



A Haunting Song

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Belle feared for her sanity. She heard the same song play at the exact time each night.

At first she associated the music with her neighbors, Dotty and Fred. She thought they'd played the identical song nightly around ten. Belle imagined an old fashioned phonograph, the black disc circulating as her neighbors danced. She envisioned Dotty and Fred taking tiny arthritic steps in rhythm to the music.

La de da la was all that Belle heard, because the unfamiliar song never played all the way through. The music clicked off as fast as it started. The older couple took a walk at night, eight o'clock sharp, but she never asked about their nightly dancing ritual believing it was a sweet romantic custom. Respectfully, the sweet noise continued to come from next door. At least she assumed the music had originated from her neighbor's house.

Belle moved to the country and the song continued to play-same time-every night. The nearest house was one half mile away, so she discredited the notion they were the source. Not that it was likely the odd lyrics would be duplicated five miles from the last set of neighbors.

She'd placed her furniture, stowed her personal items, and taken months to decorate with her mementoes of her travels abroad. Hesitant to walk alone on the roads she stayed near her house, enjoying the sounds of nature, the calls of the black bird, the skeet of the crickets and the constant buzzing of bees. The tranquil relaxing environment lured her to briefly forget about her ex-boyfriend trials.

Her friends encouraged her to date another man. She couldn't. Jim had been a part of her life for the past seven years; if they'd lived together they would have had a common-law-marriage. But they hadn't. She understood the reason, he had another relationship. Belle had unknowingly been the other woman.

Dating, trusting another man would be impossible for her. Not that she hadn't overcome her naivety, she had. Her way of life was to believe in the good of others. She shook her head, the entire drama was too much for her. She liked simplicity, and uncomplicated day to day activity. Exhausted she showered and climbed onto her lonely queen bed. Betwixt sleep and wakefulness she heard the music playing, la de da la. She shot upright in bed and glanced at the clock, ten.

Her heart beat faster than the song continuing to break the sound waves. She jumped out of bed and ran into the living room. The television wasn't on. She didn't have a radio, CD player, or even an MP device. She glanced at her computer which remained in shut-down mode.

She stood solid on her oak plank floor and tried to calm her rapid breathing. Listen! She had to get her heart and breathing to slow down in order to listen. How could this be happening?

La de da la.

The front door remained locked. She threw the switch and jerked it open. Silent. The security light illuminated the entire front of her little cottage. She closed the door and secured both locks.

Belle tiptoed into the kitchen, removed a juice glass from the cupboard and filled it with water. She sipped the liquid as she made her way back to bed. Was her mind creating music? Was she truly going insane? The melody echoed in her head.

It had to be the emotional trauma of losing Jim, of discovering his betrayal. A logical reason, she accepted that thought. She placed the nearly empty glass on the table and climbed the stairs back to her bedroom. She slipped under the covers, leaving the light on.

Her court day was set. In two days she'd be done with Jim. He didn't want to sell the house they'd purchased together. He didn't want to pay her half. According to her attorney, the

case should be a simple process and only take a day. However, her attorney had taken a trip to China and didn't plan to return to Cyan or represent her.

She feared what would happen now. In a few hours she'd meet her new attorney. Hank McLeod, the name alone made him sound like an old codger. How could he possibly help her, not knowing the situation? The entire legal process to separate her and Jim's possessions had been going on for eleven months, she needed it to end.

Cripes, Belle, let it go. Relax, think of the ocean waves. Plan your next sketch. She'd completed the pencil drawing of her Sunday tribute to The Frog Prince, a cartoon strip which had been syndicated in ten states in the past year.

According to her agent, any female from pre-teen to the elderly reads her comic strip on a regular basis. Who knew having an adventurous amphibian hero would be so interesting? A recent article declared her Prince to be equal to Garfield. Humpf. Not likely. Jim Davis's character continues to be unique and outstanding.

She sighed, creating a list in her mind to order new metal nibbed pens to cover the pencil in black ink and pigment. Her newspaper editor continually encouraged her to consider digital media, which would increase her subscriber base. She couldn't, because she loved the old fashion graphite, ink, paint method. She enjoyed the process of putting the bristled paintbrushes to paper as she created her characters. The scent of oils or watercolors as she filled in the sketch relaxed her more than the walks at night. No, she could not let a tweener color her sketches; even making them animated with brilliant tints wasn't as engaging as her physically doing the work.

What could she think about next? She was almost afraid to fall asleep. Would she hear the haunting music if she did? Would the song be a prelude to something else? Insanity?

She'd read a book about *The Watcher* who visited his soul mate. Perhaps the music was an introduction to her soul mate. She wanted a real live man though, not an enigma who would tantalize her and make her desire him without his presence being seen by others. Besides, did she really believe in soul mates?

Cripes. She wouldn't get any sleep this night. She might as well get up and work. Her cotton robe was easy to find in the predawn light, and she slipped it over her tank and tap pants. A few stumbles later and she settled onto the comfortable stool before her drawing desk. She tucked her feet between the double pedestal legs and rested her arms on the 90 degree angled ivory board.

She glanced at the empty paper. Her hero had been angry, melding out justice without the least bit of sympathy for the past several months. It's time to give him a break and the audience to see the fun loving side of him. She took pencil in hand and mapped out a sweet scene with the Prince and his lady love. Exhausted she closed her eyes, to envision what would happen in the next panorama.

"Ain't nothing like the real thing, baby," filtered into her eardrums. She reached for the phone on the bedside table and her arm slipped into thin air. She caught her fingers on the edge of the table before she actually connected with the floor.

Her breath released from its stalled position in her chest. She glanced around, getting her bearings. Living room. Drawing board. No sleep. Phone ringing. She'd fallen asleep on top of her comic strip.

The song alerting her of a caller on her cell continued to ring. She slid off the stool and jogged into the bedroom picking up the phone, recharger cord and all. Bleep. Damn, the call went to voicemail. She scratched her head and shuffled into the bathroom.

She flipped on the shower, making the nozzle show more red than blue and stripped. While the water heated she went into the walk-in closet and perused her clothing. What should she wear to the meet and greet with Hank and preliminary hearing with Jim?

Belle extracted a red dress from the rack. No, too fiery, she needed something to state she was in charge and demure at the same time. Get sympathy from the judge, yet let the guy lawyer know she wasn't taking any crap.

She shoved it at the end of two dark blue suits. Her fingers fell onto a dove gray suit. The jacket was meant to be worn without a blouse and showed a little cleavage which might keep the old geezer awake. The skirt, a-line, would be considered modest. Perfect. She hung it on the door knob, stepped over the tiled step into the shower and refreshed her body.

Dried and spritzed with magnolia body spray she dressed. A touch of lipstick, a smear of charcoal eyeliner under her eyes to highlight their light green color and a wave of the mascara wand and she was ready to go.

She unplugged her cell and pressed the button to select okay and listened to the missed message.

“Ms. Haskett, this is Hank McLeod. I'm your attorney for the civil case. Court has been canceled today. I suggest we meet at 2:00 PM this afternoon to review and when it is reassigned a date and time, we'll be ready.”

Like we shouldn't have done that before the original court date?

“I'm sorry for the delay. If you need to reach me, my office number is 765-630-6283 and my cell is 765-717-8338. Be in my office in a few hours.”

“Right.” His voice sounded younger than his name, but as arrogant as she'd anticipated.

Four hours until she needed to leave, she removed her suit and hung it on the back of her rust, brown and soft moss green paisley chair and climbed under the covers for a little nap.

Belle, haunted by the la de da la song, dreamed of a man. Not just any man, but a fantasy man who looked at her as if she were the greatest gift. A gleam of love would light his irises a fraction as she drew closer to him. Her heart would stop beating; her breath would fail to fill her lungs because she loved him as much as his mysterious eyes indicated he loved her.

Her dreams of having this type of man in her life may have led her to see the man's image at her bedside. If she told herself this a few more times, perhaps she'd believe it.

He sat in the paisley chair, legs separated and his elbows rested on his knees. In contrast to the colors of the chair he wore a blue and green plaid, containing a thin strip of red. His bare chest had old scars. Ugly, rough high-ridged pink dated wounds. His kilt stopped at his knees and she had the strongest desire to peek underneath to see if the adage was true about men wearing kilts.

Her sleep-deprived glance traveled to his face. He wore a frightful scowl and dragged his thick fingers through his cap of light brown, no, reddish locks. He shifted setting against the back of the chair. The noon sun shone in through the window obscuring his face and highlighting the medallion on his tartan. The silver gleamed. She could make out what appeared to be a belt in a circle with the flap folding over the front. Inside the circle was a bull. A fleur-de-lis symbol was the ornamental marking on the belt clasp.

“Ah, love, what am I goin' ta be doin' with ya?” Oh, good, if she were going to dream of a man, a lad with a Scottish accent was number one on her list. She closed her eyes, hoping he'd say more. Perhaps she could focus and get a clear picture. Her heart gushed with renewed energy. Tiny pants of breath had replaced her regular deep breathing.

“Lass, I cannot wait much longer,” his voice contained agony and love, or at least as she imagined love to sound. She wanted more.

La de da la.

Belle bolted upright. Sluggish leg movements brought her body to the edge of the bed. She rested her palms on the mattress and glanced at the chair. He wasn't there. It'd been a fantastic dream. His heartfelt words triggered a physical yearning and lit her soul with fire. Her fantasy renewed by her belief in love.

She stood and stretched. On the other hand, she was a pathetic desperate romantic.

She used the facilities, re-fluffed her hair and dressed in the dove gray outfit. The attorney's office was ten miles away and with an hour free time she stopped at a health food restaurant and ordered a vegan salad and green tea for lunch. As she ate she considered her dream. The music had to be associated with the figment of her imagination. Had she become so lonely she invented illusions of Scottish men?

Get a grip on reality, Belle. You're a strong woman or you wouldn't have achieved success in your art work. Discovery of Jim's betrayal led to good changes in your life. You took action against him and will claim at least half of all you put into the house and furnishings.

She blew out a breath, paid the bill, and left the restaurant. Several miles later she searched for a place to wedge her Mercedes Coup. No parking meters were open so she had to pay the ten dollars to park in the garage for two hours. She planned to add that expense to her tally. The elevator took her to the fifth floor.

She strolled into the office of Wood, Pettit, and McLeod.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Haskett.” Tracy Knapp, the black-haired, dark-eyed beauty receptionist spread her reddened lips into a smile.

“Hi, Tracy. How are you today?” Belle resituated her purse on her shoulder.

“Fine, thank you. Mr. McLeod is waiting for you.” She pointed to the office at the end of the hallway. An oversized brass plate indicated Hankin A. McLeod.

Belle stood in front of the door undecided if she should knock or simply enter because he was expecting her. She knocked softly and twisted the knob. As she pried the heavy door open a phone rang...to the tune of la de da la.

Cripes she was hearing the song everywhere now. Should she exit while he conversed or enter? Why had she become so indecisive? She flung open the door and entered.

His back was to the door as he faced a wall of windows overlooking the city of Cyan, Indiana. Broad shoulders encased in a finely woven black jacket. One hand jiggled coins or keys in his pocket and held the edge of the jacket away from firm thighs and a tight rear. He removed his hand from his pocket and weaved his fingers through dark brown hair. She'd made a stereotyping wrong judgment. His age, younger than the eighty she anticipated, was probably around forty.

He continued the cell phone conversation, not realizing she was in the room. Instead of retreating, as her inner shy personality told her to do, she sat on one of the two guest chairs across from the large cherry desk and crossed her legs. Unaccustomed to wearing three-inch heels she curled her toes to put space between the shoe and her aching foot. She tuned out his words and listened to his lyrical voice, the rhythm even paced.

Her leg, pinched by a tack in the chair, swung like a second hand on a clock with quick jumping movements. The toes curled, the shoe slipped off and banged against the wood front of his impressive desk. Thunk, clunk, and swoosh as it landed on the carpet. His jacket swished as he spun around.

Seconds passed into hours as his cornflower blue eyes stared at her. “I’ll have to call you back, Tom.”

Hank disconnected from the private investigator searching for a woman who matched the description of the female sitting across from his desk and looking at him with doe eyes. Could she be the one? The one he searched for unendingly?

“Good afternoon, may I help you?” he asked, because she hadn’t moved nor said a word.

“Ah, no. I’ll get it.” She mumbled and leaned over, seemingly to disappear under his desk.

He leaned forward to see what she was doing. Her head came up and thumped the edge of the desk.

“Damn, son of a...,” she hissed and massaged her scalp tufts of blonde hair sprung out from her head. The grey shoe she held tightly clutched in her other hand, waved.

He glanced at the folder on his desk. Damn, it couldn’t be her. The woman he had been seeking for most of his adult life could not be the client he was to represent in court next week.

“Ms. Isabelle Theresa Haskett?” he asked, hoping she’d deny it and praying she would say yes because he’d be in close contact with her for several weeks.

“Yes. Call me Belle, my mother was big on religious names,” she said and slipped the shoe on her foot. “I assume you’re Hankin McLeod?”

“Hank.” His stomach flipped flop in anxiety. He couldn’t blurt out, I’ve a copy of your photograph in a medallion left to me from an ancestor and we’re meant to be together. He’d sound like a crazy stalker. Time. She’d get to know him first.

“Like in Hank Hill, King of the Hill or Hank Morgan, from *Mark Twain’s A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*.” She smiled. A play on words he was sure since their office was on King Street in the Highland Hills district. He’d never been a fan of Mark Twain so he couldn’t relate to the book she referenced.

“Hankin is Middle English, fourteenth century. It means by strength and courage.” His cold response made her smile disappear. He didn’t want the woman of his dreams to make fun of his name. She should be all smiles, laughter, and graciousness. Instead she drops the shoe from her foot and makes a joke about his ancestral name.

Her swinging foot stopped and she placed it on the floor. Was she preparing to leave? His heart thumped harder in his chest.

“Ms. Haskett, Belle, I’m familiar with your case. While I believe it is clear and concise and the judge will surely pass the verdict in your favor, I feel we should cover a few details to counter act any negative questions coming from the defendant’s counsel.” He sat on the chair before he acted as his heart told him and grabbed her into an embrace. “And I’ve met Mr. Carne, he isn’t a pleasant person. We should anticipate dirty tactics to discredit your case.”

She crossed her legs again, apparently deciding to give him a second chance. “Okay, what kind of questions would Jim think to ask?”

“He claims you weren’t faithful to him during your time together and had a liaison with a John Wood.” He clicked open his ink pen preparing to write statements in her defense.

“Not true. John is a fellow cartoonist. We bump ideas off each other and meet at conferences. Typically he has his wife, Lindsay, and their two-year-old son with him. Jim is refracting, making his betrayal into mine.” Her lips tightened, but her leg continued the same steady pendulum.

“Do you have contact information for Mr. Wood?” He couldn’t take his eyes off of her if he’d wanted.

“Yes, but please don’t speak to his wife about this, they are expecting their second child and I don’t want her to be upset over a lie.” Belle removed her phone, pushed a few buttons and slid the unit onto his desk. She hadn’t blinked nor slid her eyes to the side. She was telling the truth.

He copied the contact information. “Mr. Carne states the majority of the antique furniture was paid for through his funds.”

“I have receipts and copies of invoices where I’ve paid for the items. I believe Mr. Pettit has the originals, but I have a copied set.”

He noted to check, the paperwork wasn’t in the folder. Hank glanced at her. “Mr. Carne and his friend are living in the house, so the sooner we get resolution the better for you.”

“I agree, so what is the new court date? I’d like to get through this ordeal and get on with my life.” She uncrossed her beautiful long sleek legs and hoisted the shoulder strap of her slim bag higher on her shoulder.

Think, what other question could you ask?

“Three days, Friday is the court date. Whatever possessed you to share space with that imbecile?” At her indrawn breath he’d wished he’d chosen a different way to get her attention. She ejected from the chair as though a spring had shot her out of it. He rushed to the door and stood in front of her before she could pull the latch.

“Move, you sap,” she hissed.

“Please accept my apologies. That comment was out of line.” He reached to rub her shoulder, but at her narrowed eyes, he gave her a friendly pat. Her breasts vibrated in the opening of her jacket as she breathed. He lowered his glance to take in their beauty.

“I want a different attorney.” Her green eyes glared.

He inhaled her scent, a floral bouquet. “I’m prepared—”

Her eyes widened. He stopped his insane breathing-in of her essence and straightened his shoulders.

“Excuse me.” She reached around him and tugged the door, bumping the wood into his stupid ass.

“No. Please. I’m sorry.” He swiped his hand through his hair, not something he normally did. What happened to his calm control today?

She released her fingers from the latch and took a step back.

“I cannot wait much longer,” he whispered.

She held her hand to her heart. “What? What did you say?”

“I’m sorry, please come sit down and I’ll explain.” He held out his hand palm up.

Much to his delight she placed her delicate, slightly callused, hand in his. Hank’s heart raced with excitement. He had another chance to convince her he was a nice guy. He’d invite her out to dinner. His gut rumbled and twisted. His grandmother was right. Skeptical when she’d told him the tale of lost love and soul mates he’d scoffed at the idea. However, he’d never really fallen in love with any of the women he’d dated. Could there be something to this kismet stuff? Because when he’d turned around and seen her his heart plummeted to his stomach. He couldn’t catch his breath.

They sat on the black leather sofa, his weight gently sinking her closer to him. He continued to hold her hand. She didn’t seem to mind. She must not be immune to his charisma as her breath came out in tiny little mint-scented pants.

“My grandmother McLeod was a wise woman and I loved her dearly, but she was daft. At least I thought so until today.” He cleared his throat. *May you rest in peace Gram.*

She lifted an eyebrow.

“Twenty years ago she gave me a medallion with a picture of gorgeous woman nestled inside. She told me according to the McLeod, Harris branch, legend, I was to seek this woman and she’d be my life mate. I tossed the jewel in a drawer and forgot about it until my Gram’s deathbed message a year ago, asking me to seek the woman.”

“And you think I’m that woman?” She didn’t jerk her hand away as he anticipated when he divulged the bulk of his announcement.

“Belle, truly I didn’t believe her. Hocus pocus and divine intervention etc. Not something I subscribe too. However after, Gram passed away I started getting a vision, of the woman, you. You whispered to me about being together.” He shook his head. “I know it sounds insane. I thought so too. I did hire a private eye to look for the woman in that image. With little to nothing to go on, he hasn’t been successful. And now, the woman my Gram told me to spend my life with is sitting beside me holding my hand.”

“What is the name of the song on your cell phone?” She held her gaze steady with his.

“I’m not sure, it’s a family song passed down for centuries. I’ve dubbed it the McLeod Tune. Why?” He rubbed his thumb over the soft skin of her wrist.

“Normally, I’d say you’re a nutcase and be out of here in two shakes of a bird’s tail, but lately I’m more open to the mysterious. I’ve been hearing the song the past year and today, I witnessed a shadowed vision. The presence surrounded me with serenity, comfort, and he said, ‘Lass, I cannot wait much longer.’”

Damn, his Gram was right. Kismet. “Fate decreed that we would meet.”

Sparkling tears hovered at the edges of her eyes. “So, are you going to ask me out on a date or what?”

He released her hand, wrapped his arms around her and tugged her close. “Belle, will you go to dinner with me tonight?”

“I’d be honored.”

Hank kissed her luscious pink lips, merging their beings.

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JJ Keller is a multi-published author of paranormal, urban fantasy and suspense novels. She enjoys reading and crafting. Traveling and meandering in her herb garden are her favorite pastimes. She lives with her husband, sons, and dog, on a small oasis in the Indiana countryside.

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