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AT HIS COMMAND  
COLLECTION

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CAROL STORM



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Love Beyond Time  
AT HIS COMMAND, BOOK ONE

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Love Beyond Time

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## Chapter 1

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**P**olly Parker sat down on the roof of the sunken tomb, gulping greedily from her canteen. Suddenly, the stones shifted under her weight. Polly let out a shriek, sliding backwards down a long dark shaft. With a crash, she fell onto a wide stone slab, the impact smashing a pile of brittle bones.

“Dad! Help! Dad!” Polly bounced to her feet, unhurt but furious at her own unusual clumsiness. Professor Dan Parker would be so disappointed! His devoted daughter had just destroyed what appeared to be the skeleton of an ancient princess. Quickly she scanned the burial chamber, noticing jewels and a gold medallion glittering among the bones she had just shattered. Light shone down into the sunken tomb from the broad shaft she had fallen through. But where was her father? Polly shouted till her voice was hoarse. It was no use. The archaeological expedition had been some distance away when she sat down. She was her father’s right hand, and she didn’t like to display any sign of weakness to the rest of the team. And now she was trapped in the underground tomb!

*Polly knew better than to panic. Any minute now, her father would notice she was missing. In the meantime, she decided to explore the burial chamber.*

*She tiptoed across the ancient vault, stepping over pots and urns of various shapes and sizes. Many of them seemed to contain seeds. A few steps brought her to a golden door that led to another chamber. The girl fit her hand into the large palm print that had been set into the soft metal eons ago. Nothing happened.*

Polly bit her full lower lip, studying the curious design that had been engraved on the door at eye-level. There was something almost hypnotic about the spiral pattern. It was full of sinuous swirls and curves, and at the center was a glowing green eye. Polly felt the fine golden hairs on the back of her neck stand straight up. The design on the door exactly matched the design she had just seen on the royal skeleton's shiny gold medallion!

Retracing her steps, she quickly located the medallion. But the bones she had crashed into moments before were gone. Only a thin layer of fine gray dust remained on the stone table. Polly shivered, a tremor of fear running through her slender frame. Perhaps the bones had crumbled due to the shock of being exposed to air and light after thousands of years in darkness. That happened all the time on archaeological digs back on Earth. But this was not Earth. This was a barren planet in a remote star system. Unknown forces might be at work, the supernatural powers of a vanished civilization. And one thing was certain. Desecrating a tomb was bad luck in every known culture. Polly clutched the heavy, round medallion tightly in her hand, fervently hoping that it would help her open the golden door and escape from her underground prison.

There was no key that she could see, no hole or slot that the medallion might fit. Polly tried scraping it against the matching design, or running it along the edges. She tried pressing it into the hollow hand impression. She tried everything. At last, frustration won out over logic, and without thinking, she put the medallion around her neck and pressed her sweaty palm against the door.

There was a groaning sound from deep within, and Polly felt

the shifting of an enormous weight as the golden door swung inwards. Timidly peering into the inky gloom, she decided right away that this chamber was a dead end. There was no light at all, no hint of another opening anywhere. Yet the air inside the darkened chamber did not smell of mustiness or decay. Sharp, fragrant odors, reminiscent of incense and spices, drew Polly deeper into the warm darkness.

“Hello,” she cried, in a tremulous voice. Yet she knew that no one could hear. No living thing had been in this chamber for thousands of years. The most she could expect to find was another skeleton, perhaps the king or ruler of this long-gone civilization. She didn’t want to cause any more damage. And if she stayed too long, the door might close behind her!

Polly was already backing out of the chamber when an unseen hand reached out and grabbed her. Choking terror rushed over her in an icy wave, stifling her scream. Yet the fingers that tightened around her slender wrist were not ice-cold skeleton fingers. Polly was imprisoned by a man’s warm grip. The pulse beneath her wrist beat wildly against his firm and dominating touch.

“Night Flower?” asked a rough, deep voice. “Is that you, my promised bride?”

“Help! Help! Dad, Mac, anyone, help me!” Polly screamed and squealed, jerking frantically towards the light. But the thing that had grabbed her had no intention of letting her get away. “Who are you?” Rising out of the blackness was the largest and most muscular man Polly had ever seen. His skin was bronze, his hair jet black. His eyes were a brilliant shade of emerald green.

Unlike the skeleton in the outer chamber, he wore no jewels or adornments. Only a crude loincloth covered his manly parts. Even in her terror, Polly found herself wondering if he was a giant all over.

“My name is Polly,” she stammered, gazing into his green eyes and feeling her mouth go dry. If this huge, splendidly built

specimen wasn't a ghost or a ghoul, perhaps she could reason with him. "My father and I are scientists, and we meant no harm. I fell into the outer chamber by accident."

Black brows knitted. "Where is Night Flower? Show me where you entered our chambers."

Polly gulped. "Would you mind letting go of my hand?"

The giant let her go. "I have been asleep for many ages. Perhaps I forgot my strength."

"Many ages?" Polly retreated, rubbing her wrist and trying not to look into those glittering green eyes. This man had to be some sort of hermit or something, a last primitive survivor. Wild theories about immortality and reincarnation had no place in the mind of a real scientist. Still, as she scuttled back into the reddish light of the outer chamber, Polly wondered how any primitive hermit, or even a grave robber, could have survived for more than a few hours in such a tightly sealed tomb.

"See, the stones shifted up above, and I slid down the shaft." Polly pointed to the roof of the burial vault, where the gaping stones let in light. The glimpse of the dead planet's red sky was reassuring, but it would be impossible to climb up the shaft without ropes and helping hands from above. Right now her only companion was staring at her as if he never wanted her to escape.

"Did you land on the slab below?" the bronzed giant asked her, his voice deadly calm.

"Oh! Well, yes. I fell on the slab – but there was nothing there, I swear it. Only bones!" Polly tried to smile, but grew more and more uneasy as she stared into those fascinating green eyes. She was a trespasser, and she had violated the remains of someone close to this large and menacing man. Those huge hands could snap her neck in an instant, before she could even scream for help.

"You killed her." Quick as lightning, the big man in the loin-

cloth seized Polly by the shoulders. His enormous hands held her in an iron grip, his furious face just inches from her own.

“I didn’t kill her. It was just a skeleton! The skeleton of a person who died centuries ago!”

Polly squealed and wriggled, but her struggles only succeeded in disarranging her hair and clothing.

As her limbs flailed and her breath came in gasps, she was becoming more and more aware of the giant’s overwhelming physical power. His chest was a wall of solid bronze, his arms two iron bars.

“You say you didn’t kill her. Yet you wear her gold medallion.” The rugged giant took the precious medallion between two fingers, holding it on its chain an inch from Polly’s heaving breasts.

Then his green eyes shifted, slicing into hers with a gaze of intense hypnotic power. “Night Flower was a spell caster. She had great power. She would have helped me to bring this world back to life. But now you wear the medallion. So you must take her place.”

“No! I’m not a spell caster. I’m a scientist! I can’t take part in primitive magic. I won’t do it!” Something gave Polly the courage to forget the fact that this huge, angry man could break her in two. She met his gaze straight on, without flinching. How frighteningly male and primitive he was! Yet there was also an unearthly light in those striking green eyes, a gleam that suggested unseen powers.

“Strong.” That low, deep voice made all the fine gold hairs on Polly’s bare arms and the back of her neck stand straight up. At the same time, those sea-green eyes made her stomach turn flips. Polly felt faint, but there was no mistaking the bronzed giant’s grunt of male approval. His slow smile was devastatingly sexy. “No woman has ever resisted Jade Panther’s inner command before. You must be a very strong spell caster indeed.”

“Jade Panther?” Polly swallowed. “Are you Jade Panther?”

“That is my name.” The green-eyed male nodded, as though talking to a simpleton.

“Oh. Oh, this can’t be happening!” Polly reeled back a step, sinking against the slab where Night Flower’s remains had once lain. All of the archeological evidence suggested that Jade Panther had been the last ruler of this planet before the great cataclysm. His relics and temples were all over the surface of this lifeless planet. Either this magnificent male specimen was lying, or he was completely mad. Or else he was a legendary hero come back to life, a warrior with the body of a god.

“You said Night Flower was nothing more than a skeleton when you entered the tomb.” Jade Panther’s deep voice roused Polly from her thoughts. “The two of us would have saved this world, but the Dark Forces must have intervened. Possibly they are still lurking after all these ages. We should leave here quickly and begin the healing magic.”

“I don’t do magic,” Polly replied sharply. “I’m not from this world. My father and I came here on ships, from a planet beyond the stars. We don’t believe in gods or magic. We’re scientists.”

“Scientists.” Jade Panther frowned, studying the alien intruder who had awoken him. The slim female wore a yellow shirt, drab brown trousers and heavy boots. Yet her hair was like spun gold and her eyes astonishingly blue. Perhaps these so-called scientists were a race of gods from another world, sent here to help him restore his lost kingdom to its former glory. Then again, they might be evil beings, in league with the Dark Forces.

“My father and his friends are close by,” Polly told him urgently. “They’ll be here any minute. We have food, water, medicine. Let us help you! If there are others of your kind —”

“There are no others,” Jade Panther said. “Only me.” The female named Polly had a kind face. Her big blue eyes showed a yearning to heal and do good. There were other yearnings, too. Jade Panther let the power of pure desire flow through him,

drawing the woman closer. Polly had resisted his inner command, but that was not the same as resisting her own natural desires.

“No others? You must be very lonely.” Polly had no idea what put that thought into her head. Loneliness was something she had learned to ignore in life, just like pain. If you didn’t acknowledge it, it didn’t exist. Dan Parker’s daughter had no time for feeling lonely or left out, not even when the day was done and the rest of the team was singing songs around the campfire. There was always something more important to accomplish. Right now she was trying to get away from Jade Panther, to escape this underground tomb. The proud aloneness in his face, the sadness in his words, shouldn’t have stirred her so deeply. Like a sleepwalker, she drifted towards him.

“For long ages I’ve waited alone. Now you are here.” Jade Panther took the slender but shapely young woman into his arms, surprised by the rough texture of her drab, shapeless clothing. Evidently these beings had no interest in making female garments seem alluring. But sweet-faced, blue-eyed Polly was definitely a female. He kissed her lips, letting his whole body respond to her.

At first Polly felt pure terror as Jade Panther enfolded her in his arms. His arms were so massive, his chest so wide and hard. It was clear she could never escape from his bone-crushing strength. But then his lips came down on hers. Jade Panther’s lips were warm, promising tenderness as well as domination. She felt the promise of his poised, hard-muscled body. His fierce kiss grew more enticing, his tongue teasing her senses. It was not so much his strength she feared now, but the awakening of her own desire. Yet she could not resist the magic. Polly kissed back hungrily, her slender arms rising of their own accord to encircle his thick, bronzed, muscle-corded neck.

“Polly! Polly, are you okay? Where are you, Polly?”

“Daddy, I’m down here! Be careful!” Polly cried out in a cracked voice, her lips still buzzing.

“It’s all right,” Jade Panther said low in her ear. “Let them come down. I want to meet these space-traveling scientists. They must be like gods, all-knowing and all-powerful.”

“Dad, wait! There’s a man —” The faintly mocking irony in Jade Panther’s deep velvety voice made Polly instantly suspicious. Was he luring her father into a trap? She wriggled impatiently, but before she could free herself from his iron embrace her father slid down the shaft.

“Whoops!” Dan Parker’s roly-poly figure made him resemble a bouncing ball as he tumbled down the steep incline. He would have taken a hard fall on the stone slab where Polly had landed earlier, but at the last moment Jade Panther reacted with incredible speed, releasing Polly and catching the older man in his massive muscular arms.

“Well, I say!” Polly’s father looked up at his rescuer, showing no fear at being in the arms of a man nearly twice his size. Dan Parker was a scientist, which meant that curiosity and the need to learn new things over-powered every other instinct. “We are friends,” he said cheerfully. “Are you a native of this planet, sir? Do you have food or drink? Would you like to eat with us?”

Jade Panther set Dan Parker down gently on the slab. He looked into his mild blue eyes, a surge of satisfaction welling up as he read the old man’s thoughts and gauged his strength of will.

“You are a wise man,” the gentle giant said, making his voice a warm, soothing command. “I will reveal all the secrets of my people to you. But first I need to make a journey into the hills. Your daughter Polly will accompany me, to help me restore life and beauty to this planet.”

“I will not!” Polly cried. She wanted to make sure her dad was okay, but this huge hulking specimen was blocking her view. All she could see was his broad back, yet she sensed the way his hypnotic green eyes were locked on her father’s, putting all sorts of royal commands into his head.

“Yes,” Parker said slowly. “Polly will gladly help you, Your Majesty. She’s a good girl.”

“Your Majesty? Dad, what’s wrong with you? Snap out of it!” Polly skipped around Jade Panther’s massive torso, and grabbed her father by his flabby arms. She shook him by the shoulders, looking deep into his mild blue eyes. Her father appeared very calm. Perhaps a little too calm!

“It’s all right, Polly.” Dan’s voice was normal. He even hugged her back. “I’m sure Jade Panther will be anxious to meet our friends. We must all serve him now, in any way we can.”

“Dad, no! What have you done to him?” Polly glared at Jade Panther, surprised by the bemused expression on his deeply bronzed features. The giant warrior who had just kissed her senseless was now looking at her in an almost curious way, as though he were a scientist himself.

“Strange,” he said. “Your father gave in almost instantly, while your mind and will are still your own. You are strong, but you must be mine. We must find some other way to make you obey.”

“Fat chance!” Polly knew exactly what the man meant. That fabulous kiss had been nothing but a sneaky ploy, meant to rope her in. She stood up straight, her hands on her hips. “You’re not playing any more tricks on me, buster! My father is a scientist, a very great scientist, but we’ve got men for protection too. Rough types who won’t fall for your mysterious mumbo jumbo.”

“That’s nice,” Jade Panther replied, serenely. “I was raised among rough types myself.”

Polly was so angry that she forgot how dangerous this man was. She flew at him with her fists, howling and pounding on his massive chest. He held her easily, inflicting no harm. Yet when her rage grew too violent to control he simply flung her over his shoulder and carried her back into the inner tomb. Her father followed along, trotting eagerly at his heels.

“Ah, the inner sanctum!” Dan Parker said, as they walked

through the darkness. “Only a great king would have such a sacred resting place. Is there an opening at the other end?”

“There is,” the mighty warrior replied. “I have already detected the presence of your men outside. They are preparing a meal.”

“Put me down!” Polly howled, not wanting Mack and the boys to see her kicking and flailing like a helpless captive. There was something very humiliating about being carried back outside over the giant’s shoulder, with her nose jammed into Jade Panther’s broad back and his hands on her hips. She kept on screeching until finally Jade Panther reached up and gave her a light smack on the ass.

“Enough,” he said gently. But his hands were firm. “You must save your strength.”

The moment her feet touched down Polly rushed over to Mack and grabbed his elbow. “Mack, you’ve got to do something. This man is dangerous! He’s put father under a spell and he wants me to go on a journey and —”

Mack was craggy, red-faced and nearly as tall as Jade Panther. He stood firm, clenching his jaw in the flickering firelight. “What’s the idea, mister? Doc Parker is in charge here.”

Jade Panther stuck out his broad hand in a gesture of friendship. “I come in peace, warrior. Will you join me?”

The two men shook hands, and Polly saw the change come over Mack’s weathered features.

“Yeah,” he said. “We can do that. It’ll be swell to see plants and trees growing around here again. And Polly’s a good kid, a levelheaded kid. You can count on her, chief.”

Polly wanted to scream. There had to be a way to stop this! She thought of running for the ship, but it was miles away. She even thought of shooting Jade Panther with the blaster in Mack’s belt. But when she saw how everyone was obeying him, building a campfire and setting out food and drink, she realized violence

would not work. Information was clearly the key. And there was only one way to gain the information she needed.

“All right, I get it,” she said, when she was alone at last with the massive monarch of this dead planet. The two of them were sitting in front of the roaring campfire, with steaming plates of food set before them. Night was falling and the fire was welcome since the air was growing cold. “You’ve got powers, psychic abilities that are probably hereditary. You were some kind of a divine ruler here once?”

“I was a king,” Jade Panther acknowledged. He worked his jaws, chewing the canned food slowly, as though it were an effort to consume such unfamiliar nutrients. In between bites he held up his huge hands to the fire, frowning a little, as if a blaze fueled by artificial heating pellets was not quite what he desired.

“You were a king. But with your psychic gifts people worshiped you as a god. And you used your mental powers to hold sway over thousands.” Polly was certain that this Jade Panther must have been a terrible tyrant. The way he toyed with her inside the tomb made her blood boil. But if it was all a matter of psychic power, then his hold over the expedition depended on his ability to concentrate, to send out enough mental energy to control the thoughts and actions of almost thirty men. Polly wracked her brain, trying to find a way to interrupt the signal.

“It wasn’t all mental.” Jade Panther could sense the spirited little female fairly bursting with defiance. Kissing her had been so easy. Yet his own response had been far too sharp, almost hungry. Polly had awakened him in more ways than one. Staring into the puny fire, he thought of the languid, dark-eyed women who had satisfied his every desire when he was a royal prince ages ago. They had never questioned his right, or attempted to resist him. Even Night Flower had come to him willingly when the time came for the long sleep. Jade Panther was troubled, feeling Polly’s alert blue eyes studying his

massive frame. He was beginning to doubt his powers, his ability to rule her mind. Again he thought about that kiss, reliving the spontaneous passion, that exhilarating sense of equality. The blue-eyed girl was not like the others. He could kiss her, but could he control her?

Polly wolfed down her stew while the big man was lost in thought. She had to keep up her strength, since she was the only one who seemed able to resist his spell. It was certainly strange how she had revived him, finding that gold medallion and opening the huge door. Polly was still wearing the heavy gold ornament around her neck. For a time it had been forgotten in all the excitement. Now she closed her hand over it once more, concentrating her mind on Jade Panther's hulking male form.

"Stop that." Jade Panther turned to her, his calm demeanor masking a growing turmoil. The bargain he had made was with Night Flower, not this alien female. He pictured the multitudes who had served him, and the lush forests that were now gone. His lost world could be revived, but only if he remained firm in his purpose. Yet suddenly everything seemed to blur, as he felt the weight of this young girl's accusing stare. "It's not right," he said thickly, his mind starting to fade to blackness. "You are Night Flower, my promised bride. You must love me . . . love me . . ."

His big body swayed, and Polly jumped out of the way as Jade Panther collapsed in the sand. Lying at her feet he looked helpless, seemingly knocked out by her own powers of resistance. Polly knelt down beside him, resting her hand on his powerful throat. Yet her own heart was racing so fast she could hardly tell if his pulse was healthy or not.

"Polly, what happened?" Mack came running up, a blast weapon in his hand. "We were just getting ready to make camp, and suddenly you disappeared. But that was hours ago!"

"We were all in a sort of trance," Polly informed him. "Apparently the people of this planet once had psychic powers. I found a way to counteract it with this." She held up the gold medallion.

“Polly, are you all right? Who is that man on the ground? We must examine him!” Huffing and puffing, her father ran up to investigate Jade Panther’s lifeless form.

“No, Daddy. The first thing we must do is tie this big fellow up,” Polly said. “Those two trainees from the outer quadrant are good with ropes, aren’t they? Let’s get Tom and Al to secure the specimen, and then Mack can post a guard over him. We can’t take chances, not with this giant. He’s out now, but he’ll wake up soon. Once he realizes his mental powers aren’t working, look out.”