

KAREN MALLEY

THE BEST THINGS IN LIFE  
CAN'T BE EARNED

MOONLIGHT  
AND MYSTERY

A CHESTER COUNTY COUPLES NOVEL

# Moonlight and Mystery

Karen Malley

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**Moonlight and Mystery**  
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To Eric, because every girl should have a big brother  
like you.



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# 1

With a flourish, the rabbit disappeared. How on earth did he do that? Beth stared, amazed by the magician her brother hired for the twins' birthday party. From the expressions on the children's faces, she wasn't the only one.

"Cool!"

"Whoa!"

"Where did the rabbit go?"

The magician smiled and strolled around the room to each of the children, pulling quarters from behind their ears. The children giggled and begged for more. Beth watched the show from the edge of the dining room where she'd been chatting with her sister-in-law. This guy had such charisma she couldn't tear her gaze away. His boyish good looks didn't hurt, either.

A moment later, his gaze found hers. Uh oh—caught. The magician made his way across the room. He reached toward her face. Surely, he didn't plan to pull a quarter from her ear!

Her eyes followed his hand.

He snapped his fingers and presented her with a pink carnation.

Still mesmerized, she reached out her hand to touch it. Her fingers brushed his, and a tingle ran up

her arm.

“Aunt Beth! How did he do that?”

The spell broken, Beth bent down to her four-year-old niece. “It’s magic, Sammie. I can’t explain it.” She couldn’t explain what passed between them, either. She shook her head. She was engaged to Blaine. This guy simply put on a good show. The fact he was well built with a gorgeous smile and sparkling eyes had nothing to do with the fluttering in her stomach.

The children trailed behind the magician, chattering. He continued his slight-of-hand tricks as the little ones laughed and clapped. Beth stared after him, astonished at how well he handled the children. She moved back into the dining room where the other adults chatted.

“What do you have there, Elizabeth?” her mother asked, nodding toward the carnation.

Beth blinked and lifted the flower. “It’s nothing. Part of the magician’s show.”

Mother tutted. “You shouldn’t be mingling with the hired help, dear. It’s distracting to them.”

“I wasn’t mingling. I was watching the show. It was fascinating. He made a rabbit disappear.”

Blaine moved forward and placed an arm around Beth’s shoulders. He spoke in her parents’ direction. “I’m sure Elizabeth was merely being polite.”

How dare he speak for her. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with watching a magic show.” Beth forced her voice to remain calm.

“Elizabeth,” Blaine said, his tone condescending. “The magic show is for the children. You should be in

here with the adults.”

Before Beth could say something she’d regret, her father spoke up. “Nothing wrong with a good magic show, indeed. If only I could hire a magician to make some of these lawsuits disappear.”

Blaine laughed along with Daddy. Blaine was always buttering up her father. Beth squeezed her fists shut, her manicured nails digging into her palms. What was wrong with her? She should be grateful her fiancée and her parents got along so well. Blaine was a fine catch. So what if sometimes he was a little overprotective? It meant he cared, right?

Sammie burst into the dining room. “Aunt Beth, this was behind my ear!” She held up a shiny quarter.

Beth bent down and tickled Sammie’s ribs. Sammie giggled and squirmed. “How did that get stuck back there? Maybe you should check behind everyone’s ears and try to find more.”

Sammie reached behind Beth’s ears. Beth patted her head. “Sorry, sweetie, I’m fresh out of quarters.” Sammie moved over to Blaine and stretched her hand up to his ear, but her arm only reached his chest. Blaine frowned and stepped back. “Go play with the other children.”

~\*~

Jason’s gaze followed the blonde as she walked back into the dining room with the other adults, shaking his head as some stuffed-shirt put his arm around her. Figured. A girl like her was completely out

of his league. Probably spent more money on her outfit than he earned in a week. Still, there was something there when he handed her the flower. Had he imagined it? He hadn't imagined her watching his performance. She was as enthralled as the kids. Sure, sometimes moms sat with their kids during his shows, but usually the adults let him do his thing and ignored him.

He packed up his gear, making sure none of the kids were watching while he put Snowball back into her cage. He tucked the cage under the cover, keeping her out of sight. No reason to spoil the illusion now.

"Jason, thanks so much." The birthday twins' father, Will, clapped him on the shoulder. "The kids loved the show. Good thing we called them for cake, or you'd be pulling quarters out of ears for the rest of the afternoon."

Jason grinned. "They'd be going on your tab. I'm not made of quarters."

"Speaking of..." Will pulled a check out of his pocket and handed it to Jason. "Worth every penny."

Jason's face heated. "We're friends. You can consider this a favor. I was kidding about the quarters."

"Nonsense," Will said. "You're a professional, and I hired you to be the entertainment at my children's party. Why shouldn't you deserve to be paid?"

"I'm not a professional magician," Jason protested.

"You could be." Will gestured to the gaggle of children crowding around his wife Jamie as she handed out slices of cake. "They loved you. Of course,

all kids love you. I guess that's why you teach."

"True, I am quite lovable," Jason said. "If only I could attract someone above the age of eight."

"I noticed my sister was quite taken with your show."

Will's sister? No way. "I, ah, I didn't notice."

"Sure, you didn't. You gave her a carnation you plucked out of thin air."

Jason grimaced. "If I knew she was your sister, I would've chosen a more exotic flower. I can't imagine any guy getting away with giving her something as common as a carnation. Like I said, though, I'm used to the much younger type." He nodded toward the dining room. "Besides, it looks like she's off limits."

Will shook his head. "Yeah, Blaine Wilkinson the Third. Angling to be the next partner at Henry, Chase, and Tarrington."

"You don't seem too thrilled with him," Jason said as he packed up the rest of his gear.

"He's not a bad guy, but he's not right for Beth."

"Is he a believer?"

Will snorted. "Sure is. He's a believer in hard work, money, and schmoozing my dad."

"You know what I mean."

Will sighed. "Probably not. He goes to church occasionally with Beth and my parents, but I expect that's more to butter up my dad than because of any great desire to spend time with God." His lips turned down. "Honestly, I don't think my parents' motives are much better. They treat church like an extension of the country club. It's a place for them to socialize. They

still don't understand why we're raising their grandchildren in the strange contemporary church we go to."

Jason started to speak, but Will raised a hand. "Trust me. I've said it all before. The only time I ever got them to visit our church was when we got the twins dedicated. All they said was it didn't look like any church they'd ever been in."

"Did they even listen to the pastor's message?" Jason asked. "You can't go a week there without hearing the gospel."

"True, but I'm not confident they were listening. If they don't listen in their church, why would they listen at ours? I'm sure if they paid attention to the pastor and the words of the hymns they sing, they'd view God a bit differently. It's a good church, but I prefer a bit of a younger vibe, especially for the kids. I need to invite Beth to our church. She was away at school when the twins were dedicated."

"Oh, what school?" Jason could've kicked himself. "Never mind, it's none of my business."

"Not interested in an Ivy league MBA?" Will asked.

"Seriously? Yeah. An Ivy league MBA, who happens to be a Tarrington, no less, wouldn't give the time of day to a small-town Christian school teacher who supplements his income doing magic shows during the summer. Thanks again for the gig, Will. I'll see you at church tomorrow."

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Beth smoothed the crumpled sheet on her desk for what felt like the hundredth time. Every time she threw it away, she rescued it from the trashcan and reconsidered.

“What’cha got there?” Someone spoke over her shoulder. She tried to cover the paper but was too late. Jan, her incredibly nosy coworker and best friend, swiped the sheet off her desk. “Community theater tryouts September 8-9.” Her forehead creased. “This isn’t one of the accounts we’re working on, is it? Community theater couldn’t afford our marketing services. And why is it all crumpled up?”

Beth grabbed the paper from Jan. “It’s nothing. A stupid idea. I’m not sure what I was even thinking.” She crumpled the flyer back into a ball again.

“Are you going to try out?” Jan widened her eyes.

“No. Like I said, stupid idea.”

“Why? I bet you’d be great at it. Weren’t you in theater in college?”

“Yes, and I loved it, which is why I thought about doing it again.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“My parents and Blaine would never approve.”

“You’re a grown woman. If you want to act in community theater, why shouldn’t you?”

“I’m a grown woman who is a Tarrington. We have a certain reputation in this town.”

Jan made a show of gagging. “You’re a Tarrington in name only. Besides, I expect you’ll be a Wilkinson

by this time next year, although I don't understand why."

"Jan! Why would you say that? Blaine is a great guy."

"Sure, if you like vanilla."

"Not all guys are dangerous and dramatic. Blaine is sweet, smart, and responsible, and my parents love him."

"But do you?" Jan's gaze was pointed.

Beth faltered for a moment. "Of course. What's not to love?"

"Maybe the fact you can't get involved in community theater because you're afraid of what Blaine will say."

Beth steeled her resolve. "You're right. I am a grown woman. I'm going to tryouts tonight."

"Good for you, girlfriend!" Jan lowered her voice. "Sorry. I came to talk to you about the Thatcher account. Do you have time to check out a few mock-ups?"

The rest of the day flew by, and after a quick dinner, Beth paced back and forth in the lobby of the local community theater, awaiting her turn to read the script. The door opened, and *he* entered. The magician. He no longer wore the magician's suit, but even in a T-shirt and jeans, she recognized him instantly. Her pulse fluttered. What was he doing here? He caught sight of her, and his eyes widened. Would he acknowledge her? Come her way?

He moved closer, and like the last time, reached out toward her. What was he doing? Reaching behind

her ear, he handed her a plastic ring.

"Did you misplace this?"

Beth grinned as she took the vending machine ring and placed it on her pinky finger, a sharp contrast to the oversized diamond on her ring finger.

"Why yes. I've been searching for it all day. It's my good luck ring. Thank you."

"Happy to help you find a blessing, Miss..."

"It's Beth." She paused for a moment. "Just Beth." Maybe she could pretend she wasn't a Tarrington, at least for a little while.

"OK, Just Beth. I'm Just Jason. Nice to meet you." He shook her hand, and she ignored the goosebumps running up her arm. "To what do I owe the honor of seeing you again? Are you trying out for the play?"

There was no denying it. Why else would she be there? "Yes. I performed in college and loved it. I thought it would be fun to get involved again. What about you?"

"I'm the drama coach at my school, but I like to act as well. It shows my kids I know what I'm talking about. Plus, it's a lot of fun."

"At your school?"

"I teach at County Christian Academy. Science teacher by day, drama coach by night."

"And a magician on the weekends?" Beth asked.

"Only in the summer. I'm too busy during the school year." Jason cocked his head at her. "I've never seen you here before."

"I've never been here before. I grew up locally but never frequented the community theater." Why would

she go to community theater when there was a professional scene in Philadelphia? Even trips to Broadway were only a couple of hours away. "I spotted the flyer and, on a whim, thought I'd try it. I take it you've acted here before?"

The door to the theater swung open and a woman with fire-engine red hair sashayed out. She wore layers of gauzy material, impossibly large beads, and half-moon spectacles. She made a beeline to Jason. "Darling, you worried me. I was afraid my star wouldn't show." She lowered her voice to a stage whisper. "You wouldn't believe some of the so-called male leads I suffered through last night."

Jason chuckled. "Now, Daria, be nice. Everyone deserves a fair shot. I'll do my reading like everyone else."

Daria turned, noticing Beth for the first time. "And who might this be?"

Jason gestured toward Beth. "Daria, meet Beth. Beth, this is Daria Freeman, head of the County Community Theatre Board, casting director, and actress extraordinaire."

Daria shooed Jason's praise away. "Oh, please. I'm long past that time. Have you heard about our latest production?"

"No," Jason said. "Everyone's been tight-lipped about it this season. Are we doing something new?"

"I'll say." Daria breathed, fanning herself with the edge of one of her gauzy shawls. "It's so new it isn't even finished yet. Roderick is writing it himself."

"No kidding. We're auditioning for a play which

hasn't even been written?" Jason asked.

"How does that work?" Beth asked.

"Now, now, darlings, don't get yourselves all worked up. He's halfway finished, and all the characters are in place. We'll hold the auditions, start the rehearsals, and in the meantime, he'll finish the play. No problems at all. Nothing to worry about." She inspected Beth and Jason from head to toe. "Hmm. There's a possibility here. You two, come in together."

"Together? Why?" Beth asked, afraid of the answer.

"To read together, of course. Jason will read for Detective Andrews, and you, Beth, will read for the countess. Ah yes, I can picture it now." She swooped back through the door.

The air whooshed out of Beth's lungs. What had she been thinking? She didn't belong here. She couldn't do the reading in front of Jason. What if her family found out she was reading lines with the magician?

"Come on, the role of a countess sounds perfect for a Tarrington."

Beth jerked her attention to him. "What did you say?"

"The role sounds perfect for you."

"How did you know I'm a Tarrington?" So much for anonymity.

"The birthday party over the weekend. Will told me you're his sister."

"Why were you and Will talking about me?"

"We've been friends since college. I asked him about the beautiful woman with the carnation hidden

in her hair. Come on, now. We wouldn't want to keep Daria waiting."

Beth stood frozen to the spot, processing Jason's words, but the only thing she could focus on was the fact he said she was beautiful. She turned to find Jason waiting for her and willed her legs to follow him.

~\*~

Jason couldn't believe it. The audition couldn't have gone better if he'd planned it. Beth was a phenomenal actress. It took her a few minutes to shake off her nerves, but once she got into character, they'd fed off each other's energy. She'd get a role in the play, no doubt. He wouldn't even need to sweet talk Daria to make it happen.

After the audition, he strolled through downtown West Chester back to his place. He opened the apartment door and nearly dropped his keys as a copper-colored blur streaked across the floor. Huge paws landed on his chest. "Down, Sadie."

Sadie dropped to the ground, and Jason rewarded her with a hug. "Hey, girl. Do you want to walk?" At the mention of a walk, Sadie's tail thumped wildly. Jason attached the leash to her collar, and they set out for a quick walk around the block. A few moments later, the skies opened up.

Sadie ignored the fat drops spotting her back and continued sniffing the sidewalk. At first, Jason tried to duck under awnings but soon gave up. Accepting his fate, he allowed the rain to soak him. The warm air

kept the chill at bay. All around him folks put up umbrellas or raced to their cars, but Jason strolled along, letting Sadie take the lead. The rain was refreshing, cleansing. He inhaled the distinctive odor and was filled with peace. Life was good. If only he had someone to share it with. His mind flashed to Beth but he instantly shut down the thought. A girl like her would run screaming under an awning. Rain would probably ruin her expensive clothes or shoes. He glanced down at his outfit. Nothing fancy to ruin here. He turned the corner and headed back toward home.

Once back at the apartment, Jason threw his keys in the bowl on the counter and grabbed a towel. He rubbed Sadie dry, changed his clothes, and took a can from the fridge. He considered texting Will to tell him about the evening, but decided against it. It would be up to Beth to tell him herself. He flopped on the couch, popped open the soda, and took a long drink. Fortunately, the school year was young and there weren't too many papers to grade, but he'd better not start falling behind. He grabbed his laptop and settled back on the couch, Sadie at his side.

Ten minutes later, he still hadn't graded a single paper. His mind kept traveling back to Beth. He couldn't figure her out. Sure, she was beautiful, poised, and professional. He'd expect nothing less from Will's sister, but there was something else there. A spark hidden under the surface. The question was, was she more like her parents or like her brother? He wouldn't expect someone with her financial background to take an interest in the community theater, but there she