stunning woman with long black hair entered. Legs reaching the sky were on display beneath a short black skirt. She completed her outfit with a purple brocade corset and silver necklace. Her curvaceous figure alone took Brendan's breath away. The moment he looked up at her face, he found himself drawn into her eyes. As dark as night and outlined with purple makeup, they scanned the room. Peering through the veil of her glamour, he glimpsed pointy ears lined with silver studs from lobe to tip. *Most likely fae and her dark colouring suggests unseelie.*

'Son of a gun!' Caleb's eyes widened, as though he had seen a ghost.

As if hearing Caleb's muttered curse, the woman turned her attention to their group and grinned, eyes darting to each of them before settling on Caleb. She advanced and Brendan felt Caleb trembling beside him. Reaching the booth, she scrutinised Caleb as she spoke in a deep, rich voice, 'Hello, Brother dearest.'

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