

LENA AUSTIN



EYES OF THE COWAN

Changeling Press

# **Eyes of the Cowan**

## **Lena Austin**

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Blaze Robinson is a newly-renowned pagan author (a la Scott Cunningham), with all the attendant problems. He cherishes his privacy, and wishes nothing more than a peaceful Beltane holiday alone. However, his agent has persuaded him to do the one thing he hates -- give a face-to-face interview with Valda Lyman, a magazine columnist and skeptic. Her satirical column has been Blaze's favorite way to laugh, so he grants the interview.

Valda has a secret reason of her own for coming to spend the week at Blaze's Florida home. Not only does she want to debunk this elite darling of the New Age crowd, but she thinks she's going crazy. She's seeing "glows" around people and things, and she's looking for a logical explanation to it all.

Sparks and magic fly when Blaze discovers Valda is young, voluptuous, and just as charmingly satirical as her column, and Valda discovers she's staying with a "real deal" witch. Beltane has never been this hot, even in Florida.

## Chapter One

"Dammit, Daniel. Why are you doing this?" Blaze Robinson barely controlled his temper, contenting himself with snarling viciously into the phone.

"Because it's good for sales, and you know it," his agent replied. Daniel Owens had worked with Blaze for years now, and wasn't intimidated by a little show of temperament.

"You know I don't want to be interviewed unless it's by email." Blaze stormed into the kitchen to start a pot of tea. He hated publicity of any kind, and with good reason.

Daniel sighed. "Yeah, I understand why, too. But Blaze, this isn't for some local yokel New Age rag. This is for *Weird* magazine. Valda Lyman."

"You're shitting me." Blaze stopped poking in his supply of herbal teas, his hand poised on top of his favorite blueberry. He began to chuckle. "The woman who does the Skeptic's Voice column, right?" In better spirits, he opened the box and pulled out some tea bags.

Daniel's voice lost the pleading note. "Yep. The same woman who makes you laugh every month, and whose column you quote to me when you disagree with how your editor wants you to sound spookier and more mysterious."

Snickering now, Blaze pulled out his favorite teapot from the cabinet. "Damn right I do. Miles wants me sound like a charlatan barker from the circus. Ms. Lyman demands logic and explanations anyone off the street can understand. Bless her scientific Cowan heart." He poured the boiling hot water into the china teapot, setting it aside to steep.

"Cowan? What's that? You and your weird terms."

"It means a non-believer." Blaze pulled down a sturdy mug with the phrase, "Life's a Witch" in bright green on the side. He could feel his privacy slipping away. Dammit, he liked celebrating Sabbats alone without having to consider anyone's tastes but his own.

"That she is. So, you'll do it?"

Blaze weighed pros and cons. "So, I allow Valda Lyman in my home for a week of arguments, instead of the peaceful, solitary Beltane I'd planned. In exchange, I'll get publicity I can't buy anywhere else and probably material to make sure my next book is clear as a bell." He leaned his hip against his countertop and frowned. "It won't be pleasant. She's probably an argumentative hag who won't take my word that the sky is blue without outside confirmation."

"Ya think? That's a no-brainer, bud. Don't worry, I'll negotiate that certain things about your life are not to be included. However, if you can convince a national columnist like Valda Lyman that you're legit enough to get her nod, you've probably got a *New York Times* bestseller waiting in the wings." Daniel drew an audible breath. "That would give me quite a bit of leverage in arguing a nice advance out of Miles on the next contract."

"Ah, now we come down to the real reason you're pushing this. Greed. You want my advances over the half-million mark." Cernunnos Publishing was notoriously tight-fisted, but had been generous enough to please Blaze. Miles was actually a good editor, when he wasn't trying to make Blaze sound more like a showman than a shaman.

"Damn right. I'll call *Weird* magazine and tell them yes. Catch ya later!" Daniel hung up with a blip.

Blaze took his teapot and a mug into his office with a long, heartfelt sigh. "Fucking great. I just agreed to allow Ms. Scientific Negativity in my house for a whole week."

He poured himself some tea, found his glasses, and returned to his latest manuscript. "Screw it. I'm not changing my ways. Come on, Ms. Lyman. I'm not

putting on any shows, nor am I stopping my Beltane celebration just for you. Come to Florida and meet a real witch.”

\* \* \*

Blaze stalked over to his tarot-reading table and sat in the comfortable chair. That thrice-damned reporter would be here in a few hours. Curiosity finally got the best of him. He wanted to know why he seemed forced into hosting a *Cowan* journalist for the sake of selling his latest book. It made the top seller lists, didn't it? So why did he feel as if he had no choice? The cards would tell him.

He grounded and centered himself, knowing he'd get a false reading if he didn't meticulously pay attention to every step. Sight was not his forte. He pulled a pad and pen close to write down the reading for reference later. The first card was a no-brainer -- The Hierophant. Yeah, that was him, the teacher. No news there.

The second card, What Crossed Him, was also not unexpected -- The Ten of Wands. Okay, yeah, he'd been working too hard. However, there was a caveat to that card. Not letting pride stand in your way. Blaze sighed. Blast it all, something was going on. He moved on through the reading.

Card number three: What he knew. The Queen of Swords. Shit. A woman of passion and power who brings change. If an Ace appeared anywhere in the reading, he was dead meat. Dammit, he didn't need any more personal growth attached to a passionate woman, even one like Valda Lyman.

Card number four: What was affecting the situation? The Moon. A mysterious force? Heightened psychic development? Huh? He dutifully wrote it down, including all the interpretations for that card. Sometimes you just had to take it on blind faith that you didn't understand the entire situation. Damn if he understood what this card meant.

Card number five: The past now fading away. The Hermit. Yeah, he preferred his peace and isolation. It was going away. Well, that figured. His latest book was selling like hotcakes, and Daniel was having a hard time keeping the paparazzi at bay.

Card number six: What was before him? Death. Oh, damn. Not only was the reading turning out to have enough Major Arcana cards in it to give him the willies, now this card indicated a major turning point. A change for the good toward a better life, but one that brooked no argument.

Card number seven: His current state of mind. The Four of Pentacles. Okay, he granted that. The miserly attitude of not wanting to give up anything, especially his privacy, fit what he was feeling. He couldn't write with other people around.

Card number eight: What surrounded the situation. The Ace of Cups. Blaze put his head on the table, right on top of the cards. "No, dammit, no." He sighed. So, a new love was in the offing. Was it with the woman who was represented by the Queen of Swords? Not exactly what he had in mind.

He didn't have to finish the reading. He knew what was coming. Like a directive from the Goddess, The Lovers card appeared right on cue, followed by The World. Resigned to the changes the reading indicated, he scribbled everything down for addition into his Book of Shadows. This reading was momentous enough to be noted for posterity. He knew better than to fight a reading this strong. No reading was set in stone, but this one bothered him.

The ways of reading cards were open to interpretation, and each card held several definitions within. He could be missing an obscure meaning. Not to mention that the very act of reading and knowing sometimes changed the future. That was why he rarely read for himself. More often than not, he was sorry he asked, and this time was no exception.

Blaze sat back with a sigh. "Okay, Goddess. I can take this kind of a clue-by-four to my head. Like it or not, Ms. Lyman is the catalyst for change in my life. I can fight it all I want, but the changes to come are for my own good. I hope you don't mind if I take time to adjust." He scrubbed his forehead and pushed back from the table.

He poured himself a mug of tea and walked out on the patio to soothe himself by watching the sun rise over the trees. His cat, a little gray tabby, rose from where he lounged on one of the chaises and jumped up on a rail to demand petting.



“Hi, Spike.” Blaze rubbed the cat and scratched behind his ears. “We’re going to have a woman in the house, boy. I hope you don’t annoy her like you did my last female guest.” He shook his finger at the cat, who promptly batted at it. “Oh, you want to box, do you? Okay. Put up your dukes.”

Blaze set aside his tea and played their favorite game. He’d try to touch anywhere on Spike’s body with his hand, and Spike would defend himself like a boxer, using his de-clawed front paws. Mock growls and masculine laughter mixed until Spike grew weary of the game. He pounced on Blaze’s hand and delivered a love bite that didn’t hurt, but definitely would draw blood if Blaze moved.

“Ouch! Okay, you win.”

Spike released his hand and sauntered off with a victorious air to return to his favorite sunny patch for a “nap attack.”

“I’m warning you, Brat Cat. No stealing her hair doodads. Hear me?” Not much of a threat, considering Blaze was chuckling.

Spike turned his back on his human buddy and washed a leg.

Blaze sighed. “You haven’t lived until you’ve been ignored by a cat.” He shook his head and picked up his tea.

He hoped Ms. Lyman had the same sense of humor that showed every month in her column. Spike was a handful of a cat, with more personality than a litter of kittens, considering he’d been at least three when he’d wandered up to the house and demanded to make his home here.

Like all cats, he seemed to know instinctively who hated cats and who was allergic. Invariably, he made their lives miserable. If he disliked that individual, Goddess help them. The last person had been some imperious TV news reporter who’d been condescending enough to want to “do a piece” on Blaze. A piece of something else had been on her agenda as well. She hadn’t lasted twenty-four hours. Blaze had politely sent all the ridiculous bows and hair clips Spike had appropriated back to the station.

Come to think of it, Valda Lyman had long hair in her magazine article picture. Blaze groaned, envisioning a sneezing, scratched, and disheveled woman storming out

of his house half an hour after she'd arrived. Daniel would kill him if he screwed this up.

For all his comments to Daniel, he knew she was no hag. Her bio was in the magazine, along with a carefully contrived publicity photo that may or may not reflect reality. He went inside and picked up his latest issue of *Weird* magazine. She looked sexy and mysterious in that picture.

"The Queen of Swords. Well, that fits you, Valda Lyman. You are passionate about your skepticism." He wondered if she was as passionate in the bedroom. He envisioned being entangled in the Beltane circle with the woman in the picture, and felt himself harden at the possibility.

"What am I thinking?" He threw the magazine back on the table, found his mug of cooling tea, and stalked upstairs. He had a manuscript to finish that was not going well. He didn't have time to be daydreaming about sex. So what if he'd not had anything but his hands to pleasure himself for months? "That's the price I pay for peace and quiet," he muttered, and started searching for his glasses. "I'd better stop talking to myself. I might start answering -- or worse, arguing."

He picked up his latest research book and found his glasses perched on top of it. He sighed. One of these days, he was going to lose this third pair in a year. Placing them on his nose, he opened the dusty book. "Tasseomancy. Think tasseomancy, I hate tea leaves," he chanted like a mantra.

At least he had warning, if he'd read the cards correctly. The woman coming to visit him was about to change his life in some way, perhaps forever.

## Chapter Two

Valda leaned back in the seat of the taxi and wondered for the umpteenth time if she was crazy. After weeks of arguing with her editor, she was finally on her way to interview the reclusive darling of the New Age crowd and self-proclaimed “witch,” one Blaze Robinson. Belinda had been reluctant in the extreme to allow Valda on this excursion, even if it meant sales for *Weird* magazine. She remembered her argument with her editor clearly.

“Look, V, you’re good, and I know that. Your column has pulled us out of the doldrums, even if you get hate mail from the fans. You dare to argue and demand scientific proof, and that generates interest. The readers love to hate you,” Belinda commented.

“Because I don’t accept anything on blind faith. That’s the point. At least some of the letters and emails are colorful.” Valda grinned. She loved the controversy she’d generated for the past year. Not only was she the token non-pagan on the staff, she liked to think she added a certain intellectual appeal. It was her personal crusade to demand proof and keep the charlatans from emptying the pockets of and harming this particularly kooky and loveable genre of readers.

“Now you want to go after Blaze Robinson? Are you nuts? The fans may stop writing and start lobbing bombs at you. He’s been a star ever since he wrote *Guide to Magical Moments*.” Belinda fingered her pearl and moonstone necklace. “Look, he’s a big fish to fry in your column.”

“That’s why I want to interview him, Bel. Listen, he made some pretty outrageous claims in his latest release. I tried some of those lotions and potions from it. Didn’t do a darn thing for me, except make me smell like leaves and flowers.” Not that

the scent wasn't nicer than the cheap perfumes she could afford, but there'd been no special effects.

"Our readers would say you have to put magic behind it," Belinda murmured.

"Yeah, right. Let me know where I can get some fairy dust, and I will."

Right up until just days before she arrived here in Florida, she was sure she'd lost the argument. Then, just last month, Belinda had sent her an email. "Robinson is a go," and then the flight information. When Valda questioned Belinda, her usually garrulous editor had clammed up. Witches sure were a weird, mercurial bunch. Probably Belinda had done some woo-woo tarot reading or something. Whatever. Valda didn't care. She needed to find a real witch. An honest one. Soon. Before she went nuts.

Triumphant, Valda leaned back in the taxi seat, and shoved her glasses further back on her nose.

The taxi wound down a road lined by oaks laden with Spanish moss that filtered out the sun. The houses changed from simple concrete block structures of no great beauty to luxurious ranch style homes. With so many windows, their air conditioning bills probably would make her car payment look like chump change.

The cab swerved into a drive between tall stone walls that formed an impressive fence. The drive was not paved, but covered in some sort of white substance that crunched. Thick foliage obscured everything but the driveway.

"Here you are, Señora. Matoaka Acres," the cabbie announced proudly in a thick Spanish accent. He swung into the circle that decorated the front of the imposing two-story home of pink brick. Valda dug the cash out of her blazer pocket and tipped him generously. Instead of taking her on a circuitous route through the wild scrub just southwest of Jacksonville, he'd driven her directly to the address, matching the route the map program had said was the shortest. Valda believed in paying for good service.

She scrambled out of the cab on her own while the driver got her bags out of the trunk. She hauled her precious new laptop from the floor of the taxi and settled her heavy purse firmly on her shoulder. After the air-conditioned comfort of the cab, she

felt the humidity slap her in the face and forced herself not to pant. A tank top under her business-like blazer gave her some relief from the stifling temperature of an April afternoon, compared to Denver's dry cool air. In Denver, there had been a late snowfall just last week. Quite a change. She'd grow a set of gills and learn to deal with the thick air eventually, she supposed.

Just as the cabbie deposited her second large bag at her feet and thanked her, the front door opened. Valda picked up one of her suitcases, determined not to burden the butler.

The man who stood in the doorway was definitely not the butler. Six feet of hunk, with straight dark hair and the most intense dark blue eyes she'd ever seen. Bare feet, blue jeans worn almost white in all the right places, and a white tee shirt with the remains of a silkscreen dragon did not fit the carefully crafted publicity photos of Blaze Robinson, but it was him nonetheless. A cute gray cat with stripes wound its way around his legs affectionately.

Men like that weren't supposed to really exist, were they? The kind of man who lounged in the doorway with a killer smile came out of airbrushed photos from the art department of magazines like hers. What was more, he was glowing golden, even in the shadow of the porch. *Neat trick, bub. Who does your special effects? Industrial Light and Magic? Oh, and nice touch with the witch cat. Couldn't find a black one at the shelter in time?*

She might have been able to handle the small hot ball of lust that formed in her lower belly -- she might even have waved off the neat special effect and asked him later how he did it -- had it not been for her personal curse. Every time she got nervous in any way, she turned into a klutz. Today was no exception. The cat jumped off the porch and wound himself around her legs. Determined not to harm such a friendly beast, she sidestepped. Her suitcase banged up against her leg, guaranteeing a bruise, even as the cabbie drove off. To add to Murphy's Law, the catch on the old thing let loose, and her clothes burst out onto the white shells of the drive.

The curses she uttered were not very dignified, nor were they ladylike, but they fit her embarrassment. Murphy's Law completed her grand entrance by ensuring the

bag that burst contained her one secret passion: lingerie. "Fucking great. Just fucking great." She knelt in the white shells and began to stuff her thongs, teddies, and bras back in as fast as she could.

The cat didn't help. He saw his chance and stood in her way, trampling her favorite bra into the shells of the driveway. She gave up and petted him while he rumbled a loud purr.

"Spike! Let the lady get her things, you spoiled brat." The sexy, amused chuckle that followed proved Blaze Robinson had a voice that should have been reading erotic novels for recorded books.

Valda felt her face flame as she heard the crunch of white shells heralding Blaze Robinson's approach. "Nice cat. What's his name again? Spike?"

"Thanks. Yeah. He's spoiled rotten. Here, let me help." Nonchalantly, Blaze knelt a few feet away and grabbed up the most far-flung pieces. He handed them to her without batting one of those infamous dark sapphire eyes or making the typical masculine comments. That is, until he handed her the robe to her favorite negligee set and saw the label. "Nice place. My mom loved them." He passed the robe soberly.

Valda raised one eyebrow. "No smart comments, Mr. Robinson?" The defensive tone in her voice was automatic. That shop he commented on was famous for its queen-sized collection, and Twiggy she wasn't.

He helped her close the suitcase and flipped the latch. "No, Ms. Lyman. Why would I?" He stood effortlessly and helped her to her feet. "They're your business."

"Damn right they are." She let him heft both the suitcases and picked up her purse and laptop case. It was an equitable distribution of labor. She had the awkward items, and he had the two heavy ones. "Well, we're off to a great start," she commented to his back as she followed him into the house.

Over his shoulder, he flashed her the cheeky grin that graced the back covers of his books. "Only fair, you might say, Ms. Lyman. You get a week of peering into my private life, while all I got was a mere glimpse."

There was the smart comment she'd expected. She knew men had to make them. That particular one was mild, and not worth answering.

So, he was as big on his privacy as the hype said, apparently. *Well, too bad, Gorgeous. I want to see how a "real witch" lives, and you are the most famous. If even half the stuff you write about is true, then I need to talk to you.*

She shrugged off her secret desperation and watched him put her suitcases at the bottom of a magnificent oak staircase just visible through an archway. When he bent over, Valda ignored the display of an appealing butt and instead turned to study the living room through the opposite archway. Classic furniture in tones of cream and soft green blended with antique tables, presenting a picture of classic understated elegance.

"May I take your laptop and put it with your suitcases? Your room has a desk in it, so you'll be able to write in comfort there." He paused and smiled gently. "I had a cable modem installed up there for you."

Valda handed over her case with a nod and continued to study the decor. Where was all the gothic gloom and doom associated with witches? The whole house was light, airy, smelled sweet, and she could hear the strains of Beethoven playing softly from somewhere she couldn't see. The cat made himself at home on a sunny chair, winking at her. She bet that was "his" chair, since it was liberally dusted with hair.

"Tea, Ms. Lyman?" Blaze now stood at her elbow. "Or would you prefer a Coke?"

That Southern drawl of his was killing her. "Uh, Coke is fine. Diet whatever, if you have it."

"Fine and dandy. Care to join me while I make myself some tea? Or would you prefer to wait in here?" He indicated the elegant living room with a wave of his hand.

Decisions, decisions. She wanted to see a witch's kitchen, but the chance to poke into the bookshelves in the far corner was equally tempting. Some of those tomes looked like they belonged in a museum. Kitchen first. Always good to know where the coffeepot was for mornings.

She dropped her purse on a small table by the front door. "Lead on, Mr. Robinson."

He turned and led her through the living room and around to a small open door, through an equally small home office that was neat as a pin, and through another door into a sunny kitchen. "Please, could you find it in your heart to call me Blaze? It seems only right to be less formal, since you'll be my guest for a week."

Valda considered that while Blaze rummaged in the modern refrigerator and gave her a diet caffeine-free cola with a smile. "Thank you. Yes, if you insist. But if we're going to be on a first name basis, shouldn't I call you by your real name?" She was positive no one would have a name like Blaze.

He chuckled and pulled a beautiful teapot from the dish drainer. "Blaze is my real name, Valda. My parents went through the obligatory rebellion of becoming flower children about the time of my birth. I was even born in San Francisco." He laughed and turned on the bright stainless steel kettle on the stove. "That's where they became Wiccans, too."

Her fingers itched for a notepad to write that down. Instead, she popped open her cola and took a long swig. There'd be time to write it all down eventually.

Blaze grinned and pointed to a yellow legal pad and pen on the kitchen table, propped behind a candlescape. "You can borrow that until we set up the formal interview."

Valda looked at him suspiciously. "How did you know what I was thinking?"



## Chapter Three

Blaze pulled down a bright yellow smiley face mug from a cabinet. "Come now, Valda. You're here because I'm a witch, aren't you? I may as well prove it before you pull the tape recorder out of your laptop case where you hid it." Goddess, it was fun to blow her mind. Blaze purposely kept his face blandly innocent.

Valda stepped back. "How did you know that?" Her eyes looked a little fearful.

He sipped his tea placidly, and ignored the slight scald to his tongue. "Why don't we move into the living room and I'll explain. This may take awhile, you see."

Huffing out a breath, Valda snatched up the pen and pad in one hand, since her other was occupied with the cola can. She turned and marched back through the office. "This had better be good, Blaze. I'm not fond of being treated like a fool."

He followed, pretending to be chastised, and sat in an armchair across from her on the sofa. "I'm sorry, Valda. Here's how it works. It took no psychic ability whatsoever to make those two seemingly telepathic comments. As you may be aware, the same techniques are used by charlatans of many types, most notably professional magicians. I merely read your body language for the first, and made a simple logical deduction on the second."

Spike wandered over and made himself comfortable in her lap. Her fingers automatically started petting. She'd always wanted a cat, but hadn't wanted to neglect any animal with her long work hours. She looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Go on. I'm with you so far."

"Your hand twitched when I talked about my name and parents. Being a writer myself, I am intimately familiar with the sudden need to write down an important point so I don't forget. That's why you'll find notepads conveniently placed throughout the

house, even in the bathrooms. All I ask is that you tear off the sheet you used and put the pad and pen back where you found them. Fair?"

"Fair enough." She scribbled a note on the pad beside her on the sofa. It was awkward, but better than disturbing the contented fellow vibrating her lap. "And the second statement was a guess that I'd put my recorder with my laptop?"

Blaze leaned back and sipped his tea. "Yes, using several known facts. I travel a great deal, when forced." He frowned briefly, and then deliberately erased the negative expression. "I try to put all my electronics in one bag so it's the only one searched by hand at airport security. Since the scanners affect both cassette tapes and computer disks, it's logical that they be in the same bag. I've read enough of your articles to know you wouldn't miss that trick."

She inclined her head briefly in acknowledgement of the compliment. "We'll get to the 'when forced' in a moment. Any other clues? I like knowing this has a logical explanation."

"Your laptop case was very heavy, more so than would be usual for just carrying a modern machine. It also bulged on one side. Therefore, you have something in there beside just a laptop. It was easy to assume a journalist would have a recorder and probably a digital camera. How am I doing?" He smiled and made his eyes wide and innocent.

Valda's lips twitched, then she laughed. In a patently false British accent she said, "Brilliant deductions, Holmes."

Joining in the fun, Blaze pretended to hold a pipe in his hand. "There's more, my dear Dr. Watson." He returned to a normal voice. "I don't care for charlatans any more than you do. Those who dupe the public out of money performing so-called psychic tricks while using simple deduction, vague statements, and outright tricks frankly piss me off."

"Well, we agree, then." Valda put down the pen and toasted him with her Coke. "So, why don't you like traveling? Somehow, I just can't see a uh, witch, disliking flying."

He choked off laughter at her joke, while at the same time noting that she used the word witch with a certain amount of discomfort. "Very funny. I don't hate traveling, except for the missed work. It's the destinations. The truth is, I've had a few difficulties with some of my fans who may be less in touch with reality than the average person." That was as diplomatically worded as possible.

One of her eyebrows shot toward her hairline. "No! Say it isn't so!" Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "Not fond of the Dances with Credit Cards crowd, or the folks who believe in Atlantis and aliens?"

Spike added a "Rowr!"

"Oh, you don't like them either, sweetie? I don't blame you." She went back to stroking, and purring resumed.

Blaze shuddered, remembering spending most of one weekend trying to convince some blue-painted lady that he was not her soul mate returned to her from some Atlantean past life. "Not wishing to upset my fans who believe in Atlantis and aliens, I will merely say that I believe there must be a few oddballs to provide entertainment value. Most witches I know are sober, responsible citizens who just happen to practice a different religion."

"Is witchcraft a religion or a practice? I've never heard of spell casting being part of any religion," she scoffed.

Blaze laughed into his tea mug. "Both." He looked at her frustrated face soberly. "I personally don't see the point in ritualized symbolic cannibalism practiced by some faiths. In witchcraft, we call that transmutation, the making of one object symbolically into something else. Technically, that's a form of spell craft, yet it's part of religious ritual in several faiths."

"Oh, ouch. I'm not sure I should print that." She picked the pen up again.

"In my faith, we're honest about what we do, and we follow the law of Harm None. I rarely transmute things, except for during the symbolic Great Rite. I don't do that but perhaps once a year since I don't practice with a regular coven."

Blaze crossed his legs and tried to ignore the beginnings of a hard-on as he envisioned a full Great Rite with the lovely Valda Lyman. She looked prim with her dark brown hair bound up in a careless bun on top of her head. The beige tank top under her brown blazer hinted at full, rich breasts. Her fashionable glasses made her hazel eyes as large as an owl's. In fact, that's what she reminded him of -- a wise owl, comfortably fluffy in its brown feathers.

He let her catch up on her notes. Valda Lyman was everything he liked in a woman as far as looks, and her infamously suspicious nature seemed to be derived from a preference for truth and honesty. He could appreciate that. Physically, she was a voluptuous package, all wrapped in cool sobriety. It was like looking at a librarian and knowing she was wearing a corset under her prim suit. That image could drive a man to madness in short order, especially when her suitcase revealed she did indeed wear sexy lingerie under those drab clothes.

Valda didn't look up from her notes, but she did say softly, "You're staring. Please stop."

He jerked back from his fantasies. What her picture had conjured was made worse by her physical presence. "My apologies. I find you as fascinating as you apparently find me."

"Yeah, right. Sure." The disbelief in her eyes when she looked up told him how little she was appreciated by the common type of his gender.

There would be time enough for that later. Blaze was content to wait. Valda was beginning to appeal to him on several levels, but he'd be damned if he'd plunge right in and scare this pretty little owl off. It was time to change the subject.

"Would you like to pull out your camera and get some of the more obvious journalism out of the way? I'll be serving dinner a little later than normal, to accommodate your stomach being from a different time zone." He stood, and offered his hand. "I'll dispose of my cup and your can, if you'd be kind enough to wait."

Valda tore off her notes and handed him back the pad. "Meet you back here in a minute." She probably was also in need of a bathroom. Spike jumped down as soon as she moved to stand.

"Powder room is under the stairs, if you need to freshen up," he offered.

Her hazel eyes widened a moment. "Will you stop doing that?" She turned and stomped off toward the stairs.

Blaze confined his laughter until he began washing the cup and teapot, where the water drowned out the sound. He stood at the foot of the stairs when she came out of the bathroom and waited patiently while she dug her expensive-looking camera out of the laptop case.

Then he led her out the kitchen door, with Spike following, and took a path that led them directly to the building that had once served as a garage. The brick structure was unprepossessing, even purposely bland. "I thought we might start with my altar room. I have a small altar set I use in the dining room when weather is too bad and I'm alone, but this is the main place I worship and do the craft part of being a witch." Ignoring the big garage door, he opened a small side entrance.

"It's not locked?" Valda stepped back to snap a couple of pictures of the building before following him inside.

He flipped on the overhead lights before shrugging. "Normally it is, but I assumed that you might want to get the still photos out of the way first, so I unlocked it this morning."

Valda went straight to the altar, but kept her hands to herself. He gave her top marks for courtesy. She glanced at him with her hand poised above the chalice, and received a nod of permission before she picked it up. "This is gorgeous." She turned the cobalt blue goblet, inscribed with a pentagram, and even held it up to the light of the window opposite the door they'd used. Then she put it down exactly where she'd found it.

“Thank you for asking permission before you pick up my magic implements,” he commented softly as he joined her. Spike jumped up on the altar and made himself at home by planting his furry butt in the pentacle offering plate.

“You can’t work with pagans for over a year without learning how precious they consider these things.” Valda smiled impishly. “For instance, I know better than to even think about touching that black-handled knife, there.” She indicated his athame with a jerk of her chin. “May I take pictures of your altar?”

Blaze shrugged. “You may, but some might not turn out. I didn’t shield anything.” It was too late. She was clicking away, waiting only long enough for the flash to recharge before taking another shot from another angle.

Blaze stepped out of the picture and let her have her way. He sat in one of the chairs against the wall and waited until she seemed satisfied.

Wordlessly, he led her through a door in the back to his workshop. Her powers of deduction could figure out the purposes of each workbench that lined the walls.

While she studied the remains of his latest project of getting his spring garden planted, she commented, “This room is bigger than your altar room.”

“I do more moving around in here. He indicated the large work surface in the middle of the room. “It’s easier to work with boards, boxes, and mirrors here.” He showed her his next project, an antique mirror about three feet square, where he’d already begun to design a faux stained glass project of, oddly enough, an owl. “This is a Samhain gift to a friend.”

Valda’s fingers traced the simplistic drawing of the owl. “Yeah? Cool gift.”

“If we get time this week, I’ll show you how to do it. It’s actually fairly easy.” He drew her out the door, where the sun was beginning to set. “Getting hungry?”

“We have a whole week. That’s plenty of time,” she protested. “Yeah, I’m starved. What are we having?”

“Shrimp Creole. I’ve other projects in the meantime that take precedence. Beltane is in a couple days. I was hoping you’d help with those crafts instead. I doubt you’ve

been invited to participate in Wiccan rituals before. Mine are simple, and I'm willing to explain everything."

"Okay. Just don't expect me to do any woo-woo stuff."

Blaze just laughed. "Okay, no magic for you."

\* \* \*

Valda finished typing her notes into her laptop. This was great stuff, so far, and she couldn't wait to put it all in a cohesive document. Blaze Robinson was turning out to be quite interesting and, well, "earthy" was the best word she could think of. His explanations of so-called psychic "telepathy" would make great copy. What was more, he could cook like a dream. She'd sipped her wine at the little kitchen table while he "messed about," in his own words, creating a dinner that could rival any restaurant.

"Hey, Chloe," she called softly to her muse. "Think this will work? Man, do I feel inspired." She leaned back in her chair. "Those Greek statues on Blaze's altar got me thinking. Look, I know Chloe was the Muse of Agriculture and all, but I like calling you Chloe. Hope you don't mind." She got up and undressed for bed.

Now clad in her favorite gown and robe of filmy white, she uploaded her pictures from her digital camera, intending to send them to her office email for later use. When they all popped up on her screen, she cursed fluently. Most of the pictures were fine, but just as Blaze had predicted, all her shots of his altar looked overexposed in spots. That gorgeous goblet, his knife, and the two statues of Greek figures weren't there. In their places were white holes.

"Oh, that's just not fair. Damn!" She deleted the worthless pictures and sent the rest to her office. "Okay, buster, what did you do? That ILM glow at the door was a cute trick, but hampering my work just pisses me off. How did you do that? Not funny, Blaze."

Muttering, she got up and stalked to the door. "Here I thought we had an understanding that you hated deception as much as I do. Time to make you come clean about the glowing, and about how you made it so my pictures wouldn't take. Grrr!"

She stalked down the hall, intent on finding Blaze. A light at the other end of the hall spilled out into the corridor, telling her where she'd find that handsome... whatever. "Man. He's just a man," she muttered. "Okay, so he's a hunk. Deal with it, Valda. He's still pulling the wool over your eyes, and you're holding him to the bargain of honesty."

As she got closer, the cold of the bare wood floor made her slow her steps. She could hear the tapping of a keyboard. Oh. He was writing. Probably still drinking tea out of those ridiculous mugs, too. A whimsical bunny had replaced the smiley face mug he'd used that afternoon at dinner. Didn't the man drink anything but tea?

The tapping of keys stopped. Valda approached cautiously. Some writers were pretty pissy about being disturbed. Sure enough, Blaze was seated at a modern U-shaped desk with a black and silver computer that made her journalist's heart drool with envy. His silver glasses were halfway down his nose, and his black bathrobe was half-open, baring a large portion of smooth chest. He was poring over some huge leather-bound tome and talking to himself. She inched closer to hear his words.

"Okay, Goddess. You got me into this. Thanks to the lovely Ms. Lyman, I'm including a chapter on symbolic transmutation." He threw his hands behind his head and twirled his chair to stare out the window with his back to her. "Let's not deviate too much from the plan, this time, please. Even with a pretty owl down the hall to distract me." He turned and rubbed his eyes.

Valda took that moment when he was occupied to flee. He'd called her a pretty owl, and said she had inspired him. No man had ever called her pretty. She called herself a coward and crept back to her room. Too many revelations in one night guaranteed insomnia.



## Chapter Four

The kitchen was beginning to smell like heaven itself, even more so than when she'd come downstairs to find a fresh pot of coffee that was close to ambrosia waiting for her. Blaze had already been making some sort of bread dough, and had plopped it into a big bowl while he cooked her the most amazing breakfast she'd ever eaten. Now the bread was in the oven and filling the kitchen with its aroma.

Valda dubiously eyed the small log that Blaze set in front of her. The glue gun was warm in her hand and ready to use. "Okay, tell me again what I'm doing, here." Spike lounged on the table at the other end, sleeping. How did one little cat manage to take up so much room?

He placed a box of dried white and pastel flowers in front of her. "All you have to do is glue these dried flowers on the log in some way that you think looks good. Cover the whole thing, or not, until you are pleased with the way it looks. Think about what a bride might like if she were to have a decorative log in the fireplace, and she were getting married in front of it."

"Okay, gotcha." She picked up the first flower. It crumbled a little in her hand. "Boy, these things are fragile as all get out. Why don't you use silk flowers? They hold up forever."

Blaze wrinkled his nose. "Because they stink to high heaven when burned. Here." He plucked a small silk flower from a garland that hung above the door near where Valda sat.

He took it to the table and held the flower over a small sand and candle display that decorated the table. Flicking a lighter he dug out of his pocket, he set the flower on fire.

The stench was overpowering. “Ugh!” Valda turned her nose away. “Put it out!” Spike ran away, yowling. She didn’t blame him one bit.

Blaze dropped the flower into the dish and covered it with the sand. “Imagine a whole log decorated with that, then burning them. The smell would drive everyone away, even in the open-air ritual I like to do. It would be like setting a stink bomb off in a church in the middle of the service.”

He walked away and opened a window. Valda couldn’t help admiring the view of his impressive ass clad in faded denim as he lifted the window sash as high as it would go. Did he have to look so good in jeans and a blue tee shirt with some sort of Celtic design on the front?

She quickly turned her mind toward the task of placing her crumbling dried flower in the very center of the log’s top. Her own rose-pink polo shirt and navy slacks made her feel overdressed compared to his decidedly casual style. The man was even padding around barefoot. When had bare masculine feet become sexy to her?

She couldn’t see over the high counter of the central island, but he was banging around a few pans.

“May I ask you something, Valda?” Blaze dumped something that rattled into a pot.

“Yeah, sure.” She picked a pastel yellow flower and glued it in place.

“How did you end up working for *Weird* magazine when you’re such a skeptic?”

She threw him a sardonic glance and picked up a pink baby rose. “You mean, what’s a nice girl like me doing in a pagan place like that? I’m the token um...” She couldn’t think of a polite word to use. She couldn’t say “normal person.”

He chuckled. “How about the word we use to describe non-believers? Cowan.” He stirred something in the pot, making a scraping sound. “What I meant was, how did you get started there? I’ve been a subscriber for years, but your column is the first dissenting voice I’ve read in it.”

She grinned in memory and set another flower in place. “Would you believe it started as a joke? I’d been doing freelance work, even in college. My roomie in the dorm

subscribed to the magazine. Just before graduation, she left one open on the table and I read it. The article was so dumb I couldn't believe people would fall for such a line of crap. So, I wrote a rebuttal article disputing the claim and demanded scientific proof." She shrugged. "I submitted it, figuring they'd send me the usual frosty rejection I always got when I submitted out of genre."

The oven timer buzzed, causing Valda to pause. Blaze grabbed some oven mitts. "I take it they bought the article? What was it about?" He bent, reached in the oven, and took out a beautiful braid of bread that made Valda's mouth water. Placing it on a towel on the counter, he stepped behind the island again.

"Yeah, they bought it." A daisy twirled in her hand. "It was some cockamamie story about opaque crystal balls pulled off the ocean floor in the Caribbean that supposedly -- now get this! -- were bombs made by Atlanteans. I mean, really! Wouldn't that have caused a stir in the archaeological community even a little?"

Blaze lifted his spoon and tasted something brown. Nodding approval, he grinned at Valda's little collection of flowers on her log. "Yeah, okay, I can see that. So, they bought the article, and then more, until they put you on staff?"

Valda bent her head and nodded. She wasn't going to describe those first couple of years, living off a receptionist's salary and submitting articles she typed up at night in a tiny rented trailer just outside Boulder, Colorado. "Took me two years to make it to -- what did you call it? -- token coward."

"Cowan. Cow Ann." He poured the contents of the pot into something else, staring intently at his work for a moment. "They certainly needed the eyes of a Cowan on things. We forget non-believers don't see things like we do."

See things? Like men who glowed golden even inside houses, like Blaze did now? Even the stupid log in front of her glowed slightly. Her hands shook and the little rose in her hand ended up glued sideways on the log. Valda shuddered and changed the subject. "Hey, aren't I supposed to be interviewing you, Mr. Famous Author?"

"Anytime you're ready." He laughed and shoved something that sounded like plastic to the side. "These will take a while to harden."

Spike had reappeared, in that silent way cats had, and was now yowling and begging. She snorted as he stretched himself to his fullest length to reach the top of the counter, pawing at something.

Blaze shooed him away. "No, I am not giving you LSD for cats. Go chase a mouse or eat your cat food."

"LSD for cats?" she repeated. "Chocolate? What are you making, anyway?" It smelled like a confectionary in the kitchen with the bread and chocolate smells.

"Come see, if you like."

Curiosity got the best of her. It always did. That was what made her a journalist instead of some comfortable wage slave in a cubicle. She sighed and got up to wander behind the island.

Penises. Chocolate penises, all lined up in neat little molds on the counter. Some were life-sized and some were no bigger than her thumb. The larger versions were three dimensional, and the smaller were flat on one side.

The surprise made her lifelong curse activate. She tripped on the rug in front of the sink and went sprawling. Naturally, because Murphy hated her, she fell sideways and slapped her hand into a mold of the largest penis collection as she attempted to catch herself.

On her way to the floor, everything slowed, like some sort of hokey scene out of a movie. She saw the first splash of chocolate catch a flabbergasted Blaze right in the face and chest.

Her impact at his feet might have been funny to anyone else, and probably twice as hilarious when the rest of the mold teetered off the counter to dump the remainder on her until it rattled on the tiles beside her. Upside down, of course. Her glasses skittered across the floor and disappeared from view.

Silence was not golden, not when you wallowed in humiliation with your eyes shut. She broke it with the only thing left to her -- humor. She didn't bother opening her eyes. "Did I mention my middle name is Grace?" It wasn't really, but he didn't need to know that. She waited, praying for laughter.

Her prayer was answered. His chuckle started low, and began to crescendo like music. She cracked an eye.

Blaze, his handsome face a startling mask of chocolate, like the Phantom of the Opera in a negative print, was guffawing so hard he had to hold his side. "And how was charm school, Grace?"

Perversely, Valda got annoyed. "It's not that funny!"

The big buffoon collapsed down on the floor beside her. In between chuckles and wiping his eyes, he managed to say, "You're priceless, pretty owl." He suppressed his laughter and wiped a tear from his un-chocolate-covered eye. "Valda Anastasia Lyman, no one has ever reacted quite that way to my cooking."

Shock made her roll over and sit up in the confined space between the cabinets. "How did you know my full name?"

He gave her That Look again. That superior, slightly smug, I'm-a-witch look. They were almost nose-to-nose. The wish to slap the smugness and humor off his face warred with the need to do something shocking. Shocking won.

She would never know the reason why she did it. Impulse took over, and she licked the chocolate off his neck. The rich flavor slid over her tongue. "Your cooking is excellent, by the way."

She sat back, her face dripping with warm chocolate, intending to get a laugh then quietly exit to die of mortification in her room. Maybe hara-kiri was in order.

Those dark sapphire eyes of his matched his name. Strong hands clamped over her arms and yanked her until their noses touched. Then his head tilted to the side and he nibbled the chocolate off the side of her chin. "It tastes much better this way," he murmured.

The heated ball of lust she'd managed to control up to now flared. Valda couldn't stop the moan that pushed its way past her lips.

Blaze was nibbling his way down to her neck. "No objections?" He waited a moment. "Good." He pulled her into his lap without removing his lips from her neck.

"I've wanted to do this since I laid eyes on you." He looked down at the cat, busily licking some of the spill off the floor. "Beat it, Spike."

Object? She could barely think. This gorgeous, talented man wanted her? Aw, to hell with it. Why not? It wasn't going to affect whatever she chose to write about him. Besides, what he was doing to her skin was driving her insane. A nice, slow carriage ride to madness sounded like the perfect way to go.

"Yeah? The feeling is mutual." She leaned back on his left arm and bared all her throat.

He was licking his way down to the hollow of at the base of her neck. "Last chance, Valda. I don't coerce." His free hand was working her shirt from her waistband by inches.

"Your safe sex or mine?" God, her voice was wanton, husky and had a distinctly feline purr in it.

"Mine." The hand that had been working on her shirt dug in a drawer above their heads and brandished a foil packet. "I had hopes, so I put this where I could get it easily."

She let him pull her shirt off her while she pondered the implications of the packet. "I'm not... I don't... oh, God." He'd unsnapped her bra without her being aware of it, pushed it aside, and buried his face underneath one of the heavy orbs.

"I know you don't." He licked the underside of her breast and shifted her off his lap to put her on the rug. "But that fancy nightgown of yours last night has been killing me by inches. A man can dream, can't he?" He switched to the other breast without touching her aching and rock hard nipples.

Her hands moved of their own volition to get under his tee shirt. The body under it was the stuff her dreams were made of. Fair was fair. "I didn't know you saw me. Shit, Blaze, if you don't do something about my tits, I'm going to rip this shirt off you."

He lifted his head and looked fully into her eyes. Mischief lit his face. In a bad Romanian accent, he quoted an old comedy. "'For you, never a quickie. Always a longie.'" But he took off the shirt.

“Right here?”

“Right here, right now.” He bent and brushed his lips over hers. “I’ve waited long enough for you.”

That slow southern drawl of his would have fired up any woman’s lust. His right hand cupped one of her breasts and lifted the weight of it without attempting to dial Radio Free Europe. Most men, upon seeing a pair of tits that matched the rest of her abundant flesh, seemed to think nothing of causing pain in their excitement, forgetting they were still attached to a living woman. His head bent to lap at the areola and crinkling nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

It should have been funny. The man’s face was half-covered in chocolate. Instead, she found it erotic. “I’ll never look at chocolate again without thinking of this.” She chuckled and added, “When I’m old and gray, I’ll ask, who was that masked man?”

Blaze looked up at her in puzzlement for a moment before releasing her breast. He fingered his face. “Oh. Yeah.” Then he reached up on the counter and pulled down a bowl. “I think I have another use for my Beltane chocolate recipe.”

## Chapter Five

Blaze smiled wickedly at the curious look in her eyes. "Haven't you ever been painted before?"

She flushed. "No."

He dipped a finger into the cooling remains of his chocolate frosting and smeared some on both of her nipples. Then he licked it off, slowly, sensuously. He wanted so much to have her enjoy this new experience, he actually felt himself trembling with restrained lust.

Switching to the other breast, he took his time. *Goddess, she is as lush and full as you are. More importantly, she has no notion of how beautiful she is to me, because of You. Help me!*

Valda's soft brown eyes had been half-shut while she seemed to enjoy what he did. Then, she writhed once and her eyes flew open. "Nuh-uh, buddy boy. This isn't going to be one-sided."

She sat up, startling him into releasing the nipple he'd been lavishing attention on. Before he could ask what was wrong, she gave him a shove that ended up with him sprawled on his back with her on top of him.

Her hair was coming out of the neat little clamp that held it up until it fell over one eye. Shirtless, her hair mussed, and her face partially spattered with spots of chocolate, she looked like some untamed leopard cat instead of his neat, pretty owl.

Blaze didn't think he could be more aroused, until she dipped her own finger into the bowl and swirled a spiral from the outside of one chest muscle inward to his nipple. He wondered if she knew she'd just painted a pagan symbol on him.



She licked a little on the outside edge. "Mmm! Did I mention how much I love the fact that you're almost hairless? I love smooth pecs." She licked again. "And I love chocolate." She licked and nibbled her way inward.

Blaze reveled in her soft breasts brushing his stomach, and noted that her knee separated his thighs to rub his aching cock. "You learn fast."

"Mmm-hmm!" The humming answer went straight from the nipple she was attacking to his groin. "I can't wait to taste a chocolate penis, too."

Her meaning was clear, since she was fumbling with the button of his jeans. His zipper went down and she reached inside to clasp his cock.

"Whoa. What a way to break my diet." She let go of his cock and bent her head to push at his jeans. "Yum, yum. To hell with the diet."

Blaze was torn between lifting his hips and helping her remove his jeans and flipping her on her back to remove her pants. Why not both? He lifted his hips and let her get his jeans and briefs past his butt.

Then he reached up, grabbed a surprised Valda and put her back on the rug. "No fair. You're still wearing pants," he admonished. "I'll bet you've even got on some of those sexy little underthings I saw in your suitcase." He found the catch that opened the pants.

"Well, yeah. Duh, gorgeous. I'll bet you want 'em off me, too."

"Damn right I do," he drawled. "After a bit. But first, those prim librarian slacks have got to go." He pulled them off her in one fluid motion.

She was wearing rose pink panties that matched her shirt and bra. He would have drooled had he been more crass.

"You look like a Beltane confection yourself. Strawberries and cream, and all for me."

"I thought chocolate was... Oh, God." He shut her up by licking and nibbling at her deep navel.

Then, impatient, he stood and removed his pants. "I can't wait much longer to taste..."

Valda took the opportunity to scramble to her knees and sucked his penis into her mouth as soon as his pants were gone. Her fingers dipped in the bowl and swirled it all over his shaft while she nursed on the head alone.

“...you,” he finished with a moan. “Oh, Lord and Lady.”

Those full lush lips concealed a mouth of gold as far as Blaze was concerned. Her perfectly straight teeth contained sharp incisors that scraped his shaft on the way up, but didn't cut on the way down. The chocolate-smearred fingers wrapped around his base and spread the sweet just ahead of her lips and tongue. He was in paradise.

Blaze felt his knees go weak, so he leaned up against the counter, barely avoiding spilling what few molds still held chocolate. When her free hand patted the inside of his thigh, he helpfully spread his legs and let her play gently with his balls. When he felt them rise in preparation for orgasm, he tugged on what was left of her hair in the clamp. “Stop for a minute, sugar. Please.”

She released his cock with a smirk. “You want something?”

“Yeah. A little more Beltane candy, I think.” He pulled her to her feet, and then lifted her onto the counter. The panties came off when he tugged.

“Oh!” For once, she was speechless as she watched him unmold a small penis from the plastic. It sagged a little, not completely hardened. Perfect.

Blaze opened a drawer on either side of her and put her heels in them, spreading her wide so he could see her glistening pink wetness. Her clit popped out of its hiding spot, so he rubbed the candy there first, then dove in to taste woman and chocolate. The taste was so wonderful he vowed he'd have the same confection every year from her if he could.

Valda leaned her head back against the cabinets above the counter, and she scooted forward. Her movements gave give him all the access he wanted. Her lips were parted, and her breaths short. “Oh, my God.”

The chocolate penis preceded his tongue anywhere he wanted, even slipping inside her to pump for a moment before his tongue replaced it. Then the little guy,

looking the worst for wear, gave his last to cover her clit. Blaze made sure his sacrifice went for a good cause.

With the candy now gone, Blaze slipped one finger inside her wet vagina and was rewarded with a fresh gush of fluid. Two fingers barely made it in on the next entry. Damn, she was tight. He kept his tongue on the prize of her clit, now distended and full.

Pumping with his fingers and sucking happily to get the last of the chocolate flavor did her in. Valda was still, gasping for air, before she came all over his fingers like a fountain. He felt every twitch of those inner muscles clamping down on his fingers. Her hands grasped his shoulders while she howled his name.

He couldn't wait any longer. Since the counter was too high and the table occupied, he grabbed Valda by the waist and put her back on the rug by the sink. Helluva place to fuck a woman until you were blind, but he was too impatient to find better. "Come here, sugar foot," he heard himself say through the haze of lust, his drawl thicker than usual. "We aren't done yet."

Her eyes were glazed and her body still shuddering, but she panted out, "Gimme, Blaze. Gimme now." She spread wide in invitation, thrusting her hips upward impatiently.

"Yes, ma'am. Happy to do so." He wanted to slam home, but she was too tight for that. He gritted his teeth and worked his way in by slow, agonizing inches until he was buried to the hilt.

Valda wasn't helping much. She was back to howling in orgasm, clawing his shoulders, and bucking like a wildcat. Not to mention strangling his cock with her inner muscles.

Blaze forced himself to move carefully, though it cost him dearly. She wrapped her legs around his thighs and pulled him in herself. His little Colorado girl seemed determined to ride him like a cowgirl at a rodeo. All he could do was be grateful she wasn't wearing spurs.

If a hard ride was what she was after, then he'd do his best. He slammed home, and she shrieked, "Yes!" at the top of her lungs. That was all the encouragement he needed. Blaze tightened his ass and rode until they both were skidding across the tiles of the floor. He had to stop several times to either yank her back or move forward, since the small rug under her back acted like a sled on a downhill run with every thrust.

That is, until Valda's hands found purchase on the ornate scrollwork that detailed the island. She opened the door of one cabinet on the other side to grab the edge of the opening. While she hung on for dear life, she yelled, "Yes, Blaze! Gimme that wonderful cock! Fuck me! Hard!"

He was more than willing to do so, and pumped until his body signaled impending orgasm. His balls were screaming for release in time to Valda's cries, and her pussy was milking him for every ounce.

He let go, just as he realized he'd forgotten the condom, but there was no stopping his orgasm. No amount of magic he could perform would turn back time. He just prayed it hadn't been Valda's only salvation to prevent pregnancy.

He tried to pull out, in vain hope of stopping himself, but Valda's legs were wrapped so tightly around his thighs they could have been steel clamps. He gasped out, "The condom."

"Who gives a rat's ass? Gimme!"

Castigating himself for his failure, he buried himself deep and let it happen. She kept moving and squeezing until he was spent. He'd never come so hard, nor felt so guilty about a rousing bout of hot sex.

When his arms began to tremble with the strain, he lifted his ass, and Valda let him go. Blaze pulled out and fell beside her. "I'm sorry, Valda. Really." Apologies were not the sort of thing a lady wanted to hear after a roll in the hay, but his honor demanded it.

She purred and rolled over to snuggle in his arms. "Don't sweat the small stuff, Blaze. I get the shots and a checkup every six months. We're cool." She licked his nipple and grinned at his moan. "While I've heard pagans can be pretty free with the sex, I also

know how scrupulous most are with their health. I think it's safe to assume you're clean as a whistle."

"Well, that's brutally frank. Yes, I am." He put his head back on the cool tiles and let them leech the heat from his body.

She lifted her head. "Was that rude of me? I didn't mean to be." She bit her bottom lip, her brown eyes worried.

"Nope. Just honest. I like that about you." He pulled her back down on his shoulder. "However, as soon as I've recovered, I think I'll correct your assumption that we pagans are promiscuous."

"You're not? Well, damn. I was hoping for another round." The mocking disappointment in her voice was tinged with satisfied good humor.

He couldn't help the laughter. "Pretty owl, you will be the death of me yet. That, you can have. Later, when my heart decides it wants to remain in my chest. I'm a witch, not Superman." He rolled over and kissed her lightly.

"I thought male witches were warlocks."

His automatic anger to her innocent question probably showed in his face, because her eyes widened. He closed his own eyes and sighed, tamping down his temper. "You have so much to learn, don't you? Let's get some tea and get off the floor."

The hurt in her eyes was more than he could bear. He kissed her thoroughly. "I'm sorry, sugar, but you stepped on a sore spot. While I recover, we'll have a drink and I'll explain." Unable to resist, he kissed her nose. "I promise that tonight, if you still wish it, I'll make love to you again." He rose and offered her a hand up.

She took it. "Deal. You have any pop?"

\* \* \*

Valda hid her hurt feelings and disappointment. Damn, she hadn't meant to insult him, if that's what it was. She pasted a bright smile on her face. No matter what, she'd just had the best bout of sex in years and had been promised more of the same.

She let him pull her to her feet, and only wobbled a little bit. "I'm going to walk funny for a few hours, anyway. It's been awhile."

Blaze dug into the fridge and handed her a Coke. "Hope this is okay. I keep a few for emergency sugar bursts on hot days when I can't stand the idea of one more cup of tea." He grinned like a naughty boy caught eating cookies between meals. "Speaking of hot days..." He closed the kitchen window they'd left open, shutting off the flow of hot, moist air that disrupted the air-conditioning.

Strutting around bare-assed naked didn't seem to bother him one bit, but Valda was beginning to feel the chill in the air now that the window was closed. She searched for her panties and tugged them on while Blaze warmed his tea in the microwave.

She shivered and tugged on her slacks. "I don't get you southerners. The heat doesn't bother you nearly as much as me, yet you set your air conditioners to Arctic, I swear."

Blaze laughed. "It's true, and I won't deny it. Here." He held out his hand and presented her glasses.

Valda's eyes narrowed. She hadn't seen him bend over to pick them up, and she wasn't that blind. "You did it again, didn't you? Another witchy trick to drive me nuts."

He leered and put on a goofy smile. "Yup, I did." He kissed the hand that reached for the glasses. "Thank you for calling me a witch."

She tugged her hand free, but gently so he knew she wasn't offended. "Are you going to tell me what I said wrong?"

He got his mug, a simple black one with the phrase "Ankh if you love Isis" on it, from the microwave. "Yes. Living room or here?"

"Living room. This sounds like I should have my tape recorder going." She just hoped she'd have a recording. It still pissed her off about the pictures.

Pausing in the doorway leading to their destination, Blaze shrugged. "Not really. Most pagans know this. But you can, if you want. And I assure you, the recording will remain this time." He grinned knowingly over his shoulder as her mouth fell open.

Valda followed him out to the living room. “Stop that. Just stop reading my mind right now. You hear me?” She kept her mutters to herself. He didn’t need to know she’d finally decided Blaze was indeed the “real deal” and she was interviewing an honest-to-god witch. At least not until she stopped shaking.

## Chapter Six

Blaze dragged his fingers through his hair as he sat down. "Let's get that warlock thing out of the way first. Then you can ask a bunch of questions." With his eyes, he shot Valda a plea for understanding. "Many pagans, me included, find the word particularly offensive. In our connotations, it means traitor. The worst kind of traitor, as a matter of fact. There are several historical references, depending on who you want to listen to, but suffice it to say they all mean about the same thing: one who betrays those to whom he has made vows."

Valda winced. "Oh, ouch. Sorry. Word struck from my vocabulary. I would guess then that witch is a gender neutral term?" She seemed genuinely contrite. Spike jumped on her lap, the bell on his collar making a charming tinkle. He purred and made himself at home, including "making biscuits" on her thigh, as his mother had called it. Val was sure there was a technical term for the way cats kneaded flesh like they were kneading bread dough. She'd have to look it up sometime.

"Yes, that will do. You don't need me to give you the full Wicca 101 lecture, do you? I hope not. It takes a year to complete the course, and that's if you're quick about it." He sipped his coffee and pretended indifference. The fact was, he'd love to teach her. More than half her problem was her skepticism, which stemmed from pure ignorance. The tradition stipulated that the teacher waited until the student asked three times, humbly and politely, to prove their sincerity and interest. He'd learned long ago that tradition had reasons for its uses, not whims.

Her hands were busy hooking her bra and grinding it around into place, occupying her for a moment. She looked up. "We can discuss that later. I'll admit to a certain curiosity, and a 101 course sounds like an introduction without commitment. Could we do it by email?"



That was one request. "Perhaps we could. You are correct. No commitment is required. However, there's one thing permitted of you, even as an ignorant Cowan. You are welcome to join me in a Beltane ritual tonight, if you wish." He leered for a moment. "We could make love in the circle, if you'd like to try it."

She blinked. "Sex outdoors?" She cleared her throat. "I... well, I suppose since your land is large and fenced so that no one could see us."

Goddess, she was cute when she blushed. "Seven acres, and my circle garden is in the very center, surrounded by evergreen bushes and trees."

The thought of Valda actually participating in a ritual with him was enough to electrify his senses. He wanted, as he hadn't desired anything before, to perform the Five-Fold Kiss on this woman. Would she be able to aspect the Goddess? No, that was too much to ask. It would be enough to have her there, reenacting the marriage and lovemaking of a joyous God and Goddess. Aspecting a Deity was an advanced skill, and he doubted very much Valda would enjoy sharing her body with Diana, The Huntress or the Morrigan.

She licked her lips. "What would I have to do?"

"I'll keep it simple for you, I promise. I'll say everything pretty much as I'd planned, but if you agree to join me, I'll add the one bit I can't do without a lady in the circle with me." He didn't feel like trying to explain all the ceremonial duties of a High Priestess, so he kept it simple.

He squashed his eagerness to have his lover perform the part of the Goddess. He'd never had the privilege of being High Priest and lover before. The chance to do so with Valda thrilled him beyond measure.

Valda tilted her head to one side. "A lady, hmm? Well, that might be difficult. I'm not very ladylike." The twinkle in her eye teased him.

Blaze groaned. "Gods, I hope you aren't. The most you will have to do is stand there, allow me to part your robes, and kiss you where I please while saying a few ritualistic words. You will be acting as a living representative of the Goddess. No

words, just feel what I do to you and enjoy it. Can you manage to enjoy my kissing your luscious body again?" Gods above and below, he was getting hard at the thought.

From her shiver and hardened nipples, it seemed that Valda was not adverse to the idea one bit. "Oh, I think I can stand it," she purred.

\* \* \*

Valda shook out the long white robe Blaze had given her that afternoon after they'd finished cleaning the mess they'd left in the kitchen. She'd helped him scrape the chocolate off his handsome face in between delightfully heated kisses and had giggled while she swiped his long, lean body with a warm washcloth to clean the rest of the sticky mess off him. Then he'd performed the same services for her face and assisted her in piling her hair back in the high-fashion cone-shaped clamp.

Blaze was an enigma she couldn't quite understand. He paraded around his home without a stitch of clothing on, quite unconcerned about proprieties. He welcomed her lusty glances without shame and returned as many as he got. Just the thought of what he could do to her made her shiver with anticipation.

They'd made more chocolate penises to replace the lost ones, while they laughed and talked about everything from Shakespeare to a television show they both loved. She'd been surprised to learn that, while some were for that night, many were gifts to pagan friends.

"For fertility," Blaze explained. "Fertility of the mind, like the writing we do, or of the body. Sometimes other types, but my friends are an erudite crowd."

He'd bitten into a flawed one, surprising Valda. Most men wouldn't touch anything penis-shaped, much less blithely put one in their mouths and relish the taste.

Seeing her shocked expression, he'd grinned. "What? It's chocolate. Who cares what the shape is? Want one?"

She'd taken one and made a show of licking it, just to watch his eyes fire. "What?" she repeated slyly. "It's just chocolate, right?" Then she bit off the head and watched him wince.

“All right. Your point is made. It’s a symbol.” He shrugged. “It just doesn’t bother me.”

“Are you bi?”

Blaze had laughed until he was forced to hold onto the counter to keep himself upright. “No, pretty owl. I’m straight. When you’ve grown up eating the ones your mother made as gifts that weren’t perfect, I suppose you lose the inhibition. Then again, we pagans have different symbols. I grew up with blatantly sexual objects all around me. However, they held a religious context. Keep in mind that sex is not a sin to us, but a form of worship.” He’d stood upright and intoned, “All acts of love and pleasure are My rituals, the Goddess says.”

Valda had stared. “Isn’t that child abuse?” She’d been shaken to the core by the concept of exposing a child to sex and sexuality.

“Oh, heavens, no! There were special children’s rituals that were tame and safe. I remained a virgin until my adolescence, same as anyone else.” He’d rubbed his chin and smiled. “In fact, I was a bit of a late bloomer. There wasn’t much mystery for me in the female body so I was more aware of the consequences of sex. I waited until I found an agreeable young pagan lady, and we had a good time.” He shrugged. “Both of us were responsible about it, enjoyed ourselves, and went our separate ways without regrets or hurt feelings when the time came.”

“That sounds so casual, even cold.” Then why had she felt a flare of jealousy? There was no need for it, was there? Handsome men like Blaze would attract females like honey draws bees. He could have easily been one of those who used women and then discarded them.

“No, it was honest. We were horny and we gave each other what we needed. But we weren’t in love and saw no reason to lie. We were just two good friends and we still are, really. I’m godfather to her third child. She married a nice sailor and lives in Japan at the moment.”

Well, he was hers now. At least temporarily. She couldn't be a hypocrite and say she wasn't doing the same thing as that long ago young girl. A nice casual fuck or three over the course of a week, and they'd part company.

Then why did the thought of leaving here hurt so much? Valda shrugged and tried to maintain her grip on reality.

Spike nudged open her bedroom door and sauntered in like he owned the room. Without glancing in her direction, he jumped on the bureau and grabbed one of her ponytail bands in his teeth.

She laughed and grabbed for the cat's prize. "Spike! That's mine!"

He evaded her half-hearted attempt to take his new toy and ran under the bed. She dove after him, laughing so hard she could hardly breathe. "You little stinker!" A sneeze from a large dust bunny caught her unawares. Then another. "Okay! *Achoo!* You win. Keep it. I've got a million of them, I think."

As a precaution, she took the rest of her hair ornaments and put them in the heavy top drawer of the bureau. Then she danced to the bathroom and ran the hottest shower she could stand. Her thoughts returned to Spike's owner and her own lusty imaginings.

"Get a grip, Val. You have a man who is enjoying your fat ass right now, but there's no future in it." She continued to berate herself as she tore off her clothes and tossed them in the hamper, then stepped under the scalding spray. "You will go back to your apartment and eat a pint of Pralines and Cream ice cream in his honor, then use your vibrator. Enjoy it now, kiddo. Maybe you can have sex again in another year or two."

Her shower complete, Valda returned to stand in front of the white robe lying on the bed. The thing looked like a tee shirt with an elongated hem all the way to the floor, except it looked like it had been made from a bed sheet, and was split all the way down the front like a bathrobe. Nothing special.

Her fingers trembled a little as she put it on. Was she really going to do this? Not the part about participating in a pagan ritual. That didn't bother her. Playing the part of

a Goddess did. It seemed a little sacrilegious. Maybe it was like the old Nativity plays in the church her mother dragged her to every year. Somebody had to play the part of Mary and Joseph, right? She could deal with it for more of Blaze's drugging kisses and the feel of his body covering hers.

"Okay, Val. Analyze this. What's bugging you?" she muttered. "Ignorance. That's part of it. You don't know what happens during one of these things. No witch ever seems to write explicitly what happens. They dance around it, but never say." She reached for the simple white rope belt and tied it around her waist. She sighed. "The truth? Okay, I'm scared. Of what, I don't know. The unknown? Maybe. Will I see that golden glow around Blaze again? What is it? What does it mean? I hate not knowing."

She checked her hair in the mirror. Blaze had requested no jewelry, not even a hair clamp. She turned away. "I guess it's time I was as honest as Blaze says pagans are. I know he's the real deal." She sighed. "I'm going to have to ask what the glow is. Tonight."

Her hands shook as she went downstairs. "Time to face the music."

Blaze waited at the bottom of the stairs, his robe as black as night and made of some velvety material that shimmered lightly. He held out his hand. "The night is warm. I went out and took care of a few oddments."

Valda placed her hand in his, feeling a bit like a bad actress out of an old black and white movie. Dammit, he was glowing again, only this time she could barely see him through the dazzle. A sizzle went up her arm when he kissed her hand like some sort of medieval knight. The shiver coursing through her body wasn't just because she was weirded out, either.

"You drive me crazy, Blaze." She shook her head as he led her gently out the back doors. "One minute you're as solid and earthbound as any other guy, the next you do freaky things. How's a girl supposed to keep up with you?"

He stopped and spun her into his arms. "Women are just as mysterious and wonderful to me. Be yourself, Valda. I like you best that way." He kissed her nose. "Come on, the moon is just rising."

Valda followed him willingly down the path. The walkway was partially paved with large, flat stones and the rest with some sort of springy green moss that smelled wonderful when she stepped on it. Intermittent lamps hung from poles to light their way, with small, fragrant candles guttering within.

A dark arch of evergreens welcomed them inside a large circular area. Circle garden, indeed! Surrounded by evergreens taller than Blaze, the place gave Valda the impression they weren't in the real world anymore. Lanterns seemed to be suspended in mid-air, though upon closer examination, she could see they hung from thin, wrought iron poles positioned in the evergreens.

Valda's jaw dropped at the sheer beauty of this nighttime sanctuary. "Blaze, this garden is gorgeous." She bent to sniff at a white rose that grew next to the path, so pale it seemed to glow in the dark. The fragrance was like the night itself -- heady, sweet and mysterious.

He grinned at her from the center of a paved area made of white flat stones with more of the moss acting as a dark spongy mortar. "Thank you. My grandmother was quite an accomplished gardener." He moved around the circle, lighting candles and incense sticks.

A large stone table was behind him, with many things arranged on its smooth top. Four waist-high pillars decorated the outer edges. They were shaped like the monoliths of Stonehenge in miniature, but clearly made of modern cement. She couldn't help wandering into the paved area for a closer look.

The sound of singing drew her gaze from the study of the symbols carved in the cement monoliths. Blaze walked from pillar to pillar, chanting at a volume so low, she couldn't hear the words clearly. At each one, he lit a candle, sprinkled a substance she couldn't see, and then moved on to the next.

She stood quietly, moving away when he came to the pillar closest to her, keeping her gaze trained on the table, where the promised chocolates and a beautiful punch bowl sat in state to one side. Without knowing how she knew, Valda was aware

she shouldn't ask questions or listen too closely to what Blaze sang. If he wanted her to hear, she was positive the mellow baritone would become audible and clear.

The singing stopped. Blaze turned to face Valda, and she suppressed a gasp with difficulty. The golden glow that surrounded Blaze before was now a beautiful rainbow of colors, and his stunningly dark blue eyes shimmered with power.

Something had changed. Whoever or whatever this was, it was not Blaze.

## Chapter Seven

Valda trembled. She'd forgotten to ask Blaze what the glow around him was, and now she paid dearly for her ignorance. Her instincts told her the man standing just in front of the table in the center of this beautiful place was not her lover of a few hours before.

Blaze held out his hand, and smiled winningly at her. "Don't be frightened, Val. I won't harm you. This will be just as I promised." His coaxing voice was the same. Those dark sapphire eyes were just as always.

"Don't be frightened," she muttered. "Yeah, right." Nevertheless she put one foot in front of the other, determined to see this through.

He kissed her hand as soon as she placed it in his. "I've called the circle into being. It's too bad you can't see it."

She looked around and saw a thin rainbow glow that looked like a giant bubble encased them. It solidified until it resembled a brick wall, even as she looked. "I... I..." she faltered. She wanted to tell him she could, but he tugged on her hand and drew her until she stood before the table next to him.

"Would you feel better if I told you what I was going to do, step by step, pretty owl?" He waved his hand over the table. "The altar contains what I would use if I were working alone. Some things will not be needed tonight." His fingers lovingly caressed a thick dowel of wood, devoid of bark, carved in the shape of a penis.

If that was a dildo, she'd die. Just fucking die. No way was that thing coming anywhere near her. Valda cleared her throat. "Uh, yeah. That would help."

His hand moved away from the dildo thing to caress her face. "Now that the circle is cast, we can begin the ceremony. Remember I told you I was celebrating a wedding?"



She nodded.

"This is the date we pagans celebrate the wedding of the God and Goddess. You and I will reenact their wedding night. Is that okay with you, still?"

"No wedding ceremony? We won't be married after this, will we?" Part of her wished for a wedding. Hell, yeah, she wanted that, someday. Maybe even to some guy like Blaze. Someone who made her laugh the way he did. Someone who made love to her the way he did. Shit, he was turning into her ideal man. That was going to spoil her for 99.9% of the male population. Gorgeous, rich, successful men didn't fall for women like her. *Get a grip, Val.*

Blaze chuckled, and then kissed her. "No, sweetheart. You'd know if I were marrying you. Besides, I wouldn't do you out of having lots of witnesses and a fine gown to wear instead of a simple cotton robe." His forefinger traced the path from her throat to the belt around her waist.

She blinked. That didn't sound like a rejection of the idea. "Okay, so we go straight to the honeymoon."

"Not quite, though I'm looking forward to that." His smile turned sensual. "I've already called the God into myself."

Oh. That explained the change in the glow. Didn't it? What was she saying to herself? That she believed in this? Okay, yes, she did believe he was the Real Deal Witch.

"Now it is time to call the Goddess into you, if she wants to come. I told you about this part. Are you ready?"

No way was some deity going to visit her. Then again, you never knew. She swallowed and pretended bravado. "Sure. I'm ready." *Just don't turn me into a glowworm, okay?*

Blaze batted her hand away where she fumbled nervously at the knotted belt around her waist. "Allow me." His expert fingers untied the tangle of rope easily.

The belt fell at her feet, and Blaze made no move to pick it up. He lovingly parted her robe until she was completely exposed before him. The night air caressed her

breasts, but she couldn't have said if it was the slight chill or the heated look in Blaze's eyes that caused her nipples to harden like rocks.

He opened his own robe, and the whole thing fell away from his shoulders to pool at his ankles. His erection jutted out, telling Valda she wasn't the only one affected. She licked her lips hungrily.

The kiss he pressed on her lips was warm enough to ward off the night breeze's chill. "And now we begin. Hold still, baby. You'll have your reward in a minute, I promise."

He sank to his knees, his eyes locked with hers. "Blessed be thy feet, which walk in the sacred ways."

Valda watched as he bent and kissed the top of her left foot. It tickled, and made her toes curl. Her breath caught. She hadn't expected to be this affected.

Blaze looked up again. "Blessed be thy knees, which kneel at the sacred altars." He pressed his lips to her right knee.

She felt her knees tremble. This small thing, kissing certain parts of her body, was driving her nuts with lust. She felt heat bloom between her legs.

"Blessed be thy womb, which may bring forth life."

Aw, shit. He wasn't. He bent forward and pressed a kiss just above her triangle of hair. Val trembled and swayed until Blaze put out a hand to her hip, and steadied her.

Then, when he was sure she would not fall over, he stood. His eyes bored into hers, with that incredible rainbow of light dancing all around them both. Her panting breaths seemed so loud to her ears, overriding the sounds of crickets in the background. His hand slid up from her hip, over the curve of her waist, to cup her left breast. His right hand gently lifted the other breast.

"Blessed be thy breasts, formed in love and beauty."

His thumbs brushed her nipples before he bent and kissed them both. As if he couldn't help himself, he sucked the left nipple into his mouth and tasted her.

Val had never believed in the term, “puddle of lust.” Now she did. She seriously considered sinking to her knees and... and... doing the same to him. Feet, knees, and the cock that even now pressed against her navel. She wanted to. Where had that come from? It was almost as if she knew what to say.

Blaze gathered her close. “Blessed be thy lips, which speak the sacred words.”

The kiss was at first sensual, then teasing, and finally demanding. She parted her lips willingly, and gave back as much passion as he poured out to her.

They sank down together on the sun-warmed pavestones without breaking the kiss. Valda guessed the ceremonial part was over, and now she could satisfy all the lust he’d caused in her.

She wanted to taste him. Now. What would happen if she did that same sort of ceremonial thing to him? She squirmed out of his arms and grinned down at Blaze’s surprised face.

“My turn, right?” She grinned impishly at him, and shoved until he was on his back.

“You don’t have to, my love. I’m...” He stuttered when she kissed his feet.

“Let’s see if I can remember this. Blessed be thy feet that walk...” What was the rest? “In sacred ways,” she finished.

“Close enough,” he moaned. “Val, you don’t have to do this.”

“Hush. This is fun. Besides, it’s payback for what you did to me.” She kissed his knee. “Blessed by thy knees, which kneel at sacred altars.”

She kissed her way up his thigh, enjoying the way his cock bobbed and twitched. *Yeah, babe, you’re next. And it won’t be a little peck on your tip, either.* Deliberately, she said the fancy words first. “Blessed be thy penis, which helps bring forth life.”

She kissed his scrotum first, delighting in the smell of ripe man. He smelled clean and musky, all at once. Yummy. Delicious. She flicked her tongue in between tiny kisses all the way up his shaft.

“Oh, Goddess!” His cock twitched like it had a life of its own.

Blaze's cry delighted her. "Just doing to you what you did to me. Hold still, you big baby. I'm not hurting you." She grabbed his cock to quiet it. Then she planted a deliberate "big wet one" on the tip before sucking it down her throat.

Kneeling between his knees, Val had access to all the delightful parts while she bobbed her head up and down just to listen to Blaze moan.

"You need to finish the words." His teeth were gritted, and he was tearing up handfuls of the moss mortar between the stones.

Val released his cock, but reached below his balls to play with the skin between his sack and ass. "You want me to stop?" she purred.

"No, dammit, I don't." He sat up, grabbed her shoulders, and pulled her on top of him until she lay full length on him. "And that's the point. If you don't stop, you'll miss out on some action. I'm still only a witch, not Superman." He pressed her head to his chest. "Finish."

"Oh, baby, oh, baby, oh," she mocked, pretending to sound afraid. "I'll let you win. This time."

She licked a hard brown nipple, and felt his cock twitch against her pubic hairs. "Blessed be thy pecs, formed for my lust."

"You're deliberately twisting the words."

"Yeah, I am." She kissed, and then suckled on the other nipple. "Got a problem with that?"

"Not right now. Kiss me, you delectable Cowan."

She decided she'd kiss him her way. Valda sat up and wriggled forward, just enough to impale herself on his cock. While he groaned, she leaned forward until he almost was out of her. "Blessed be thy lips, which speak the sacred words."

Blaze lifted his head and pulled her down for a kiss. This separated her from his cock, but left it caressing her aching pussy. "Gimme that back!" she murmured against his lips.

Blaze grinned and flipped her on her back. "I'd be delighted to."

Valda lifted her knees and spread. "I hope your God and Goddess are enjoying their honeymoon as much as I am."

Blaze plunged in unerringly. "Me, too." Then he pounded into her, until she wanted to squeal like a blasted pig. Oh, to hell with it. Who could hear her in the midst of seven acres?

He was giving her the ride of her life, and one she'd not soon forget. No man before him, and not likely ever again, would fill her so completely and perfectly.

She matched him thrust for thrust, edging closer to madness every time his cock collided with her cervix in pleasure that came close to pain.

Valda willingly gave herself to the madness, her world coalescing into the sensation of this man doing his best to crawl inside of her. Every sense she had was heightened and focused, from the scent of their lovemaking to the harsh sound of the low growls he made with every downstroke.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, she opened herself completely to him. He roared and increased the speed of his strokes, his eyes half-shut. Her pleasure peaked and she striped his back with her nails, too involved to scream.

Blaze followed her into orgasm as soon as she pulsed and squeezed his cock in the throes of her passion. She could feel every stroke giving her his hot semen in bursts.

With one last thrust, moving her an inch or two on the stones, he was done. They stayed where they were, panting for breath, until Blaze shook his head violently. Those magnificent dark blue eyes of his cleared, and he smiled down at Valda.

"Thank you, my love." He lowered his head to kiss her.

*Oh, God, he said the "L" word. No! Don't let me think for one moment that you love me!* Her heart didn't listen to her head for an instant. It leapt right out of her chest and plopped at his feet like a Mayan sacrifice.

Blaze pulled out slowly, gritting his teeth, until her body reluctantly let him go. He rolled and fell beside her, and yelped. "Damn these stones are cold." Then he gathered her in his arms and pulled her on top of him. "There. My pretty owl is not allowed to shiver."

"I wasn't cold," she protested, then snuggled on his chest and listened to his labored heartbeat.

"You made my Beltane night magical." He wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head.

"Yeah? Mine too. One of these days, I'm going to get you to explain those neat ILM tricks to me." She'd decided. She'd ask him to teach her this witchcraft. If she could see it, she could do it. She sighed contentedly.

"What ILM tricks?" His voice had changed to a low, angry growl.

## Chapter Eight

Valda cringed back at the fury in Blaze's eyes and cursed under her breath. Her mouth was always getting her in trouble. She'd really stuck her foot in and chewed vigorously this time.

She rolled off him and went to her knees, refusing to place her naked butt on the cold paving stones. This was going to take some serious backpedaling. "Look, Blaze, I know I called you a warlock earlier, but that was... well, shit, think how all this looks to an outsider, will ya?"

Blaze stood up in one fluid motion and bent to pick up his robe. He threw the white one at her and said in a deceptively mild voice, "Why don't you tell me, then?"

He wasn't fooling her one bit. The glow around him was a swirling mass of red thunderstorm clouds. Her chin went up. Maybe it was better for both of them to have it out right here, in a place he considered holy. He wouldn't do anything stupid in here, she hoped. The idea of being green and hopping tomorrow just didn't appeal.

"Okay, gorgeous. You asked for this." Valda got up and wrapped the white robe tightly around her, and took her time knotting the belt.

Something like humor flickered in Blaze's eyes for a moment, but the red swirls around his whole body were making her dizzy. "They say that you should be careful what you ask for." That southern drawl of his made the sarcasm worse.

Val tossed her hair and sat on the table to put her somewhat on an eye-to-eye level with him. Her butt scooted a few things out of the way, but nothing fell to the floor. "Then don't be so pissy when you don't like what you hear, bub." She shook a finger at him and ignored his glare at where she'd planted her behind. "I'm holding you to that 'harm none' stuff, especially when you're livid enough to spit nickels and give change out your ass."

He raised one sculpted eyebrow. "I'd have never thought I'd hear those words out of those lips."

"Get over it. We both make our living with words. I just have less word count than you do. I doubt I have to define them for you."

"Touché." He folded his arms. "Let's hear it all, then."

"Okay, fine." She pulled some of her hair around and started combing the knots out with her fingers. "Gimme a sec to figure out how to phrase things."

"Fair enough," he drawled, and marched over to pour some pink liquid into a goblet near the mound of strawberries. "Wine?"

"No, thanks. I don't drink. Look, think how this appears to someone ignorant, Blaze. We just had sex in the equivalent of church, as part of a ritual."

The look he shot her was a combination of exasperation and lust. "Yeah."

The angry red clouds were slowing down. Maybe she was getting somewhere with this thickheaded witch. "You know, in your own way, you're as pig-ignorant about the outside world's culture as I am about your ways," she observed. "You seem to know that all this witchcraft causes negative reactions, but can't seem to figure out why."

He sipped his wine. "You're right about that. I can't understand why people won't just live and let live."

"Well, duh. What if you'd been told all your life that this stuff," and she waved her hand at the table she sat on, "was wrong, evil, and designed specifically to cause your Deity trouble?"

Blaze opened his mouth, probably to answer with hot words. Then he stopped and leaned against the table. "Y'know, that's basically what I was taught about Christians. That they would do their level best to harass, harm, and even kill me. All in the name of their idea of God."

His voice was thoughtful, and the red swirling was turning slowly back to orange-gold. "All I want is to be left alone." He faced the entrance and swirled his goblet thoughtfully before taking a sip.



Valda snorted. "Won't happen, babe."

He turned back to her. "Why not?"

She shook her head. "Do you want the list alphabetically, or in order of importance?"

"You're such a smart ass. Why do I love that about you?" He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Give 'em to me any way you want. Some, I think I know."

"You aren't in love, you're in lust. Why, I have no clue." She held up her hand when he opened his mouth. "That's unimportant right now. Let's clear this up."

She rattled on, barely pausing for breath. She didn't want to know why he thought he loved certain things about her. That would just make it harder on her when she flew home. Right now, her cozy and silent condo sounded a whole lot more appealing than allowing her heart to break over a guy she'd never have.

"Let's just assume for a moment that some believe witchcraft actually has some sort of ability to make things happen, okay?" She waved her hand to forestall any protest. "I've got a logical mind, so pardon me if I use the ones that science has half-assed identified like clairvoyance and telekinesis. Clairvoyance is a major invasion of privacy, in a way. I wouldn't want anyone snooping into my life that way. Telekinesis is worse, the ability to manipulate objects or situations. That's not fair. I have to wait for the stoplight to change, why shouldn't you? Doesn't that make you superior, or at least different?"

"So, I'm different. And?"

"So, Superman, what do you expect? You're a threat. You and your kind could take over the world if they wanted to, couldn't they?"

"No. There aren't enough of us, even if every witch wanted that kind of power." The disgust in his voice told her how fond he was of the idea.

"Ah-ha!" Valda interrupted. "That word -- power. I looked it up. One of the definitions, if you paraphrase, is possession of control. I read enough of your latest book to get one thing. You witches believe in control of one's self and your immediate surroundings."

Blaze threw up his hands. "Praise be, someone finally got my books! I was beginning to wonder if I was writing for nothing."

Boy, she was going to hate to burst his bubble. "The wrong people are reading your books, Blaze."

His jaw dropped. "The marketing staff at my publisher would disagree."

She didn't blame him. Last she heard, his book was published in three languages, and he had a signing tour coming up in a few months. She forced down the small hope that his itinerary included Denver, and told it to shut the hell up.

"You want to be left alone? You market to the folks who are so ignorant of your kind that they're scared enough to harass, harm, and even kill. Teach them, or you'll always be the sex-crazed, baby sacrificing Satanists determined to cause evil and trouble in the world."

He turned and faced away, staring into the night. "I'll think on that." He sighed. "Still doesn't explain why you don't believe." Without warning, he whipped around. "There you sit on my altar, fresh from our lovemaking, and you still don't believe this is anything but a special effects hoax I've concocted to convince you that I'm a real witch." Something fierce lit his eyes. "It's time I did my best to prove myself beyond a shadow of a doubt." The breeze stirred, becoming stronger, until it was close to gale force. The glow around Blaze changed from gold to purple.

*Oh, shit. I'm going to be green and hopping. Or worse.* Valda scrambled off the table, er, altar. "Nuh-uh, bud!" she shrieked, determined to get out of this so-called sacred place fast and in a hurry. She just hoped running through the circle of light wasn't going to be the equivalent of running through flames.

The wind whipped up, tangling her legs in the white robe. She tripped and hit the pavestones so hard the breath was knocked out of her. "Great. What a time to be a klutz," she wheezed. Her right ankle screamed in pain, telling her she'd at least twisted it, and probably worse. Blaze's voice echoed unnaturally loud in her ears. "I'm tired of handling you with kid gloves. You want proof? Here it is."

"You promised you wouldn't harm me," she whimpered.

Blaze's voice was silken. "Whoever said I was going to harm you?"

Valda felt herself being lifted off the cold pavestones, but no hand touched her. Before she could do more than gasp, she was looking down at Blaze from a height where her toes could not have touched his forehead. Nothing held her up in the air.

"Since you can feel that you have no harness, no wires and," he smiled wickedly, "there's no strings on you, Pinocchio, I doubt seriously Industrial Light and Magic could match this trick."

She shook her head, and forced herself not to cry. "That may be so, but aren't you violating one of your laws? You have removed my free will to move or leave, haven't you?"

Blaze jerked back as if she had struck him, though her voice had remained soft. He stared up at her in silence for a long moment. Even the crickets had stopped chirping, and only a light breeze teased Valda's hair.

His face drained of color. "Oh, Goddess, what have I done?" He raised his arm, his palm facing downward. He slowly lowered his arms, allowing Valda to descend until her bare feet touched the grass.

Even with plenty of time to gather her balance, Valda could not seem to find the ability to stand. Her ankle didn't want to take her weight. She fell forward onto her hands and knees, grateful simply to touch the earth.

She heard Blaze stammer, "I'm sorry. Very sorry. You're correct. It was very wrong of me."

Through the curtain of her hair, Valda looked up. The anguish on his face was clear. Part of her wanted to rage at him for being six different kinds of an idiot, and the rest of her wanted to go hug him and tell him it would be all right.

Blaze turned away and put his hands on the altar as if he could barely hold himself upright. "I suppose love really is a form of madness, isn't it? I want so desperately for you to accept what I am that I do foolish things to prove it to you. Even harmful things."

“All witches are nuts, so don’t give me that madness crap. I have believed for some time, silly witch. Ever since I saw you glowing while you stood in the doorway to welcome me into your home. I didn’t want to accept it then, but I knew in my heart you were the real deal.” Valda pushed herself to a standing position on one foot, and brushed off her hands. She smirked a little at his shocked face when he wheeled around to stare at her.

“How long have you been able to see auras?”

The ankle would bear her weight, but she wouldn’t be running any foot races. “Since my teens. I ignored it, and it went away for a while. Lately, it’s been returning at the least opportune moments.” She shrugged. “My plan was to find out if you were the real thing, however unlikely that was, and if you were, ask you to make it stop.”

“I can’t make your talent go away.”

She sighed. “I kinda figured that. So, my next choice was to ask you to teach me. Or, barring that, at least recommend a teacher local to me.”

Blaze shook his head. “After what I just did, she still asks me to teach her. Is that three? I can’t remember,” he muttered.

“What is this? Knock three times on the ceiling if you want me? Blaze, if you don’t help me I think I’ll go crazy.” Valda white-knuckled her hands until they ached.

“I must think.” He strode to the outer edge of the sparkling circle of light, and gestured in an arch. Where his finger touched, the light winked out. He ordered over his shoulder, “Stay here.” After he stepped through, the circle of light was whole once more. Then he was gone, his black robe fading into the darkness.

## Chapter Nine

Valda sat down on the cold paving, and gasped at the shock on her warm butt. “How long do I wait, you goddamned enigmatic witch?”

Blaze strode away from the circle, and Valda. Guilt ate at him like a painful disease. When had he turned into one of those oversensitive idiots who wore huge pentacles on their chests, daring anyone to say a negative word about his religion? There’d been no reason for his anger, and certainly, he’d overreacted.

He turned around, walked back, and sat on one of the benches in an alcove just off the main path that led to the circle. “Just a few minutes to clear my thoughts. Then, when I’ve analyzed why one beautiful journalist makes me lose my head, I can make some decisions like a rational witch.” He kept his voice at a whisper, and scrubbed the bridge of his nose.

The view through the evergreen arch was clear from his dark hiding spot. He could see Valda rubbing her ankle, and promised himself he’d heal it with a poultice as soon as he carried her back to the house. The look on her face guaranteed he’d pay for every mistake tonight, and if he were very lucky, she’d spew her words directly at him instead of using the sharp edge of her pen.

That razor wit of hers delighted and appalled him, sometimes simultaneously. She was going to be one of those students that drove a teacher mad, sucking up information like a sponge and barely giving him time for breath.

He started at where his mind had gone and laughed softly to himself. “Well, one decision made. I will teach you. If my subconscious is already seeing the lessons, I’d better pay attention.” He grinned. “Daniel’s going to kill me, but I think I’ll rearrange my schedule to allow lots of time for it.” He could hear his agent screaming now, but a wedding invitation might mollify things.

“Second decision made. Looks like I’m going to replace that white cotton robe for satin and lace, assuming you don’t slice me to ribbons with your tongue.” He stopped mid-plan, as Valda got up with a determined look on her face.

She limped over to the edge of the circle where he’d exited. “No one keeps me in a cage,” she snarled. “I’m going back to Denver if I have to fucking walk.”

Blaze pulled back into the shadows of the alcove. “Well, I’ve blown it now, haven’t I? Looks like the lady doesn’t like being tied down. I’d better rethink that marriage proposal.” He pulled his knees up to his chest. “I’d better start forming a good apology before I let her out of there.”

Valda put her hands on her hips. “If I can see it, I should be able to do something about it.”

She reached out and touched the edge of the magic, and Blaze felt the twang on his protections. His jaw dropped when she began to cut an arc in his own magic like a hot knife through butter. A doorway appeared just like his own, and she stepped through.

“There!” She jerked her chin up and brushed her hands together in satisfaction at the hole she’d made in his normally impervious protections. “Take that, you controlling bastard. I’m making like a hockey team and getting the puck outta here.” She stormed past him and was out of sight, limping only slightly.

Blaze stared after her in awe. “That’s one powerful little witch, whether she knows it or not. Even if I weren’t in love with you, Valda Lyman, I’d be obliged to teach you now.” He hung his head. “But I’ve screwed it up, and badly. I wonder if you live close enough to Lady Margaret in Littleton, Colorado. Please, Goddess, I hope so.”

He looked down the path where Valda had gone. “I may have treated you so badly that you hate me, but you deserve the very best teacher there is. I’ll send a note recommending Margaret to you through Daniel tomorrow.”

Despondent, Blaze went to clean the mess inside his circle garden. The remains of his protections pulsed at him until he had returned the magic properly to the earth. Then, he trudged to the altar and pulled out the sealed containers that would hold the

strawberries he'd dipped for Valda. Only the goblet of wine and a few of the choicest strawberries were set aside as gifts to the Goddess.

"What are you doing here, foolish boy?"

A raspy voice startled him into almost dropping the candlesnuffer in his hand. He jerked around to find an old woman standing near his altar, her arms folded and her face annoyed. Her robe was similar to his, but made of a black material mingled with starry stones that mirrored the night sky.

He knew instantly what and who she was. Blaze dropped the snuffer and dropped to his knees.

\* \* \*

Valda pushed through unfamiliar bushes and tripped over tree roots, making her ankle throb with agony. She'd not left the well-lit path, but a gust of wind had blown out all the lamps, even in their protective casings. One step more, and the darkness had swallowed her, her bare feet no longer feeling the cold pavestones that should have led her directly to the house.

It seemed impossible to be lost on a mere seven acres of land with a big, well-lit house in the middle, but she couldn't find any recognizable landmark. Surely, if she just kept walking, eventually she'd find the high stone wall surrounding the property and follow it.

"If this is more of your magic to keep me here, Blaze Robinson, I'm going to be more pissed off than you ever thought possible." She shoved aside some fragrant bush with white flowers blooming in the night air. "I can't exactly charge you with kidnapping. I can just see me telling the cops, 'Oh, but Officer! He held me in a magic circle until I cut my way out with my fingernail.' Yeah, right. How long do I want to spend time in a loony bin? Not that I couldn't use a vacation. But I had a nice trip to London in mind, and plans to take a Jack the Ripper walking tour."

One of the garden benches that littered the property appeared in the moonlight only a few steps away. Had she been walking in circles? Valda took the seat gratefully.

She put her face in her hands. "Stay pissed off, Val. Don't think, because once you do, you're going to cry like a fucking ninny." She choked on a sob. "Oh, to hell with it. Who's going to see me here in the dark?"

A small, dark shadow moved from the bushes and leapt up to join her on the bench. Before she could shriek, she heard a purr and "Rrowr!" Soft fur rubbed her arm, and a tiny bell's tinkle provided the clue as to the identity of her visitor.

"Spike, you scared the shit out of me." She caressed his head, and he settled himself in her lap like a king on his throne. Petting the imperious creature soothed her nerves. "Feel like listening to me work this out, boy?"

Her hand was head-butted, and his purr grew louder.

"Okay, as long as I keep petting. I get it. When did I become a cat slave?" She sighed, and answered her own question. "The minute I fell in love with your owner."

"Mrowr!"

"Okay, I admit it. I love that arrogant witch. The handsome sucker broke my heart anyway, no matter how hard I tried to guard it. Doesn't matter, does it? I'm going home." She allowed the sob she'd choked down earlier to come out. "Oh, hell, it damn sure does matter. I'm a hurting puppy."

She rubbed her face on the cat's soft head and listened to him rumble his love.

"Oh, I know you. This is pantry love. Long as you think there's a can of cat food involved, right? I don't suppose you'd be willing to play Lassie and lead me back to the house, would you?"

As if in answer, Spike meowed loudly and jumped down. His bell sounded back the way she'd came, and she hobbled along behind.

Thus began a weird game of cat and mouse through the land of a witch, she thought with humor. If she lost sight of Spike, all she had to do was call his name and she'd hear a meow or a bell. Sometimes he'd jump out from a bush and attack her ankles playfully before scampering off again.

"You're out of your mind, Val. You're trusting a capricious cat who steals your ponytail bands for fun to lead you back to the house." She skirted a large bush and



listened for the bell. "Haven't you always been a 'lead, follow, or get the hell out of the way' sort of person? Falling in love with a witch has you singing a new tune."

She started humming what she knew of "Crazy" by Patsy Cline. That suited her.

Light. She could see a flickering up ahead, and her feet touched an icy pavestone. "Next time, you bring flip-flops," she told herself sternly. "Oh, who am I kidding? There won't be a next time."

Spike meowed, and dashed ahead. She picked up speed, determined not to lose her guide. With her eyes scanning the ground for a gray ghost of a cat, she didn't realize where she was until she pattered under an evergreen arch, and skidded to a halt.

She was back in the circle garden.

"Aw, damn," she muttered. "This is just not my night."

Blaze knelt before a gray-haired woman garbed in a black robe that shimmered like it was made of a starry night. His gaze jerked up, and his eyes were wide and startled. He looked like a kid caught with his fingers deeply buried in the cookie jar.

Without really understanding why she knew, Valda realized she'd stumbled into Blaze being royally chastised for his actions. She cleared her throat. "Um. Sorry to interrupt. I'll just boogie on down the road, now."

Blaze returned his gaze to contemplating the pavestones in front of him. She hoped his knees hurt.

The old woman smiled, as kindly as a granny. "No, I don't think so, my dear."

The circle fired to life again, so incandescent that Valda winced in pain and covered her eyes. "Yeowtch!! Tone it down, will ya?"

"Sorry, Val. It stays. But I can remove your gift temporarily until it suits me to give it back." Her raspy voice was just as acerbic as Valda's own could be when she was displeased.

The brightness no longer seeped between her fingers. Val ventured a peek. "Whew! That's better. Hey, thanks. You must be a much more powerful witch than Blaze. He said he couldn't remove that er, gift."

Blaze snickered, but kept his head down.

The old woman grinned. "You might say that."

"Mrowr!" Spike returned to nudge his head against Val's leg before scampering over to leap on the altar and sit like a statue near the witch.

"I'll deal with you later, you little traitor," Valda muttered. "That's what I get for following a cat." She seriously considered buying a Rottweiler from the pound, just so it could eat Spike for breakfast.

The old lady answered her unspoken thought. "I wouldn't, if I were you. Let me show you how Spike thinks of himself." She gestured, and a huge Bengal tiger lounged all over the altar, his tail thumping on a closed plastic container.

*Those paws are the size of dinner plates!* "Um, that's one helluva self-image Spike's got. But then again, I guess it makes sense." Val blew out a breath. "Okay, so no Rottweiler, Granny."

"Good, because he was acting on orders." The witch seemed amused by the appellation, but Blaze turned white as a sheet and opened his mouth. "Shut up, Blaze. You've botched enough tonight. I'll tell you when you can talk."

Blaze closed his mouth with a snap.

She couldn't help herself. Valda applauded and sauntered over to stand with the old witch. "Cool beans, Granny. Can I watch while you tell him off?" This must be Blaze's superior officer kind of witch, Val guessed. She relished the idea of being present while he got a thorough dressing down.

Blaze groaned and put his face in his hands. A choking sound came from deep in his chest.

Granny laughed. "Poor Blaze. He doesn't know whether to laugh or spank you for impudence."

Valda shrugged. "No biggie. I'm not exactly in on the hierarchy of witchy types, am I?"

His hand burying itself deeply in his mouth smothered whatever he might say, and considering he was torn between horror at her blasphemy and amusement at her innocence, Blaze wasn't sure what would tumble out.

Val watched in wonder as he bit down on the hand. Hard. "What's with him?"

"Oh, I can't say I blame the boy. He's in trouble, and the woman he loves is being sacrilegious. He's half afraid you'll be a smoking hole any second." Granny nudged Val with her shoulder and took her hand like they were old friends. "He just doesn't get us girls having a bit of fun at his expense."

Val giggled. "Yeah. Hey, y'know, you are the coolest witch I've ever met. I really like you." She squeezed her newfound friend's hand for emphasis.

Her hand was squeezed back. "I like you, Valda. Good thing, because I really do hate being disturbed on my honeymoon."

## Chapter Ten

Before Valda could step back, kneel, faint, or do some equally obnoxious bowing and scraping, the Goddess tugged on her hand and grinned. "Don't be silly. Besides, I haven't turned anyone into a toad in, oh, centuries I think. I lose track of time, since it has so little meaning for me."

"Oh," was all Val could think to say.

"Now, I won't say I don't get annoyed. But if wanted kneeling and supplication, there are better ways of getting it. The only reason I'm allowing Blaze to kneel is that he needed a lesson in humility. Being one of my more powerful High Priests does that to a fellow."

Val snickered when Blaze choked and turned red.

"If you're wondering how I managed to hide my true nature from you, well, it's very simple. Not only am I very good at hiding myself when I want, I gave you that gift, and I can take it away." She held up a finger at the hope for removal of her "gift" that flared in Valda. "I won't. I have a very good reason for giving you such a monster talent. But first, let's all get comfortable, shall we?"

Out of the earth, vines grew in three places. Thick and tough, they wove themselves together until the rudiments of three sling chairs formed of their growths. Valda watched fascinated as they interwove their branches until the seats looked as comfortable as any chair in Blaze's home.

A rumbling purr interrupted her introspection. The Goddess looked up at Spike as he lounged across the altar. "Yes, dear. You may. Don't forget to thank them before you eat them." The great tiger became the ordinary gray tabby, which jumped off the altar and stalked away with his tail in the air.

"I'll never look at Spike the same way," Val murmured.

The Goddess sat in the chair nearest her, as regal as any queen. "So you shouldn't. Even your mother's Chihuahua remembers his connection with the wolf and every songbird feels a connection with the eagle. Have a seat, children."

Blaze took his seat with the air of one who'd been freed from prison, humbled and grateful. But his eyes were twinkling. Valda took the last vine sling, marveling at how it bore her weight as if it had been there for centuries. The seat was surprisingly comfortable. "Okay, I'm talking to a Goddess. I think I can handle this," she muttered without bothering to hide her thoughts. Goddesses could tell what you were thinking anyway, so what was the point?

"You can. You're doing just fine." The Lady's brow knit together. "However, both of you weren't doing so well earlier." She folded her arms. "Don't you think it's time to tell the whole truth," and the Goddess' eyes lit, "and nothing but the truth, so help you Me?"

If it weren't for the fact that Val knew precisely what truth the Lady meant, she might have burst into gales of laughter. She swallowed it down, knowing she was stalling, and glanced at Blaze. At least he was wincing.

"Who gets to confess first, Lady?" Blaze asked.

"Valda. It won't affect what you have to say, Blaze, only your emotions." The Goddess' voice was stern and uncompromising.

Val gulped. "Great." She took a deep breath. "Well, since I don't want to be the first frog in centuries, well... um... IloveyouBlaze." Her words came out in a rush, and she shut her eyes tightly for a few breaths.

The Lady waited until Valda cracked one eye, and then smiled, content as any mother at a child's accomplishment. "There, that wasn't so bad, was it? Blaze. It's your turn. Be a brave boy and do it correctly."

There had been a certain relief in just saying it. Val whooshed out a breath and looked at Blaze.

He jerked his chin up, and threw back his shoulders. "Yes, Mother. Would you do me the kindness of providing..."

“Yes, yes. Here you are.”

A large bouquet of silvery white roses and a small box appeared in Blaze’s arms. He got up and knelt on one knee in front of Val. Her jaw dropped in astonishment, but only a tiny squeak came out.

“I’m sorry, Val, but I’m a traditionalist sometimes,” Blaze began sheepishly. He handed her the roses, which she took, feeling as if her arms were made of lead and her joints of wood.

Val glanced at the Goddess. Yes, She would know Val got sappy for romantic things, and longed for them. The Lady nodded and winked.

“Thank you,” Val said in a small voice. She wasn’t sure if she was thanking the Lady, or the man. Maybe both. Boy, standing -- er, sitting, no, being -- in the presence of a Goddess sure took the ginger out of Val’s preferred method of sarcastic comments when presented with flowers, candy, and other trappings of romance. Not that she’d had much experience with the stuff. Most of the times that a man had presented her with flowers, he wanted something.

Blaze was opening the tiny velvet box. Inside was a little pink diamond in the shape of a heart. Val’s eyes welled up with tears. No one else but the Goddess would know how much Val hated traditional white diamonds. They looked like chips of ice, boring and cold. She’d never understood the need to wear giant rocks on one’s hand. This little pink stone was tasteful, quiet, and different without one flash of ostentatious. Even the setting and band were a quiet silver, or maybe platinum. Much better.

“Valda Anastasia Lyman, will you marry me?”

Blaze’s voice jerked Val back. She studied his serious dark blue eyes. He meant it. What was more, he looked relieved. Not like he’d been intimidated into this.

“Why, Blaze? Why?” She managed to get that one question out of the thousand insecurities in her head. “You barely know me.” The fact that she wanted to fling herself in his arms and shout yes had nothing to do with it. She had to know why he wanted this.

His lips twitched. "Do you want those reasons alphabetically, or in order of importance?"

It would serve him right if she said she wanted them alphabetically. "Smart ass." She lifted one hand to caress his cheek. "Okay, I'll give you the rest of our lives to tell me." She took the hand away from his face, since that happened to be her left, and held it out. "Crown me, gorgeous."

Blaze plucked the ring from the box and slid it on her finger. "I crown thee queen of my heart." Of course, the ring fit perfectly.

The Goddess' rasping voice interrupted their contemplation of each other's faces. "Good. Now that's settled. Blaze, you can kiss her later. Get back in your chair. I want to discuss this rest of your lives concept. I'll bet you're wondering why I bothered to get involved, since I normally prefer to let people blunder around making their own mistakes."

"I did wonder about that, Lady." Blaze returned to his seat, but couldn't seem to wipe the silly grin he now wore off his face, the big sap.

*Okay, he can be the sappy one for the both of us. I'll anchor his adorable little ass to the earth as often as necessary. The thought struck her. Aw, shit. I'm marrying a witch. I'm going to have spell-casting toddlers with temper tantrums. Good thing Daddy works at home.*

The Goddess' eyes twinkled merrily at Valda, and then she winked. "Well, to use the old cliché, I'll bet you are wondering why I gathered you here. And yes, before you ask, I arranged this most carefully." She sat back and looked stern. "There's trouble brewing because a few fanatical people in this world want to make everyone live the same moral code they do, whether the world wants to or not."

"Yeah. Something about the concept of their Deity giving mankind free will they just don't get," Val agreed.

Blaze reached out and grabbed Val's hand. "I think I might see where this is leading."

"You always were a quick one, Blaze. Nevertheless, let me tell it my way. You're only partially right." The satisfaction in the Lady's voice was laced with mischief.

“Valda, you have been partially right all along, bless you for it. Both of you use the written word to speak to many. It’s time you spoke to more than the pagan community, Blaze. Valda provides you with the eyes of the Cowan, so you can see your writing through their eyes.”

“But she’s not really Cowan, Lady. Her gift.” Squeezing Val’s fingers emphasized Blaze’s protest. She gently pulled her hand free with a smile and shook her fingers.

“No, but Valda’s gift is special, Blaze.” The Lady turned to Valda. “I’ve given you more than just the gift of Sight, dear. I’ve given you the means to see the spirit of others clearly, in all its tones. That includes the ability to sense truth, once you’ve gotten used to it.”

“Okay, let me see if I get this.” Val tapped her finger on her chin. “Like, when I knew Blaze was angry, I saw red. Hey! ‘Seeing red!’ That’s an old expression for being angry.” She thought for a moment. “So, when someone is depressed, I’ll see them ‘feeling blue’. Or, ‘green with envy,’ right?”

The Lady nodded. “Very good, dear. Yes, that’s the basics of it. Humankind has already instinctively known these colors. Though compared to what you see, they are blind. What they see only dimly, you see in full spectrum. When I finally give it back to you, that is. It’s better if you never see my full power.” She harrumphed. “Last time The Lord did that, the poor human was shocked pure white-haired and we ended up restoring his sight before he could leave. What a mess. Still, it brought the point home.”

“I’ll bet,” Val responded wryly, having a feeling she knew who the Lady referred to.

“Now, Blaze here is your guardian, of a sorts, and you his. Both of you working together will get the message to the masses without My Lord and I having to do something ridiculously spectacular. To that end, I need to show Blaze what you see.”

She turned to Blaze, who’d been thoughtful and quiet throughout the entire discussion. He looked up with his eyes wide, but he sat up and nodded without speaking.



“Stand in front of me, Blaze. Look at Valda, only.”

\* \* \*

Blaze did as he was commanded. He'd been stunned once too often in this night to do anything else. His mind was a whirlwind that wouldn't settle. He'd won Val's heart, and that would have been enough to make any man dizzy. The ring was on her finger, and he'd do his best to see to it she was whisked up the proverbial aisle before she changed her mind. He'd make sure that ring never left her hand.

Now, he was coping with the concept that Val was more than just a new witch with an odd gift. She was Goddess-blessed with far more than the average witch. He doubted sincerely she realized the potential of her power. She literally could choose the next president flawlessly, avert wars by knowing who was negotiating honestly, and save lives by seeing illness before it manifested.

“Blaze, pay attention. You'll have time to sort all this out logically later,” the Lady admonished softly.

He forced himself to concentrate on his bride-to-be. Without further warning, Valda's spirit incandesced to life. Most of her aura was purple, and he interpreted that as a sign that she felt in control. However, one small portion of Valda was pink, and fluffy as a cloud -- her lower belly. Blaze glanced at the Goddess for reassurance. Was Valda already pregnant?

The Lady gave him a secretive and knowing smile.

Fatherhood. He felt himself grinning like a fool, and didn't care. If the Lady had wanted Valda to know, She would have said so directly. Well, he could wait. In the meantime, Valda looked at him expectantly. Blaze chided himself for his unconscious pun. He knelt again before Valda. “You're even more beautiful this way, to me.” He took her hand and kissed her fingers, just to watch her eyes soften. His temporary gift winked out, and he sighed with relief.

The Goddess rose to her feet. “Well, I've interfered enough, and it's time for me to get back to my honeymoon.” She stopped, and turned. “Oh, by the way, Valda. Chloe is just fine as a name.”

Valda gasped and blushed. "Um, thanks for letting me know."

Blaze turned and watched the Lady manifest her maidenly aspect full of youthful exuberance. The beautiful young girl skipped out the archway where a great stag waited, just barely visible in the darkness. The last thing he heard was a giggle, then a white hind and the stag ran off into the night.

"Hey, Blaze?" Valda tugged on the hand he still held, but not to get him to release it.

"Yes, my love?" He kissed the fingers again, just because he wanted to.

"Does this mean we start the honeymoon ceremony all over again?" Her smile was wicked. "If so, can we celebrate inside this time?"

Blaze laughed and stood before scooping her up in his arms. "Your bed or mine?"

"Yours. Because I intend to plant my butt there until we're safely married. I'm not giving you a chance to change your mind! You're stuck now, buddy boy."

"Then we'll find ourselves a judge tomorrow." He strode down the walkway. "Because I'm not letting you change your mind, either."

## Epilogue

Valda eased the pain in her lower back by pressing with one hand while still hefting a tray of four hot cocoa mugs with the other. "I'll never get used to winter in Florida. Decorating the Christmas -- I mean, Yule -- tree in my tank top was just wrong. Sweating in February is even more so."

Blaze grinned and relieved her of the tray. "Isn't it better than snow ten feet deep? Now go sit down."

Muttering, Valda sat in the rocking chair Blaze put in the kitchen just for her. "Sit, sit, sit. Good grief, Blaze, I'm pregnant, not an invalid. Besides, it doesn't snow that much in Denver."

"My wife is due to give birth at any time, and I'm protecting her from all that instinctive nesting she's been doing. How many times have you rearranged the nursery now?" Blaze kissed her with an indulgent grin and pushed through the door to serve their guests who'd made the drive despite a raging thunderstorm outside before she could reply.

"Only three," she grumbled to the swinging door. The sounds of music and laughter drifted back into the kitchen, but Valda rocked contentedly for a few minutes, hoping the ache in her back would go away. She was sweating like a pig, and it wasn't that hot in the house.

The doctor had warned Valda the baby had dropped, and labor could happen at any time. Blaze had taken the advice to heart, coddling her until she was ready to throttle him.

Her editor, Belinda, bounced into the room, resplendent in her green gown, to the fanfare of a particularly loud clap of thunder. "Hey, V!! When are you going to drop that kid and come back to work? It's Imbolg already!" She sipped her cocoa and

moaned. "Does Blaze have a brother? Any man who can make chocolate taste this sinful ought to have a sibling I can snatch up."

Valda hefted herself out of the rocker. "No, I got the only one. But surely in that room full of male witches you can find a nice guy, right?" She nudged Belinda, who was staring at her rocker. "Right?"

"Um, Val?" Belinda nodded at something behind Val.

Val turned and looked at her rocker, fearing Spike had brought her another headless mouse carcass again. The seat was sopping wet. "Aww, shit. I wasn't sweating, I guess. Least I know why my back's been killing me all evening."

Belinda thrust her mug of cocoa into Val's hands. "I'm getting Blaze." She moved so fast, she might have teleported.

The first real pain struck Valda halfway to the telephone to call the doctor. "Whoa... that didn't feel good." She dutifully checked her watch. Seven twenty-one pm.

Blaze came bursting in with Belinda right behind him carrying Valda's favorite black ritual robe.

Cheerfully, Belinda presented the robe as if Val hadn't seen it before. "Thought you might like to change before making your stately way to your room to change for the ride to the hospital. Your ass is wet."

Blaze grinned and reached for the phone. "I'll call the doc."

Belinda stripped Valda of her wet jeans and pink tee shirt emblazoned with a picture of the Good Witch of the North from the Wizard of Oz saying, "Are you a good witch or a bad witch?" on the front.

Valda was just settling her robe comfortably when Blaze swore and slammed the phone down on its charger. "Phone's dead. Probably the storm. Belinda, have you got your cell handy?"

"Yeah, sure. Charge is fresh. Just remember, this is long distance for me." The blonde editor pulled her cell out of her waistband. "Can't go anywhere without my electronic leash."

Blaze flipped open the top as soon as she handed it to him. He punched a few buttons and held it to his ear. "Static. It's not dialing."

"What?" Belinda snatched it back. "I pay extra for roaming charges, and this is what I get?" A clap of thunder shook the house. "Could it be the storm is blocking access to the satellite too?"

Valda looked at her watch as another pain struck. Seven thirty-two. She panted around the strong contraction until she could speak. "Uh, guys? I'm less than fifteen minutes apart. Let's get a move on, shall we?"

No one among the guests had service. They all tried, but nothing worked. By then, Valda's contractions were less than ten minutes apart, and even a ride in a Hummer wasn't going to get Val to the hospital in time.

"Aren't I supposed to have lots of time for this? Geez!" Val complained as Blaze carried her up the stairs to their bedroom. "I wanted drugs and a nice sterile delivery room, I'll have you know."

They made it to the landing halfway up before there was a loud pounding on the front door. Blaze didn't pause, knowing someone would answer for him. "Late arrival, I guess."

"Sorry to spoil the Imbolg celebration," Val panted between contractions. She'd been so looking forward to the snowflake cookies.

He placed her gently on their bed. "Yeah, you did this just to be contrary, I know." He kissed her nose and expertly removed her robe.

"Blaze! Strip off the coverlet. Your grandmother made this. What's more, I am not having this baby buck-ass naked. Gimme a tee shirt, at least."

Belinda sailed in, waving her pink tee shirt like a banner. "Midwife is here! Hallelujah! Brilliant of you to invite her to the party, Blaze." She marched over and pulled the tee shirt over Valda's head so her vision was obscured for a moment.

Valda heard Blaze gasp, and tugged the shirt into place. They hadn't requested a midwife. Then she saw who the midwife was.

The Lady's eyes twinkled with mischief. "Blaze always invites me to his celebrations, don't you, dear boy?" She patted Blaze's cheek.

The stunned and white-faced Blaze managed to choke out, "Yes, ma'am, I do."

"So thoughtful of you. Now, let's get organized." The Goddess shrugged out of her raincoat and laid it on a chair. "Belinda, dear, go get some towels to put under Valda. She might make a bit of a mess. Blaze, darling, take off that lovely bedspread. It looks like an heirloom."

A strong contraction made Valda cry out. The Lady was beside her in an instant. She grabbed Valda's hand. "There, there, dear. Just relax. You don't need drugs as much as you think you do. Look at me."

Valda was caught in the mesmerizing stare of the Lady's gaze, and felt her body relax. Then, she was floating among the clouds and stars, peaceful and content.

\* \* \*

Blaze watched in amazement as his spirited wife turned angelically compliant. He was able to remove the embroidered coverlet his grandmother had made while Valda cooperated without a murmur of complaint about being jostled.

Belinda returned with armloads of towels to sop up any fluids and the Lady tucked them in expertly. She then sent Belinda off for "some of that delightful chocolate I smell" and winked at Blaze.

"Get up behind Valda and support her, Blaze. This isn't going to take long now that Valda is cooperating. Aren't you, dear?"

Blaze obeyed orders, and sat on the large collection of pillows that decorated the bed. He wrapped his arms around his wife's swollen body, awed by the process and grateful more than he could say that the Goddess herself was performing one of her ancient functions of midwife.

"Yes, ma'am. I gotta take a shit." Valda's voice was sweeter than he'd ever heard her speak, despite the crassness of her words.

The Lady checked between Val's legs and smiled. "No, you don't, darling. That's the baby coming. It's the same sensation. Do it whenever you feel the need, using the same muscles. We have crowning. She'll be out in a few minutes."

"Okay. Glad this doesn't hurt," his normally temperamental wife replied dreamily. Then, she grunted and seemed to strain.

"Good girl! Keep pushing. I've got her head and one shoulder now."

Valda fell back panting after a few moments. Belinda came in, set the tray of steaming mugs on the bureau, and gestured a toast at Blaze. He took that to mean Belinda would go prepare the champagne they had chilling for this occasion. He nodded, and Belinda tiptoed out of the room.

"One more push, Valda," the Lady encouraged.

"Push, my ass. I'm taking the biggest crap of my life." Valda strained again, nearly pulling Blaze with her.

Blaze laughed. Whatever the Lady had done, and he suspected straightforward hypnosis, it hadn't interfered with Valda's acerbic personality, only her ability to feel pain.

The baby slipped out and into the Lady's waiting hands, her umbilical cord a bright purple. Using an extra towel, the Goddess wiped down their daughter and laid her on Valda's stomach so they could both admire her perfection and count toes. Blaze did so with what he knew was a silly grin on his face. He couldn't have removed his smile with a baseball bat.

"All right, Valda. One more push, please, to remove the placenta."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm tired, though." Back to the dreamy, sweet voice, Valda grunted and gave a good effort.

There had been a decorative bowl with a pitcher on the bureau. The bowl caught the purple mass easily in the Lady's capable hands. She set the bowl beside her and waited until the umbilical cord gave its last. Then, producing a pair of silver scissors from her pocket, the Lady ceremoniously offered them to Blaze. She brandished a silver clamp, remarkably like those high-fashion cone clips Valda wore.

“Cut, Blaze. Everything is sterile, of course. This clamp looks like a hair ornament Valda might wear. We must be plausible for the paramedics who will be called.” She winked. “The storm will end in an hour. Say you boiled this clamp because it was metal, dear.”

Blaze snipped and winced only slightly, hoping it didn't hurt his newborn daughter.

The Lady stood up and washed her hands in their private bath. By the time she returned, Valda was alert.

“Suckle Rhiannon, Valda dear. It will help everything return to normal. You can use those bottles in three days. Fair enough?” The Lady pocketed her scissors and placed the bowl of placenta on the now-crowded bureau.

Rhiannon Anastasia Robinson. Blaze blinked. Of course, the Lady would know the name they'd picked out.

Valda obeyed, and gasped. “Whoa, Granny! Did you make it feel this good on purpose?” She panted and looked like she was ready to orgasm.

“Val!” Blaze protested.

“Hush, Blaze. I like it. It's a girl thing, to use a modern expression.” The Lady laughed at his expression. “I don't expect you to understand. You'd have a nice male bonding with my Lord if he was here, but he's not. Yes, Valda, I did make it feel good. You'll be happy to feed her now, won't you?”

“Oh, yes! Even if she is a little Hoover vacuum. When will I know to switch sides? I assume I've got two for a reason.” Valda grinned down fondly at the busy infant.

“When it becomes uncomfortable, of course. Press on your nipple with a finger to break her suction.” The Goddess bent and gave Valda a grandmotherly kiss on the forehead, then did the same to a stunned Blaze. “Well, to quote a certain movie, it's time for me to blow this pop stand. I'm outta here.” Between one blink of Blaze's eyes and the next, she was gone.



From downstairs came the popping of champagne corks and the strains of "We Are Family" on the stereo system.

Valda laughed and snuggled in Blaze's arms. "Well, that's appropriate. Hand me some cocoa, will you? Want to bet it's still hot?"

"Sucker bet." Blaze reached over and got two mugs. "They're still steaming."

Valda grabbed hers greedily. "Ah, magic and chocolate. Are you sure it's Imbolg and not Beltane?"

\* \* \*

The Lady sauntered into the mist until she found her Lord waiting for her.

He kissed her lavishly. "Hello, meddler."

She pouted at him, back in her Mother form. "You know I don't, normally!"

"Did you tell them that baby was special?" He looked stern.

The Lady lifted her chin. "Of course not. She'll grow up normally until she finds her destiny, same as the rest of humanity."

"Or not. It will be her choice." He grinned.

"Or not," she agreed. "Next time, it's your turn to meddle in the affairs of men."

## **Lena Austin**

Someone cursed Lena Austin with “may you have a life so full you’ll have many tales to tell your grandchildren.” Lena’s a “fallen” society wench with a checkered past. She’s been a licensed minister, hairdresser, realtor, radio DJ, exotic dancer, telephone service tech, live-steel medievalist swordswoman, BDSM Mistress, and investment property manager. Not necessarily in that order. She never finished that degree in marine archaeology, but did learn to scuba -- she’s got a lifetime of “research material!”

Hey, why waste these stories on kids who won’t listen anyway? Writing them down is a nice way to spend her retirement. What? You expected an ex-BDSM Mistress to take up crocheting or something? See all her books at [www.LenaAustin.com](http://www.LenaAustin.com). You can reach her by e-mail at [voiceomt2002@yahoo.com](mailto:voiceomt2002@yahoo.com).