



UNRULY MAGIC

Stella Mayweather Paranormal Series #2

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ONE

For the first time in six months I woke up without the shaking after effects of a nightmare. Instead my first thought as I edged my eyes open had been *peace*. I stretched out in my bed – in my bedroom, in my home, as I had to remind myself frequently – while I listened to the quiet of the outside world. I spread my hand out hopefully across the covers as I did every morning and felt... nothing. No Evan.

Pushing sleep away, I opened my eyes fully and yawned. I strained to hear sound, any sound but, as per usual there was nothing. This was as close to bliss as I could possibly get right now, which was good because by this afternoon, my short lived peace would be blown to smithereens. If I'd known that when I woke up, I might have stayed in bed.

I lived on the fringes of a little town called Wilding. Situated just a few miles out of town, my home was completely isolated but for the only other house within screaming distance, which happened to be right across the road. As we were well off the highway few cars came this way, and, as such, few people either bar the mailman whom I'd yet to actually see. As far as close company went, my neighbours were it, of course, and I was fortunate that they were a friendly pair. They had made me feel very welcome right from the day I'd first pitched up unannounced on my doorstep and dissolved the wards that had protected the house for two decades. My neighbour, Annalise, who was only a few years older than me had seemed positively overjoyed at some close company and had made it her business to be my friend. However it was Gage I'd seen first, on the same day I'd moved in and though he seemed less enthusiastic about getting a new neighbour, he was pleasant enough, even if he hadn't gone way out on the welcome committee.

Though I had been in Wilding for only six months, it was already nearly one of my longest ever residences. I'd been moved around a lot as a child, thanks to a long stream of foster homes, and even when I got out of the system, I still moved around a lot through a series of icky house shares; all that was thousands of miles away from my memory, as well as geographically now. I'd left all that behind with barely a blink of an eye. I hadn't even gotten homesick.

My new home was a welcome refuge from the horror and terror of those final days of being scared witless by what I had seen – and what I'd done – at the safe house I'd been ensconced in for my training. I'd been there only a few weeks and I'd barely escaped with my life... but I had been one of the lucky ones. Not that I really considered myself lucky when I thought about what I had left behind, who I had left behind.

"Get a grip, Stella," I groaned, getting ready to give myself a firm pep talk. So much for finally beating my nightmares; I couldn't help but rehash those memories every single time I woke up. It was the same thoughts of course; what could I have done differently? What if the outcome was different?

What *if* wasn't getting me anywhere.

I pushed back the covers and slid out of bed, my feet hitting the cold hardwood floor. On auto pilot I turned around to smooth the covers flat again and padded into the adjacent bathroom where I went about my morning routine. After, I pulled on jeans and a cotton shirt plus a pair of bright Havanas suitable for plodding around the house. In the kitchen I flipped on the coffee pot, the vice I had picked up at the safe house, to make my morning fix. It was starting to become a competition in my veins as to what took priority there – coffee, magic or blood. Today the coffee was probably going to win.

Just like every morning I pulled out my map from where it had been folded in a drawer, and spread it across the table, careful to smooth out the fold creases that made the thin paper buck against the smooth grain of the table top. I held the long ribbon loop of the crystal I'd bought and be-spelled and dangled it over the centre as I did every morning. With a flick of my wrist I set the crystal in motion to spin clockwise while I willed it to find Evan and give me his location – the crystal was supposed to lurch to a spot on a map but after a few seconds of momentum it petered out and hung limply in the middle, giving me no direction or indication whatsoever that Evan was anywhere to be found, at least not in the States. Perhaps it was time I widened my search, or give up crystal scrying. One thing was for certain: I had spent months looking for him and I wasn't giving up until I had an answer one way or another.

I folded the map and dumped it back in the drawer, returning the crystal to its pouch and tossing that in on top. With a sigh of annoyance I cast a glance out of the kitchen window. This side of the house looked out over the back of the property and there

wasn't a lot to see, just the bushy shrubs that badly needed pruning back for the winter months and a dark tangle of trees that signified the beginnings of the tree line that ran for another mile or so alongside the road heading north and goodness knows how far back. All I could hear was the sound of the pot bubbling away next to me, and nothing from outside at all. Just the thought of that was niggling at my subconscious in a way I couldn't quite fathom. Lately it had started to strike me as weird. Sure, no traffic was great, but where were the birds? Why did I never see a dog or see a stray cat? Or a groundhog? I really wanted to see one of those funny creatures, or at least something native... except skunks. I'd give those a miss. Occasionally I heard howling in the woods that bordered the back of my property but I'd never seen any animal close-up in the day time so I hadn't gotten to the bottom of what might be living out there. Come to that, I don't think I'd ever seen an animal in Wilding which seemed odd for a town that had several thousand people. Compounding that was the knowledge that out here it was relatively rural and there should have been something mewling or stirring up a racket. I shook my head. I was being silly. Of course I was struggling to adjust: I was a city girl and I was used to lights and noise, a constant barrage of unwelcome sound at all hours.

Anyway, yeah, I had been the lucky one, not that it really felt that way, I thought as I stirred two level sugars into my steaming mug. When Evan's face lurched into the front of my mind I had to grip the counter to hold myself up right, the force of the sudden memory almost making my legs give way.

Evan. *Oh*, Evan.

His name alone was like a vice squeezing my heart, leaving me breathless and disorientated. Even the thought of him could reduce me to tears, even after all these months. What was even worse was the speculation that I had replayed in my head a thousand times. What had happened to Evan and where was he? He had saved my life, but had he lost his? I just didn't know and it was the not knowing that made everything so unbearable. After all this time waiting for news or some kind of sign, I didn't know if I would ever know the answer but that didn't stop me looking and it was that determination that gave me strength.

All I knew was that the last time I had seen him, Evan had been badly injured and I'd poured my energy into him in a bid to save his life. He had been alive, barely, when our friends Etoile and Seren had taken him to safety. All I could do now was cherish the thought of him, and search for him when it didn't reduce me to a heap of sobs.

I glanced towards the front of the house when I an engine roared to life outside – finally, a sign of life – and I recognised it as the sound of my neighbour Gage's motorbike. I figured he was heading out to work and wondered if that meant Annalise would come by soon. She worked from home and could pick and choose her own hours, so she often came by for breakfast and I enjoyed her company. I eyeballed

the coffee pot. There was plenty more. All I had to do was take deep breaths, put on my happy face and pretend that everything was normal ... that I was normal.

A quick rap at the front door jolted me out of my maudlin thoughts and I moved through the house, from the kitchen at the back through the living room, pasting a smile on my face as I went to answer it. Annalise waved through the window at me and her sweet, perky smile automatically gave me an energy boost. I privately thought that the phrase 'a sight for sore eyes' must have been coined right after meeting her. She was one of the nicest people I'd ever met and I couldn't pick a better neighbour.

I unlocked the door and let her bound in like a new puppy, blonde curls bouncing all over the place, streaks of pink flicking out like carnival candyfloss.

"Oh good, you're up. Have you had breakfast?" she asked, her eyes bright and shiny.

I shook my head. "Just on my first coffee. Come on through."

"Uh-uh," Annalise said, grabbing me by the hands, her eyes alight with mischief. "I've come to invite you over to us today. Gage has just gone to get pastries and we thought we'd eat on the porch, if you'd like to join us?"

"Sure, thank you," I said, pleased.

"Oh, it's no thanks at all! I practically eat you out of house and home as it is."

"You know I don't mind." I'd happily have Annalise for lunch and dinner too, her company was so nice and she had helped me settle in to town in such a joyful, welcoming way. Out of all the potential neighbours in the world I was glad I'd struck lucky with her. Plus she had no idea how grateful I was to her for not letting me live my life in a terminal fug.

"Well, you're sweet but today breakfast is on us. You'll need a sweater," she said looking down at her jeans and padded coat. "We're kissing goodbye to the sun today."

"Just let me put my mug back in the kitchen and I'll come on over."

"Okay, I'll wait on the porch for you." She skipped back outside, leaving the door open. That was the thing out here. No one came out this far out of town so it didn't seem totally necessary to close the door all the time. Plus there had been wards on my house for years – this had been my parents' house and they had left it under a stasis protection spell during their absence, a spell which had faded as soon as it recognised me – and lately I'd begun to spin new ones of my own for protection. It had been very much trial and error. The first spell I'd created had caused my house to throw out a go away vibe; at least it only took me a few days of watching Annalise approach only to turn right around and go back to her house again to realise my

error, undo the spell and try again. I thought I'd finally got it right though I didn't really have anyone to check with. Anyway, what would be the point of protecting myself if I called up the council and asked them to check out my wards? In angry moments, I rather thought I was protecting myself *from* them.

I went back to the kitchen and put my mug in the sink to deal with later. I grabbed socks from the drawer in my bedroom and kicked off the Havianas by the front door and sat on the floor to pull on my socks and sneakers. I picked up my jacket and zipped it up. I didn't pick up anything else – I wasn't going anywhere far and hadn't troubled myself about getting a cell phone as no one would ring – so I shut the door behind me and locked it, my fingers leaving a few boosting sparks of magic as I touched the lock. I wasn't sure why I bothered but it was habit that was hard to break.

Annalise was standing on the path waiting for me. "You know you should think about painting this place," she said when I got even with her. I looked back at the house and saw it through Annalise's eyes. The paint was starting to peel in places. The stasis spell had held it, suspended in time for more than twenty years, and now that it was gone, I wondered if time was catching up to the house as quickly as it could. Things seemed to be breaking an awful lot lately and the peeling exterior could just add to the list.

"I don't think I can do it myself," I said, thinking of the sanding and painting and the sheer volume of work. At least there was only one storey to deal with.

"I bet one of Gage's friends could probably fix it for you," Annalise said, and I thought she was referring to one of the gaggle of guys that seemed to come over to their place a couple of times a week. I had been invited over one Friday night and arrived in the middle of a rowdy poker game that looked on the verge of breaking into a fight, but mostly they seemed like a nice crowd and they had that shared common history in the way that residents of small towns did. They knew everyone and everyone knew them, and, by the same regard, they had all heard about the new girl in town so I was new blood to look over and gossip about. "Come over tonight and maybe you can ask one of them to take a look."

"You think they'd have time?"

"One of them would make time for a pretty gal like you," Annalise winked at me and I knocked her playfully on the arm. She pretended to wince.

Knowing there wouldn't be any traffic to look out for, we crossed the road and stepped onto the grass that signified the edge of her property. Her house was a little different from mine, with the main difference being that it faced out on to the road and had two storeys to mine's one. The wide wrap-around porch, painted in a creamy white, was my favourite spot of her house. With a big swing and lots of colourful plant pots, it was a welcoming space and I could often hear the tinkle of the

wind chimes from across the street. I had never been upstairs in her house, but I knew the downstairs had a similar floor plan to mine with a big living room straight off the front door, an eat-in kitchen and another smaller room that Annalise used as a work room. Mine differed by having a dining room sized space – currently empty – off the living room and bedrooms beyond that, with a sun room that was really anything but at the moment, given that fall was making way for winter.

Annalise had already laid out a little table on the porch. There was a tray with glasses and a big pitcher of juice. Plates and napkins waited on top, each a mismatch of colour and pattern that spoke to me of Annalise's eclectic style.

"How long had you lived here?" I asked as we settled next to each other on the swing. I thought that I should get one for my house. It would be nice to sit out and kick up my heels next summer. As it was, I hadn't really done much with the furnishings in or out yet and there was a lot of tired decor that really needed to be dealt with if I was going to stay here long term. The repairs had more urgency now that it was getting colder. It wasn't easy getting to grips with homeowner problems after a series of rentals that I could have done nothing about even if I wanted to, but I was trying to relish it. Begrudgingly, anyway.

"Oh, always. This was my parents' house."

"You've always lived here?" Well, duh, she had just said so. Even so, I imagined living in the same place forever. It sounded lovely. If my parents had lived, I might have had those kinds of roots, but they had been killed when I was young and I had to live with that sharp knowledge even though I had, at last, made peace with their passing. At least I had the answers now.

"Well, I moved away for a few years then I just came on back." Annalise shrugged like her years away were nothing more than a blip in her existence.

"It must be nice having Gage around," I said conversationally.

"Sure is. Always good to have a big guy in the house, right?" Annalise was slightly shorter than me, but even so, I knew what she meant.

My heart tried not to sink a little and I leaned forward to pick up my glass, mostly so that my eyes wouldn't betray my pain, and took a long drink. In the stillness of the morning, we heard the engine throb long before we saw Gage skirt around the corner onto the driveway, his feet on the blacktop stabilising the bike as he came to a stop. Annalise stood up to wave and I noticed her glance down at me curiously, like she couldn't quite work me out. Some things were just best left that way.

Gage kicked up the motorbike supports before swinging one powerful leg over the seat. He raised a hand to wave then eased off his helmet, shaking his crop of hair out with a swing of his head, and tucked the helmet under his arm. He came towards us carrying a big rucksack. Taking the side steps up to the porch two at a time, he

unzipped the bag to pull out two large brown paper bags. Bending to kiss Annalise on the cheek, he caught her in a quick hug and I felt that familiar pang of sadness deep in the pit of my stomach. I couldn't remember the last time I had been touched with affection. I shivered and shook out the pity party that was going on in my head. I couldn't grieve forever, and I couldn't be sad at other people's happiness. It just wasn't right.

"Danishes," said Annalise with undisguised glee as she cracked open the bag and spilled the big pastries onto plates. "Help yourself. There's no such thing as formal eating here as you know."

Gage sat down on the rocker across from us and stretched out his long legs. They seemed to go on forever. He was a lovely looking man, tall and broad with a dark crop of hair, wide brown eyes and perpetual day-old stubble. He was built tall and strong, with a broad chest and neat waist. He kept his jacket on and the well worn leather creased in supple lines as he reached forwards. "Plate, Stella?" he said, interrupting my gaze. I accepted the plate with a quick nod and at once dropped my eyes. What was I thinking of in admiring Gage's physique when my friend, his wife, was sat next to me? When I coupled that with being wrenched apart from Evan only six months ago, I felt more than a little ashamed of myself. There was no excuse for being a rubbish person.

"Got any plans for today, Stella?" Annalise asked and I gulped. Feeling guilty should take up most of my day now, damn it.

"Uh, no, not really," I mumbled.

After my first month of wallowing here, struggling to even get up every day, I'd slowly started to explore the area, tentatively venturing into Wilding and, occasionally, further beyond. Annalise had introduced herself within a day while bearing a steaming casserole to welcome me – that had been the first of many suppers together – and she had been incredibly useful when it came to recommending stores to go and get new bed linens from and crockery to update the ones in the house. Though I was careful with my money I had to spend quite a bit of cash on these updates to make the house liveable, especially as things snapped, tore, and just plain broke. Strangely, I'd found myself enjoying it in the moments when I could stuff my pain far away from my consciousness. As such, Annalise had helped me become the proud new owner of smart sets of bed linen, kitchenware, crockery, new cushions – pillows, as she called them – and other bits and pieces. She had introduced me around town as well. At first she had been simply a useful guide for me – though one I enjoyed the company of – now I was happy to call her my friend.

Gage, I thought he was her husband, anyway – she didn't wear a wedding ring, neither did he – was much more of an enigma to me. I saw him from time to time and he was always polite and nice but a bit more reserved. He seemed to be pretty popular when their friends came over for their game nights. It might sound parochial,

even hokey, but their game nights seemed like real fun and they always had a lively crowd over. Though I had been a couple of times, I didn't want to just assume I could pitch up whenever I saw the lights were on, so mostly I stayed away and didn't try and wedge my way into their lives.

"You could keep me company. I've got a few more things to sew then I need to package up my stuff to take to the fair tomorrow." Annalise was a whizz at sewing and crochet and her business was to make pretty home things that she sold at fairs. Right now I knew she had stockpiled a huge collection of things to sell and she hardly ever came home with anything. Even her pricier stuff was so beautifully made that she never had to worry about not selling it.

I ended up not going home at all for the rest of that morning and well into the afternoon. Annalise tugged her baskets of goods out onto the porch and we sat there, bundled up, drinking coffee – she was much better at hospitality than me, but then she'd had a life time of doing it – well into the afternoon. By the time I left, I had an invitation to their house for game night, and strict instructions to bring by my list of repairs.

"See you," I called, skipping down the steps, waving over my shoulder at Annalise as I cut across the grass. Gage was flat on his back on a tarpaulin on the driveway, tinkering with his motorbike, a deep frown of concentration settled on his forehead. I looked over my shoulder as I started to cross the road and he looked up briefly and waved a hand at me. I smiled and waved back then jogged along the path to my door.

If I'd been more alert I might have made something more of the feeling I got in the air as I took the steps up to my porch. Just as my body was getting soft, and my magic rusty, my senses had also gotten sluggish over these few months. Even when the idea that someone had been in my space, someone with a signature that I should recognise, trickled into my thoughts, I didn't bother to turn it into a fully fleshed curiosity.

I paused at my door, my hand on the knob, and turned around, hesitating for a few seconds. I had the faintest sense that someone had been here and might still be here, but when none of my senses gave me anything to work with, I shrugged and let myself in.

I still locked the door behind me.

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My afternoon was as idle as idle can be and was mostly spent pouring over my list, which was growing every day. Painting the exterior of the house came after more than twenty other urgent bullet points that included checking out the kitchen plumbing and finding the source of the clanking pipes, cutting the grass which had shot up (I'd wondered who had been doing it over the past twenty years the house

had lain empty, or whether that had been under a spell too) and re-grouting the bathroom along with a bunch of problems that were cropping up all over the house. Pulling a face I added, *paint entire inside of house*. After a thought, I added *porch swing* to the bottom of the list.

I sank back on the sofa, tapping my pen against the pad of paper, and wondered if, seeing as magic had kept everything pristine for so long, if it was possible to use it for the house's upkeep too. I had no idea if there were rules on that kind of thing. Surely that would mean every witch had a perfect house? I had absolutely no idea.

By late afternoon I was so bored that I was actively looking for things to do. I really needed some kind of purpose in life, I decided, as I started cleaning the kitchen countertops with hot soapy water. The new Stella might be awfully house proud, more through boredom than by design, but it didn't take the place of getting out there and doing something. I didn't even have my studies to keep me distracted. They had ended abruptly with Eleanor Bartholomew's attack and now there wasn't a witch in miles. At least, I thought there wasn't. I was sure I hadn't come across any and I could recognise the vibrating signature of my own kind's magic now. Besides, I didn't even know if I wanted to continue in training, especially if that meant getting caught up in witch business again. From what I had known about the witches' council – some sort of quasi-governing body that monitored and assisted our kind – I'd found them to be weak and inept. They were certainly to blame for a chunk of my past troubles, even if they had been there in the moment that I'd really needed them. Or rather, Étoile had been there and I owed her big time. I huffed and scrubbed harder. It all seemed like so long ago that I'd been alone and terrified, then gradually happy and finally in the arms of the man I adored. It had all ended too quickly, too abruptly. I channelled my anger into scrubbing the counters furiously.

When I could almost see my reflection in the super clean surfaces I finally wrung out the sopping cloth and laid it over the sink edge to dry and scowled at my face in the kitchen window. My top was clinging to me in wet patches. Nights at Annalise and Gage's house were as casual as casual can be, but I still couldn't turn up as a wet mess which meant I would have to tackle my washing. Boring.

Tugging my laundry basket through, I sat on the kitchen floor, separating colours from whites and made untidy piles next to the washing machine. That was also on my must replace list thanks to the ominous rattling sound it made every time it spun a cycle. I suspected corrosion was catching up with it thanks to it, like everything else, being part of the stasis spell. I bet homeowner's insurance didn't cover it, I thought with a snort. I shoved the first set of laundry in and turned the sink faucet on so I could wash the few leftover dishes that languished there.

The surge of magic that bloomed into the kitchen through the open doorway nearly knocked me for six. It wasn't the force of it, and I didn't sense any malevolence, but I was surprised into dropping the glass I'd been washing. It splinted into a bunch of

little pieces on the floor. I looked from my feet to the doorway, my body rigid with anticipation.

“Hello?” called a small female voice from my living room. “Is there anyone there?”

Slowly, carefully, I stepped over the shards and edged towards the voice, panicking all the time. I didn’t get the feeling I was about to come to harm but one could never be too careful, so I prepared to shimmer out of there the moment things looked dicey. Teleportation certainly had its advantages.

“Where the hell am I?” demanded the girl standing in the centre of my living room. She was in her late teens with glossy dark blonde hair that hung about her shoulders in a feathery cut. She was dressed in skinny jeans, acid pink heels and a white jacket that sat on her hips with a little pleated flounce. She clutched a thick book in her arms that looked heavy and old against her new and shiny self.

“You’re in my living room,” I replied, bracing myself for whatever would come next.

“Am I in England?” she asked in disbelief as she looked around in distaste at my furniture. “I did *not* think England would look like this.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Huh.” The girl looked around again then give me the once over. “You *are* Stella Mayweather?” she asked.

“Who the hell are you?”

“I asked first!” I thought she might stomp her foot. I certainly felt like it but I settled for glaring at her instead. Obviously, it was the more mature option.

“I’m Chyler,” she said at last, and dropped on to my sofa, the book perched across her knees.

“What are you doing in my living room? How did you get here?” If my wards were dogs, they’d be in the dog house right now. How had she got in here when I’d done everything I could to keep everyone out, especially people who could just flash in, like she had, in the blink of an eye.

“I said the spell,” she, Chyler, said, patting the book like she couldn’t help it, “and I just ended up here. You are Stella, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I said after assessing her for weapons. She looked too scared to be thinking about hurting me and I didn’t think the super tight jeans could conceal anything.

“Yes!” Chyler fist pumped the air. “I just knew it! The book said it was you and now here I am.” She beamed at me.

“What book?”

“This book. It’s the family spell book,” she said, slowly, like she had to spell it out. Groan. One bright blue nail tapped the aged leather exterior of the book. “You don’t have one?” she asked, catching my frown.

I shook my head. “But what are you doing here?”

“I need to hide,” Chyler said and all the confidence seemed to drain out of her. “I asked the book and it said you would protect me. It gave me the spell to find you.”

“The book just... told you?” I tried to not let the disbelief show on my face.

“Usually I have to ask it really nicely but this time it practically demanded to help,” said Chyler as if chatting to a book was a perfectly normal event. At least she didn’t seem to think it was abnormal, which it totally was. “It even had a picture of you.” Chyler thumbed through the thick leaves and finally flipped the book open. She held it up to me, the spine pressed against her middle as she balanced it in both hands. Sure enough there was a pen and ink drawing of my face looking solemnly back at me. “Cool, right? I’m on the run,” she added, helpfully.

“Who from?” I couldn’t help but ask, but maybe, given the knowledge I’d received in the past few months, I should have been asking *what* rather than *who*.

“The council, of course,” said Chyler, her face returning to glum. “They want to kill me and you’re the only one who can stop them.”

Unruly Magic will go on sale at the end of July! Please check www.camillachafer.com for announcements, book news and more extras.