

Impossible Dreams

By

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NOTE: All the characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

One

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“If you’re a bill collector, all the money we have is in the cash box under the counter. If you take it all, you’ll be taking food from the mouths of babes,” a musically feminine voice called from behind the long glass counter.

Startled, Axell waited for his eyes to adjust to the murky interior of the New Age gift shop. The chiming bells of the door behind him silenced, and in their place the haunting aria from *Man of La Mancha*: “To dream, the impossible dream...To fight the unbeatable foe...” swelled to a crescendo.

Intrigued despite himself, he wondered if he’d entered some netherworld far from the ordinariness of the Carolina sunshine outside. “Shall I leave the change?” he inquired dryly, searching the narrow shop for the source of the voice. A display case counter stretched along one long wall. Crammed with items too intricate and numerous to identify, it claimed his interest first. The layer of dust and fingerprints on the glass could be the reason most of the objects were unidentifiable. Fastidiously, he dusted a corner over a bumper sticker reading: *Very funny, Scotty, now beam down my*

clothes.

“You can have the Canadian pennies and McDonald’s tokens,” the voice called cheerfully.

“Miss Alyssum?” he inquired, bending to look over the glass for the shop proprietor but captured instead by what appeared to be a crystal ball beneath the spot he’d wiped clean. He ignored the overflowing shelves of commonplace gnomes, dragons, crystals, cards, and dangling beads on the other wall, but the shimmering rainbows of color beneath the glass deserved further examination.

“Still there? Be with you in a minute. Once I’m down here, it’s a struggle to get back up.”

Intrigued by a telescope on a tripod, Axell used his handkerchief to dust it off, adjusted it to face the dirty shop window, and peeked through the eyeglass. A kaleidoscopic whirl of colors materialized before his eyes, sparkling like jewels through the sunshine, gliding and transforming from the fires of the sun to the tides of the sea in vivid blues and greens.

“Haven’t seen one of these in years. They’ve improved.” He’d come in here with a definite purpose, but it slipped his mind as he looked up and fell into eyes the same shade of sea blue and green he’d just admired in the kaleidoscope.

Startled by the unexpected intimacy of her gaze, Axell stepped back. He’d thought that silly nonsense about a man

drowning in a woman's eyes a lot of sentimental claptrap. Maybe the air of the shop contained hallucinogenic smoke.

Wryly noting the dusty handkerchief in his hand, she brought him back from his cloud. "Let me guess, Virgo, right? I don't suppose you've come to make order of my universe, by any chance?" She threw her own dusty rag onto the counter. "It's murder cleaning all this junk. Cleo's ideas were always bigger than her ability to carry them out."

Grounded again, Axell blinked and tried to sort out the various impressions conveyed by the extraordinary apparition behind the counter. Once he disentangled himself from the crystal turquoise of long-lashed eyes, he encountered a fiery explosion of dark red wiry curls streaked with—purple? He'd had some interesting clientele in his bar before, but none could equal this eccentricity.

This wouldn't do. He'd come here for a reason. He couldn't allow himself to be distracted—his gaze drifted back to that purple streak. It almost made sense against the blue-green of those eyes.

Taking a deep breath, he gathered his wits again. "Miss Alyssum?"

She nodded, and the curls bobbed vigorously. "Right the first time. And you are...?"

"Axell Holm." Unconsciously, he rearranged the disorderly

stack of loose cards on the counter. One fell over, revealing a grinning joker figure. “Tarot?” he inquired.

“Don’t do this to me. I definitely do not need this.” She removed the cards from his hands, tapped the deck together, and stacked them with the unopened boxes. “Not only Virgo, but probably Aquarius ascendant. I can’t imagine a worse combination. You must have driven your mother crazy.”

Unperturbed, Axell opened the cover of a book titled *Messages from Michael*. “I’ve examined the precepts of astrology and while it has a curiously reassuring effect on certain personalities, it has no scientific basis whatsoever. When looked at as a whole, it is not only improbable, but laughably naive. If this is the kind of thing you teach in your school, then perhaps the mayor is right in wanting it closed. I’m certain the children would benefit from more scientific direction.”

A benevolent smile lit her face, creating the illusion of shimmering mother-of-pearl luminescence in the dusky shop interior, drawing his attention to moist, pink, bow-shaped lips. For a brief—very brief—moment, Axell imagined kissing those lips. Appalled by the kind of lusty image he hadn’t experienced since adolescence, he immediately drew back and focused on the details of his surroundings. “The Impossible Dream” changed to a Gaelic pipe, and the angle of the sun shifted to shoot a beam of rainbows

through the crystal prisms hanging above the proprietor's head.

“Would you like some tea, Mr. Holm? Whatever my sister's failings, she knows her teas. I have a particularly lovely Chinese green that might soothe your muddy aura sufficiently for us to communicate.”

“No, thank you, Miss Alyssum. I have come to discuss the school. The mayor has every intention of closing it.”

Panic pierced her, but Maya smiled unblinkingly at the attractive lion of a man in front of the counter. She'd guess him to be in his mid-thirties, a decade older than she and definitely of a dangerous social status, judging by his excellently tailored dark blue suit and expensive silk tie. She seldom responded physically to men with his cool Nordic looks, especially ones with the arrogant authority of Axell Holm. She preferred her men dark, passionate, and artistic. Good thing, too, because she didn't need those dreamy Aquarian gray eyes messing with her already crazed mind. The way they narrowed as they followed her incited definite palpitations.

“The Impossible Dream is not a public school,” she reminded him, removing the carafe of near-boiling water from the hot plate and pouring it over the crinkled green leaves in her sister's prized Yixing teapot. “It's a private school and not within the mayor's realm of power.” A brand new private school with a temporary

permit, the germ of all her dreams. She pried her nervous fingers loose from the carafe handle.

“Obviously, you have little experience with government, Miss Alyssum.”

“Maya, call me Maya,” she replied absently, setting out her own precious porcelain cups and saucers with their intricately painted landscapes of a different world. They didn’t match Cleo’s brown teapot with its single lotus blossom, but they had the same significance to both of them, so in Maya’s mind, they matched perfectly. “And I’ve had entirely too much experience with government authority, I assure you.”

The phone rang, and she ignored it as she carried the delicate porcelain to an old-fashioned ice cream table in the back corner. The Gaelic music changed to a monk’s chant, the phone shrieked, and in the back, the steady drip-drip of the bathroom faucet intruded. She really needed to get that fixed, or wait until the utility company turned off the water for non-payment. That would solve the problem. She’d write it down right after “fix broken lock on back door.”

“Your phone is ringing, Miss...Maya.”

“True Virgo,” she muttered as she set down the saucers. “Let the machine get it,” she responded airily as he glared at the offending instrument. He vibrated with an acute Virgo intensity

that he hid behind catlike wariness, but she'd detected a spasm of some sort as she emerged from behind the counter.

She smoothed the crinkly crepe of her long skirt over her protuberant belly and smiled fetchingly at him. Whoever was on the phone slammed down the receiver as the answering machine kicked on. Bill collector, she concluded. She watched her visitor struggle with his curiosity. Mr. Axell Holm looked like an absentminded professor lost in a particularly disturbing problem instead of the wealthy proprietor of the town's most popular—and only—watering hole. She'd finally placed his face, if not his name. She'd seen it in the local paper several times since she'd returned to Wadeville to take care of her nephew.

Holm was on the city council, she remembered with apprehension.

“I didn't realize you were married, Mrs. Alyssum. I apologize. The way Constance speaks of you, I assumed...” He backtracked and asked pointedly, “Is your husband available? Perhaps together we could discuss some arrangement...”

Constance! Of course. The name finally clicked. Holm—Constance's father. Maybe this wasn't entirely about the city council. Maya patted his arm and indicated one of the delicate wrought-iron chairs. “Have a seat, Mr. Holm, and let me pour you some tea. Do you take honey?” She retrieved the pot from the

counter, a little too aware of his fascination with her bulging belly. That was the problem with Aquarians, they were too darned nosy. Thank goodness his Virgo sun sign dominated or she might have to dump the tea over his head.

He waited expectantly—not for the tea, she observed. The jasmine fragrance wafted soothingly around them as she poured. “Constance is quite correct; I’m not married. She’s an exceptionally intelligent, talented child, and a delight to work with. You should be proud of her.”

She took the seat opposite him and sipped the elegant tea with quiet pleasure. Maybe if she concentrated, this would all go away. She really didn’t want to hear what new disaster loomed on her horizon. She merely wanted to enjoy her tea and the china and the rainbow of colors through the prisms and the lovely man trying not to frown across from her. And he *was* a lovely man: true golden-blond Nordic hair bleached by the Carolina sun, intelligent gray eyes with thick brown lashes, and a jutting cleft chin that would make Sean Connery proud. His soft Southern drawl seemed somehow out of place in a man like this, but it brought back sweet memories from long ago.

Of course, there were those thin lips and the flaring of his aristocratic nose to warn her of a lion-king’s arrogance behind the knowing expression...

“Umm,” he hesitated, looking for a nice way of asking his next question, “Perhaps your significant other...”

Maya laughed.

Axell watched her features light with the pure joy of her laughter. No weak trill or artificial tinkle for this gypsy. Joy rang out as melodically and soulfully as the musical metal chimes overhead. Definitely high quality chimes, he observed in wonder, each one perfectly attuned to a note on the scale. He wanted to enjoy it, but the chaos of light, color, sound, and emotion swirling around him proved too distracting.

His gaze followed the prisms of color in her already rainbow-hued hair. The jasmine-scented tea combined with a potpourri of rose petals on the counter, the bouquet of flowers on the table, the pot of golden honey, and the herbal fragrance of the woman herself. The sensual atmosphere was radically different from the sterile environment of his own home.

“You would very definitely not wish to include Stephen in our conversation, even were he here, Mr. Holm. Take my word for it. Do you like the tea?”

He hated tea. From the disorder and dust of this shop, he feared the cleanliness and safety of anything ingested anywhere within a hundred yards of it. Still, in the interest of peace, he lifted the cup to his lips. The fragrance enticed him into sipping.

“Interesting.” Calmly, he lowered the cup and sought another approach. The colorful young woman across from him was the antithesis of everything he’d expected. A teacher at the utopian after-school program should be highly intelligent, goal-oriented, efficient, independent, and eager to forestall the problems he perceived ahead. She should be grateful for his offer of help.

Instead of the rational, business-suited career woman he’d expected, she was an explosion of femininity. The thick cascade of red curls spilled over delicately boned shoulders draped in a lacy ivory shawl. A satin-trimmed wide collar of a shifting blue-green silky fabric drifted downward in points that clung to high firm breasts resplendent with pregnancy. He didn’t dare look any lower. His gaze fastened on unadorned slender white fingers wrapped around the outlandishly decorated burnt-orange teacup.

“I disturb you, Mr. Holm,” she said gently, in a voice that whispered above the pulsating tide currently emanating from the speakers. “You do have a first name, don’t you? May I use it?”

“Axell, please do,” he replied absently as a graceful branch of flowering forsythia dipped and caressed her fingers. The disorderly bouquet of branches, daffodils, and crushed violets reminded him of his purpose. Constance. A thump of panic struck his heart at the thought of his lovely, lost waif of a daughter, and his determination returned.

“The mayor is dead set against the school, Miss... Maya.” He set the tea cup down, adjusted the saucer so the scene of bridges and trees lined up with the edge of the table, and the cup’s design faced him. “I suspect your liberal principles are anathema to his conservative soul, but mostly, the building occupies acreage the new shopping center needs for parking lot access.”

“I have a three-year lease on that building, Mr.... Axell,” she imitated him teasingly, the tip of her tongue touching her top lip with mischief. Axell blinked and tried not to wonder if her tongue tasted of tea or honey.

“The shopping center people really should have met dear Mr. Pfeiffer’s selling price if they wanted the land,” she continued. “Mr. Pfeiffer grew up in that house. He has no intention of giving it away. My lease specifies he can’t sell for three years. I don’t see any problem. I trust Constance is happy with the program?”

“It’s the only thing that does make her happy,” he said bluntly, and therein lay the crux of his concern, although he wouldn’t admit it to anyone and certainly not to this pixilated gypsy. “She’s very attached to the program.” And to the teacher—again, an admission he wouldn’t make aloud. Confessions of a personal nature revealed weaknesses that could be used against him, he’d learned long ago. “The location is convenient, and it’s a relief knowing she’s in capable hands while

I'm at work. I don't wish to see that arrangement disturbed, but the mayor is pressuring the department of transportation for a road through there. The state can condemn the property if a road is approved."

A tiny frown wrinkled the delicate bridge of her nose, then disappeared as she took another sip of tea. "Well, just tell the mayor that would be a misplacement of the public trust and a personal use of the taxpayers' money. I have plans to expand to a full-time pre-school facility at the beginning of the next school year. As you said, it's an ideal location. The children love the yard, too. We won't be moved."

"You don't understand...Maya." Axell hesitated over the preposterous name, wondered briefly what planet she hailed from, then ruthlessly dismissed all his nagging questions in favor of his goal. "A school of your size requires a license. Should the state decide to side with the mayor, you won't receive that license. Unless you're independently wealthy, you won't be able to sustain your lease for long without income. For the sake of Constance and the other children..."

She rose and drifted toward the counter where the phone was ringing again. He'd never seen a pregnant woman move with such grace. When Angela was...

He shut down that path of thought. "We really must consider

some alternatives.”

She poured more hot water over the leaves in the pot. A cat he hadn't noticed earlier leapt from a high shelf to the counter, stretched luxuriously, sniffed the tea, then settled for a cream-filled saucer beside the hot plate.

His gaze fastened on the gauzy red-brown pleats of her jumper as Maya turned. He glanced away as the baby moved. She was definitely making him uncomfortable.

She patted his shoulder reassuringly as she passed by. “Don't fret, Axell. I know you like all your little soldiers in a row, but life isn't like that. I appreciate your concern, but fate will decide whether the school survives or not. You may try to steer the hands of fate, if you like, but I'm afraid I rather have my hands full dealing with more earthly concerns. Fate is out of my realm.”

She said this last so dryly, he almost winced. “You're new to the area, I believe?” he asked, determined to get a handle on the situation despite her evasiveness.

“No place like home,” she murmured.

“Perhaps you don't understand the local politics,” he suggested diplomatically.

“Authority rules for the good of all and the benefit of none,” she quoted, setting her cup down. “I appreciate your concern, Axell, but I'm certain you have better things to do. Constance will

always have a place in my program after school, and she's welcome to join our full-time summer classes. I think she might be happier with a little more individual attention, don't you?"

Setting the cup precisely so the handle aligned with the table's edge, Axell rose. "I don't think impossible dreams make a good basis for an education, Miss Alyssum. If Constance needs individual attention, I'll place her in a more traditional private school. Thank you for the tea. It was nice meeting you. Good day."

He strode out, not a wisp of that sunny hair misplaced by the spring breeze, not a speck of dandelion fluff daring to cling to the knife-sharp crease of his gabardine trousers or the broad expanse of his suit-coated shoulders as he passed by the shop window. Tall and sturdy rather than elegantly lean, Axell Holm strode down the street with the arrogant certainty of his place in the world.

Maya admired the surety of his stride as he passed, then smiled as he stopped on the corner to examine a foil kite displayed outside the corner drugstore. That Aquarian curiosity would be his downfall, she predicted.

Patting the restless stirring inside her abdomen, she relaxed against the chair back, reprogrammed the sound system, and let the aria from *Man of La Mancha* carry her away from this time and place. Music was supposed to inspire the unborn child, increase

their intelligence and awareness, and she wanted her child to have all the right advantages. She breathed in the crescendo of “The Impossible Dream.” Impossible dreams were the only kind she knew.

She had no money, a stack of bills higher than her sister’s inventory, and no real job to speak of, but wherever her heart was, was home. She could pack up and leave anytime she liked—after Cleo got out of jail.