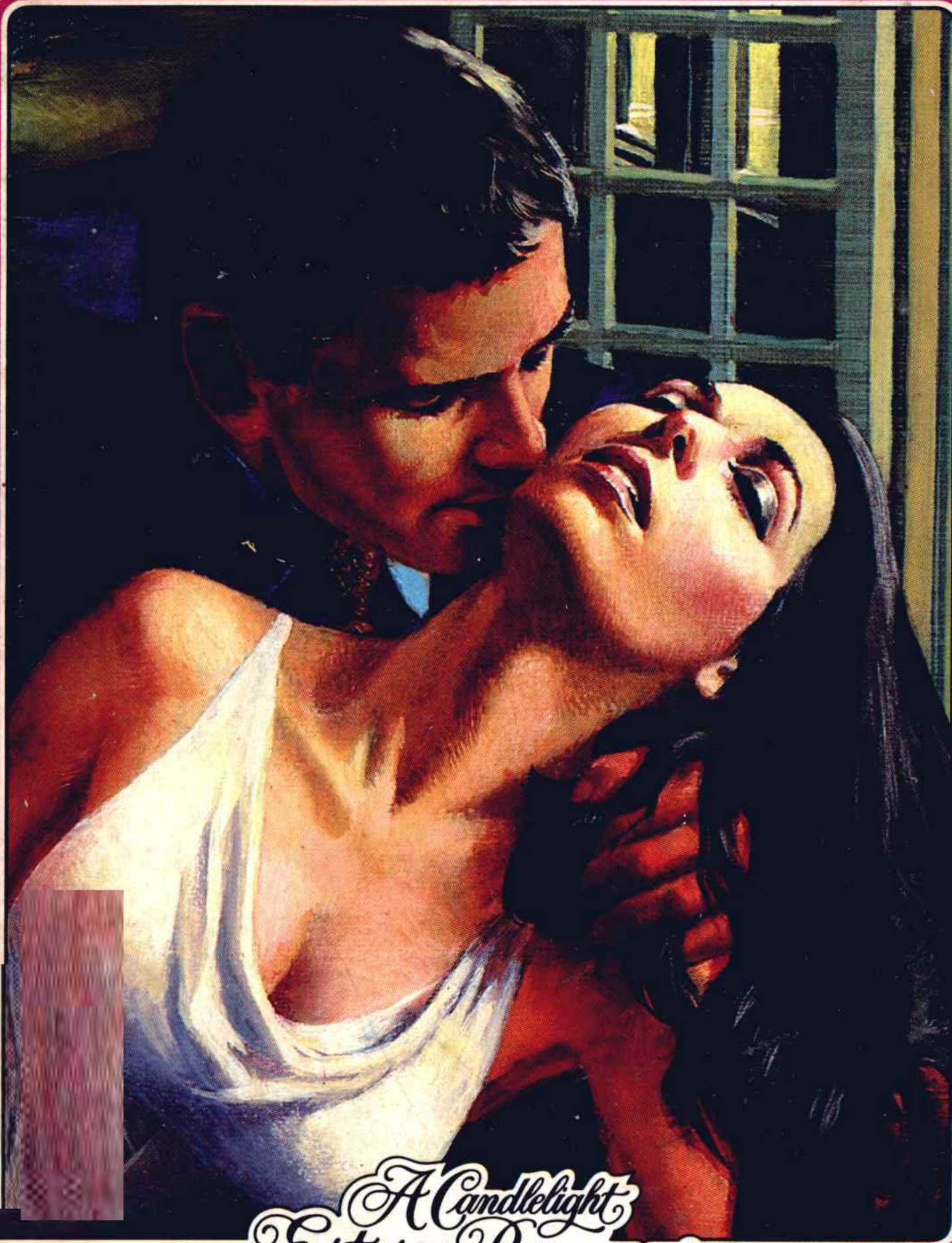


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Megan Lane

THE TROUBLE WITH MAGIC



*A Candlelight
Ecstasy Romance®*

A Candlelight Ecstasy Romance[®]

“THIS IS ALL WRONG, MATT,” VELLA SAID. “I NEVER SHOULD HAVE BECOME INVOLVED WITH YOU.”

“Vella,” he began, “somehow we have got to make this work. I love you too much to let you go.”

“You don’t understand. I don’t want to see you again. I’ve known nothing but heartache since I met you. Let me go back to my private life.”

“You don’t mean that,” he insisted. “I’ll give up politics if that’s what you want—if it means not losing you.”

“I don’t want your kind of life I could never live in a goldfish bowl with people prying and poking at me because—because I can see what most other people can’t. I won’t change and you shouldn’t either. Neither of us will decrease happiness being less than what we are.”

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Megan Lane

A CANDLELIGHT ECSTASY ROMANCE®

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To Our Readers:

We have been delighted with your enthusiastic response to Candlelight Ecstasy Romances®, and we thank you for the interest you have shown in this exciting series.

In the upcoming months we will continue to present the distinctive sensuous love stories you have come to expect only from Ecstasy. We look forward to bringing you many more books from your favorite authors and also the very finest work from new authors of contemporary romantic fiction.

As always, we are striving to present the unique, absorbing love stories that you enjoy most—books that are more than ordinary romance. Your suggestions and comments are always welcome. Please write to us at the address below.

Sincerely,

The Editors
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New York, New York 10017

CHAPTER ONE

Vella Redding brushed her long black hair over her shoulder and leaned forward on the edge of her tall ebony stool to add some more color to the greeting card she was designing. The picture was a kaleidoscope of swirling brightness which, when one looked carefully, revealed the face of an Indian surrounded by a headdress of brilliant bird feathers.

A playful wind stirred the ash tree outside her tall studio window, causing the slender branches to sway rhythmically. The sun skipped through the dancing leaves, momentarily splashing golden highlights on the painting.

Just as Vella made the last stroke with her brush, the man's face altered before her eyes. The vision was brief but vivid, as she saw the image of a stranger superimposed over the Indian face she had come to know as well as her own while she painstakingly created it.

Compelling blue eyes replaced the dark Indian ones, and the complexion became fair, the features patrician, yet sensual. Then, as quickly as the face had come, it was gone.

Vella shivered involuntarily and straightened on her stool. She wasn't frightened by the vision; there had been others similar to it over the years

and she had become accustomed to them, but this one always left her with a strange, incomplete feeling. She wanted to hold the image longer, to study the picture until she understood why she kept seeing it. But that was never possible.

Because she had seen the same picture periodically since she was a teenager, the man had almost become like a friend, so familiar was his face; yet Vella didn't know him. The visions of him were becoming more frequent now, the details of the face more precise. Still, he remained a mystery to her.

Seeking answers she knew she would not find, she gazed around at the Indian decor which reflected her half-Indian heritage. This room always made her feel good. The floor and walls were decorated with Indian rugs collected from all over the Southwest, each with special meaning; huge pillows covered in brilliant colors were scattered on the floor; and everywhere there were woven baskets, pottery jars, and Kachina dolls.

Vella stared at each of the dolls as if she expected the familiar face with the blue eyes to surface on one. But it did not return.

Abruptly, the phone rang, startling her out of her reverie, causing her to jump in surprise. Her thoughts instantly turned to her close friend, Debby, and for a moment, her total concentration was focused on the woman. Debby's presence seemed so real that Vella could almost touch her.

Reaching out for the phone on her desk, she said, "Hello, Debby."

"Vella, one of these days you're going to speak to the wrong person and be embarrassed," Debby said.

Vella laughed softly. She doubted it seriously,

and she knew Debby did, too. She had known it would be her friend on the line. Obviously she was acutely sensitive today.

"So, what are you up to? It's some new man you're trying to hook for me, isn't it?" she asked.

As sure as the seasons changed, in the spring-time Debby began to think of June and weddings, and like a rite of spring, she sought out a husband for her friend. She couldn't seem to tolerate the fact that Vella remained single.

She heard the bright laughter in Debby's voice. "Really, Vella, you're impossible. I just called to invite you to a party."

An image of the man Vella had seen briefly on her painting flashed into her mind, holding her attention momentarily until she spoke again. "What kind of party? Is it for a friend of yours this time?"

There was a slight pause in the conversation before Debby continued. "Not a friend, really. He's a politician. Sam and I are giving a dinner party as a fund-raiser for him. Oh, do say you'll come."

"Not a fund-raiser, Debby," Vella said with a groan. "You know I hate those."

"I'm a little nervous about this one myself," the other woman confessed. "The man is really quite intriguing, and I know he's the best Republican candidate for senator, but something about him intimidates me a little. He's so—so in control. On the other hand, that's what this state needs. He's honest, forthright, and down-to-earth."

Vella thought to herself that he was a rare bird indeed if he was honest and thought he could survive in politics, but she didn't say that. She always

stayed strictly away from that topic and she hoped her friend wasn't going to talk politics now.

"Well, at least you're not up to your old match-making tricks," she said to change the subject.

"Oh, not with this one," Debby agreed. "Even I, the eternal romantic, know that this man's not for you." She chuckled ruefully. "Although I'll admit I do hate to pass up the chance to play cupid with such a fascinating specimen. But it would be a disaster of the first order. He was a military man, a war hero, and he'll make a formidable politician."

Vella couldn't miss the excitement in her friend's voice. "He's certainly got strong backing from former political leaders here in the area. I've heard he was handpicked and coached by a retired general he once served under. The movie folks here are mad about him, too. People actually asked us if they could come to the party to show their support. We couldn't say no, but that's why I need you to give me a little support. It promises to be a hectic evening. Please say you will. I'd do it for you if you asked."

Vella's laughter sparkled. "You know I wouldn't give a political fund-raiser if my life depended on it."

"You know what I mean," Debby said in a pleading voice. "I'd do anything at all to help you, and I need your help with this."

Vella suddenly felt a familiar shiver race over her skin. She sensed that she should go to this party; and she had to concede, at least to herself, that the guest of honor did sound intriguing. She was curious to see this man who had her friend in such a dither. It wasn't at all like Deb to be uneasy with anyone. And besides, Vella couldn't refuse such an earnest plea.

“When and what time?”

After Debby told her and she had hung up the phone, Vella stared blankly at the painting in front of her, the Indian's face now clear and untainted by the face of the vision. Idly, she wondered why she had let herself be persuaded to attend the party. She disliked those political affairs and she was uncomfortable with the strangers who came to them.

But she had had little choice. She couldn't let her friend down. She adored Debby and her husband Sam; they were energetic and interesting, and seriously dedicated to their political causes. Vella had long ago given up trying to explain her jaded views of politics and politicians. At thirty, she had made it her business to know herself and she had no illusions about her prejudices and preferences.

Catching a movement in her peripheral vision, she looked down just in time to see the tail of her cat as it vanished behind the partially open door. She smiled to herself as she silently followed the multicolored animal. Sneaky was a stray who had seen an easy touch and simply sneaked into her house one morning while she was outside picking up her paper. When she walked past the door, he jumped out to wrap his front paws around Vella's leg, but she had anticipated his move.

“Attack!” she cried, bending down to scoop him up in her arms. She smiled as she gazed into his wide blue eyes.

“You were trying to pull a fast one on me, weren't you?” she said, shaking his big head. She studied the playful cat for a moment, then sighed. “If only you knew how uncomplicated your life is, Sneaky,” she told him, thinking of the party.

The large animal began to purr happily. Feeling resigned, Vella went down the cool, dark hall to her bedroom to see what she could wear to the big event.

A week later, Vella drew in a long breath as she paused on the winding walkway of the exclusive house perched high on a hill overlooking the city. Although it was evening and a roguish breeze teased the land, the desert community was still heavy with the day's spring heat. May was barely here, but in Southern California that often meant temperatures in the nineties, and today had been such a day.

There was an aura of gaiety and excitement surrounding the house, and Vella was drawn forward as if being pulled by invisible strings. Glancing at the windows, she watched the silhouettes of the guests as they played across the shades, animated and larger than life.

Suddenly, she trembled with anticipation. She had a feeling that something special was going to happen tonight, and she had never been wrong. Even as a child, she had sensed events that were going to occur before they did. Her mother had encouraged her to trust her intuition, and it soon became clear that Vella's intuition was highly developed.

As though she were already a part of the party, she let the happy atmosphere envelop her when she went up to the front door. She found it odd that she was so eager to join the fun. She really did love a good time, but these political affairs were usually boring. She avoided such occasions whenever possible. And yet, she was looking forward to meeting these people tonight.

"Vella!" Debby spied her friend through the elaborate screen door and hurried forward. "I'm so glad you're here," she said, her face flushed, her eyes glowing. "Come in."

The smile on Vella's face belied the slight tension coursing through her slender, regal body. When she had entered and accepted her small brown-haired friend's kiss, she murmured, "You certainly have an august-looking group tonight."

"I know. The guest of honor really brought them out," Debby said in a low voice. "Now you know why I needed you here for moral support. Just wait until you meet him. His handshake alone is enough to make somebody pay attention to him and his political views."

"One of those, huh?" Vella murmured, thinking of all the hearty, phony politicians she had seen in her time.

"Just wait," her friend said in a low voice. "You'll see." She smoothed the skirt of her gown. "Can you believe it? I, the hostess, didn't know what I should wear to this party."

She lowered her voice even further and whispered conspiratorially, "You know this is an ambitious undertaking for me. The mayor is usually the most important politician I give parties for. I'm so nervous. I had a devil of a time deciding what dress to put on."

Vella laughed. "You managed to find something. You really do look marvelous tonight."

"And you—oh, Vella, must you always outdo us all? It's so unfair," Debby half-joked. "You're already such a magical, mystical creature with your grace and power and looks. Must you dress the part, too?"

She gestured toward the long, sheathlike white

dress Vella wore. It clung to her slender figure, outlining her high, pointed breasts and calling attention to the long legs that went with her five-foot-eight-inch body. The dress had a cowl neck in front and was backless. It truly did take an exceptional body to wear it well, and it fit Vella as if it had been made especially for her.

Vella smiled, and her smile had a wonder all its own, sweet and sincere, but her smoke-colored eyes were glinting mischievously.

"You have no worries, Deb. No man will notice me with you standing there in that daring magenta gown. I'd have to do bust exercises for two years to get that cleavage."

Debby giggled. "I have to *scream* my attractions." She glanced down at the V of her dress. "Look at this. It goes all the way to my navel, but you—you're just you," she said, sighing in resignation.

Vella really wasn't aware of how unusual her looks were. She was not beautiful in the classic sense, for her features were too extraordinary, her bone structure all angles and planes, and her coloring so dramatic that she stood out everywhere she went. Straight midnight hair cascaded down her shoulders to contrast with her fair skin, and startlingly wide gray eyes gazed beneath winged brows and thick black lashes.

Her movements were swift and sure, yet she seemed ethereal when she walked. She was so remarkable that most men instinctively shied away until they got to know her.

But that wasn't the case with Matthew Colridge, who sat across the room from her, watching the vision in white with interest. She was the most