



**Moon Magick**

Book 2 in the Coven of the Wolf Series

Rae Morgan

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## Chapter One

*June, the month of the Dyad moon, the time the God and the Goddess become one. It is a time to seek harmony in all things: light balances dark, heat balances cold, and good balances evil.*

Brenna Lindsay stood silently in the circle she'd formed of white beeswax candles. The full moon bathed the clearing with silver light. Cool night air met the still-warm ground, creating wispy patches of ground fog blanketing the earth like a sheet of transparent white cotton.

Her wolf, White Star, sat on his haunches next to her, alert and on guard. Her other companions, twin shapeshifters, Boris and Igor, prowled the perimeter of the glen, watching for any hint of danger.

A hoot of an owl and the rustling of a small creature were the only sounds detectable on the night air.

Brenna relaxed, trusting that her companions would stand guard. She resumed her preparations for the Summer Solstice ritual. Normally, at the lesser Sabbat of Litha, it was common to seek the Goddess's blessing upon earth's bounty and protection for one's home. With the veils between the worlds of light and dark at their thinnest, a witch has the charge to maintain the delicate balance.

This year, that duty was of higher consequence.

Evil was afoot, and had gathered strength since June's crescent moon. It was then that she'd received the first warning, a note tacked to one of her herb farm's drying sheds...

*We're watching you, witch. Stay out of business that doesn't concern you, or else!*

After several more ominous threats and some incidents of vandalism, she contacted the head of the Coven of the Wolf in Chicago, Drake Morgan. Briefly, she'd considered going to the local law. The new sheriff was reputed to be a fair and impartial man, but she quickly discarded the notion. No matter how open-minded the sheriff was, once the words "witch" and "magick" became involved, his liberalness would vanish more quickly than ice in Hell.

Drake's response had been gratifyingly immediate. He sent two men from his security team, the Russian twins, Boris and Igor, to investigate ~~and~~ provide protection. They'd arrived yesterday, just in time for the midsummer ritual.

A light breeze blew her azure-colored cloak against her legs and caused the blanket of light fog to shift and move as if it were a living, breathing creature. She shivered as some animal screamed in the forest at the edge of the clearing. Star stiffened beside her, nose raised to sniff the air. After a moment he relaxed, nudging her hand in reassurance, urging her to finish the night's business.

Whatever was out there was not a direct threat to them, or Star would've attempted to drag her away.

Turning back to her preparations, she placed several large amethysts and other protective stones that she would ask the Goddess to bless. The larger stones she would bury around her house and those of the other local coven members. The smaller stones

she would fashion into protective amulets for her non-coven employees to wear while on the job.

But her magick could not insulate the countryside. So, she would seek a visualization of the evil. She hoped that once she knew who or what was the cause, she would be able to stop it before anyone got hurt.

In the exact center of the circle lay a small pond. It was this she would use for the scrying.

"Woo-oof." Star nudged her hand.

She looked down at her pet and smiled. The white star marking around his eye almost glowed in the moonlight. It was the only lightness on him other than his silver-colored eyes, his pelt being as dark as a moonless night. "What is it, boy? Do you wish to hunt whatever is rustling out there in the woods?"

Star showed his teeth and nodded.

Laughing, she stroked her pet's head between his ears. "Go on with you. Boris and Igor will protect me. Just don't bring whatever you catch home. I don't want rodent parts in my house."

Star rubbed his head against her leg in obeisance, then took off for the wall of trees at the edge of the clearing. His dark body merged into the inky shadows.

"Why do you put up with that wild animal?" asked Boris, or was it Igor? She still had a bit of trouble telling the two apart.

"He's no wilder than either of you." Her glance swept over the twins, who'd shifted from their wolfhound form into human. They stood outside the circle, their pale, naked bodies almost glistening in the bright moonlight, waiting to be invited inside.

"Please enter. All be blessed who come within." After the two crossed over, she re-consecrated the circle and began to light the white beeswax candles. "Didn't you bring any clothes?"

"No," said one of the twins. She thought it might be Igor, since his tone seemed serious. "We thought summer solstice rituals were performed sky-clad."

"Traditionally they are," she said, "but this spot is adjacent to public forest land, so it is safer to have clothing at hand."

"Be assured, Mistress, if someone comes, we'll shift back to animal form," the other twin said. This had to be Boris. Igor had stopped calling her mistress yesterday evening. She thought Boris, who'd proven to be somewhat of a smart-aleck, did it to pull her chain.

"Boris, I asked you not to address me as mistress." She turned to complete the arrangements for her ritual. "My employees are beginning to wonder about our relationship."

Boris stifled a snicker.

She glared at him. "That wasn't meant to be funny. This is a small town, and all I need is for one of the non-believers to go to the new sheriff and tell him I'm a dominatrix. Or that I'm having orgies with two of my employees."

"Yes, ma'am," Boris said, grinning like a loon.

"What can we do to help?" asked Igor as he punched his brother in the arm with his fist.

"Nothing. Just stand and listen."

Brenna arranged a wreath of white flowers on her hair, then removed her outer cloak. Both men gasped, but she refused to acknowledge their recognition of the sheerness of

her robe. Igor was correct. Most rituals were performed in the nude. To honor the tradition, but protect her modesty in case someone stumbled onto her during ritual, she preferred a sheer gown.

Taking her staff of polished oak, she pushed it into the earth. By grounding herself to Mother Earth, she would prevent an inadvertent crossing over into the dark world. Closing her eyes, she felt the flow of the Gaia's life force seeping its way into her. She was now ready to plumb the high energy of the summer solstice. If things went well, she would garner that energy for protection and seek out the root of the evil.

Picking up the chalice containing wine she had pressed from last year's grape harvest, she took a sip, then held her hands to the sky.

*Goddess, we bring thee gifts to celebrate the time of light and dark.*

*Help us seek balance.*

*Bless these stones to protect our home and those within.*

*Provide us with the wisdom to preserve the gifts of your bounty.*

As her words ended, the crystalline stones she'd placed around the circle shimmered and glowed. She turned toward the East and took another sip of the wine.

*Goddess, send the winds to refresh our land.*

The eastern breeze increased in its intensity, clearing out the heavy night mist. She turned toward the South, toasting the Goddess once more with her cup.

*Goddess, send the sun to warm the earth and allow all life to flourish.*

A strobe-like flash of light from the south swept over the circle, then vanished into the ground at Brenna's feet. She rotated another quarter-turn toward the West and sipped her wine.

*Goddess, bless us with rain to help the bounty grow.*

The rumble of thunder and a flash of lightning came from a cloudless sky and the pond rippled with the droplets of a phantom thunderstorm. She turned one final time.

*Goddess, send the seasons in their proper time.*

Brenna took the green cord knotted about her waist and kissed the ends, ending the traditional Litha ritual.

Going to the four points of the compass on the circle, she laid offerings of flowers and cookies for the nature spirits, asking them to aid in the protection of her home.

Kneeling by the pond, she grew warm from the power she'd taken. Stirring the waters in a clockwise fashion, she imparted some of the energy to the cool liquid. Within the misty swirls, images began to form as she sought knowledge of those who threatened her and those she protected—maybe even the why of the threats.

*Goddess, all we have asked of you,*

*We welcome with open hearts full of light and goodness.*

*Please reveal who seeks to harm me and mine.*

The waters bubbled and boiled as the air within the circle whistled and screamed like a banshee. A white owl swooped down and landed at the edge of the pond, a mere arm's length away from Brenna. Its golden-eyed gaze captured hers with its intensity. Boris and Igor closed in on the bird. She stayed them with a shake of her head.

The owl spoke to her mind:

*Daughter, you have done right in seeking me out. There is a darkness upon the land. The dark ones are using you and yours for their own evil purposes. Soon, you will discover their perfidy and must choose your path to re-establish harmony. Be warned,*

*you must not battle the evil alone, for you are of the light. Look to the waters. See the other that will make you whole. Together, in balance, you will defeat the threat from the darkness.*

The owl blinked once, then flew off with a flashing of wings.

Brenna gazed at the waters. Among the ripples she saw many things. Death would come this very night. Evil would reign over the land. The only way to halt the onslaught of darkness and defeat evil's takeover was to find her opposite, a man of strength, formed in the fire of battle. A warrior.

At the last image, she closed her eyes, but still she saw ... him. The one. He was naked, his bronzed body sculpted by a master's hand. His hair was long and silky black, touching his shoulders. His profile was formidable; his nose straight as a blade, his face, rugged. But what was indelibly etched on her mind's eye were his hands, long-fingered, as they reached for her as she lay, naked, on an unfamiliar bed in a room she had never seen.

Shaken by what the Goddess had revealed to her through the owl, she didn't shrug off Boris's assistance in standing. On her own, she might never have gotten off the ground.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Brenna," said Boris, for once being sober, "but aren't owls symbols for the crone aspect of the Goddess?"

"Yes." She shivered and looked around for her cloak. Igor held it for her and she slipped it on, grateful for its warmth against the damp night air. "The trilogy of the Goddess: Maiden, Mother, Crone. The crone represents wisdom, thus the owl. The full moon is the phase associated with the crone."

"What did the owl tell you?"

Before she could frame an answer, a howling erupted from the darkness. The sound raised the hairs on her arms.

"It's Star. He's found something."

She ran toward the sound of Star's cry. Shifting into their animal forms, Igor and Boris ran alongside her, then quickly outstripped her two-legged pace with their four.

She followed them into the forest's foreboding darkness.

When she found them, the trio stood in a semi-circle at the base of a large oak tree, gazing upwards at something she could not see from her angle of approach. Hurrying to join them, she hit a wall of energy, as solid as if it were made of bricks. Malevolence exuded from the psychic barricade, making her queasy.

Star whimpered, then called to her. "Woof!"

She fought her way through the thick murk to join her companions.

Treading carefully, she walked around the oak's trunk. Her hand automatically reached out to calm Star, who whined, low and incessantly, at the back of his throat. She looked up to see what had captured their awful attention.

"Blessed Goddess." She would have fallen if one of the twins had not shifted shape to catch her within his strong arms.

A beam of moonlight had fought its way through the canopy of trees and highlighted the oak's trunk. Like a black-and-white horror show, it outlined the figure of a man staked to the tree. His blood ran darkly down his naked body and dripped onto the forest floor.

Muttering a prayer to God and the Goddess, she sought a swift passing for his essence to the other side. But it was not to be.

The man's spirit pummeled her senses with his need to be avenged, seeking entrance to her mind.

*Be calm, angry spirit. I will listen ... later. There are actions that must be taken first.*

It was as the visions in the pond had revealed. The duty to seek out the evil and vanquish it belonged to her and the man she had yet to meet. Until that time, she had to follow mankind's laws. There was no way to hide this death from the authorities.

"We have to call the sheriff," she addressed the twins. "One of you has to go and report this. The other has to go to the clearing and clean up the circle. I'll stay here." The naked male warmth plastered against her back, enveloping her, caused her to add, "And for goodness sake, get some clothes."

"One of us can stay here," argued Igor, his warm breath caressing her cheek. His arms were the ones that had caught ~~and~~ still held her. Closely, too closely. His nakedness added to her unease with what the night had brought ... that and the knowledge that he was not the "one".

"No," she said as she sought to move away from his possessive embrace. Igor growled low in his throat as his grip tightened for a mere fraction of a second, then went slack. Before he could rethink his position, she stepped out of his arms and turned to capture both twin's gazes with her own. "I have to stay. I need to make an attempt to reach what might be left of his life force." And that of the evil which lingers here, but they didn't need to know that. "Besides I'll have Star with me. He and I will do just fine."

"Brenna, you can't get mixed up in this," said Boris. "With the threats to expose you as a witch..."

"He was killed near my land. I'm already involved. Besides, a death was prophesied by the Goddess for this night. His death. The balance has shifted to the dark side. She has informed me it is my duty. I have to shift it back."

Igor's sharp blue eyes swept over her face. "Just what did you see in the scrying?"

"The future." *My future.* "And somehow this man's death will bring it to me."

## Chapter Two

*Sharing dreams or visions with a male, be he mere or witch mortal, indicates that the female witch has found her mate. Whether the two will ever meet is left to fate.*

*- Covendom Rules, p. 35.*

While Star stayed by her side, she closed her eyes and communed with the spirits of the woods. The tree to which the man was staked, while not mortally wounded, sighed its pain on the wind. Later, after the forces of the law had removed the man, she would perform a healing ritual for the injured oak. Seeking more deeply, she found nature to be in balance. The evil that had committed this foul deed was gone and had only harmed two this night, the oak and the man.

Girding her strength, she reluctantly resought communion with the man's tortured soul; its clamoring for an audience still beat upon her senses. He wanted vengeance. And she was his only hope.

*Avenge me!*

The words cut her mind like razors with his fury and despair. The soul's obvious depravity sickened her with its past life's ugly and sordid deeds. Yet, she could not turn her back and walk away. Whoever had killed this man was even more evil, so evil that more death and destruction were imminent.

Her duty was clear. No matter how much of a bastard he'd been in life, she could not turn away from his appeal for justice from beyond the grave. Balance must be restored.

*Who did this to you?*

*I don't know.* A mournful sigh echoed in her ears. *I did ... nothing to deserve ... this ... Lindsay witch.*

The man's death spirit lied to her. She heard it in the hesitant pauses, in the whining tone of one who refuses to recognize his own bad acts. Sensed it in the very duplicity of his life deeds. He knew his murderers!

Even worse, he knew her!

She re-examined the ravaged features of the man, the light of the full moon now fully cast upon them. She gasped. He was ... had been ... Bob John Roebuck, a local developer and her nemesis. They'd clashed many a time over conservation of the forests and undeveloped lands in and around their southern Indiana community. She suspected he was behind many of the recent threats and vandalism aimed at her and her business.

*How can I avenge you, if you lie to me?* she asked.

Bob John's spirit wailed, screamed in anguish, then fell sullenly silent. Its presence still hung about her, but he spoke no more.

Then, as if his silence proclaimed it aloud, she knew. Bob John lied to himself, even in death. He refused to acknowledge that he had brought this upon himself. The character of this man, and it had not been a good one, would lead to his murderer or murderers.

Star whined, then growled low in his throat.

Someone approached.

Brenna opened her eyes and all her other senses and directed them back toward the clearing, lit by the full moon and barely visible through the denseness of the forest.



From the shadows, a lone man appeared, walking confidently in the dimly lit woods. He seemed a part of the darkness, yet not. Behind him, others followed, lighting their way with large flashlights. Boris and Igor, now dressed, were among them.

As the man crossed the clearing a shaft of moonlight illuminated him. She gasped. It was him! The warrior of her vision.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, her body responded to his presence. Her loins tightened and vaginal fluid dampened her inner thighs. Her silk gown abraded aroused nipples. She moistened her lips as her body all but preened in a ritual as old as mankind.

Brenna pulled her cloak more closely around her, but knew it didn't fully hide her body's sensual show. She shivered, whether with embarrassment, cold or anticipation, she didn't want to know.

As the man who would become her partner maneuvered the thick woods and undergrowth between her and the clearing, she considered the brief glimpse the moonlight had awarded. He looked to have Native American blood. The sharp angles of his face were split symmetrically by a blade of a nose, an Indian feature, softened with some European ancestry, perhaps Scots or maybe French. His eyes were light, piercing in the shaft of moonlight. Predatory eyes, glowing with inquisitiveness, intelligence and some inner awareness.

Images of a timber wolf crossed her mind.

She closed her eyes for an instant and visualized him roaming, one with the forest, alert to danger or prey like his totem the wolf. He had magic! Whether he knew it or not was yet to be determined.

"Miss?" His voice rumbled across her senses like a storm chasing over the earth. And like the earth absorbs life-giving moisture, she absorbed the sound. "Are you okay?"

Her eyes flew open, her gaze immediately captured by his.

His eyes were pale, a silver-grey in the reflected light of the moon and the men's flashlights. His gaze swept over her with the intensity of the hunter he was. His voiced concern was underlaid with suspicion. His scrutiny missed nothing of her appearance. Even though the darkness and her cloak worked together to shroud the nudity barely covered by her gown, his predator's night vision had seen. His slight intake of breath confirmed it. His chin raised slightly, then his nostrils flared as if he could smell her arousal.

His inspection increased. His eyes swept over her body ... once, twice ... as if he could see all through the darkness and the cloak. A musky scent of male arousal wafted upon the night air. Her core throbbed to the beat of another's heart. His heart. She was mesmerized, unable to break away. This attraction was too primitive, too much like an animal mating ritual. She'd never felt this way before and, despite what the Goddess had prophesied, she wasn't sure that she liked this loss of control.

"Brenna! What happened?" Boris's worried tones cut through her stupor. "I knew we shouldn't have left you alone."

The twins had moved to her side while she'd been under the thrall of the dominant male in front of her.

Shaking off her lethargy, she attempted to reassure the twins. "I'm fine. Nothing happened. No one is in the woods but those present."

"I'm not sure how you know that, Miss," her warrior said, as he moved to stand in a shaft of moonlight. "I'll have my men check it out all the same."

His wolf-like eyes glared at the twins. His nostrils flared, this time with anger. The sound of his gnashing teeth reached her highly attuned senses. He tensed, preparing to make a move, as if he felt the twins threatened his alpha-female.

Next to her, Igor growled softly and moved closer. Boris murmured something that sounded like "Oh, shit" under his breath, but mirrored his brother's protective movements on her other side. Even Star sensed the danger from the alpha-male. Her pet whined and stood his ground, huddling closer to her and butting her hand with his head for reassurance.

While she appreciated their concern, she moved away from them, one step closer to the man in front of her. Enough blood had been spilled this night.

The testosterone levels lowered appreciably, but still simmered under the thin surface of the twin's human civility and her pet's faith in her.

So, her mate was the law. Knowingly or not, he'd chosen a career that reflected his nature. He was her opposite, just as the owl had said, a warrior to her healer.

"They'll find nothing. I know these woods and the creatures that live within. Before you came, the birds and animals had no fear, so no one but I and Star were present."

"The animals and birds don't fear you?" The question, she sensed, was asked out of an intense curiosity. There was none of the derision in his tone she'd come to expect from the mortal world, especially skeptics such as law enforcement officers. He was truly interested in her answer.

"No. They know I will not harm them. I live in harmony with all Nature's creatures."

The man's sharp-eyed glance raked her body. Brenna pulled her cloak even more closely around her.

He cast a warning glance at the twins who'd moved once more to flank her. He was jealous! Hoping to head off a potentially ugly situation among the three men, she went on the offensive and confirmed what she already knew. "And just who are you?"

"Sheriff Ty Buchanan. And you are?" His eyes swept over her, then flicked again to the twins. "And these ... men?"

He spoke the word "men" as if it left a nasty taste in his mouth. The twins bristled, recognizing the insult in the sheriff's tone.

"I'm Brenna Lindsay. I own the land adjacent to this part of the Hoosier Forest. These are my cousins, Boris and Igor, visiting from Chicago."

"Hmm." He didn't believe her, she could tell. He glanced down at her side. "Is that a full-blooded wolf?"

"Yes," she said, stroking Star's head in a gentling motion. "His name is White Star."

A look she could have sworn was envy crossed over Ty's face as if he wished he were the one being petted.

"Do you recognize the dead man?" He angled his head toward the tree, now surrounded by men and women setting up lights, taking pictures and marking the area off with yellow crime-scene tape.

The temporary lighting cast a strange white glow over the area. It looked like a play with Bob John at center stage and the edges in darkness, hiding the reality behind the scenes. But in this instance, what was on stage was the reality. A man was dead.

And her vision showed her she had to help Ty Buchanan find the killer.

But something told her Ty, a very dominant male, would not appreciate her help.

Now was not the time or place to explain what she knew and why he had to accept it. There were too many eager ears around, ready to eavesdrop on her truths and spread them countywide. When she told Ty what she was, it would be in private surroundings where she would have more control over the how and the when of the revelations.

Ty stared at her waiting for the answer to his question.

"Maybe. Um, I'm not sure," she lied, then involuntarily glanced at Bob John still hanging from the tree. Several people finished taking pictures, while others waited to take him down and carry him off to let the coroner's people determine cause of death. "His face is so ... distorted."

Of course, if she'd wanted, she could tell him that Bob John had still been alive when he'd been staked up there to bleed to death. He hadn't died easy. His death spirit was evidence of that.

"Did any of you hear or see anything unusual in the woods?" Ty asked.

"No," she said. And that was the truth. She and the twins hadn't heard a thing other than the usual night sounds. The killers must have gagged Bob John in some way. She sensed that they had watched as he died, taking away the gag after he was too weak to cry out.

Then it hit her. The killers had to have struck while she prepared her ritual. Star had sensed the intruders and had gone to investigate, only alerting her after the danger had passed. She surmised it would have taken more than one man to hoist a full-grown man up and stake him. Star would not have called her into a situation where she could be harmed.

The murderers might have even been aware of her and the twins' presence this evening.

"Oh," she gasped.

Ty and the twins shot questioning looks at her outburst, but she ignored them, her mind ticking over questions. Could the killers, and not Bob John, be the ones who'd sent her threatening notes, warning her to mind her own business? Had someone been spying on her rituals in the woods? Were they trying to cast suspicion on her? Or, was placing the body of a man who'd been her self-proclaimed enemy near her land merely a coincidence and the killers had other reasons for the gory display?

She didn't know, and didn't like the answers that presented themselves. Not at all. She shuddered.

"Brenna?" Igor placed his arm around her. His warmth relayed to her how cold she was. It reached all the way to her soul. "What is it?"

Male hormones once more announced their presence as shouting in her mind. The noise came from Ty, who stood shooting dagger-like glances at the twin who held her.

"Nothing," she said as she stepped away from Igor's warmth. The angry noises in her head faded. She sighed. "I'm upset. Sorry."

Igor's eyes told her that he knew she'd lied and that they would return to this topic later.

She closed her eyes and shivered once more. If the men who had killed tonight had seen the twins shift, she feared for all their futures.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Lindsay. I realize how upsetting this must be. Maybe your cousins could take you back to your house," said Ty. His keen eyes examined her face, then flashed to Igor, who had placed a hand on her arm.

No hormone storms beat at her senses this time. Ty only frowned and shook his head as if something didn't add up.

Brenna worried about the extent of Ty's perceptiveness. Could he tell that she lied? What did he really think the relationship between the twins and her was? And what would he do when he found out what she really was, and could do? Had his wolf-like eyes pierced her facade through to her very soul?

"I will come there to question you," he added. "Right now, I have a crime scene to deal with."

"Yes, later would be fine."

Brenna needed to get away from his scrutinizing glances. She had to center herself and regain control. Because when she told him that he needed her as a partner to solve this crime, to find and negate the evil that had escaped this night and to regain the world's balance between light and dark, she would have to counter, in a calm, logical manner, all of his objections, of which, she was sure, there would be many.

As to the rest of the vision, well, she had a gut feeling that Ty would figure that part out without any help from her. His maleness had all but called to her. His actions claimed her.

She, Star and the twins turned to leave when Ty's voice halted them.

"Ms. Lindsay, I'll want to know what you were doing out in the woods in the middle of the night with your *cousins*," he said, his emphasis indicating he knew she lied about the relationship with the twins. "Make sure the story is believable. It will be for the official report."

Damn, just as she suspected, he could tell when she lied. She was in serious trouble. By lying to him, she'd already given him leverage over her. And she'd learned a long time ago, never give an alpha-male the upper hand. They always used it.

\* \* \* \*

Ty watched as Brenna Lindsay and her supposed cousins made their way back to the small copse on her land. A tangle of emotions—~~anger~~, jealousy, lust—~~boiled~~ within.

She was the one. His mate.

*Why here? Why now? Why her? Was she involved in this man's murder?*

The little minx had lied to his face about knowing the victim and about what she might have seen or heard in the woods. And if those two were her cousins, then he was the President of the United States. The one who had dared to touch her ... it had been all he could do not to rip the bastard's throat out.

God! He had to get control of himself. He was a law enforcement officer. He had a crime scene to process. A murderer to find.

Shoving his territorial feelings aside, he turned his thoughts back to his crime scene.

Although someone had tried to hide the evidence, his keen eyes had detected signs of some sort of circle ritual on her land. He suspected the three had been in the throes of some sort of orgiastic rite when the wolf had found the body. He muttered an obscenity. If so, it would be the last time. He paced the area just outside the crime-scene tape,

clenching and unclenching his fists as he visualized Brenna, naked and servicing two lusty males. In the future, he vowed to be the only lusty male in her life.

No matter what they'd been doing in the clearing, he'd bet his Ruger Redhawk pistol that the killers had been aware of the three. Probably had gotten a charge out of killing a man so close to others and getting away with it.

He clenched his jaw. Brenna could be in danger whether she'd seen anything or not. The two men could fend for themselves, but Ty vowed no one would harm Brenna.

But was she an innocent in all this? Could all three of them be the best suspects he had? As to Brenna, his instincts told him no, and if he chose to admit it, he didn't believe the two men had any part in the murder either. His instincts had never failed him in the past; trusting them now would save him from following a dead-end trail.

Yet, there was something going on with his beautiful Brenna and her companions, and he meant to get to the bottom of it. They were hiding something about what went on in the woods this evening. He needed to find out what it was and either rule it out or fold it into his investigation so that he could move on to find the killer.

"Ty?" Someone tugged at his sleeve. He turned to see his crime scene tech, the only trained tech the county saw fit to budget money for. "What is it, Toby?"

"Ahh, you need to see this." Toby led him to the base of the oak. "We figure Bob John was still alive when he was, uh, staked. Doc Jones thinks he must have slowly bled to death. Not sure why those three people didn't hear anything. He'd have screamed or moaned, at least at the beginning. The killers must have silenced him in some way. Probably find signs of a gag or tape around his mouth, once we get him down."

"You know the victim?"

"Yeah. He was a local businessman, Bob John Roebuck. He was what you big city boys..."

Ty snorted. Ft. Wayne wasn't all that big, but to Toby, a life-long resident of Paoli, it must seem like it.

"...would call an entrepreneur."

"What can you tell from the crime scene?" Ty asked, as he looked around. "Did the witnesses trample my crime scene?"

"No sir, the witnesses came in from the direction of the clearing and stayed in one spot judging from their tracks. Those two men were really helpful and showed us exactly where they'd stood. Funny thing, though. It looked as if there was more than one four-legged animal here. But the men said there had only been the one dog..."

"Wolf, not a dog," Ty interrupted. "Be careful around that animal. He may look tame, but he's wild. I'm not sure how Ms. Lindsay has gotten him to act like a lap dog. Now, show me those dog tracks."

"Uh, Ty," Toby gulped, avoiding his eyes, as he led him to the spot, "the locals say Miz Lindsay is a witch. Since you're new, you might not have heard the rumors yet. She owns the farm and produce store up the road. All the land along the Hoosier Forest border," Toby swept his hand back toward the road, "belongs to her."

Could that be what she hid? The fact that the locals thought of her as some sort of witch?

As he considered Toby's provocative comments, Ty knelt down behind the crime-scene tape and examined the tracks surrounding the base of the tree. Portable lights lit the

area like daytime and he had no trouble seeing the markings and differentiating human from animal.

*Well, hell. What have we here?* He shook his head. He'd have to come back during the day and see if he could track the animals, or whatever they were, that had made the markings at the base of the oak.

Turning his attention back to Toby, he asked, "Why do they call her a witch? Is it just because she raises herbs?"

He was thirsty for any information about his comely Brenna. The glimpse of her sheerly covered body through the opening in her cloak had brought to mind his vivid dreams of the past few months. Dreams about her in all her naked glory and him heating up the sheets in his Paoli cottage-style house.

The dreams had begun the night he'd moved in and had him hard and hurting every single night since. His grandfather had always said he would find his life mate in his dreams. Ty hadn't believed him.

Now he did.

But before he could make her his, he needed to find out what she and those men were hiding. On the surface, it looked like she had more than enough males caught in her erotic web. Those twins looked at her as if she were a choice dessert. The one who'd touched her looked as if he'd like to rip out Ty's throat. The feeling had been mutual.

"Uh, Sheriff, did you hear me?" Toby peered at him, blinking like a nervous rabbit in the klieg lights.

"Sorry, Toby. I was thinking. What did you say about Ms. Lindsay's reputation as a witch?"

"Lots of folks around here raise herbs and such, so that's not what stuck in most people's craws. They call her a witch, because, uh, well, they say she can talk to animals—and plants. And that she has rituals in the woods." Toby's face burned red.

"What kind of rituals?" whispered Ty, his tone harsh with repressed anger as his thoughts once again turned to the sheerness of the gown beneath Brenna's cloak and the men's protectiveness of her.

"Um, sex things." The highly educated, but still wet-behind-the-ears tech looked down at his shoes. "I heard she has orgies at the full moon, back there in the clearing."

"Fucking hell!" he muttered. If it were true, he'd have to let those two Russians know it would never happen again. The only orgies in the woods Brenna would be participating in would be with him. With no extra bodies allowed. He didn't share his woman with others—ever.

As Toby chattered away about body temperatures and rigor, Ty heard his spirit guide call to him. Over Toby's shoulder, a shimmering timber wolf appeared, standing under an oak and eyeing him.

*Alemwa, she is the one.*

Images assailed Ty's mind. His groin clenched at a vision of Brenna and him, both naked and in the throes of passion, lying on the cool grass on a hot summer's morning. In its vividness, the image was just like the dreams that had tortured him nightly. So real, that he could almost smell the grass, their combined musk, and feel the early morning mist washing over their heated bodies.

*She is your future, Alemwa. Protect her well. There is danger. You must fight to keep what is yours. Be aware, that your woman is more than she seems. Trust her instincts as you would your own. Seek with all your senses to find the right path.*

His guide leapt into the darkness of the forest and was gone in the blink of an eye.

Ty shook off the lassitude left by the waking dream state. His spirit guide and his hypersensitive senses and instincts were a genetic gift from a Miami Indian ancestor, a shaman, a direct descendant of the Miami Prophet. His grandfather had filled Ty's head with stories, but he'd forced them to a dark corner of his mind once he'd attained his manhood. For most of his adult life, he'd managed to keep that part of his nature buried except for the times that it thrust itself upon him.

Before tonight, his spirit guide had only appeared before him three times. The first when he had undergone his rites of manhood at age thirteen. It was then it was revealed that his nature was akin to a wolf. The second when he was in Special Forces and his mother was dying. He made it home just in time to speak to her one last time. And the third just before a drug dealer shot him in the back. The warning saved his life. That last experience was the reason he'd left Ft. Wayne and had come to live in Paoli.

Shit! Why was all this happening? Especially now, with his first murder case as sheriff. He groaned. His life had just gotten a lot more complicated.

## Chapter Three

*The Law of Cause and Effect:*

*What goes around, comes around, or, as it is also known, karma.*

*- Magick Laws.*

Entering her log home, Brenna went to her bedroom to change into something more concealing. She'd be a lot more comfortable ~~and confident~~ dealing with Sheriff Ty Buchanan if she were fully clothed.

Ten minutes later, she walked into the great room. The twins lounged on the leather sofa in front of the fireplace. One of them had lit the logs. They held steaming mugs of a hot beverage.

"We made cocoa," said Igor, his golden-brown eyes glowing with an emotion she'd rather not put a name to. "Yours is on the end table by the chair."

She took a seat in the large chair-and-a-half, swung her feet up onto the matching ottoman, then reached for the mug. Cupping it with both hands, she sniffed at it, then took a cautious sip. Just as she suspected, they'd liquored it up, but she drank it anyway. If she couldn't have alcohol at a time like this, then there'd never be a better time.

"Just for curiosity's sake, what's in this besides chocolate?" She sipped the creamy concoction, feeling its warmth, both alcoholic and temperature-wise, spread throughout her body.

"Amaretto and marshmallows," Igor replied. "It was Boris's idea. He said we all could use it. We don't find dead bodies everyday."

"Well, at least not ones staked to trees," Boris inserted.

"Neither do I," she sighed, not sure she wanted to know what other kinds of bodies they'd found. "Life is usually pretty peaceful around here ~~or~~ at least it was until the notes started."

"Do you think the body and the notes are connected?" Igor stared at the fire, idly stirring his cocoa with his finger, then licking it.

She supposed that most women would find Igor's gesture, and the man himself, sexy. And maybe earlier today, she, too, might have responded to his sensuality, but that was before the vision. Before Sheriff Ty Buchanan entered her life's circle.

She shook off the dream of them making love, running like a film loop in her head, and replied, "Maybe. I'd like to think they were, then I wouldn't have to worry about trouble from different sources."

"You think there's more than one bad guy?" Boris sat up and stared at her. "Why?"

She shook her head. "I know it seems silly, but the notes, while threatening to expose me if I didn't mind my own business, weren't imbued with the same kind of evil that killed that man. I just sense it. Nothing I can prove."

"You knew the dead man, didn't you?" said Boris. At her nod, he swore. "You lied to the sheriff. Why?"

"I don't know." She shrugged, then took a large gulp of the cocoa, burning her mouth. She set the mug down and noticed that her hands shook.



"Brenna? You do know." Igor's voice had softened as if he were soothing a fractious animal. "What is it? Why did you lie? Does it have something to do with your visions in the scrying pool?"

"Yes." She picked up the cup of cocoa to warm her hands, hoping the heat would warm the rest of her as well. "I lied because I didn't want to admit I was a witch. That you two were shapeshifters. That ... that the sheriff and I were destined to be lovers. And..."

"Well, shit!" Boris said. He turned toward his brother and poked him in the side. "That leaves you out, brother mine."

So, Brenna hadn't misread Igor's body language at the crime scene and here. He wanted her as a sexual partner. And she couldn't see Ty Buchanan, if he wanted her ~~and~~ the Goddess and her own intuition said he ~~did~~ sharing.

She really didn't need this male macho crap right now. It was going to be difficult enough dealing with one alpha-male, let alone two.

"Shut up, idiot," growled Igor as he slapped back at his twin, who deftly ducked the blow. He turned toward Brenna, his face couched in neutral lines. "Go on. You were about to add something else. Was it about the dead man?"

So, he was going to play it cool. Or, was he just regrouping? Igor had been around magick and witches long enough to know that destiny was a path, not a destination. Ty and their mating was not etched in stone ~~yet~~. But if she were a betting woman, she'd lay odds that Ty moved fast when he saw something he wanted. And all that was female in her told her he wanted her badly.

Returning to Igor's question, she said, "Yes. Bob John ~~that's his name~~ ~~and~~ I didn't see eye-to-eye on lots of things." She paused and sipped her cocoa. "If I had to bet on who sent those notes, I would have put my money on him. It's the kind of sneaky thing he would do."

Boris cursed under his breath. "You know that'll bring you to the top of the sheriff's most-likely-to-have-committed-the-murder list, don't you?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe? You're lying to yourself this time, Brenna," Igor snapped, his calm facade gone as if it had never existed. Was his anger aimed at her or at Ty Buchanan? Or, at himself? "There's no maybe about it. The man is first and foremost a lawman. A hunter. I don't think his having an instant hard-on for you is going to keep him from conducting a properly handled investigation. From his perspective, you have motive and opportunity..."

"And two healthy males, about whom you also lied, who could have helped you do it." Boris finished for his twin.

They were right.

Maybe that was the main reason she'd lied to Ty about Bob John. She hadn't wanted to see the look on his face when he realized she was one of his prime suspects. He'd find out sooner or later. One of his deputies would surely tell him all about her past run-ins with Bob John. She just hadn't wanted his censure to come on top of their first meeting.

"Brenna?" Boris looked worriedly from her to his twin, whose face had gone artificially calm once more. "Did this Bob John have any enemies?"

"Besides me?" She let out a short, strangled laugh. "Yes, thank the Goddess, he did. Lots of them. But none of them were conveniently in the woods in the middle of the night

under suspicious circumstances. Or at least, that's the way the law will look at it, as Igor has taken great pains to point out."

"No, they won't," said Igor. "Not if we point them in the right direction. Talk to us. Tell us about Bob John and his many enemies."

Brenna's body sagged with relief. Igor wouldn't allow her to be a suspect, let alone be arrested, for a murder she didn't commit. He was back to being what he was, a protector. And she silently thanked Drake Morgan for sending him and his brother to her. If they had not been here, she would have been alone during the Litha ritual, with no one to believe that she hadn't killed Bob John.

"Where should I start? There are so many. He was not well-liked. He had one of those personalities that rolled over anything or anyone in the way of what he wanted."

"I'm curious," Igor said. He stiffened from the languid pose he'd maintained since he'd punched his brother. His eyes narrowed until they were amber slits. "What did *you* have that Bob John *wanted*?"

Oh, Hecate's hangnails. Igor's thoughts were as clear as her scrying pool.

"He didn't want me sexually."

Igor snorted. Boris reached over and punched his brother, then muttered, "Shut up, idiot."

"Bob John wanted access to the State Forest." Brenna set the cup on the table. Her hands once more restless, she twisted the ends of her hair as she spoke. "He wanted access across my land, from the main road to the State Forest. He had made a bid on some of the public forest lands for a large splashy resort. He needed both pieces to go with some he already owned to make a resort deal work. It was rumored that someone with lots of money was backing him. While wealthy, Bob John didn't have that kind of personal money. Or, at least not that I knew of."

"State Forest land?" Boris sat forward, his arms braced across his knees. "You can buy public lands?"

"Not usually, no. But he had some pull with the local state representative. Some people said he blackmailed the state rep. I don't know what was true. But I wasn't going to sell my land, and I damned well wasn't going to let him buy up public lands, either. So, I headed up a coalition of groups to stop him."

"That seems harmless enough," said Igor.

Brenna smiled. "Then I helped push through zoning ordinances in the county that would keep him or any developer from building a resort anywhere on or near the public lands that featured buildings taller than one story, more than three bedrooms and two baths, that had a golf course or tennis courts or a swimming pool, and that featured gambling."

"Well, shit." Boris answered her smile. "You would have relegated him to building mere cabins."

"That's right."

"No wonder he was mad at you," said Boris, shooting his brother a superior look. Igor growled, then got up and viciously poked at the fire. "You limited him to a small-potatoes camp ground rather than a mega-resort."

"That about sums it up," she agreed. "He called me every name in the book. Harassed my employees. Got his cronies to picket my market and drive through my fields and destroy my crops. I obtained enough evidence against him and took him to court ~~and~~

won. A very large settlement, plus a restraining order keeping him and his employees from approaching me or my property."

"God, no wonder Drake said you needed a keeper." Boris turned red. "Oops, can you forget I said that?"

"Ah, no, I don't think so," she smiled tightly. "But I'm not surprised he said it. Drake knew about the coalition and the lawsuits, but I told him we were handling it. I'm sure he monitored the situation closely despite my assurances."

Boris nodded, and Igor muttered, "Smart move, blockhead."

Brenna suppressed a grin at the brothers' blessedly normal bickering. "I don't need a keeper, you know. I am really a very powerful witch."

"He told us that, too." Igor gestured helplessly with his hands. "But he told us you had a way of finding trouble, and the vibes he'd gotten about the notes and vandalism told him you needed your back covered this time."

"He was right about that. You two are my alibi that I didn't put an end to Bob John's miserable life."

"Okay, but since the sheriff already suspects we're lying to him, that isn't going to do you a lot of good," Igor said, getting back to the business at hand. "So, let's look at who else might have wanted to get rid of Bob John."

"Well, in retrospect, it seems to me that the murderer or murderers wanted it to look like the local eco-terrorists' group, Save Our World, did it more than me," suggested Brenna. "SOW was one of the groups that opposed Bob John's purchase of the public lands. However, they also had other run-ins with Bob John. Almost every project he ever proposed, raped or pillaged the environment for him or his development company's clients in some way." Brenna smiled grimly. "Plus, SOW has been on a general rampage lately, and not just against Bob John's projects. They've burned down new construction, sabotaged logging equipment, and spiked trees."

"Spiked trees?" Boris asked.

Brenna nodded. "After you went to get help, I finally noticed that some of the other trees surrounding the one where Bob John was staked had been spiked." Seeing their quizzical looks, she explained, "Eco-terrorists use long nails, like the kind used in construction of joists. They hammer them into the trunks of the trees. When the loggers use their chainsaws, the chains snag in the nails and break. Often the chains then fly back and injure the logger. It costs the logging companies lots of time to remove the nails one-by-one, so they tend to abandon the tree. The nails don't kill the trees."

She paused and frowned. "But most eco-terrorists don't use spikes like the one found in Bob John. To me, it looked like a railroad tie. But why kill him like that unless the killer or killers wanted the law to think that SOW did it? "

"Maybe the method of death was symbolic? Maybe it was a crucifixion for Bob John's evil doings?" Igor suggested.

"Maybe," Brenna said. "I hadn't thought of it in that way. And the fact that it casts suspicion on SOW is just gravy."

"Well, if we can see that the method of murder used was to cast blame on the local terrorists, then the sheriff will pick up on that," said Igor. "The killer or killers couldn't have known we would be in the area when they murdered him. We were just a lucky happenstance."

"Yeah, really lucky," Boris said dryly. "Okay, so we've decided Bob John's background is the key. What was he into that could get him killed, and in such a ghastly, gory way? Plus, we need to consider that it was so, well ... staged. Could his death, in that manner, be a warning to others?"

"A warning? In what way?" Brenna asked.

Before Boris could explain his feelings, Star entered through the doggy door from the deck. He came over, nudged her, then dropped what he held in his mouth at her feet.

It was a spike, very similar to the one that had been lodged in the dead man.

Kneeling, she examined it without touching. It looked clean, but appearances were deceiving. The sheriff would be here soon; he could deal with it.

"Star." She scratched under her wolf's chin until he lifted his head and looked at her. "Can you show me where you found this?"

The wolf nodded, dislodging her hand, then swiped the same with his big tongue in a wolfy-kiss.

"Okay, we'll take the sheriff to the spot when he arrives."

The twins scrutinized the large metal stake.

"You really think the wolf can lead us to the spot where he found this?" Igor asked.

"Yes." Brenna scratched Star's ears, then got up to get him a treat. "Star and I communicate quite well."

"Speaking of communication, I got the impression that something else happened while Boris and I were gone."

"Yes." She glanced at both twins. "I spoke with the dead man's spirit."

Neither twin's expression changed at her admission, so she assumed that either they'd had similar experiences themselves or heard of them at Morgan Ltd.'s headquarters. She knew she was not the only witch in the Coven who spoke to the dead.

She continued, aware she had their full attention. "He lied to me ~~and~~ himself. Said he didn't know why he was killed. But he did. He may not have recognized his killers, but he definitely knew why. So, your theory about Bob John's character being the key is right on the mark."

"Right on what mark, Ms. Lindsay?" Ty Buchanan's husky baritone held anger.

"What do you know? Did you and your *cousins*," his emphasis on the word almost a sneer, "kill him?"

He stalked into the room from the front hallway.

Star growled a warning at the back of his throat as he moved forward to intercept the man, but stopped when the sheriff shot a fiery glance at the animal. The wolf whined, then bowed down to the floor, his two front paws stretched out in front of him in a submissive posture. The sheriff nodded at Star, who got up and padded away to sit next to Brenna.

At similar movements from the twins, he froze them in their place with an icy-hot blast from his eyes.

*Well, we now know who the dominant alpha-male is in this pack.*

Then the sheriff turned his smoldering grey gaze on her. "Answer me, dammit!"

Anger, hotter than molten lava, flowed through her, cleansing her soul, clearing away all doubts and self-recriminations. No more second-guessing. No more blaming herself for not seeing the evil before it had come. She was an upper-level witch, and even though the sheriff might have subdued the male animals in the room with his alpha-male,

I'm-the-leader-of-the-pack machismo, it wouldn't work on her. Goddess prophecy or not, she was not a doormat and refused to bow to any man's greatness. Even one destined to be her lover.

She contained her rampant emotions. Losing control with this man was not an option. He would just shoot her down and then attempt to dominate her with his male strength.

In a low, even tone, she replied, "I know exactly what they did to that man, Sheriff." Straightening to her full height, she looked straight into the heat of his smoky eyes. "His spirit told me. They drugged him, gagged him, strung him up to the tree, then staked him. Then they watched him as he slowly bled to death. They, or the ones who sent them, are evil incarnate. And, no, I didn't kill him. Neither did SOW, but I can't prove it. Any of it."

Ty's eyes still burned into her, but his posture relaxed, the hands at his side unclenched. She swore she heard his sigh of relief. Or, was that just in her head?

He believed her. Some of her own tension ebbed.

She'd hoped that he would. Had counted on it. If what she'd sensed in the woods was true, he knew when she lied. He might not like her truth, but he would recognize it.

"Well, shit," Ty said. He rubbed his hands over his face, then hooked his thumbs into the top pockets of his jeans. "I'm almost afraid to ask this, but what are you? Psychic?"

"Brenna." Igor shook his head. "Don't..."

Ty snarled, and in a flash moved on Igor. He poked a very large finger in the Russian's chest, then changed his mind and grabbed the slighter man by his shirt and lifted him up to his toes. "Just shut up. Let her answer. I'll know if she lies. God help me, I don't know how, but I'll know."

"Leave him alone," Brenna ordered. Ty released Igor who shook as if he were flinging off an unwanted pest. "It's okay, Igor. Boris. If he doesn't believe me, then that's his problem."

"I'm more worried that he will believe you," Igor said, his anger adding color to his pale cheeks. He almost glowed with his rage. "Then what will we tell..."

"Believe what?" Ty's gaze took in the trio.

"I'm a witch. A healer. And psychic-at times."

"A witch?"

Ty's face didn't reflect his feelings at all, but she sensed a heightened tension in him; it hummed and buzzed in the space between them. Looking at the twins, she knew they sensed it also. It was like waiting for a bomb to go off.

"A Wiccan-type of witch?"

The fact that he could distinguish Wiccans from other witches demonstrated that this man was uncommon.

At her nod, he sighed. "O-kay, I think I can deal with that. After all, it's just another form of religion-sort of. A healer, got a few of those in my family tree. But what the hell does psychic-at-times mean?"

She froze, wondering what she could tell him that wouldn't make him think she was even more of a freak. Just because he equated Wicca with religion and healing didn't mean he would accept the woo-woo world of talking to the dead. Plus, she was more than just an everyday normal Wiccan witch. Once he found out what she could really do, he would...

"Brenna?" Even in the grip of strong emotion, Ty's voice caressed her name.

"Yes?"

"He wants an answer to his question," Boris clarified. He turned to Ty and added, "You'll have to excuse her. I've found that witches do that, you know, get all spaced out for a bit. Brenna more than most."

"Thanks." Ty nodded abruptly. "I'll keep that in mind."

Brenna shot Boris a look that promised she'd get him for the "spaced-out" comment later. Turning to Ty, she noted his grey eyes twinkled and his posture had relaxed at Boris's note of teasing. Maybe she wouldn't turn the shape shifter into a toad after all. His joking had released the tension in the room.

Recalling Ty's question, she said, "Sort-of-psychic is like what I experienced in the woods—with Bob John. I'd never spoken to dead people before, just earth spirits and the Goddess, of course."

"Of course." Ty sat down, heavily, on the nearest chair. He rubbed at his face, mumbling under his breath. After taking a few deep breaths, he nodded as if he had come to some sort of important decision.

To Brenna, it was as if time stood still and the room held its breath as they waited for the sheriff to speak.

He swept a comprehensive glance over her. Despite the seriousness of the situation, the heat of his gaze warmed her, sending frissons of electricity over her skin. He wanted her. She knew it with a certainty that could not be challenged.

"Okay," he said. "I believe you. This conversation is not going into the official record. Your, um, religious practices and abilities are on a need-to-know basis, and I'm the only one in the department who needs to know."

Then she heard him add under his breath, "Because nobody will goddamn believe it anyway."

It was then, at his easy acceptance of her revelations, that she fell in love with her destined mate.

She hadn't expected it to happen so soon. It had taken years for her mother to admit to loving her father, and him, her. They'd lusted with the best of them and had some of the most fabled arguments and marital spats in the covendom, but love had not come until her father and mother had learned to compromise. It was usually the way with two strong personalities. And she expected that she and Ty would have some fine arguments—and lots of lusty encounters. But instant love had not figured into her acceptance of her eventual mating with this man.

And she wasn't sure being in love with him would make it any easier for her to do what had to be done to fight the evil they must fight.

Ty turned his gaze toward the twins and asked, "Who in the hell are you two? And don't tell me you're her cousins. I already know that isn't true. Are you her lovers?"

Once again as it had in the woods, masculine tempers threatened to flare out of control. Testosterone all but crackled and sizzled in the air. Igor stood up, his hands clenched into fists, and took a step toward Ty. Boris moved to cover Brenna. So did Star.

Ty sprang to his feet and faced Igor.

Brenna gasped, "No, Igor. Sit down." Igor shot her a sullen look. "I mean it." He nodded, but stopped where he stood.

"As for you," she glared at Ty, "How dare you insinuate that..."

"Brenna." Boris's voice once again broke the tension. "Let me explain."

She nodded. In her anger, she might let out the twin's true nature, and it was their choice to keep their secret or tell Ty as they would.

"We're security from the Coven's main headquarters in Chicago," Boris said, holding Ty's fierce gaze with one of his own. "We're here at Brenna's request. Someone threatened to expose her as a witch."

Ty's eyes turned from blazing silver to the color of dull pewter as he shifted his glance back to her. "Who threatened you? When? Where?" He reached her before she was aware he'd even moved.

Grasping her shoulders, he shook her gently. "Why didn't you call the law?"

"I, uh..."

"No," he sighed. "You wouldn't. The story would have been all over the county before you even left the station."

He pulled her to him and enfolded her within his strong arms, then as if he realized what he'd done, he thrust her away, putting an arm's length of distance between them.

"Why are you willing to trust us?" Brenna didn't understand his rush to immediately defend her. It was more than the action of a man attracted to a woman. What manner of mortal had fate chosen for her? "Who are you ... really?"

"Just a cop, formerly from northern Indiana, who's seen some pretty unusual things in his time." He moved back to the chair he'd sat in earlier. "When I was on the porch, I heard part of your discussion. And I agree with your two bodyguards ... tonight's body was staged, and it was a warning. Maybe not to you in particular, but to someone. No matter how tight I try to keep the lid on this, what happened to Bob John will be all over this county by tomorrow morning at the latest. So, what can you tell me about him?"

So, it was back to business. Tension drained from her body. Well, she could handle that.

What had she and the twins revealed during the last few minutes of their conversation? Definitely not the twins' true nature. And having admitted to her pagan religion, she need not go farther and explain what it all really meant. Maybe later, when Ty and she had consummated their physical relationship and he grew to know her better, she would demonstrate what it really meant to be a witch in the Coven of the Wolf.

"What do you want to know?" Brenna asked.

"Everything," Ty said, his quizzical glance scanning her face. "What is it you're still not telling me? Did you see something out there tonight?"

"Yes, I had a vision in which I saw Bob John's death, and more death and destruction." She faltered, then continued, "And, I saw you ... and me ... together ... searching out the evil and putting nature back into balance. You will need me to solve this crime, and stop the others. It is written in our joint fates."

"No!" His voice was firm, authoritative. The voice of a man used to giving orders and having them respected. "You will not get involved any more than you already are. It'll be hard enough to keep your secrets. If you get involved, it would become impossible."

Ty paused and took a deep breath. He let it out slowly as he shoved his hands through his long, dark hair, disheveling it even more than it already was. "This is a murder case. I have to do things by the book. Right now, I'm listing you as witnesses in my report. Potentially, you could be in danger. The killer or killers will learn you were in

the woods tonight. If I have to, I'll take steps to protect you. Put you into protective custody to keep you safe and out of the middle of my investigation."

"We didn't *see* anything," Igor's almost amused tones cut in. "And if you jail us, even for our protection, Drake Morgan will have us out in less time than it takes me to say it."

Ty jumped up from his seat to jab a finger at Igor. "I'm not afraid of Drake Morgan, whoever the hell he is, and I will just put you right back in as suspects if I have to."

"We didn't kill that man, and you know it. And Drake would still get us out, in one manner or another. I'd advise you to be very afraid of Drake," Boris drawled as he restrained Igor, who looked as if he would like to tear Ty's throat out. "I wouldn't be surprised if he doesn't already know you just threatened his two top security officers and his coven's prize healer and naturalist. You'll be lucky if he doesn't turn you into an earth worm and relegate you to Siberian tundra."

"Bullshit," spat Ty, seemingly unfazed by Igor's show of temper and Boris's almost insulting tone of voice.

"Not," said Igor, unholy amusement crossing his face. "We've seen him do it."

Boris nodded, a sober expression on his face the likes of which Brenna had never before seen.

"Oh my goodness," she breathed. "You're serious?"

Both twins nodded.

She turned toward Ty. "I don't care what you do. You can't avoid it. I was destined to help you. You don't have to like it, just accept it."

Ty strode toward her. His eyes stormy, he snarled, "I don't want you in my investigation. It's too dangerous." He reached for her then quickly drew back his hands, as if he knew he would shake her, or worse wrap her in his arms.

"I know," she said sadly. "But we have to do it. It's going to take all of our combined intelligence and abilities to figure this out."

Ty closed his eyes. "Damn."



## Chapter Four

*North American Indian shamanism is closely akin to the practice of witchcraft.*  
*- Prologue, History of Witchcraft and Native American Interaction: 1492 to Modern Times.*

The sun had just risen when Ty pulled his county-issue four-wheel drive into the parking lot that was meant to serve the state forest's trail head.

He hadn't managed to get much rest after he'd left Brenna Lindsay's log home at two o'clock in the morning. While he'd tossed and turned, he'd mulled over what Brenna had said. And what she had not.

Just before dawn, he concluded that she and the Russians still hid something from him. Once she'd come clean about knowing the victim, her visions, and her pagan religious background, she'd only been evasive about the twins, casting glances at them whenever he included them in the questioning, as if she warned them not to talk.

He was pretty sure the subterfuge wasn't about sex, at least not on her part. The looks she'd cast at the twins were more those of a mother reminding her kids that they should be seen and not heard. The one she called Igor, however, had cast himself in a role other than that of a mere employee. The dagger-drawn glares he'd cast at Ty had been those of a lover warning another male away.

But Brenna had seemed oblivious, or pretended to be, to the Russian's devotion.

In fact, the only hot glances she'd given anybody had been directed at him. Just the thought of her turning all that molten anger into passion ~~passion~~ for him had him hard and hurting.

Once he'd managed to fall asleep, dreams of Brenna lying beneath him, wearing nothing but what God had given her, plagued him, and he finally had given up on sleep at all. A dream-Brenna wasn't very satisfactory, now that he had met her in the flesh. She'd be his before she or her wanna-be lover, Igor, would realize.

He shoved those thoughts away to concentrate on the task at hand. The three of them were still hiding something about the scene of the crime and what they had seen or done.

Since he'd already been wide awake, he figured he'd get an early start on the day with a trip to the murder scene before all the ghouls in the area came out to gawk.

Now, as he walked to the crime scene, Ty took in a deep breath of moist, already warm, air. It was going to be a hot one today, which meant lots of business for local law enforcement. Hot muggy days fostered short tempers, which in turn led to even shorter fuses and finally to acts that generated 911 calls. Luckily, the town police and his deputies could handle most of those so Ty could concentrate on the legwork of tracking down Bob John's many acquaintances.

When he'd phoned into the office earlier this morning, Toby, always the eager beaver, had already arrived at work. The young deputy supported Brenna's statement that Roebuck had made more enemies than friends, and that the previous sheriff had thought that even those so-called friends weren't all on the up-and-up.

Conclusion. There were lots of people out there who would have loved to stake Bob John to a tree. Wonderful.

He gave Toby the assignment of making a list of the dead man's so-called friends and business associates so that they could get started on the interviewing process. The crime had been personal. The answer was in who Bob John was, with whom he associated and what he might have done to bring such viciousness down upon him.

The crime scene tape was still in place. Lifting it, Ty carefully stepped closer to the tracks that had piqued his interest last night. The animals that had made these tracks were in the canine family, but were not like any wolf's or dog's prints he had ever seen. Peering at them again, he noted from which direction they had approached the scene. The tracks of the two unknown canines paced the wolf, Star. All three of them had come from the direction of Brenna's land.

He ducked back under the tape and followed the paw prints.

As he crossed from the public forest lands onto Brenna's, a tingling sensation repeatedly skittered over his skin as if hundreds of little electrodes shocked him in sequence. Stunned, he stepped back over the unseen line into the shelter of the trees, then re-crossed. The same feeling chased across his skin.

"Magick," he whispered to the stillness of the empty glade.

Closing his eyes, he sought with all his senses as his shaman grandfather had taught him so many years ago. He perceived no intent in the invisible barrier other than that of a warning. White magick, then.

Muttering a few words of a quelling spell that had lain dormant in the dark recesses of his memory, the phenomenon ceased.

He looked around. Nothing moved. Not a leaf stirred in the trees. No insects buzzed or skipped across the placid surface of the small pond. No animal rustled or made a sound. All in the small glade held its breath as if waiting for his next move.

Had the Great Earth Mother mistaken his Miami counter spell as a precursor to evil? It was true that his Miami language skills were very rusty, and he might have inadvertently cast a dark spell.

He hastened to dispel any mistaken notion. "Greetings to those who dwell here and to the Mother of us all. I bear you and the lady of these lands no ill will."

Amazing that the lessons learned as an eager and impressionable thirteen-year-old would come back to help him almost twenty years later.

Ty waited patiently to see what would happen. If he'd spoken the words correctly, the protection spell that had been placed on this land could only be negated by white magick.

As if air had been let out of a balloon, a sigh swept through the area, ruffling his hair and cooling his overly warm skin. He, too, sighed his relief.

Then he laughed, a mixture of amusement and simmering anger, both emotions directed at himself for being so unobservant last night. His grandfather had taught him how to see with his inner eye. Last night he'd been thinking only with his mortal senses, his logical brain ... and his one-eyed snake.

A Wiccan witch, a mere grower of herbs and organic produce, his ass!

This spell was not created by a person who worshiped nature and had amateurish rituals four times a year on the Sabbats. Brenna Lindsay was a high-octane, full-time witch with powers he hadn't encountered since his grandfather's day.

Maybe this was why she'd shot warning glances at her two Russian friends; she hadn't wanted him to know just exactly what kind of a witch she really was. Now he was

sure she knew more than she'd told him. She probably had dream visions like he had wet dreams.

Reluctantly, he admitted that her insights on the crime and Bob John could be helpful, but he would refuse to let her know that. He didn't want her helping him find a killer.

Witches were mortal, even the good ones.

Bottom line, he would protect her whether she wanted it or not.

Forcing the thought of Brenna to the back of his mind, he sought the tracks that had led him onto her land. Finding them, he followed them toward the pond, which was now, with his presence accepted as unthreatening, alive with insects, amphibians and fish.

The strange animal prints suddenly disappeared, replaced immediately with two adult males' tracks.

Shaking his head and muttering about lack of sleep, he retraced his steps and followed the animal prints once more. Stunned, he stood and stared.

The conclusion he reached, the only one supported by the evidence of his eyes and his innate ability to track anything on two or four legs, was inescapable: two men began running away from the pond with Star at their sides and Brenna trailing, and at this point of the glade they'd somehow turned into four-legged creatures of a canine nature.

"Holy hell," he whispered. "Shapeshifters."

The damn Russians were shapeshifters. While he'd heard such tales around the campfire at his father's and grandfather's knees, he'd never encountered any before.

"So, you figured out our little secret, Sheriff." Brenna's voice preceded her into the opening in the forest. "Will this go into your report, or will you keep this on a need-to-know basis, also?"

Ty turned to face her. His eyes raked her petite but womanly form. She wore the same jeans and t-shirt she'd changed into last night. His spell ending the protection barrier must have pulled her from her bed. Her hair flowed around her shoulders, still disheveled from sleep. Her shirt was wrinkled and looked as if she had slept in it. Her jeans were partially zipped, held up only by the snap closure at the top, as if she'd hastily thrown them on. Her small feet, with their red-painted toe nails, were bare. A part of him wanted to see her in the previous evenings' ritual garb. Or, better yet, nothing at all.

He fought the primal instincts screaming at him. The thought of her naked almost defeated the power of his mental chain mail. Mentally cubing prime numbers, he beat back the urge to strip her and throw her to the soft grass where he could make love to her in the misty morning sunshine. It was a hard battle, but the thin veneer of civilization he wore like armor kept him where he was.

"Sheriff? Ty?"

Her voice sounded anxious. And near.

Startled, he abandoned his higher math computations and noted she was close to him. Too close.

He could see the blue and grey specks in her forest-green eyes and the small scattering of freckles across her elegant cheekbones, so pale that they would be unnoticeable from a distance.

"Will you tell?" she whispered. Her eyes reflected the fear she fought to keep out of her voice.

Fear for whom? Herself? Or the shifters?

Anger chased across his conscious mind like a tornado across the plains. He knew as sure as he knew his name that she feared for the Russians more than herself. He didn't want her thinking of other men—even in a protective way. He wanted all her thoughts to be for him.

*"Alemwa!"*

*His spirit guide appeared beyond Brenna's shoulder. The white wolf stared at him with blazing cold eyes.*

*"What?"*

*"She is of the Great Mother, the one she calls the Goddess. She is, by nature, a protector. I hope I need not remind you of what that means."*

*"No." Ty closed his eyes, ashamed. "I will control my anger ... my jealousy. But, I cannot believe that she is meant ... for me."*

*The white wolf shook his head. "Alemwa. It is written in your stars. I have told you. Look around you. Observe. Remember."*

*The wolf faded away.*

"Ty!" Brenna held his arm and shook it. "Answer me! Will you tell about Boris and Igor?"

"No," he said, his voice rusty as if he'd just awakened from a sound sleep. He cleared his throat, and repeated, "No. I won't tell as long as they had nothing to do with the murder of Bob John Roebuck. No one will hear about them from me."

A smile broke over her face like the sun breaking through dark rain clouds. She stood on her tiptoes and brushed a kiss across his jaw. "Thank you. It would not be easy to explain. Poor Igor and Boris have enough to deal with being Russian in a strange land."

She stepped away. He felt cold and almost reached out to pull her back, to bask in her womanly warmth.

She continued, "You're an excellent tracker. Did they teach you that where you trained to be a police officer?"

*"Alemwa, look around. Observe. Remember."*

Ty reached for Brenna's hand, which she gave without hesitation. The cold that had stolen over him was banished in a split second. He trembled in response.

"Sheriff? Ty? Are you all right?" Her tones were those of someone who cared. Cared a lot.

He scanned the glade, as his spirit guide had instructed.

The sunlight burned through the morning mist. A glistening rainbow marked a spot beyond the small pond, a spot he recognized. Not because he'd physically been there before, but because he'd seen it every night in his dreams and the vision last night when he first met Brenna. That spot. At this particular time of day.

They'd made love on that grassy mound overlooking the pond, highlighted by shimmering refractions of color and surrounded by flowers.

Sniffing the air, it even smelled like the place in his vision.

"Last night," he paused to swallow the emotion threatening to choke him. "Hell, even before last night, I've had visions, dreams of you and me—here."

"Here?" Her voice was so low he had to strain to hear her response.

"Yes. On that mound, with the sun as it is now. We were ... um, naked," he finished, his voice husky with the memory of her skin dappled with sunlight.

Sighing, Brenna stepped away. He almost cried out at the loss. Was she leaving him? The glade once more went still. Not a sound could be heard.

Brenna didn't go far. Boldly holding his gaze, she pulled her T-shirt over her head, baring her breasts.

He exhaled, and the creatures of the glade came alive with sound as if they too had held their breaths.

Removing her jeans, Brenna stepped out of them, kicking them to lie beside her discarded shirt.

Wearing only a tiny pair of bikini panties, she held out her hand. "It is as the Goddess has spoken. We are meant to be together." Smiling with a mixture of innocence and womanly power, she said, "Show me. Show me what you saw in your vision."

Ty took her hand and pulled her closer. Fate, Goddesses and spirit guides aside, this was the twenty-first century for God's sake. He had to be sure. "But you don't even know me..."

"Ah, but that's where you are mistaken, Ty," Brenna whispered into his ear as she brushed her bared breasts against his chest. "I've *known* you in my visions, and obviously the Goddess has chosen this spot for us to join together in the flesh."

He stared into her smoky green eyes. "You've seen us making love?"

She smiled and nodded.

"Here?"

"No, in a bed. Your bed, I would imagine, since it looked nothing like mine."

"Jesus."

"I don't think he was involved in any of this—just the Goddess." Freeing her hand from his, she leaned into him and began to unbutton his shirt. "It's our fate, you know." Her voice revealed a calm acceptance of her destiny. She peered at him from beneath the longest eyelashes he'd ever seen. "But you do know, don't you? I get the sense that fate, magick, and visions are not all that new to you?"

He heard the question in her voice. He'd tell her about his spirit guide and the shaman blood later. Right now, his brain had other ideas besides carrying on a metaphysical conversation.

He pushed away her hands and stripped off his shirt, popping off the last few buttons. Toeing off his tennis shoes, he tugged off his jeans, taking his briefs with them.

"Ty?"

Was that fear in her voice? Of what?

Going into attack mode, he scanned the area and saw nothing but for Star. The wolf stood sentry on the path leading into the glade.

What had frightened her? He followed the direction of her wide-eyed gaze.

It ended at his turgid penis.

His powerful little white witch was scared of a merely mortal piece of male flesh?

"Didn't you see how big I was in your vision?" He stifled an amused chuckle out of respect for her innate feminine wariness.

How detailed *were* her visions as compared to his? He swept a comprehensive glance over her. His had been pretty damn accurate, right down to the unusual wolf-shaped birthmark on her hip.

"No, the Goddess mustn't have deemed that tiny ... no, not tiny .... that enormous! ... piece of information important," she said as she licked her dry lips.

She dropped to her knees in front of him. His eyes widened and his breath caught in his throat as she reached for him. His staff pointed to her mouth like a dowsing rod. "Maybe she just wanted me to be surprised."

"Brenna, my little one, let me..."

"Shut up, Sheriff. You aren't putting that massive tool in me without some lubrication."

Ty would have said something to her about *her* lubrication being of primary importance, but as he opened his mouth Brenna licked the length of his penis as if it were her favorite flavor of Popsicle on a hot day. Words escaped him as he savored her mouth's warm wetness.

She surrounded his cock firmly with one small hand, and as she sucked him in-and-out of her mouth, she followed with a hand motion that had him seeing the sun, the moon, the stars and maybe just a touch of God and the heavens, too. Her other hand fondled his balls in a gentle massaging movement that reached all the way to his soul and back.

He threw back his head and moaned. It was so frigging good.

She set a pace that kept him guessing. First, fast and heavy sucking with lots of hand motion. Then she'd back off and take gentle little licks around his glans as she held his pulsing tool in a firm grip. She was driving him crazy with lust.

Now she took him fast and furiously, and his heart raced to keep up. A familiar tightening of his balls told him he'd come soon—too soon.

God, he had to stop her. He wanted to come inside of her the first time. He needed to mark her as his in order to keep all other contenders for her hand, like the Russian, away.

Placing his hands on each side of her head, he held her still and pushed her mouth away from his throbbing penis. "Too much, too fast. Let's slow this down a bit."

Before she could nay-say him once more, he shifted his grip and pulled her up into his arms. He carried her to the soft mound of grass and wildflowers he'd seen in his vision. Lowering her to the sun-warmed earth, he followed her down.

"Let me look at you, little one. Let me touch you."

He began his exploration at her face. Gently, he swept a stray lock of silky black hair off an elegant cheekbone. Her forest-green eyes, glazed with passion, locked on his face. Sliding a finger to her lips, he traced the lusciousness of them, then bent over to lick the path his finger had followed.

"Ty?" His name escaped Brenna's lips on a sigh. "Please."

"Please, what?" he asked as he outlined her lips with his tongue, dipping in for a taste when she sighed. Her eyes closed as if to concentrate on the feelings he engendered.

"Take me," she whispered. "I want you now. It seems like I've been wanting you forever now that I've found you."

"I feel the same, but we don't need to rush. I want the first time to be special ... memorable." He chuckled and added, "And as you so rightly pointed out, I'm large and I don't want to hurt you. I want you to be ready to take me—all of me."

Brenna grabbed his arm tightly, so tightly her nails dug into him; the erotic combination of pain-pleasure only added to his excitement. "I'm ready—now!"

"Let's see," he whispered against her lips.

Taking her mouth, he braced himself on one arm and deepened the kiss, then continued learning her body with his free hand. He missed nothing, not her pebbled

nipples, her passion-warmed skin, her tautened stomach muscles and especially not her moist labia and hardened clitoris.

Her moans, now almost continual, flowed into his mouth as she moved sinuously under him. Her movements against his lower body made his penis grow harder than he could ever remember it. So hard that it was painful. But it was a pain he welcomed, for the pleasure would be all that much greater.

Stroking her clit only made her wetter, so wet that he knew she could handle his length and breadth with ease. Releasing her lips, he captured her gaze, giving her time to focus on him. When he was sure he had her attention, he brought the fingers covered with her sexual musk to his face where he sniffed then licked her essence off of them.

"So good, my little witch. So damn good."

Her eyes widened at his gesture. "Ty? Love me ... please?"

"You don't have to beg. I plan to do exactly that ... after I take another taste of you."

"Fiend!"

But her tone held no sting, just desire.

Holding her down with one strong arm, he moved down her body, licking his way from her breasts to her navel to her nether regions.

"Oh yeah, you are so beautiful. All rosy pink and wet just for me," he whispered, his voice tightened by his hunger for her.

He zeroed in on his passion's goal. First, he swept her labia in a figure-eight motion with his tongue several times, pausing at points along the way to discern her more sensitive areas. Then he pulled her clit into his mouth with a gentle but strong sucking motion.

"Ty!" she screamed.

He had her full and complete attention now.

He smiled before plunging his tongue into her opening, taking a deeper taste. The movement of her hips, the grip her hands had in his hair and her low earthy moans told him she was attuned to him and his touch.

Raising his head, he noted her gaze was once again unseeing, her head thrown back in sexual abandonment. She was ready.

"You're mine," he said in a tone that brooked no disagreement. "All mine."

Moving up her body, he braced himself. He prepared to enter her when a commotion at the edge of the glade stopped him.

"Woo-oo-f. Woo-oo-f."

Star's ferocious barking raised the hairs on Ty's body. Answering growls from an unknown source sent a frisson of impending danger down his spine.

He dove for his gun, which lay holstered near his abandoned clothes several feet away. Grabbing the weapon, he returned to place himself between Brenna and the menace.

She rose to stand beside him.

"Stay behind me," he ordered, releasing the two-handed grip on his weapon to shove her gently away from the danger lurking in the woods. His eyes never wavered from the entrance to the glade. "Be ready to run into the woods and hide at my command."

"No." Brenna was so close that her body heat seared his nakedness. "I can conjure up a protection spell. I won't leave you."

Her clothes rustled as she pulled them on. How had she gotten them? Did she have telekinetic powers, also? He shoved the anomaly away to be addressed at another time. He had enough on his mind with what they might be facing.

"Star! To me!" Brenna called out.

The wolf bounded into the glade and took a protective stance in front of them.

Trouble followed in the form of a large dog. Ty only knew the breed from pictures he'd seen. It was a Russian wolfhound, all shaggy, multi-colored fur of blond, auburn and brown and amber eyes filled with what looked to be malevolence.

Wolfhound!

"Which one are you?" Ty's voice rumbled through the small clearing like rocks falling down a mountainside. "Igor or Boris?"

A shimmering disturbance of the area around the shifter, akin to a mini-Aurora Borealis, lasted for a few seconds. Where the dog had once been, now stood a leanly muscled, naked man. All the man's muscles were tensed, ready for action of more than just the pugilistic kind.

Ty swept the younger man with a derisory glance. "You always come out of your animal form with a hard-on, Igor? Or, are you just happy to see me?"

Igor's eyes narrowed as he swept Ty's nude body. "I could ask the same of you, *Sheriff*," the Russian sneered. "Where is she? What have you done to her you ... you defiler of innocent women?"

"Innocent?" Ty lifted his eyebrow and smiled. "Well, at least I know you've never had her."

"Enough!" Brenna shouted, a tinge of exasperation in her tone, as she stepped around him. "I'm not some piece of meat that you ... you *men*," she spat, "can fight over. When you both have come to some semblance of a negotiated truce, you can find me at home. We have a killer to stop."

She snapped her fingers at Star and walked out of the glade, head held high and pride stiffening every inch of her petite body.

After she'd gone, Ty turned toward Igor, who stared at the spot vacated by Brenna, a stunned look on his aquiline face.

"Guess she told us, didn't she?" Ty said, amused despite the fact that his balls were blue and his penis hurting.

"Yeah." Igor's shoulders slumped and he looked as if his momma had just told him he wasn't getting any presents for Christmas this year.

Ty held out his hand. "Truce?"

Igor looked at the hand and then up at Ty. He shrugged and held out his hand. "But only until we find the killer and balance is restored."

"Fine by me. But Igor," Ty said over his shoulder as he turned to retrieve his clothes, "you can't fight fate ... and Brenna is destined to be mine. She accepts it, so should you."

"You lie." Igor's voice sounded sullen, the look on his face belying the accord just reached.

Ty heard pain in the man's voice. He almost felt sorry for him. Almost. He sighed. "Ask her."

"You can be sure that I will." Igor shot past him.

\* \* \* \*



Brenna fumed and stormed all the way home. She couldn't go to work like this, covered in grass and Ty's scent. Most of her employees wouldn't notice, but her witches would. And so would she. It would be a lingering reminder of what had almost occurred. She had been so close to ecstasy, then nothing. She'd never felt so frustrated in her whole life.

Igor was damn lucky she was an understanding sort of witch, or there would have been toad-dom in his future. Drake Morgan wasn't the only witch who could transmogrify.

Stomping into the bathroom, she stood in front of the vanity, took a few deep, calming breaths, then stared into the mirror.

Did she look different? She felt it. But no, it was still her ... short body, curves proportioned to her petiteness, long dark hair, and green eyes. But yet, there was something about her, some indefinable quality that shouted "shameless hussy" to the world at large.

She blushed. Maybe she should thank Igor for interrupting. That woman in the glade wasn't really her, was it? If possible, she turned even redder. What in the name of the Goddess had she been thinking? She had stripped, dropped to her knees and sucked an almost total stranger's penis into her mouth. Then, she allowed him to make love to her. In fact, she joined in with enthusiasm. Hecate's hangnails, she'd sighed and moaned her encouragement loudly to the skies, allowed him to kiss and touch her in ways she'd never let any other man, mortal or witch, do.

Worse yet, she'd done it in broad daylight in the open where anyone could ~~and did see~~ them. Public sex was just so ... not her. Or, was it?

*Whoa there, missy! Don't be so hard on yourself. You know how this stuff works. He's not a stranger. You don't have visions that don't have truth in them. He is the "one" in your vision.*

Well, yeah, but that doesn't mean she had to be so ... easy. That was the most embarrassing thing about it. At the very least they should get to know one another while ridding the world of evil, then progress to the sexual part of the relationship.

Slow it down a bit.

*It was his vision. It was meant to be ... as was Igor finding you. Deal with it. You know what your real problem is, don't you?*

What?

*Ty didn't finish what he'd started.*

"Ooh, shut up!" Brenna shouted at her mirror image, afraid that her inner self voiced the real truth of the matter.

A motion in the background caused her to jump with fright. Gathering energy from the earth, she prepared a fireball.

"Sorry, Brenna," Igor's voice preceded him into the room. "I didn't mean to startle you. Are you alone?"

"Yes." She closed her eyes and ratcheted back the energy she had been about to release. His mirror image showed that he still hadn't gotten dressed.

"Then, who were you telling to shut up?"

"Myself."

"Open your eyes," whispered Igor, his voice close, way too close. She stiffened at the naked warmth reaching out to entice her. He was so close she could feel his arousal at the small of her back and smell the pheromones oozing through his skin.

"Not until you put something on." Brenna shifted to one side, putting distance between Igor and her. He didn't follow and some of the tension left her body.

"Isn't it a little too late to be so shy?" he said. "After all, you laid naked with that man in the woods. Besides, you've seen my nudity before—last night at the Litha ceremony. Why should it bother you now?"

Brenna didn't answer. She knew why, but sensed that the truth would wound him.

The rustling of cloth reached her ears. Then Igor said, "You can look now. I'm covered."

She turned. He stood with the ease only a man comfortable with his body could while wearing only a loosely arranged towel around his middle. A very aroused middle. "Semantics, Igor. You still aren't decently dressed."

"Like I said, it happens every time I shift. Why does it bother you now?"

"I don't know." She couldn't meet his searching gaze.

Igor's face paled at her lie. His golden eyes dulled to mustard-brown. His body braced for whatever came next.

"Igor, I, uh..."

"Do you belong to the Sheriff, Brenna?"

"Igor..."

"Just answer the question. It is a direct question; all I want is a direct answer."

"Yes."

Something akin to pain flashed across Igor's face before it hardened into more neutral lines.

She rushed to explain, to alleviate his hurt if she could. "Ty and I have had similar visions depicting our future. We are together in all of them. For how long we are meant to be as one, only the Goddess knows."

"And you always abide by your visions?"

"Yes. They are a part of what and who I am." She held out a hand, begging for his understanding. "I have always followed the path shown to me. Where it will lead, I don't know. But I sense it will continue to lead me to Ty." *Which is the real reason why I threw off my clothes so quickly and allowed him to make love to me. It was inevitable.* So, maybe she wasn't such a shameless hussy after all. "I told you last night, he and I are meant to be together to restore the balance."

Igor turned away, giving her his back, stiff with male pride. "That doesn't mean it has to happen."

It sounded as if he almost choked on the last word.

She sighed and approached Igor as she would a wounded animal. Touching his naked shoulder, she rubbed it, trying to give him comfort, trying to absorb his unhappiness. "It will happen sooner or later. Ty's totem is the Wolf. He has a spirit guide. His shamanic nature was evident the first time he walked into the glade. My soul recognized his before we ever met. It's meant to be," she whispered. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to hurt you."

"I'm sorry, too." He shook his head, still not looking at her. "I don't know how deep my feelings go for you, Brenna, but they are ones I've never had before. I think ... I think that I could love you."

Tears streamed down her face. Igor's shoulder disappeared from under her hand as he shimmered, then shifted into animal form. He leapt for the door and raced from the room.

She stood there crying until arms surrounded her, pressing her face into a warm, strong chest. Ty's chest.

"Brenna, what did that dog say to you?"

Brenna lifted her head to face her destiny. "I didn't know..."

"Hell, I know that. He does, too, if he'd only admit it. He's hurting right now. Hell, I even understand how he feels." He kissed her forehead, then whispered, "I'd be madder than hell if someone stole you out from under me."

"Goddess willing, that will never happen." She stroked his chest, inhaling the essence that was his alone.

"Damn straight. The men in my family mate for life." His arms tightened. "You realize that, don't you, Brenna?"

"Yes." She sighed. So, he thought of their future in terms of mating, not love? The Goddess hadn't promised more than that. Just that he was the one.

One large hand stroked her back in a comforting motion. At least he seemed to care, and he wanted her. That was more than some women ever got.

As he soothed her, her earlier embarrassment and self-recriminations at her actions by the pond evaporated like dew under a hot morning sun. When she was near Ty, her witch's heart and senses told her the relationship was right. She pressed a kiss to his chest where his shirt lay open and added as fate had decreed, "We witches of the Coven of the Wolf also mate only for life."

Boldly, she tongued the rapidly beating pulse at the base of his throat as she caressed his hardened member through his pants.

Okay, so she liked the power she had over him. Maybe she was a wanton woman after all.

Growling in the back of his throat, he raised her head to take her lips in a passionate kiss.

"Ahem!"

At the sound, they tore themselves apart.

Ty groaned and swore under his breath as he laid his forehead on top of her head.

"Yes, Boris?" Brenna asked, when she really wanted to scream out her sexual frustration. The Goddess had a sick sense of humor.

*Destiny's path does not always run in a linear fashion, my child.*

"What's wrong with my brother? He's outside digging holes. Big holes. He only does that when he's furious."

Ty opened his mouth to speak, but Brenna placed her fingers over his lips and shook her head. He kissed the fingertips in acknowledgment. He turned to face Boris and pulled her with him, anchoring her at his side with a fiercely possessive arm.

"He came upon Ty and me in the glade," she answered.

"Oh, well, that must have been uncomfortable for you." Blushing slightly, Boris shook his head. "I tried to tell him last night he didn't have a chance, but he let his balls talk to him instead of his instincts."

"What do you mean?" Brenna asked. "Are you intuitive?"

"Well, empathic, if that counts. And our other five senses are more highly attuned. I smelled the pheromones you threw off at the Sheriff as soon as he came onto the murder scene last night. Then it got to be testosterone city with old Gor and the Sheriff. Heck, I thought I might have to break up a fight." Boris shrugged and flashed them one of his carefree grins. "Gor just ignored the evidence of his own six senses. He does that sometimes. He may act serious, but he has no discipline."

"And, I assume all this empathic ability is another bit of information that is on a need-to-know basis and shouldn't go into any official reports," Ty said. In an undertone, he muttered "As if anyone would believe me anyway."

Brenna jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow. He grinned at her.

"We'd appreciate that, Sheriff," said Boris, closely watching their interplay.

"Call me, Ty."

"Okay, Ty." Boris grinned at the two of them. "I guess I'll go pick a fight with Gor so he can work off his anger on something other than on Brenna's rose garden. You two just go back to what you were doing. I'll, uh, just shut the door."

After Boris had gone, Ty pulled Brenna around to face him. "Remember where we left off, my sexy little witch. We'll pick up at that spot tonight in my bed. Got to stay on track with our visions." He winked at her. "I've got to go to work and start questioning Bob John's employees and known associates."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Think about me, and later tonight." He kissed her lips lingeringly. He groaned.

"Damn, remind me not to kiss you when I need to go to work. You go straight to my head and knock everything else out of it. Now, what was I saying?"

Shaking off her own sensual lethargy, she said, "You were telling me to stay put and be the good little sex kitten."

"That sounds like a plan, little one." He kissed her nose and left the room, whistling some out-of-key happy tune.

"Like hell, I will." The man needed to learn right off to trust in her abilities.

Brenna smiled as she prepared to take her shower. She knew exactly where to start her investigation into Bob John's activities. With the eco-terrorist group, SOW. And wasn't it handy that several of her college-kid employees had connections to the elusive group?

She stepped into the shower, humming her own version of a happy song. Hers was in tune.

## Chapter Five

*A mere mortal may petition to marry into a coven. After the petition is filed, he or she must pass a series of interviews and tests. The mere mortal need not have any innate magick.*

*- Covendom Rules, p.60.*

The roadside store where Brenna sold produce not destined for the chain of Morgan, Ltd. organic food stores, hummed with activity. Cars filled the parking lot and overflowed to park along the county road leading to the rural location. It was a Wednesday, not usually one of the market's busier days. The local grapevine must have worked at high-speed DSL rates. She bet a lot of the shoppers hoped to hear all the ghoulish details about finding Bob John's body.

She sighed. Maybe she could sneak in the back way and avoid the inevitable cross-examinations. Maybe she should hire a press agent and have him hand out prepared statements. She laughed at the presumptuous image. She'd have to remember to share it with Ty.

Ty!

A warm feeling of oneness swept through her veins. It was as if she'd downed a shot of one-hundred-proof tequila. Fate had provided her a mate, a partner, someone with whom to share the little things.

And the big. The imbalance in nature's energy hovered menacingly at the edge of her conscious mind and siphoned off the warmth engendered by Ty's presence in her life.

She couldn't fully enjoy her newfound relationship and the paths it opened until the evil leeching into the world was halted.

No doubt about it, the lack of balance in nature's energy sucked the big one.

Nodding to some of her regular customers, she managed to avoid direct eye contact. She wanted to dissuade the possibility of empty commiserations as they pumped her for juicy details. Bob John was not well-liked, but he was well-known, and many would love to be the first on their blocks to have all the gory facts.

She took a path that led back to the acre-large herb garden, laid out in a traditional English-garden knot pattern. The pea gravel walkways crunched under her clogs. The smells of freshly pinched-off basil, cilantro, and thyme soothed her senses as she searched for the two employees who had SOW-ties. Normally, she would not approach them, thus placing them in an awkward position, but this was murder, and evil was loose. Such things were more important than respecting an individual's political choices.

There they were—Chad Bourne and Stacy Walker.

Stacy was one of Brenna's local coven. She'd transferred to the local community college because of the coven's business interests. Stacy's goal was to get her MBA and learn to run the proposed California branch of the organic produce farms. The fertile Castroville region would allow a more stable year-round supply of the herbs and other produce that their coven and other covens throughout the United States used for rituals. Morgan, Ltd. already had a large organic farm in central Florida. Brenna oversaw that

branch as she would the one in California when Stacy was ready to take her place as on-site manager.

Chad Bourne looked like a typical hometown college hero—tall, athletic, brown hair sun-streaked with golden-blond and red, and friendly blue eyes. Just the kind of guy most mothers wanted their daughters to bring home for dinner, then later marry.

Yet, Brenna had sensed his weightier depths from the day he'd applied for a job. He had a razor-sharp intelligence and a liberal, anarchic soul. His crusade was the environment, and she sensed that although he hadn't yet committed any act of violence in furtherance of "green" rights, he had managed to bend or break a few laws.

Stacy, aware of his activities, had informed Brenna. The younger witch knew where her ultimate loyalties lay, and she'd wanted Brenna to know just in case any of Chad's—and later her—actions bounced back to reflect on the coven's business interests.

Chad had been of particular help when Brenna had taken on Bob John's plans for destroying the public lands with his resort. They shared the same goals, just had different approaches.

He did not know about the coven.

And Brenna meant to keep it that way.

If, and it was a big if, Stacy decided Chad was the love of her life, well, the Coven's elders would handle that hurdle when the time came.

"Brenna!" Stacy called out. "We heard about Bob John. Are you all right?"

The younger woman met her by a large patch of sage, the tiny purple flowers covered in small bees. Brenna couldn't tell if the buzzing in her head was from the industrious insects or feedback from Stacy's magickal powers.

Brenna smiled. "I'm fine. How did you hear about it?"

Stacy looked over at Chad who stood and stared at them in silence. Brenna had never seen that particular look on Chad's face before; it was one of solemn concern.

"Chad heard it from one of his friends, who was on a ride-along when the call went out. This guy saw you at the scene. You and the twins."

Well, just as she suspected, the word was out even before the press had gotten hold of it. No telling what details were added or embroidered in the many retellings.

"Was it true that Bob John had been ... um, castrated?" Stacy's eyes were wide with horror.

"No!" Why did people feel the need to worsen an already bad situation? "He was staked to a tree." Brenna watched Chad's face for some sort of reaction as she added, "There were spiked trees all around the crime scene. The sheriff has reason to believe that SOW killed Bob John for some perverted reason of its own."

Okay, so she'd made that last part up. But all was fair in the detecting business.

Chad's eyes narrowed and his lips thinned. She could almost hear his teeth grinding as he struggled to hold back, what she was sure would be, vituperative words.

Stacy gasped and glanced quickly at her boyfriend. Brenna felt the empathic, healing energy the young witch effortlessly sent to soothe him.

Visibly relaxed, Chad finally spoke, "SOW has nothing to do with violence like this, and you know that, Brenna. Someone is framing the organization. Lots of people hated Bob John and what he stood for. Heck, even you had reason to kill him. I hear he'd been threatening you." A sly smile crossed the young man's face. "Threatening to expose you and this business as a front for satanic witchcraft."

"Chad!" Stacy hissed. No healing energy in that tone. Brenna actually saw the red-violet stream of energy hit Chad in the chest, throwing him back a few feet.

"Shit, Stacy!" Chad cried. "Why'd you do that?"

"'Cause you just outed your knowledge, lover," she said sweetly. "Now, just wait and see the mental and emotional wringer the elders of the coven will put you through. You aren't ready yet."

Brenna summed up Chad's reaction, his knowledge and the interplay between the two, quickly coming to a conclusion. "You've been preparing him for the tests. You told him about the Coven."

Stacy turned, a pleading look in her eyes. "Yes. We want to get married. Chad wants to go to California with me and help run the organic farm. I wanted him to pass the first time. Mere mortals tend to get discouraged if they fail the sufficiency exam the first time."

"I can understand that, Stacy," Brenna said, "but you know the drill. You should have come to me before you *outed* us, as you call it. There are protocols, things I need to do to lay your case before the elders and Drake."

"I know that," Stacy said with an apologetic whine in her voice, "but I couldn't..."

"Can't we discuss this later," Chad interrupted. "There's been a murder, and I know for a fact SOW had nothing to do with it."

"Because you are the ringleader for the local cell of SOW." Brenna held his defiant gaze with one of her own.

"That wasn't a question, was it?" Chad sighed.

"No. I know you are the person behind the local activities."

"But not the cell that burned the building and killed that vagrant," Stacy interjected. "That was another group. Not ours."

Chad nodded his head emphatically. "It wasn't us."

Brenna glanced from one to the other. She believed them. What a load off her shoulders. She wouldn't have known what to do if they had been involved in the death of an innocent, let alone Bob John.

"Okay," she said. "Just what do you know about last night's death?"

"I know you didn't do it," Chad said. "I only mentioned it to point out that whoever did this has to know a lot about the local community in order to frame SOW and yourself."

She smiled tightly. "Believe it or not, Chad, Ty and I figured that out for ourselves."

The two young people's eyebrows raised at her use of Ty's name, but were wise enough to keep their comments to themselves.

"So, what else was Bob John involved in that might have gotten him killed?" she asked.

"Why do you think I would know that?" Chad said with a cagey look in his eyes.

"Because you had him investigated from A to Z to find his vulnerable points for your raids."

She hadn't known that for a fact, but had only suspected. >From the glances Chad and Stacy exchanged, she'd struck pay dirt.

Chad rubbed a large, tanned hand across his face. "Okay, one of my cell members lives in one of Bob John's rental properties in Haughville. There's been a lot of comings

and goings from one house in that neighborhood. We did a little digging and discovered that there's a Detroit drug ring operating there."

"How do you know this? Do you have any proof?"

"You need to talk to Ted," suggested Chad. "He's the one who told me all about it."

"Ted Cassidy?" Brenna asked. "The same Ted Cassidy who works for me?"

"Yeah. He's back at the greenhouses today," Chad said.

"Thanks." Brenna headed toward the back of the property when Chad's voice stopped her. She turned.

"I'll ask around. See what else I can find out about Bob John." He turned red as if embarrassed. "SOW cells operate on a need-to-know basis. Maybe some of the other cells in the area..."

*Like the one that burned the building with the vagrant in it?*

"...know more about Bob John's enemies. He was one slimy dude," Chad finished.

"Thanks, Chad." Brenna started walking, then stopped and turned once more.

"Chad?"

"Yes?"

"Be careful. Very careful. Ask Stacy about Litha and the line between good and evil."

Stacy gasped, comprehension clear on her face.

Brenna continued, "The line got crossed last night. Whoever killed Bob John is not playing games. There is a great likelihood of more death and destruction."

Chad nodded, as Stacy took his hand in hers. "Don't worry, Brenna. I'll watch his back. We'll let you know if we find out anything—anything at all."

\* \* \* \*

Brenna found Ted Cassidy transplanting seedlings into peat trays. The computer geek worked for her three days a week in order to get fresh air and his hands dirty, or at least that's what he'd stated on his job application.

So, Ted was also a SOW cell member. It was news to her, but in the grand scheme of things, she really didn't care. He was reliable and did his job well.

The fact he lived in Haughville disturbed her. It was a rough, lower class, bordering on poverty-stricken area on the south side of town. It had a high crime rate. She hated to think he couldn't afford to live in student housing closer to the campus. The fact that Bob John owned rentals in the run-down area did not surprise her in the least. When this was all over, she would help Ted find a better place to live.

"Hey, Ted!" she called out.

The tall, shaggy-haired kid looked up from his transplanting. He pushed his nerdy-looking glasses up his nose with one large, dirty finger, leaving a trace of peat where his finger had passed. He reminded her of a little boy playing in the dirt. She smiled, grabbed a paper towel from the dispenser by the door, wetted it with some water from the drip hose and handed it to him.

"You got your nose dirty." She pointed to the corresponding area on her nose.

He grinned, wiped the dirt away and shoved the paper towel into his overalls pocket.

"Hey, Brenna." His grin disappeared. He, too, had heard about Bob John and her role in discovering the body. "You okay? We all heard..."



"Yeah, I know. I don't imagine there is anyone left in a fifty-mile radius who hasn't heard."

Ted chuckled. "Well, you know, small towns and gossip."

"Yeah." She smiled at him. "Ted, Chad said you lived in one of Bob John's rentals."

"Yes, ma'am. In Haughville. Now, don't look like that. I can afford to live in a better neighborhood, but I chose to live there. Reminded me of where I came from, and where I don't want to end up after I graduate from college." His smile was self-effacing. "It keeps me tough and on my toes."

"Well, if you ever want to move, let me know. Several of my employees rent out rooms to college students," she offered.

"Thanks." He patted dirt around a small seedling, his touch sure, yet delicate. "I bet you want to know about the goings on in the hood." He laughed. "Chad and I huddled this morning, trying to decide how much to tell you, since you seem to be implicated like SOW."

"So, why did you decide to *out* yourselves to me?"

"'Cause Stacy is one of yours and Chad loves her. He'll protect her with his life. He's even willing to leave SOW for her. And my reason?" Ted walked over and started to trowel more growth medium into the peat trays. He continued, "I'm dating Jenn Mason."

Brenna sighed and nodded. Jenn, an ER nurse at the county hospital, was another Coven member.

Ted threw his trowel into the ground, betraying the first anger she'd ever seen in the gentle giant. "Bob John was a worm. No, he was lower than a worm, and as corrupt a black-hearted devil you'd ever want to meet. He might have deserved getting killed, but there is no reason SOW or your people have to suffer because of it. Chad and I decided that the sooner the real killer or killers were brought to justice, the better for all of us."

"I agree," she said. "So, tell me what you know about Bob John's illegal doings in Haughville."

Ted sighed and ran his hand through his longish locks, disheveling them even more. "I live across the street and down one house from another of Bob John's rentals. Most of the rentals in the neighborhood are inhabited by low-income service or itinerant farm workers and groups of college students. But this one seems to have a rotating group of people living in it. Frequently rotating, like every other month or so. All of them have Michigan plates. I checked the Michigan BMV, and the majority of the plates were issued in the Detroit area."

"Checked the BMV?"

He had the grace to look ashamed. "Yeah, I hacked into the system and ran the plates. I've got printouts if you want them."

"Uh, no, I don't, and I think we'll just forget I heard you did that." Brenna exhaled heavily. "Okay. So, I take it these people from Michigan aren't students or don't work locally?"

"Exactly, unless you consider dealing drugs work?" Ted watered the peat tray he'd just filled with herb seedlings. "There are always four people living in the house." He frowned. "But there are nightly comings and goings ... all sorts of cars. Lots of them college students. That's when my house mates and I suspected drugs."

"Why drugs? Maybe they were having parties and providing liquor to minors."

"Nah. No music, and the visitors didn't stay long, as if they were afraid to be seen there."

"That's all you have? Your suspicions?"

"Yeah, and hearsay from some of the other college kids in the neighborhood who've visited the place. Nothing that would hold up in court, and no one's willing to fess up because they're either users or are afraid of the dudes in that house." Ted shook his head. "We thought about tripping over there and knocking on the door to see what was up. At the time, Chad didn't want us to take the chance that it was a police operation out to catch college students. He said we had to think of our SOW cell first."

Chad sounded like a born leader. He'd pass the suitability test for marrying into the Coven, easily. The questions were skewed for leadership ability and independent thinking. Magick was not required, just loyalty and the ability to serve the Coven's greater good.

"So, why do you think it's not a police operation now?" Brenna was curious about what had changed.

"After we heard about Bob John's death and that SOW had been set up to take the fall, I decided to take my BMV list and do a more in-depth search on the names."

"Beelzebub's breath!" Brenna shook her head and shot a stern look at Ted. "Are you trying to get arrested for hacking?"

"Not a problem, 'cause I'm good. No, I'm better than good," Ted said with a cheeky grin. "Anyway I back-doored my way into criminal records in the Detroit and Wayne County area."

"And?"

"Fireworks and hallelujahs. Most of the names on the list had records. Dealing and possession of narcotics, robbery, weapons charges ... well, you name a felony and one of the names on the list had it covered." Ted's face sobered and his voice lowered, "Including murder."

"How can I tell the police?" Brenna muttered. "My source hacked into government records to get the info."

"Well, we could stake the place out and record what's going on inside the house," Ted suggested, "and then report it to the cops as good citizens. Right?"

Brenna nodded. "Right. That's just what I'll do."

A look of horror crossed Ted's face. "Brenna! I didn't mean you. I meant Chad or I or one of the other SOW cell members could do it. It's too dangerous for a..."

"Too dangerous for a what, Ted?" She arched a brow and waited for him to finish what portended to be a sexist remark.

"A woman."

She clenched her hands against an angry demonstration of just what power she commanded. "I'm a witch, Ted. Mere mortal crooks and punks had better fear me. I'll get the evidence and I'll tell the sheriff. He'll take it better coming from me, anyway."

Ted nodded and murmured under his breath, "Hope you have a Kevlar witch's cape."

Brenna laughed. She had something better. She had the twins.

## Chapter Six

Ty, followed closely by his deputy, entered the luxurious offices of B.J. Roebuck Real Estate. As would be expected, due to the death of the owner, the atmosphere was subdued. But it seemed that even in death, business must carry on.

He and Toby approached the reception desk. The woman sitting behind it was his idea of how a modern-day, wicked witch would appear: pale white skin, dark blood-red lips and matching talon-like fingernails, black-as-midnight hair, and funereal garb. Her pale, silver eyes hungrily devoured him as if she'd like to cast a love spell on him. He wasn't sure he'd survive the experience.

Something in his return gaze must have indicated that she wasted her time in trying to enthrall him, so she turned the rapacious stare toward Toby. The deputy blushed redder than Texas dirt.

"Toby, why don't you go to Personnel," Ty said, as he turned and shoved his stricken deputy in the correct direction, "and get me a list of Bob John's employees at all of his businesses."

Too tongue-tied to respond, Toby stumbled his way to the appropriately marked entrance.

Ty turned back to the receptionist. Her amused gaze was underlaid with a hint of satisfaction as if Ty had passed some sort of test.

"He's kinda cute. He married?" she asked, arching a perfectly groomed sable eyebrow.

What was her game? First him, then Toby.

"Down girl. He's too green for the likes of you," said Ty, a slight smile creasing his face.

"And you?" she inquired. "Are you too innocent, also?"

"No, I'm just not interested."

"Too bad," she said with a pout. "We could have had some fun."

"Miss..." Ty looked at her name plate, "Hardon, I..."

"Vanessa," she purred. "You can call me Vanessa."

"Miss Hardon, I need to speak to whomever has taken over after Bob John's death."

"That would be Danny, um, Mr. Porter. He's the Senior Vice President of Operations." She peered coyly through lashes weighted down with thick mascara. "Would you like me to buzz him for you?"

"No," he answered abruptly "Just tell him I'm here to see him ~~now~~."

Ty found a placard on the wall that stated the executive offices were on the second floor. He turned his back on Vanessa Hardon and took the floating stairway upwards.

As the receptionist spoke into the phone, her throaty voice followed him up the stairs. "Hey, Danno-baby. The heat is here. Stuff your dick back in your pants."

Her ensuing laughter sent chills down Ty's spine, and he revised his first impression of her as the image of a modern-day wicked witch. She was more dangerous than that; she was a succubus. He'd be sure that Toby stayed clean away from her and her poisonous wiles.

\* \* \* \*

Dan Porter was not his idea of a manly man. While tall, Dan had met one too many all-you-can-eat buffets. His white dress shirt had remnants of what looked to be scrambled eggs and strawberry jelly, and his tie was crooked and badly knotted. His shirt gaped open where he'd hastily buttoned it up wrong.

Ty would bet that Vanessa had something to do with the man's disheveled clothing.

His cop eyes quickly swept over Bob John's former office. It hadn't taken long for Dan to make himself at home. Pictures of Bob John and various local dignitaries were lined up three or four deep on the floor along one wall. The places where they'd previously hung now held paeans to Dan and his cronies. A box filled with desk items sat by the door, full to overflowing with the former occupant's mementos.

A glance at the desk revealed a black leather and silver desk set, untidy piles of paper, and, on top of it all, a copy of the latest adult men's magazine, a bookmark hastily stuffed in it to mark the spot.

Ty's glance flicked over Dan's crotch; the zipper wasn't quite all the way up and the button was still undone. Looks like he wronged the receptionist. She wasn't responsible for her new boss's disarray. Old Danno had been flying solo, as she'd hinted.

So much for mourning and honoring the late Bob John.

Dan noticed the men's magazine and reddened. He pulled it off the desk and shoved it into a drawer. He attempted to smile, but failed mightily as he croaked out, "How can I help you, Sheriff?"

Ty remained silent and stared.

Old Dan fidgeted, looking anywhere but at him.

The only sound in the room was Dan's loud, wheezing breaths, and the creak of the desk chair as Dan's nervous movements shook it.

"Is it about Bob John's ... um, unfortunate incident?" Dan asked, stumbling over the euphemism he substituted for his boss's death.

Ty almost snorted out loud, but managed to control the urge. "You call being murdered, staked to a tree and bleeding to death an unfortunate incident?"

"Well ... yeah," Dan stammered. His eyes shifted from side to side, then up and down.

The man was hiding something. But what?

"And?" Ty tested the mettle of his opponent.

"And?" Dan's voice cracked on the word. His brow furrowed as he hurriedly sought for words that might satisfy Ty. Suddenly, he beamed as if he'd just grabbed the brass ring. "A tragedy?"

Ty smiled. "Exactly, Dan. A horrible tragedy. A cold-blooded case of homicide. There was evil in the woods the night Bob John was killed, Dan, and I'm here to discover why it sought out your boss."

Dan audibly gulped. His smug grin vanished like doughnuts in a cop shop.

Ty pulled a chair over to the front of the desk and sat down. He pulled out a small notepad and a pen. Dan's piggy eyes never left him; he waited and watched as if he were a tasty, plump rodent and Ty, the stalking predator.

"Where were you last night?"

The man behind the desk jumped in his chair and a small squeak emerged from his throat. "Well, I was at home ... with my wife. In bed. Sleeping."

"And she'll corroborate that?"

Dan's eyes shifted to a spot over Ty's right shoulder and widened. "Yeah, well, maybe. I mean she was asleep after all, and..."

"Don't lie, Danny-boy." Vanessa's purring tones preceded her into the room. She moved to the dumbfounded man's side and began to rub his shoulders. Her dark red nails looked like splotches of blood against Dan's shirt.

Instead of relaxing Dan, her massage stiffened him as if he had a two-by-four strapped to his spine. Dan licked his lips rapidly. He reached for the can of soda on his desk and drank greedily as if he'd die without the fluid.

Hell, Ty didn't blame poor Danny-boy. He'd be nervous, too. Vanessa scared the bejesus out of him, and he was immune to her powers. Old Dan hadn't had a chance with the she-wolf. He guessed he now knew what Dan had wanted to hide.

Vanessa moved behind Dan, put her arms around his neck and leaned over his right shoulder. She licked his ear, then took a tiny nip. She glanced at Ty to see how he took the scene playing out in front of him.

Ty, willing to let her feel in control, for now, shot her a sly grin. "Slumming, Vanessa? I think poor old Danny-boy here is out of his depth." He narrowed his gaze. "You sure picked a substitute for Bob John pretty damn fast. You like being the power behind the throne?"

She smiled like a cat who'd found a bowl full of cream. "What do you think, Sheriff?"

"I think old Dan here is shitting his pants that his wife will find out," said Ty.

The man in question squeaked, "Nessie?" The panic in that one word was so evident that Ty almost felt sorry for the man ... almost.

"Just for the record, where were you last night?" Ty asked.

Vanessa dug her nails into Dan's shoulder when he would have answered. "I was with Danny ... here."

"In this office?"

"No, silly. In Dan's old office across the hall. It has a couch." She winked. "I like my creature comforts."

"Nessie!" Dan whined. "He'll tell my wife."

"Don't worry, lover. I can handle your wife," crooned Vanessa as she stroked Dan's disheveled hair. "Besides the Sheriff won't tell. He just needs our alibis, so he can rule us out and go about his investigation. Isn't that right, Sheriff?"

"Yeah." Ty shook his head. She was right. He didn't care if the two rutted like rabbits 24/7 as long as they had nothing to do with Bob John's death. "You were both here from when until when?"

"From about eight o'clock in the evening until one in the morning," Dan reluctantly offered. Vanessa petted his shoulder in encouragement. "Then I drove Nessie home and went home myself. I dropped her at her place around one-thirty. Right, Nessie?" He angled his head to look up at his lover.

"That's about right. It would take Danny about thirty more minutes to drive to his house from my place. I live out by the reservoir ~~the~~ east side of the reservoir."

That would put them together during the time the murder occurred. And for the most part, on the wrong side of the reservoir.

Or, they could both be lying and were in the woods near Brenna's land.

"Is there anyone who can corroborate that story?" Ty doubted it.

"Why, yes, I do believe there is," Vanessa said with a sly smile on her face.

"What?" Dan said, his voice strangled by shock.

"Danny-baby, I didn't want to upset you, but while we were, um, playing, one of the cleaning crew happened to open the door." She turned to Ty. "Well, you get the picture, don't you, Sheriff?"

He nodded. "You got a name for your witness?"

"Jake Landon." Dan shrunk in his seat at the mention of the man's name. Vanessa smiled at his reaction. It wasn't a pretty smile. "He'll be here around five o'clock tonight. You can ask him then."

"And what time would this Jake have seen you?"

"About eleven-thirty or so."

Ty made a note. Since he hadn't given out any details, Vanessa had no way of knowing that time was in the ballpark given him by the coroner for the time of death. If Jake's story agreed with hers, she and Dan were in the clear, at least with the law.

Shifting topics, he asked, "Tell me something about Bob John's business partners."

"What partners?" Dan asked, relief at the change in topic evident in his suddenly relaxed posture. "Bob John was a one-man show. He hated to share power with anyone, even his upper level management team."

*Bet that rubbed you wrong, Danny-boy.*

Since Ty suspected that Roebuck's business relations were more complicated than his underlings let on, he'd shelve the question of partners for later. After he had a chance to look into Bob John's business arrangements more closely.

"Besides the real estate operation, what other businesses did Bob John own?"

"Locally? Or, all over?" Dan asked.

"All of them."

With Vanessa now perched on the side of the desk, Dan settled back into his chair. His back had lost its stiffness with the shift to talking business. His comfort zone reached, he answered Ty's question in an almost genial tone. "He owned a chain of dry cleaners called Dry It." Dan ticked them off his fingers. "He had two here in town, and five others across southern Indiana. He also owned three restaurants: one, a pizza place, another, an upscale Italian, and the third, a bar and grill on the reservoir. He also owned fifty percent of the Yacht Club."

Ty whistled silently. Bob John was more wealthy than he'd thought, or he had some silent partners unknown to Dan. But, he'd bet, not unknown to Vanessa. She was one sharp cookie with an eye on the main chance.

Yeah, he really needed to dig some more, and maybe have Brenna meet Vanessa and see what she could "feel" from the woman. Something about her bothered him. She made him itchy-and not in a sexual way.

It also struck him that the majority of those businesses, as with the real estate, could be used to launder large amounts of cash and make the dirty money legitimate.

He eyed the couple. "Who inherits Bob John's business empire?"

Dan looked at Vanessa, who shrugged. He addressed Ty. "I don't really know. You'd have to ask his lawyer, Paul Pettibone."

He almost groaned. Pettibone. Ty hadn't been in the area long, but he'd already had several run-ins with the local flavor of shyster. The man was slime from the word go. It figured that Bob John, a real operator, had a crooked lawyer.

"I'll do that." He made a note. "What about the business? You just going to carry on as usual?"

"We have to, Sheriff," said Dan, his hands lifted in a plea for understanding. "We have houses to sell, deals to close and rentals to maintain. The world can't stop revolving just because Bob John got himself killed."

"Got himself killed? That's a funny way to put it," drawled Ty.

"What do you mean?" Dan's back had the poker up it again.

*Hit a nerve there, did we?*

"What do you think I meant?" Interrogation 101, always turn the question back on a person, especially when that person is sweating bullets and his lover is shooting daggers at him.

Dan stammered gibberish for a few seconds, before Vanessa took pity on him and turned to Ty and said, "Obviously I pick my men for something other than looks and brains..."

"Nessie!" Dan whined.

"Oh shut up, you idiot!" She captured Dan's chin, her nails dug in to hold it still, then hissed, "I'll take care of you ~~later~~." She released her grip, then ran the tip of one very sharp nail along the underside of his chin, down his neck and into a gap in his shirtfront. She flicked open a few more buttons and toyed with the chain joining together a pair of nipple clamps. "Now, sit there like a good little boy-toy while I attempt to get the sheriff on his way. Lying to the law is a stupid thing to do, and you'll take your punishment like a man, correct?"

"Yes, Nessie."

Dan's voice was so soft Ty had to strain to hear the reply. Ty had pretty much figured that Vanessa wore the pants in the love affair, but hadn't figured on this level of dominance. Maybe he wouldn't have Brenna meet this woman. His innocent little witch wouldn't understand this kind of depravity.

"What did you call me?" Vanessa shrieked as she tugged hard on the chain.

Ty winced as Dan moaned. "I meant, yes, Mistress Vanessa."

"That's better, my pet." She pulled the shirt front together. "Button yourself. A real man, like the sheriff, doesn't want to see your humiliation."

Dan tilted his burning face downward and buttoned his shirt then fidgeted with the beyond-repair knot in his tie.

Ty wondered why Vanessa had revealed the couple's role-playing. Was it just one more way of humiliating her lover? Or was she stalling for time? Trying to find a way to reveal what she knew about Bob John's business without incriminating herself in any of his dirty deeds? She may not have killed Bob John, but that didn't mean she was entirely innocent, either.

Her alibi now looked to be awfully convenient.

"Sheriff, you didn't hear this from me, and God forbid anyone should think you heard it from my little worm here." Vanessa paused and stroked, almost lovingly, a strand of hair off Dan's sweaty brow. "I don't know everything, mind you..."

Which meant she knew quite a lot.

"...and neither does Danny..."

That he believed. Dan Porter was not a good liar. Every feeling showed on his face. His marriage wouldn't last much longer, in Ty's estimation.

"...but we put together what we'd observed and what we knew about Bob John and came to the conclusion that Bob John was a mere puppet on someone else's strings."

A complete reversal of their earlier admission, but why the about-face?

"Whose strings would those be?"

Vanessa hemmed and hawed. Dan whimpered, not from pain, but from what Ty surmised was fear. And not fear of what his mistress might do to him later—he man had chosen that relationship with his eyes wide open. Dan's fear was for the faceless puppeteers. So, maybe this was why Dan had initially lied about Roebuck having no business partners. He was afraid.

"Did they really stake him to a tree with a railroad tie?" she finally asked, choosing, for the time being, not to answer his question. Her fingers dug into Dan's arm lying on top of the desk. Her pale face was even more bloodless. The cocksure Vanessa Hardon acted afraid.

"Yes." But how had she found out that bit of information, he'd like to know. Either there was a leak in his department or the coroner's office ... or she had more information than an alibied person should have.

She winced and bit her lower lip. Taking a deep breath, Vanessa said, "Even a son of a bitch like Bob John didn't deserve to die like that."

"Yeah." The way she'd said her deceased boss's name, as if she'd hated him, had Ty asking, "What did he do to you?"

"Oh, he liked to play with Danny and me," Vanessa grimaced, "except he liked to play a lot harder than little Dan and I like. And Bob John was always on top."

Abruptly she stopped talking as if she realized she'd said too much. What was she not telling him? Or was she playing with him again?

Ty asked, "Do you know the identity of who funded Bob John, pulled his strings?"

Vanessa shrugged. "Sort of."

"What the hell does that mean?" Ty was tired of playing this woman's games.

"I know you think I'm evading your question," she said, looking him directly in the eyes, "but I only know in general. Bob John was involved with organized crime."

"What? Money laundering?"

"Yeah, and drug trafficking, prostitution, white slavery—well, you name it. Anything unsavory, Bob John was involved in it." She attempted a small smile. "I know what you're thinking about Danny and me, but we have rules and boundaries. We just did our jobs and didn't ask any questions. Plus, we never hurt anybody, or even each other. But Bob John ... well, he was just mean. Bone-deep mean."

"I see," he replied, because she seemed to need some sort of affirmation. In reality, she and the man cringing next to her sickened him. Her declaration that they never hurt anybody rang false. There were always victims in organized crime. She and Dan may not have placed the drugs in the hands of the users or kidnapped the women who were turned



into slaves, but they'd abetted it, even if it was only because they knew it was going on and didn't report it to the authorities.

For now, he'd string them along. Later, he'd give the county prosecutor what he'd discovered and let him handle the twosome. "You have any clue with which crime organization he associated?"

Vanessa's innate self-confidence flashed from the saucy grin she shot him. "Oh yeah. But it was more than one crime syndicate. Bob John walked a tight-rope, playing one off against the other. He was a greedy bastard, and I seriously think it got him killed. He'd been really jumpy lately, always looking over his shoulder as if someone was following him."

"You have any idea which syndicates?"

Vanessa shook her head. "No, not exactly. But, I think one was from Detroit. The others, I'm not sure."

Now, why didn't he believe her? Her eyes were direct and her voice steady and sure, but she still could be lying through her teeth. He just wouldn't know until he dug further.

She added, "He kept more than one set of books, which he managed to keep away from me. The extra set always went home with him. You might try searching his house."

Another gift from this woman. Were the books a red herring? Or a vital clue? He was reminded of Greek's bearing gifts.

"Thanks, we'll do that."

\* \* \* \*

After Dan printed off a list of all Bob John's businesses, both local and non, Ty rejoined Toby, who had a computer printout of all of Bob John's employees, or at least the ones that were reflected on his payroll. Who knew how many under-the-table people Bob John had had working for him?

Both the lists were lengthy.

Over cheeseburgers and fries at a small mom-and-pop diner, Ty gave Toby an abbreviated version of what Vanessa Hardon and Dan Porter had revealed.

Toby almost choked on his burger when Ty clued him in on Vanessa and Dan's sexual proclivities. "You mean, she ... uh, she likes to, well ... hurt men?"

Ty would have laughed, but Toby was blushing so hard that he'd burst a vessel if any more blood shot to his face.

"Yes, so stay away from her. She's way out of your league." Plus, he'd bet before they were through she'd be wearing prison day-glo orange.

"Holy Moly," breathed Toby. "I know Dan Porter and his wife. They go to my parent's church." He regarded Ty, confusion in his eyes. "How will I ever be able to look at the Porter's again and not..."

"You'll handle it." Ty wasn't so sure, but he found that with rookies you had to instill confidence.

Toby didn't appear convinced, but nodded anyway.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do." Ty took a sip of his cola, then picked up the list of businesses. "We'll start to visit the local ones. I'll have Margie in Statistics run profiles on all the employees, see if we can pull up any records that reek of organized

crime. We'll worry about the out-of-town businesses only if we don't pinpoint a trail from those two avenues of investigation."

"What do you want me to do?" Toby's eyes looked like a puppy dog asking for a petting.

"You're with me on surveillance of the businesses."

"Cool."

\* \* \* \*

With his years of law enforcement experience in first Chicago, then Ft. Wayne, Ty had a fairly good idea of what was going on with Bob John's businesses by late afternoon. Toby had yet to figure it out.

"How do you know that the dry cleaners are a front to launder money?" Toby's brows knitted in confusion. "They look like plain old dry cleaners to me. In fact, my mom uses the one on the north side."

"Yeah, they do clean and launder clothes. But did you notice the customer traffic?"

"Well, there was a lot of it."

"Good. What else?"

Toby scrunched his face in thought. "There seemed to be more dropping off than picking up?"

Ty nodded and smiled. "Exactly."

"What does that prove?"

"It indicates that a majority of the customers are dropping off dirty money disguised as bundles of clothing. They'll never pick anything up. Just drop off."

"But some people are taking away clothes! I saw the plastic bags and shirt boxes."

"Those are the real customers, like your mom. The establishments do just enough regular business to have clothes in the store, but not enough to reconcile the amounts of money going through the books."

"Shit," breathed Toby. "What about the restaurants?"

"The pizza parlor looked legitimate. But that was just from a cursory glance. We need to see how much in supplies they order versus the pizzas they actually sell. We need someone on the inside." Ty paused to negotiate a tricky curve on the way to Haughville and the rental properties on the list. "I'll do a quick once-over of the Italian restaurant later when it opens for dinner," Ty said. He'd use it as an excuse to see Brenna in a social setting before he took her home to finish what he'd started earlier at the pond. "But the bar and grill we visited ... it's probably a front for prostitution or illegal gaming."

"Okay, what did you see that I missed?" Toby's voice held more than a hint of exasperation. God, had Ty ever been that young and impatient?

"The building is too big for a bar and grill. It had three full floors and no other businesses located in the building. Bob John would have gone bankrupt a long time ago without keeping at least his street-level retail spaces at eighty percent capacity. So..."

"So, he's making more money out of the bar and grill than just serving beer," Toby concluded.

"Yeah. I bet you'll find the rooms upstairs are in use. We just have to find out for what."

Ty flipped open his cell and placed a call to the State Police barracks. After arranging for undercover state troopers to hang around the pizza parlor and the bar and grill to see if they could get some action, he and Toby began a street-by-street canvassing of the Haughville rental properties.

After one pass through the rough neighborhood, Ty drove away with one eye on the rear view mirror.

"Why didn't we stay and knock on some doors?" Toby asked, his forehead scrunched in puzzlement. "Maybe some of the renters have seen things that are unusual or out of place."

"I can definitely say that at least one of the renters knows something." Ty's tones revealed more emotion than he would have liked.

"How in the blazes could you tell that?"

"I recognized someone on that little drive-through ... someone I'd hoped never to see again outside of federal prison."

"Who?"

"Big Mo'Habab, a drug dealer and all-round crazy from Detroit. Probably the Detroit connection that Vanessa Hardon mentioned." Ty consciously relaxed the stranglehold he had on the steering wheel and took two deep breaths to ease the tightness in his chest. He didn't succeed. The clenching had now moved to his gut. "Where you find Big Mo, murder and mayhem follow." Ty turned into the Sheriff's Office parking lot. "Big Mo and his little syndicate of homeboys are to the drug trade in the Midwest what the Columbians are to Florida and the Gulf Coast. He is bad news ... and he knows me."

Toby's jaw dropped open. "You said something about prison?"

"I put him there," Ty said, his voice harsh with anger, "for life ... no, correct that, for five lifetimes. I got that piece of fucking shit off the streets for what I thought would be forever. Now someone's let him loose."

"Do you think it's a coincidence that he's..."

"Here?" Ty glanced at his companion's pale face. "I don't believe in coincidence. He has to know I'm here. He could have killed Bob John without a single qualm. He'd do it to foul up my little rural county with his drugs, gangbangers and the violence that follows them just to show me he can, then..."

"What?" Toby's voice was whisper-soft and filled with horrific awe.

"He'll kill me." Ty turned the motor off and thrust open his door. "He promised that as they dragged him off to the federal penitentiary. Fuck, I thought that would be the last I'd see of the son of a bitch."

"What're you going to do?" Toby exited the car and came around to confront him.

"First, I'm going to find out why he's out," Ty said as he stalked to the entrance of the Sheriff's Department, "and then I'm going to make sure the bastard never has the chance to contaminate another decent community again."

"How you going to do that?"

"However I can."

## Chapter Seven

*Shifting during times of extreme emotion can be dangerous. Shapeshifters are advised to maintain control at all times, or risk injury or even malformation.*

*- The Anatomy and Physiology of Shapeshifters, 2d. Ed., p. 22.*

Brenna turned first one way, then another, eyeing her reflection in her dressing room's full-length mirror. Did she dare to wear this dress out in public? Would she even get to eat dinner if Ty accepted the invitation the dress offered?

Her skin flushed, her breathing elevated and her sex swelled with heat and liquid anticipation of Ty's reaction to the flesh-toned slip dress. Even with a body slip under it, her breasts were clearly revealed as braless. And because of the clinging fabric, she could wear no panties, just a garter belt and sheer silk stockings a shade lighter than the dress.

Hecate's horned toads, she screamed sex in this dress. She had no doubt that Ty would accept the invitation to finish what he'd started earlier that morning. In fact, she counted on it.

Taking one last look, she turned and left the dressing area. As she entered the great room, the twins looked up from the couches where they lounged, watching television.

Igor sprang to his feet, his face turning first white, then red. "You aren't going to wear that out!"

It was an order, not a question.

He stalked toward her, staggered, then stopped when his brother grabbed him by his shirt tail. "Whoa, slow down, Gor," Boris said. "She has a right to wear anything she wants."

"But, not that ... that whatever in the hell it is." Igor turned his head to look back at his brother. "It's underwear, not a dress. She might as well be naked."

Boris's eyes slitted, and he took two or three deep breaths before he answered. "Gor, just leave it. She looks wonderful, and she has a right to dress however she pleases for her date. Give it up, bro. Face it, she's not going to be yours."

Igor tore himself away from his twin's restraining grip. Wild-eyed, he said, "They aren't hand-fastened, yet."

Then he ran from the room, shifting on the fly. His wailing howl sent shivers over her skin.

She looked at Boris. "How can I help him? Ty is my fate, one I willingly accept."

Boris stood up and approached her. He reached out and pulled her to him for a hug that was both calming and reassuring in its warmth. "He'll get over it. Trust me. It'll just take time." He held her away from him and looked down, grinning. "Now, go and have a good time. You're a knock-out in that dress and the Sheriff will love it—and hate it. Trust me."

\* \* \* \*

After putting a stakeout on Big Mo's rental in motion, Ty arrived at Bob John's Italian restaurant twenty minutes early for his dinner with Brenna. He found a seat at the

bar and had a drink. The alcohol relaxed him just enough to thrust the thoughts about Big Mo's release on a technicality to the back of his mind, where they lingered like a festering sore.

The early arrival also gave him time to figure out that something was going on in the basement of this building. But what? Another puzzle to be solved later.

Right now, he wanted none of those dark thoughts to color his evening with Brenna.

He knew the exact moment she entered the restaurant. It was like sonar pinging in his head, leading his gaze to her exact position. He swiveled on the bar stool.

She stood in the small waiting area, haloed by the light from a crystal chandelier.

At first glance she looked like an innocent angel; a second glance wiped all thoughts of innocence out of his mind. The off-white dress was a mere shade darker than her skin and made of some sort of filmy material that clung to her shapely body. Hell, she might as well have been naked!

His cock throbbed as his memory filled in the details of what lay barely disguised by the indecent fabric. Yet, memory wasn't needed to recall her breasts or the way her nipples perked when she was aroused, because every man and woman in the place could see them, faithfully outlined and revealed by the damn dress.

Angrily, he rose to go to her before some yahoo tried to pick her up.

Before he'd moved halfway through the evening crowd, her eyes found him in the dimly lit bar as if tracking him on her internal radar. The happy smile that lit up her face lightened his anger.

Happy or not, he still intended to beat her luscious little ass for dressing to attract the leering gazes of every red-blooded male in the vicinity.

"Ty!" She held out her hand.

He grabbed it, pulled and anchored her to him with one arm. His heated glare swept the immediate vicinity, discouraging the three men zeroing in on Brenna's position. *Take that, guys. She's mine.* Then he released her just enough to shrug off his jacket and throw it around her shoulders. Once her attributes were decently covered, he pulled her snugly against his body, then walked them over to the hostess to be seated.

"Ty?" she said in a breathy, low murmur.

"What?" he snapped. He felt her quiver.

Damn, he'd scared her. Probably hurt her feelings, too. And she had smiled at him. Bet she wasn't smiling now.

He chanced a look at her upturned face.

She grinned, a mischievous twinkle in her cat green eyes. "You don't like my dress?" She arched a delicate, feathery black brow. "Boris ... and Igor ... loved it."

The little witch was teasing him! Didn't she know how short his fuse was where she was concerned?

"The hell they did," he growled.

She laughed, a low, husky sound that sent an electrical charge straight to his already uncomfortably hard cock. "Jealous, Sheriff?"

"Damn right," he squeezed her and brushed a possessive kiss across her smiling lips. "You're my woman. And don't you forget it."

"Never," she promised as she leaned into his body and sighed. That was a satisfied sigh, if he'd ever heard one.

As they followed the hostess wending her way toward their table, Brenna's earthy female scent filled his head and set his heart to pounding. Oh, God. He wanted her bad. And he wanted her now.

But it wasn't going to happen.

He'd pushed his schedule to its limits in order to squeeze in this dinner. And justified it by telling his team he wanted to check out Bob John's restaurant. He'd only planned on dinner and an apology for having to work later that night. Then he would have taken her home where he would indulge in a short, but serious make-out session in the car. After which he would have locked her safely into her house. Away from Big Mo and his violence.

He had to get the goods on Big Mo and slap the gang leader's ass back in jail before the animal discovered Ty's interest in Brenna. She wasn't safe while the gangster was on the streets.

But the way he felt right now, a little making out wasn't going to hack it.

The gods who watched over love-sick, lust-ridden males must have felt his pain, because the table the hostess led them to was perfect for what ailed him. The dark, intimate little booth was in the back corner of the restaurant, separated, as all the booths were, by dark, filmy draperies. Perfect for a heavy petting session.

"Oh my," Brenna breathed as she pressed against his side. One of her breasts brushed against him about mid rib cage. It was firm, warm, and as his earlier glance had surmised, unfettered. His mouth watered, and it was all he could do not to reach over with his free arm and fondle the luscious globe. "Bob John must have had some interesting parties in this place," she whispered as she brushed against him once more. Harder this time. He could feel her nipple poking him all the way to his balls.

"Why..." He coughed to clear a lump the size of the Rock of Gibraltar out of his throat, and tried again. "Why would you say that?"

"Because, I sense sexual energy in this place. Lots of it. Past and present." Brenna scooted into the leather booth. Her dress rode up as she moved across the seat and revealed the lace tops of her sheer stockings.

God! His mouth suddenly dried out and his eyes fixed on the silky white thighs left exposed by the stockings. He licked his lips, blinked to clear the haze from his eyes. What was she thinking? After this morning in the glade, she had to know he lusted after her. So, what in the hell was she doing dressing for sex? In a public place? He wasn't a monk, for God's sake.

His heart pounded as blood pooled to his crotch. He was seconds away from losing control and taking her on the spot and to hell with the rest of the world.

He slid into the booth, reached for her and asked what was uppermost in his mind. "Are you wearing panties?"

"Ty. Didn't you hear what I said?" She fended him off with one hand. He didn't like it. He shoved her arm out of the way and pulled her into his body.

"Ty. Look at me." She placed one small hand on his cheek, directing his gaze to hers. "This is important. It has to do with Bob John and this place."

Through the primitive urges bombarding his body, one small, still rational, part of his brain registered that her flirtatious, sexy manner had changed. He labored to control the primordial command to mate as he processed her current mood. Concern. Disgust. But not for him, thank God. She still looked at him with trusting eyes. Something else

must have disgusted her. He didn't think he could handle it if she didn't want him as much as he wanted her.

That last thought escaped him in a low urgent tone. "I want you. Here. Now."

"I know, and I want you," she reassured him in a warm, silky tone, "but first you need to listen to me. There's something going on in this restaurant, somewhere on the premises, that has to do with sex. Dark, ugly sex. Not the healthy, loving lust you feel for me."

She wanted him! She was okay with his lust.

He inhaled deeply. "Give me a second."

He took her hand and kissed the knuckles. She smiled at him and returned his clasp with a small squeeze. The small acceptance calmed him. He took another deep breath and inhaled her scent, like flowers after an early morning rain. Then she smiled at him, and in that smile was all that she felt for him ... trust, understanding, patience, and love.

She loved him!

A force unlike any he'd ever felt swept through him, dulling the edges of the lusty male urges and replacing them with feelings of calmness and warmth ... and something else. Something he'd never felt before for any woman.

Somehow, between her visions and his dreams, love had arisen and captured them both. It felt right.

"Ty?" She leaned over and brushed the hand holding hers with her lips. "Are you okay? You went all white there for a moment."

"I love you."

Damn! He hadn't meant to blurt it out like that. But was glad he had. Her answering smile warmed him to his soul.

"Oh, Ty." Brenna lay her head on his chest. "I love you, too."

For a few seconds, they held each other, isolated from the rest of the world by their feelings.

Ty kissed the top of Brenna's head and wished that they could just leave, go to her house and make love for days. But that wasn't in the cards. Not until Mo was behind bars, or better yet, dead.

Was Big Mo really the evil Brenna had seen in her vision? He knew that the gang leader was foul enough to throw anyone's world off-balance. But was he smart enough to be the power behind the diversified business interests fronted by Roebuck? Neither Mo nor Roebuck seemed to have the brains or power to juggle all the criminal activities Hardon had mentioned. Was there someone else's fingers in the mix?

"There are things in my past, things that could endanger you." Now, why had he blurted that out? And more importantly, where had it come from? Was his subconscious attempting to scare her away for her own protection?

"Ty, I know you fear for me. I can sense it, but you needn't worry. We'll be fine." She took his hand and placed it over her heart. "In here. I know it in here."

He wanted to believe her, but she had no experience with what men like Big Mo could do. If Mo knew about Brenna, he would use her as a weapon against Ty.

He didn't want to talk about Mo, so he changed the subject. "What do you think is going on in this place?"

"We'll come back to your unreasonable fear for my safety, later," she warned. She sniffed the air as if something were burning. "Can't you smell the sex? The fear? The rage? It's all around us."

He sniffed. "No, I can only smell you."

But something had bothered him since he entered the building. He'd chalked it up to the unusual amount of activity entering and leaving a door off of a back hallway. Their furtive behavior raised his suspicions. Whatever Bob John's illicit business, it was located here in this basement. Ty would bet his Babe Ruth rookie card on it.

He inhaled once more. Again, all he could smell, feel was Brenna. Her clean essence and aura of goodness stroked his senses, calming him like a powerful sedative.

She kissed the pulse point at the base of his throat. Snuggling against him, she said, "Well, trust me, it's there, underlying all the other smells in this place. If I didn't know better, I would say there is some sort of sex club in the basement—you know the kind I'm talking about."

"Yeah, I think I do."

It all added up. He quickly recounted his visit with Vanessa and Dan.

"Well, yuck." She wrinkled her nose. "I don't know this Vanessa. She must be a recent addition to Bob John's businesses. But I do know the Porters. They buy produce from me." She shivered and he drew her closer. "Ugh. I can't picture him as a submissive. He bosses his poor mousy wife around. I always suspected emotional abuse at the very least. Trust me, if I had seen any marks on her, I would have reported him."

"Well, don't picture him at all. I don't want you touched by this. Let me take care of it. You just raise your herbs and flowers."

Brenna pushed away from his body and raised her head from his chest to stare him in the eyes. "Ty, no matter how hard you fight this, it won't work. In the long run, we have to do this together. So, don't coddle me. Don't hide things from me. I can't make the right decisions or choose the correct path if you hold things back or wrap me in cotton wool in an attempt to keep me safe. You must not only love me, but trust me as well."

"Would you two like to order something from the bar?" The waitress's voice interrupted them.

Saved. He understood what Brenna was saying, but it didn't help. She'd never met Big Mo. Trust was a two-way street. In this instance, she'd just have to trust him to know what was right for her.

"Well?" Brenna asked.

"Well what?" He wasn't going to argue with her in front of a stranger.

"Red or white?" she said.

"Pinot grigio, please," he told the waitress, who wrote it down and walked off.

"Ty, tell me what's wrong. Something happened other than this Vanessa and Dan playing bondage games. Tell me!"

"What do you mean?" Ty chanced a glance.

Man, she was gorgeous—and mad. At him. He was tempted to kiss the anger right off her face, and the questions right out of her head.

"I mean," she said as she took the wine menu out of his hands and tossed it onto the seat beside her, "what's happened that has you so conflicted? Chaotic energy is just flowing off you."



"God, you can sense that?" He'd better figure out just what she could and couldn't sense. Who knew? She might already know about his past and the dangers it had brought forward into their present. "Can you read my mind?"

"No. I have very strong empathic abilities. The same abilities I use to sense Bob John's angry spirit, your desire for me, and the lust in the basement of this building, I can also use to sense other emotions. This morning, you were balanced, very linear, well, except for the sex thing."

"Sex thing?" He grinned. "You mean being interrupted in mid..."

"Yeah, that." She held off his advancing mouth. "And stop trying to distract me. Talk. What has made you so upset? Is it something about Bob John's death? What else did his employees tell you?"

He closed his eyes and sought guidance from deep within his soul.

*Trust in your mate, Alemwa. She is strong. Your fear will not keep her safe. Only your trust will.*

Okay, so he would tell her. But he still intended to put her out of harm's way. He wouldn't tell her about the stakeout. He wasn't buying into this absolute partnership, at least not as far as Big Mo was concerned. She didn't need to be there. He could handle Big Mo.

Ty scooted closer to Brenna. "Bob John was up to his ugly good-ol'-boy neck into organized crime. Worse, he had the bad taste to become associated with more than one crime syndicate. And worse yet, one of those syndicates was the D-Town Gang from Detroit, led by one Mo'Habab, more commonly known as Big Mo."

"Satan's toes! Organized crime? So, Ted was right."

"Ted?" Ty's head snapped up. "Who the hell is Ted?"

Brenna ignored him and closed her eyes. She remained silent for so many seconds that Ty didn't know whether to shake the answer out of her or beg her to forgive the jealous question.

Then she spoke, "I can't sense this Big Mo, yet. I'll need to see him."

"Like hell you will."

She placed her fingers on his lips, halting any further words from him. "But Bob John's spirit has just confirmed that he dealt with three different groups. The Detroit one you just mentioned, which was his drug connection. One out of Chicago that was Russian and had to do with forced prostitution. And another one from Florida, Miami, I think, also dealing with drugs."

"Shit." A chill raced down Ty's spine. So, Hardon had been right in her supposition that other criminal syndicates were involved. Roebuck had been playing with TNT and a short fuse. He pulled Brenna even closer as if he could take her into his body and protect her with his hardened exterior. The urge to pick her up and carry her away from the mess Bob John had created beat strongly within him.

He knew she wouldn't go.

"Don't even think about asking me to leave town," Brenna warned, practically reading his mind once again. "We have to deal with the evil together. If we don't, then evil will win, and this town will be Hell Central."

"You don't understand..."

"Yes ... I do." She sighed. "Ty, trust me. Trust in my magick. Trust in my vision."

"I'm trying. I have already told you more than I wanted. Chalk my gut reaction up to me being a cop and a lone wolf for far too long." He kissed her cheek and nuzzled her hair. "I already put Big Mo away once, and the law let him out. I almost lost my life doing that." As if she had known about it all along, Brenna placed a kiss on his chest where Big Mo's .44 had put a hole. It humbled him how in tune with his feelings, his pain, she was. And once again, he felt unworthy of her. "I may have used up all my luck."

"So that's why you're so angry? Frog's toes. Fate brought you to me. Together we are stronger. We can take care of this Big Mo and anyone else he or those other criminals want to throw at us." She laid her hand on his wound and gently massaged the stiffness and the pain from his body. "Better?"

"Yes." He kissed her nose, then looked her in the eyes and whispered, "Now, who in the hell is this Ted that you seem to be so cozy with?"

"No one you need to worry about," she said with a smile.

"Damn right, because you're mine and everyone who doesn't know it, soon will." She tsked at him, and Ty groaned. "I'm sorry."

"For what? Being jealous?" She smiled, a look so filled with such genuine love that his jealousy vanished. "Don't play the insecure man, Ty. It doesn't become you." She picked up his hand where it lay clenched on the table and kissed the whitened knuckles, soothing away the cramping anger.

"You're too good for me. You don't know what I've done..." Lurid images of his undercover work flashed through his mind. He shuddered. "The things I've seen..."

She shushed him, halting the confessions of his past. "I know all I need to know. You are a good man, with magick of your own. A warrior. The male to my female. My love."

"But I turned my back on my shamanic side when I was a teenager," Ty said, picking out the one weakness in her argument.

"I'll help you find it again." She caressed his face with a gentle finger then dropped it as he nipped the tip.

"Until then, who's Ted, my little witch?" He nuzzled her ear and bit the tempting ear lobe peeking through her silky curtain of hair.

"Ted works for me. I told you he'd heard and seen some things around town."

"What sort of things? Where?"

"Nothing you don't already know."

He searched her face. "Now, why don't I believe that?"

"I'm not sure, but I'm telling you the truth. He told me that he heard there were drugs in town from Detroit. You just confirmed that. So, see, we both got the information from different sources. Doesn't that say something about our partnership?"

"Yeah, that I'll have to watch you like a hawk." He zeroed in on her lips as his hand found its way up under her dress and touched the skin bared at the top of her hose. He slid a finger under the garter and followed it up. "Kiss me, Brenna."

\* \* \* \*

"You want more than that," she whispered. Her thighs clenched as his questing finger found her naked labia. She was glad she'd left off the panties. She'd hoped for just a moment like this.

The heat between them was palpable. Images of what they'd done at the pond that morning flitted across her mind's eye. Instantly, she was aroused, so aroused that her earlier unease about the bad vibes in the building, about wearing the dress in public and about re-establishing the line between good and evil vanished in a wisp of smoke. She wanted to feel what he'd made her feel again. Now. Right now. And damn the consequences.

She'd never had to fight this sort of attraction for any man. All her preconceived notions of what was proper and what wasn't between a man and a woman seemed to fly right out of her head when she was near Ty.

"Yes, and so do you," Ty whispered in a husky tone as he nibbled her lips.

"Yes."

Any further suggestions as to what she wanted were cut off by the arrival of their drinks.

The waitress set the glasses on the table then proceeded to open the bottle of wine. After offering a small portion for Ty to okay, she poured out two glasses and placed the bottle in the wine caddy. "Are you ready to order?"

"Give us a few more minutes, please," Ty said, as he casually fingered Brenna's clitoris under the cloaking protection of the tablecloth. Small red-hot licks of fire shot into her groin where they gathered and throbbed to be released.

The waitress hurried away as someone beckoned to her from across the room.

"Ty, please?" she begged.

"Please, what, my love?" He dipped one finger into her cleft and stroked as he thumbed the bundle of nerves at the apex. "Please order for me, or please make me come?"

"Make me come." She hid her face in his shoulder, shocked that she would beg to be relieved in public, angry that he was taking too long to give her the pleasure his actions promised. She'd been thinking about this sensation the whole blessed day, and now that she felt it again, she could not wait until later for more privacy. Damn his sexy hide, but she wanted him.

"My pleasure, little witch."

He took her lips with his and began a rhythm with his tongue that he mirrored with his finger in her opening. It didn't take long before the spiral of pleasure took her to a peak where she fell, down into a whirlwind of ecstasy-love, lust, relief, hunger, need. Most of all need for this man's love to make her whole.

Ty drank the moans from her lips and cushioned her fall within the safety of his arms. As she calmed, he stroked her back and rained kisses on her hair. He was a protector as well as a warrior. She sensed that she would always be safe in his arms.

"Are you okay, little one?" he murmured against her hair.

"I've never been better." She turned and took his lips with a kiss of her own, stroking his tongue, his lips, wanting to share the pleasure with him. "Thank you." She felt for his arousal and stroked it gently through his trousers. "Now, how are we going to take care of this? Hmmm."

"I can wait until later ... let's say dessert ... at your place?" He smiled.

Her throat dried at the thought of taking him into her mouth and reciprocating the pleasure he'd given her. The thought rekindled the ambient flame of her own desire. She wanted him to enter her body and take her to that peak once more.

She drank half of the glass of wine. Hecate's breath, she wasn't sure she could wait until dessert.

His penis pulsed under her massaging touch. It was big, hard—and all hers. Men weren't the only territorial animals. She was his alpha-female, and she had the urge to bind him to her as strongly as he bound her to him.

A wicked thought crossed her mind. Could she really do that here? And not get caught? She grinned. Yes, she could.

"I don't think I like the looks of that smile, little one" Ty topped her glass of wine.

"Let's order, shall we?" she glanced at the menu. "I know what I want."

Ty signaled the waitress and they gave their orders.

"That must hurt," she said, as she looked at the prominent bulge in his lap. Intense desire, or the wine on an empty stomach, slurred her words.

"Well, let's just say we aren't lingering over dinner." Ty chuckled.

Brenna surveyed their surroundings. No one was looking. In fact, their little corner of the restaurant was extremely secluded. And dark.

She'd already decided to do it. Besides, she didn't imagine he would last long. He looked ready to explode. She slid under the table. Ty's shocked "Brenna" turned into a moan as she handled his big, hard problem.

"What are you doing?" His voice was harsh with his arousal and the implications of her disappearance under the table.

She didn't reply, feeling action would carry far more weight in this instance. She unzipped his pants and felt through the slit in his boxers for her goal. It sprang into her hand like the Jack in the Box at the end of "Pop Goes the Weasel."

It was hot. Silky. Hard. And all hers.

He groaned. His hand went to her head. Whether to stop her or urge her on, she didn't give him time to decide. She licked the precum from the tip of his glans. His excitement was such that another, more copious drop immediately replaced it. This one she smoothed over the head of his penis with a gentle finger. His answering groan told her all she needed to know.

He wanted her. This strong man was as weak with his need for her as she was for him.

He was hers. In her hands, so to speak. And she knew just what to do with him.

She took him into her mouth as far as she could, then she stopped and just held him there. No movement other than the milking motion of her cheeks.

"Brenna." Ty garbled her name as his hand clenched in her hair. "Please."

Yes, she'd please him. Just as he'd pleased her. She could never deny him her love, never refuse to show her desire for him. Only him.

She started to move, working his cock as if it was a piston and her mouth was the valve. Each time she took him a little further back and into her throat.

"Oh God, Brenna. You're killing me." His harsh whisper and sharp inhalations of breath told her he wouldn't last long.

The sense of power was like a spark to dry tinder, and added to the rekindling of her own arousal. She burned, and needed him to burn, too.

Bracing one hand on the seat, she used her other to reach into his pants and fondle his balls. Yes, there. They tightened more with each motion. Soon. Soon he would flood her throat. She needed that more than she needed to breathe.

He held her head to him in a gently fierce grip.

"So good, baby. So good. Yes, just like that. Harder, darling. Please!"

She worked him firmly, then his pelvis took over the rhythm, increasing the pace until he exploded. He tried to stifle his orgasmic groan, but didn't quite manage it. The sound caused her vagina to gush in response, her clit to throb. Her heart soared. He was hers.

She released his still-pulsing member from her mouth. Cupping him in her hands, she cleaned him up, tucked him back into his boxers, then zipped his pants.

Shimmying back up and into her seat, she used her napkin to tidy her face, then calmly took a sip of her wine. Chancing a glance, she found Ty's satiated gaze on her. His breathing was still heavy, and she sensed that he used every single bit of willpower he possessed not to jump her bones right there.

The risk she'd taken was worth it.

"That was refreshing." She took a bite of foccacia dipped in olive oil. "All of a sudden I'm hungry, aren't you?"

"Oh yeah. I'm going to eat all right, but it won't be here." Ty raised a shaky hand. "Waitress! Check ... and we want our meals to go, please."

"Ty!"

"No. Not one word. You can't expect me to sit here and calmly eat my meal now."

"But, you did me. I just balanced the scales a bit."

"Trust me, I'm not balanced, little one." He moaned. "I need to come inside you. Mark you as mine. Do you understand?"

Brenna smiled at the worry in his eyes and voice. He was her alpha-male all right. "I understand perfectly. Marking territory with a finger doesn't count, right?"

He pulled her hand and placed it over his already hard penis. "Exactly. Tonight, we'll have the dessert before the meal. You got a problem with that?"

"No," she said, her breath coming in pants at the evidence of his quick recovery. Then the humor of the situation hit her, and she said, "After all, I've already had a taste of mine. It's only fair that you should have yours."

"Damn straight," he said.

## Chapter Eight

*The flying sensation during sexual intercourse is an indication of the conjoining of complementary mates.*

- "Complementary Mates: How Will You Know?" *Modern Witch Monthly*, December 2003.

Ty negotiated the crowded parking lot in the large county-owned SUV. Once on the street, he laid rubber as if he'd just received an emergency call. His destination? His house. It was miles closer than Brenna's, and after all, her vision had placed them together in his bed. Ty wasn't going to quibble with prescience, especially when it suited his purposes.

Plus, the truth be told, if he had to drive to Brenna's, they wouldn't make it. He didn't want their first time to be in the back seat of his county vehicle. Now that they were skipping dinner and going straight to dessert, he'd bought himself the time needed to linger over the lovemaking. Although the way he felt, he didn't know if lingering would be the operative word. Multiple quickies more accurately described his frame of mind and state of arousal.

"Ty?" Brenna's breathy voice stimulated his excitement. "Hurry, please."

His little witch sounded like she didn't want to wait either. He glanced at Brenna. Sweet Jesus!

He jerked the wheel, throwing the speeding vehicle into a slight swerve. Gritting his teeth, he over-steered to correct for the error, then chanced another look at the sight that had thrown him off course.

In the glowing green and white lights of the dashboard, the dark curls at the apex of Brenna's slit glistened. A visual siren's song to his already aching need to touch her.

"Damn," he breathed. "Are you trying to cause an accident?"

"What do you mean?" She stared at him, her eyes heavy-lidded with arousal.

"Your dress ... it's well ... up." God, he couldn't even think straight enough to talk coherently.

She glanced down at her lap and gasped. "Sorry, it must have ridden up when I climbed into the car." She moved to pull her dress down.

"Don't," he gritted out. "Leave it. Touch yourself for me."

Leaning her head back against the head support, she closed her eyes, then swept one finger over her clit. She murmured, "So good." Then she inserted first one, then two fingers. Pulling them out, she rubbed the feminine musk over her nether lips, concentrating on the clit.

Ty groaned. "Let me."

Keeping one firm hand on the wheel, he reached over and stroked the exposed thigh closest to him. "So beautiful. Soft. Warm. Like living silk."

His hand sought the juncture of her thighs and the moist heat there. She opened for his touch with a sigh. He smoothed one finger over her swollen labia, gathering her sweet essence, then brought it to his lips.

"Mmm, you taste good, sweetheart. You're so hot, so ready. Just a few more minutes, and we'll be there."

Her unique scent and the small taste he'd taken had him harder than ever. He wanted more. He wanted to finger her to orgasm and hear her breathy moans, but if he didn't stop now, he'd wreck the car.

He reached for her again, then pulled away. He had to exercise control, at least until they were parked in his driveway. Her disappointed groan described his feelings one hundred percent.

Surreptitiously, he reached to rearrange his dick in his pants.

Brenna's hand shoved his away. "Keep your hands and eyes on the road, Sheriff. Let me handle this emergency. You just get us there in one piece."

The touch of her hands burned through his clothing to his throbbing dick. "Yeah, that's it. Touch me, little witch."

"Yes," she whispered as she unbuttoned then lowered the zipper on his pants. As in the restaurant, his dick unerringly sought her as if it were a heat-seeking missile. "What a handsome cock." She leaned over the console and licked the tip where a bead of precum had appeared. "He seems to be ready."

"I have news for you," Ty said, letting out a groan as she grasped his meat in one strong little hand. "I've been ready since I first fingered you in the restaurant."

"Even after I sucked you off?" she asked, then followed her question with a little lick and a gentle squeeze.

"Yeah. I've been hard all day. Since the pond."

"Glad I wasn't the only one suffering," she replied before taking him into her mouth and setting a slow pumping rhythm.

Ty loved the feeling, but called a halt as he pulled into his driveway. "Save that for when we get inside. We're here."

He turned off the engine and pulled her off his cock. "I want to watch you suck me off this time in the comfort of my bed after I eat my dessert, of course."

"But Ty..." she moaned.

He covered her mouth with his and swallowed the words that would tempt him to let her finish what she'd started. But it was too risky. He wanted her behind closed and locked doors where he could enjoy their lovemaking without worrying about nosy neighbors, homicidal drug lords and disruptive emergency calls.

\* \* \* \*

Brenna groaned as Ty's mouth took hers in a kiss so rich, earthy and full of hunger that it should be registered as a lethal weapon. All he had to do was kiss her and she acquiesced to his way of doing things. He wouldn't always get his way, she vowed silently.

All too soon, Ty broke off the kiss and placed several inches between them.

After maneuvering his massive hard-on back into his pants, he closed them. "Wait right there. I'll come around and get you."

She nodded, shivering at the way he'd emphasized "get". All sorts of lovely, sensual acts whirled through her mind like a spinning top.

The passenger door opened. Ty pulled her into his arms. As he carried her into the house, he retook her lips. The world spun crazily around her, forcing her to close her eyes to avoid becoming too dizzy.

Ty released her lips and she lay her heavy head on his shoulder where she placed hungry, nipping kisses to his shirt-covered chest.

"Hold that thought, my little cannibal," he whispered. "We're almost there."

The click of a lock and the whoosh of the door indicated that they'd arrived on the front step. The shrill beep-beep-beep of a security alarm was quickly silenced. The slam of the door and a couple of other beeps signaled they were locked in. Alone. The outside world held at bay for whatever moments they chose to steal.

Brenna sighed into Ty's mouth as he retook her lips. As she floated along in his arms, she stroked urgent fingers through the hair on the back of his neck. Such a strong neck. Such silky hair. He smelled like citrus, musk and sex. A unique combination only his.

Ty broke off the kiss as he placed her on the bed.

Her eyes flew open. "Ty?" she said as he stood by the bed and stared down at her. He said nothing, just stood there, while his eyes swept up and down her body. His torrid gaze scorched her soul with its intensity.

Then she felt it. Her dress had once again ridden up. Or had Ty arranged it that way? She suspected the latter.

Her sheer peach-colored garter belt framed her nakedness. The garters had come undone from their stockings.

The stockings that Ty roused to motion as he smoothed them down her legs.

"Sweetheart, thank you for wearing the garters." He placed nibbling little kisses down each leg as he removed the hosiery. "They might just have made my night. But do you know what has made my week?"

"No," she gasped as he sucked one of her toes into his mouth, his large, strong hands massaging the bottom of her foot. An answering gush of warm moisture flooded her vaginal opening. Her clit throbbed as she keened through a totally unexpected mini-climax.

"No panties." He abandoned her feet and surged up her legs only to stop at her naked mons. "I just love a panty-less woman."

"Ty?" she shrieked as he dove into her with his tongue. He lapped at her like she was a double-dip ice-cream cone that he had to eat before it melted. "Please ... please ... I don't think I can ... stand ... no, don't ... don't stop." The last word came out on a wail as he inserted a finger, then two and shifted his oral attack to her clit.

The mini-climax of a moment ago was a mere appetizer compared to the feelings Ty engendered now.

The combination of his mouth and fingers plus the entire evening of prolonged foreplay took its toll. She panted and groaned as she climbed the steep mountain of pleasure. As she reached the pinnacle and fell over the edge, she screamed words she'd never spoken aloud before. Earthy words of sex, lust, passion and love.

As she rode the orgasm, her generous and skilled lover worked to prolong it. A firm pressure here. A nip of the clit there. A stroke of a finger from top to bottom, then back again. Husky-toned, earthy words of praise and encouragement.

Her pleasure seemed to last forever as she alternately keened and panted.



Finally, she floated down on a warm cloud of afterglow. Small gusty sobs were all she could voice.

Cool air rushed over her heated body ... and she was alone.

Vague and distant sounds of clothing rustling reached her through the thick sensual fog. A shift of the bed, then Ty's warm arms surrounded her, anchoring her once more to reality.

The reality of a hard, naked male hungry for her.

"Sweetheart?" His voice like roughened silk sounded at her ear. "You okay?"

"Mmm, yes. Better than okay." She tilted her head to see him. "What about you?"

He chuckled and nuzzled her neck. "I feel like a goddamn sex god after evoking that reaction from you."

"I'll get it embroidered on a pillow for you." She sighed and turned more fully into his long, hard body. Reaching for his penis and finding it harder than her oak staff, she said, "Take me. Use this magic rod and make me yours."

He laughed. "Yes, ma'am."

\* \* \* \*

Ty couldn't believe how perfect she was. Everything about her excited him, from the cloud of silky black hair to her petite curvy body to her tiny, pearl-tinted toes. He had been shocked and pleased that she'd responded so beautifully to his lovemaking.

He was eager to discover if they could reach the same heights of passion together.

"Tell me what you like, little witch," he breathed into her ear. "Tell me what makes you hot." He licked around her lobe, dipping his tongue into the opening before licking from her ear down her neck to her shoulder.

"You ... you make me hot."

He nipped then licked the sensitive cord at the side of her neck. He traced lazy circles on her collarbone with his tongue, pausing to take a nip now and then. As he worshiped the delicate bones, he captured a breast with one hand. The small but full globe fit into his hand as if the Goddess had created this woman just for him. He balanced the warm breast in one hand, swiping his thumb over her nipple.

She moaned. "Touch me. There. Please."

"No need to beg, little witch," he whispered. "It will be my pleasure."

After one last lick, he abandoned her collarbone. Placing her on her back, he now had an unobstructed approach to her breasts. He anchored her to the bed with one leg and chose a breast. As he nibbled and sucked, his other hand prepared its equally luscious partner for his oral ministrations.

When he switched to the other breast, Brenna's breathing quickened. Her chest flushed rosy pink with excitement. She grabbed his head and held him to her as if she feared he would stop.

"So good, so good..." she wailed as her body arched into his. Her hips thrust against his thigh, wetting him with her copious juices. Her words soon became unintelligible as she switched to a language he'd never heard before.

Yet, his heart recognized the words. She spoke of love and passion for him.

As his heart filled with her sensual magick and words of love, he could wait no longer. The urge to mark her as his in every way ruled his actions. An inner voice egged

him on. Somehow, it was important to claim this woman now. Tonight. Before it was too late.

He couldn't stop now if all the hounds of Hell descended upon them.

Rolling over onto her, his unyielding hardness entered her acquiescent warmth. He'd come home. His life, his world was all tied up with this woman. From the beginning of their lives, they had traveled many and different paths to reach this one moment.

And it was right.

Her Goddess and his God willing, the two of them would share their future paths together. Forever.

Silently, he pledged to keep and protect this woman for as long as he lived. His gaze seeking and capturing hers, he began the instinctual movements to culminate their union.

As he set the rhythm that would make her his in deed, she whispered, echoing his silent pledge. "Forever ... in this world and beyond."

With each thrust, his rod throbbed harder and harder. They set a rhythm, one uniquely their own. When he changed his hip motion, her hips moved in tandem with his as if she knew before he did what he was going to do.

Her breathy cries of "so good, so good" reverberated throughout his body and into his soul.

His balls felt so full that he was surprised he hadn't already exploded into release. It was as if his body waited for a sign.

He had no time to ponder on that feeling, because just as soon as he thought it, Brenna cried out in orgasm, "Ty! Hold me ... I'm flying."

And at her words, the world around him exploded into thousands of shards of pleasure. As he pumped into her body, she cried and moaned his name repeatedly. She held onto him as if her life depended on him. As if he were the only thing anchoring her to this world.

He experienced that very feeling as he reached the climax and his seed filled her womb. He soared, flying high into the sky above his bed, his room, his house, with her held tightly in his arms. And as they reached the apex of their flight, he cried out, "Brenna! Love."

Slowly, he regained the sense of his physical body firmly planted on the bed. He smiled. They'd made it back from wherever or whatever that was. It was unlike any sexual experience he'd ever had.

And, he knew he wanted to do it again ... and again with this woman.

Satiated for the time being, he lay with Brenna's head on his chest. In a reversal of his earlier lovemaking, her top leg lay over both of his. He liked the feel of her stretched over him, blanketing him with her body.

He rubbed soothing circles on her damp back as she stroked the scar over his heart.

Ugly reality sent an icy chill through him. The memory of who had given him the scar, and the fact that the threat could now hurt his woman, reminded him that he had work to do. He hated to part from her, but his team needed him. It was more imperative than ever to put Big Mo behind bars. He didn't want Brenna to be touched by the ugliness from his past.

"Brenna, love," he whispered, "I have to leave you for a while. Duty calls. Stay here. Sleep. I'll be back in the morning."

He got no response. Her even breathing told him she was already asleep. Yet, her hands still stroked him even as she slept. He smiled and placed a feather-light kiss on her forehead.

Cautiously disengaging himself from her body, he got up. He'd leave his sleeping beauty a note. With any luck, he could be back in the morning in time to wake her with a kiss.

\* \* \* \*

Brenna waited until Ty had dressed and left before getting up to take a shower.

Her body hummed and buzzed with the vitality of the life forces generated by their union. The soaring orgasm they'd shared was something she'd only read about in ancient grimoires and heard from the elder females of her coven.

As they lay in the aftermath of the sensual storm, she'd examined his muscular body. He was a gorgeous, healthy male animal. His burnished skin, a result of his Native American blood, made him look like a bronzed Greek God. The wolf marking on his hip had come as a pleasant surprise and was obviously an indication of his totem. It looked very similar to her wolf birthmark, although hers was magickal and indicated her status as a potential complement to a Coven of the Wolf leader. Could some of Ty's ancestors have belonged to her coven? She'd ask one of the elders as soon as she could.

Since Drake Morgan had found his Rhea and consummated their relationship, the leadership of the coven was sacrosanct until Drake died. But if it hadn't been, Ty, if he indeed had witch blood as she suspected, could have challenged the unbound Drake for leadership with her as his complement. Their orgasmic flight onto the astral plane was evidence of that.

But even before their final union, she'd sensed the synergy between them.

Ty didn't know it yet, but there was a very good chance that she could, as he feared, read his mind. She doubted that he could return the favor ... yet. He would need to, first believe, and second, train. She eagerly anticipated teaching him. Lots of soaring into the astral plane would make the task easier. The fact that it would be pleasurable for them both was a great perk.

The Goddess had sent her a perfect match.

But there was something in the air that ate at her mind and turned her blood cold. Something she'd sensed as they soared to the astral plane.

A foul darkness loomed in the distance. It called to Ty. It promised death—his death—and the death of anyone that stood in its vile path.

Brenna was sure he had no awareness of it. Yet. With his instincts and shaman blood, eventually, he would sense it, react to it, possibly in a way that would get him killed.

It was more imperative than ever for her to trace the source of the evil. It threatened Ty more than her or her coven.

She reached into the depths of her magickal ability, seeking the insight of the Goddess.

*"Ah, my child, it is good that you have conjoined with your mate. You'll need that connection of minds the binding brings."*

*"I see death," Brenna said, getting to the point. "Death for Ty. How do I stop this?"*

*"You must go and enter the house of evil before the mere mortals ... before your man who does not know his power yet. Only you can stop this evil."*

*"But the vision. You told me we had to fight this evil together. Why can't I tell Ty?"*

*"There are many ways of working together. One is to trust in the other's strengths."*

*"I've told him this, but I sensed he still held something back."*

*"Ah, he wishes to protect you. It is the nature of a warrior. He will soon close a circle in his life that plays a role in the evil that crossed over on the night of Litha. Once this is closed, his trust in you will be given more freely. Have patience, my child."*

*"The evil is in Haughville?" Brenna asked, confirming what her senses and resources told her.*

*"Yes. Go now. Take your animal companion and the shifters. Stop the evil before it lets loose its horrible power on the unsuspecting. Hurry."*

Brenna shuddered as a chill swept through her body. The evil even now, unchecked, grew stronger. She felt it beating upon her senses, so foul she could almost smell it.

She vowed to do whatever it took to defeat it.

## Chapter Nine

*Complementary mates within covens are often, but not always, marked in some way, most often with a similarly shaped birthmark.*

- *"Complementary Mates: How Will You Know?" Modern Witch Monthly, December 2003*

"No. Absolutely not!" For the past few minutes, Igor had ranted and raved as he paced the great room in her house. If he were in his canine form, he would have been wagging his tail furiously from side to side with his teeth bared. "You are not going to enter some drug gang's house so that you can protect Ty Buchanan and find another angle on this murder case. I refuse to let you."

Boris groaned, then muttered, "Watch it, Gor. You're skating on thin ice here." His penetrating glance had not left her since she'd entered the house. His nose sniffed the air as if he was on a trail. He knew about Ty and her.

"Satan's toes!" swore Brenna. If Boris could smell the evidence of sex on her, then so could Igor. Jealousy, anger and hate played into Igor's strident tones and opposition to her plan.

She would not be swayed. There was too much at stake. Ty's life was not something she was willing to gamble with.

Besides, the Goddess was positive about the danger. She had no choice. And she wasn't going to tell them about the real evil she suspected was in the house in Haughville. Then Boris would side with Igor, and she needed them to cover her.

"I'm an adult witch with full use of more elemental powers than you could ever imagine. Not to mention my spell casting is of the highest levels. How in Hecate's Hell could some slack-brained gangsters from the 'hood' defeat me?"

"Slack-brained gangsters?" Igor stopped and looked to the heavens, his hands raised in supplication. "How in the Goddess's name, do you, a do-no-harm witch practicing earth magick, plan to stop the guns, Brenna? Are you going to hoe them to death? Threaten them with your weed-whacker? Cast a fertility spell?"

Boris's dryly muttered "really Gor" ended the tirade.

Igor got in one final warning. "Even dumb gangsters have guns, and have been known to use them on unwelcome guests."

"It worked the last time I tried it," Brenna said, arching an eyebrow.

Igor's pacing stopped as suddenly as if he'd run into a brick wall. "What in the hell are you talking about?" Igor asked. His voice was overly calm, belying the look of shock and disbelief flickering in his eyes.

At least he wasn't thinking about Ty any longer.

"When was this?" Boris asked.

"I didn't always live in bucolic southern Indiana, raising herbs and organic produce. I used to live in Miami, as in the sunny state of Florida, not Ohio, where the Columbians ate little gangsters like this Detroit lot for breakfast."

Brenna smiled as Igor managed to squeak out a few, unintelligible words, most of them sounded blasphemous.

"I bet there is a humdinger of a story in there somewhere," Boris said, keeping a wary eye on his brother. "You'll have to tell us about it some time. Right, Gor?" He stepped over and slapped his brother hard between the shoulder blades.

Igor coughed, then sputtered a few more profanities. "I'm not convinced," he said, taking a deep breath before continuing, "but if you plan on going to that ... place tonight, you are definitely not going alone. So, we need to make plans."

"Well, if you'd listened to me before going off into a macho-tirade, I would have told you that my strategy included you two."

"What's your plan?" asked Boris.

Igor's eyes narrowed and lips thinned with skepticism, but he remained silent. Probably waiting to pounce and pick holes in her very simple plan. Well, let him. Her plan would work.

"I'll cast a spell on the people inside the house while you two prowl around outside. If other people approach, you'll warn me and stall them until I can get out of the house," she said. "Once the inhabitants are under my control, I'll question them about Bob John. If they aren't guilty of the murder, maybe they will know who is. At the very least, we can turn them over to Ty for drug dealing. I'm sure there will be drugs in the house. Ted said there was a lot of business."

"God save us. Are you frigging nuts?" Igor exploded into motion. As he paced, he wildly gesticulated. "What if your spell doesn't work on all of them? I've seen that happen, you know. What if one of them comes out of the spell while you are playing Columbo and shoots you? What if we can't stall unexpected guests and they come in and shoot you? What if..." Running out of steam, Igor stumbled to a chair and sat down heavily as if his knees had turned to limp lasagna. "We'll be outside, and you'll be dead."

His voice told the whole story. He cared for her and still hoped to make her his.

Boris chimed in, "It's not that bad of a plan, Gor. After all, she is a top-level witch, and not without some experience in these matters. I don't imagine she'd rely on a spell if it wasn't going to work one hundred percent of the time. Right, Brenna?" He went over and stroked his brother's shaking shoulders in a soothing motion.

"Right." Brenna bowed her head slightly to Boris.

"Are you okay, Igor?" Boris whispered.

"No, but I'll survive." Igor shuddered and shook off his brother's consoling touch. "What kind of spells would a do-no-harm witch have up her sleeve?"

"Ones that can put them in a trance, sort of like twilight anesthesia. The Coven elders call it *waking sleep*. They'll be able to show me their hiding places for the drugs and will be more susceptible to telling the truth. I also plan on placing a security spell around the house once we leave so that they can't get out, but the police can get in."

Inexplicably, Igor started to laugh. He laughed so hard that he started to shimmer preliminarily to shifting.

"Whoa, Gor. Control yourself. You don't want to shift this way. You'll hurt yourself." Boris grabbed his brother and held onto him until he emitted only a small spark of energy now and then.

"Why are you laughing?" Brenna huffed. "What's so funny?"

Igor choked back another laugh, then took several deep breaths. Finally, he calmed down enough to answer, "The sheriff. The alpha male. I can't wait to see his face when he realizes that you took on a drug dealer and his men."

"Well, since you aren't going to tell him, what he doesn't know won't hurt him," she said in what she hoped was a threatening tone. "We'll be passing along evidence that the house is a place where drugs are sold, and after that, if one of the gang members just should happen to turn on the others and tell all..."

"Then he hits the jackpot without ever knowing how he got so lucky," Igor stated, his levity of a moment ago gone as if it never happened. "Isn't that lying to him, Brenna? Are you afraid he can't accept your strengths, so you hide them?"

"No," she said without any hesitation. She knew that Ty would accept her as she was—strengths and weaknesses. "I'm afraid he will get himself killed, trying to protect me from his past." Giving the twins a partial truth was better than none.

"Then he's obviously not the man for you," Igor said, his eyes filled with fiery jealousy. "You need someone of your own kind. Someone who can fight by your side." His unspoken "like me" hung in the air. "Not this mere mortal whom you feel you have to protect. The vision at the pond had to have been wrong."

"He carries the mark of the wolf," she said.

The words hit the silence like a stone hitting water, rippling outward in its effect.

Boris gasped. "He's a witch? He carries the sign of the Coven?"

She nodded.

Igor turned white and groaned. "There's no hope for me, is there?" He held up a hand. "No, don't say anything. I smell him on you. Your body screams sex. You've conjoined." He then muttered under his breath, "The only way you'll be free is by his death."

"You don't know that," Boris said. "So, they had sex. Big effing deal. It's not like she's his complement."

As Boris argued with his brother, dark thoughts whirled through her mind like an icy wind, bringing doubt and mistrust. She would watch Igor closely whenever Ty was near. The shape shifter's loyalty to the coven's interests should come above his own, but jealousy had eroded such allegiances before.

"But she is a coven complement," Igor argued. "I saw her wolf birthmark through her gown last night. They've mated, so together they are as one."

His statements effectively silenced Boris's protestations.

"Yes, we are one. Forever. In this life and beyond." Brenna underlined the fact. "Together we will be able to defeat the evil unleashed on the night of the Summer Solstice."

"The key word here is *together*, Brenna," Igor stated. "So, I reiterate, you should call the sheriff and let him handle the drug dealers."

A sly smile briefly crossed the Russian's face, so fleetingly that Brenna almost thought she'd imagined it. But she hadn't. Yes, she would have to watch Igor very carefully. She couldn't trust him to watch Ty's back. She wondered if Boris would follow his brother's lead in this or not. She couldn't take the chance; she would watch both of them.

"No, I've told you my reasons." *The only ones I'm willing to share.* "The investigation into the house in Haughville must be done in this way, in this order ... tonight."

She wanted her lover nowhere near Haughville until she'd eliminated the deadly evil the Goddess said was there.

"Then, I guess we're going with you," Boris said. "Right, Gor?"

"Yeah, sure. After all, Drake sent us to protect Brenna. If she goes to the house, we go to the house. Whatever happens, happens." Igor's face was a blank mask. The emotions beneath his calm surface bubbled and boiled like a witch's cauldron. He was a bomb waiting to go off.

\* \* \* \*

The warm summer evening had turned cool with the onset of night. A low ground fog hung waist high over the yards in Haughville. Scattered clouds pushed by a light breeze alternately covered and uncovered the still full moon, dimming the light it provided. A perfect night for a stakeout.

When Brenna, Star and the twins had arrived at Ted's vacated house a few hours earlier, the sun had set, but the neighborhood still bustled with activity. Older couples sat on their front porches and chatted with their neighbors. People walked their dogs one last time before locking themselves in for the night. Under the streetlights, kids headed for home from the playground, still bouncing their basketballs or riding their skateboards. Older teens took over the streets, driving up and down, showing off their cars.

Other cars stopped at the surveillance house. The people in those vehicles did not stay long. Just long enough to conduct a little business.

It was all as Ted had described earlier that day.

Ted's house gave them a perfect vantage point. With the drapes open and the lights out, the twins and she watched from a distance, absorbing the rhythm of the drug trade taking place across the street.

For the past hour the neighborhood had been particularly quiet. The only sounds on the night air were the cicadas, crickets and the occasional dog barking.

"It's finally settled down out there," commented Boris.

"I don't like the feel of this," Igor said. "Something in the air is making me twitchy."

Brenna knew what he meant. Evil had sprouted from the rental across the street, spreading its roots out to its surroundings, hanging over the neighborhood like hellish Spanish moss. The level of malignity bothered her. It was more than mere mortal evil.

It felt like dark magick. The Goddess had hinted at this, but had not revealed the extent of the malignity.

Her inadvertent gasp had Star whining and caused Boris to leap to her side. He grabbed her arm. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure ... exactly." She shook her head. She couldn't tell them the whole truth. They would try to drag her away and then she would have to hurt them. "Something else is going on in that house. Other than drugs. Or, maybe it's that the origination of the drugs has more sinister roots. But there is too much evil. More evil than we felt going up against the Columbian drug cartel in Florida, and that was pretty bad."

"It's not too late," Igor said. "Call this off. Now. It's not your job."

Icy rage swept over her like a winter storm. She turned toward Igor, restraining the urge to scream and said, "I'm going in. It's more important than ever to find out exactly who or what is at the base of the darkness emanating from that house."

"I'm up for it," Boris affirmed. "Gor?"



"I won't leave you alone or unprotected," Igor said, his tones clipped with his anger. "I'm here for the duration."

"Good. Let's get started."

The four of them exited Ted's place and headed toward the alley behind the suspects' house.

"It's too quiet," Boris said. "I don't hear any TVs or radios or arguments from any of the neighbors. It's as if all those people we saw earlier have disappeared. Plus, there are people out there, hidden in the darkness. It's as if they're waiting for something to happen."

Igor lifted his head and turned it first one way, then the other. Then he sniffed. "I do believe you're right, brother. I also smell the presence of other men in the vicinity."

"Have they seen us, do you think?" Brenna had no doubt the people were out there just as the twins had said. Their senses were as heightened in their human form as in their shifter state.

"No, I don't get a sense that our presence is known." Boris halted then pulled them back into the shelter of a large oak. "Your cloak melds with the night, but I think you will need to use some magick to get to the back of the house without being seen. Can you transport?"

"Yes. I don't very often, but I can do it." Brenna couldn't remember the last time she had transported across space. Hopefully, it was like riding a bicycle. "That's a good idea. You two shift and start your patrols. I'll transport over to the house. We'll communicate telepathically from now on."

Boris nodded and in a shimmering flash he shifted and ran toward the house.

"Igor?" Brenna wondered what his problem was now.

"Be careful." Igor said, his concern evident even through the harshness of his order. "Call on us if anything ... anything at all doesn't look right. The Coven can't afford to lose you."

Brenna heard the "I don't want to lose you" Igor left unsaid.

"I'll be careful. I promise," she replied. "Now, go! Star, go with Igor."

Igor nodded, then shifted and followed his brother. Remnants of his shift energy dotted the air, flickering like a thousand fireflies as the energy dissipated in his trail.

Star let out one low bark, then set off after the twins.

Brenna began the counterclockwise turn that would lead to her corporeal body merging with the air. With each turn she increased her speed, visualized her destination, and began the chant that would direct her body's atoms, she hoped, to it.

*I call upon the night winds.*

*Come to me now and speed me on my way.*

*Deliver me to my destination,*

*With no side trips along the way.*

As the last word faded in her mind, her body shed its heaviness and became one with the universe. The cyclonic motion of the winds she'd called sucked in her disembodied mass and then carried it upward. She'd forgotten how strange a sensation transporting was. Her mind still functioned. She'd often wondered if this was what death felt like, if this was what happened to the spirit after the body had failed. With any luck she would not test this theory for many years to come.

As she passed over the houses and trees, her senses took them in as if she had fast-forwarded a movie. As she approached her destination, her surroundings began to reform and hold shape until finally all was at rest. She had arrived.

Her transportation skills had not failed her. She rematerialized in the alley behind the drug house. It was good to know that some skills never got rusty.

She pulled her dark cloak around her and stepped into the darker shadows cast by the garage overhang. Closing her eyes, she listened with all her senses.

Star and the twins arrived at her side, panting from their run across the street. In the background, she heard metallic sounds and the low hum of communications equipment. What had she brought them into? Did the gang in the house have guards hidden outside in the neighborhood?

*"Brenna?"*

*Igor's thoughts came to her as clearly as if he spoke them aloud.*

*"Yes?"*

*"Boris was correct. We checked several houses. No one is at home—in any of them. Lights are on. But the houses are empty. And the men in hiding are police officers."*

*"Police? Here? Why?"*

*"For the same reason we are?" Boris said.*

*"Maybe. Ty knew about this place."*

*"That means they don't need any evidence for a drug bust," Igor argued. "They are here to arrest these men. We can leave now. Stay in the background in case they need our help."*

*"I agree," Boris said. "Let the police do their job. They have enough firepower out there to take out two houses of drug pushers."*

*"I can't leave. I still need to find out just what the source of the evil is. A clue is in that house. I'm still going in. The evil has to be identified before it can be stopped."*

And, most importantly, Ty was still in danger, more so than before. For he was out there. She turned her head, searching with her sixth sense, and found him across the street, several houses away from Ted's. He'd left her in his bed to come into this danger.

He wasn't aware of her ... yet. But that situation could change at any time. He was more intuitive than he realized. She had to hurry. If he realized she was here, he would rush to get her away from here. She couldn't allow that to happen.

The twins' acquiescent sighs whispered through her mind. They didn't like it, but they would support her.

*"Be careful,." the twins said in unison.*

*"I will."*

Star and the twins left to begin their patrol around the house.

Brenna patted the inner pocket of her cloak for the bag of herbs and flagon of aromatic oils she had placed there. Good, the transporting hadn't disturbed them. As long as she could get into the house and access the heating/cooling vents, she would be able to blanket the house in a sleeping fog. With any luck, it would only take her a few minutes.

If she could not get into the furnace room or find another way to disperse her concoction into the house, then she would go to Plan B. But that would entail pyrotechnics, and with all those armed men out there, Plan B didn't sound as good as it had several hours earlier.

Damn Ty. He should have consulted her. He wasted a lot of man-hours and public resources on a job she could do in mere minutes ~~with~~ a guarantee of secrecy. No need for warrants, probable cause ~~nothing~~.

She would have to have a serious talk with him about trusting her.

*"But you didn't call to tell him you'd be here, now did you?" the Goddess said.*

*"Because you told me there was danger to him and to his men," replied Brenna. "He wouldn't have taken the notion well that I had to protect him from whatever is in this house."*

*"Well, there is that," said the Goddess. "All relationships have a learning curve. You'll figure it out ... eventually."*

*"But not without a lot of bumps along the way," Brenna said.*

The Goddess's laughter faded away on the night breeze. It was good to know that she had the deity on her side.

Using her cloak as a shield, Brenna moved as swiftly as the wind to the basement access to the house. One of the twins had circled back to trail her, then took up a position at the basement door to guard her back.

With a flick of her wrist and a small spell, the door was unlocked. She entered.

In the total darkness of the basement, she moved as sure-footed as a cat doing a nightly prowling toward the heating and cooling system.

*"Illumine,"* she whispered, and her crystal pendant glowed with enough light to aid her in her work.

In the main vent, attached to the blower unit on the system, she poured the oil. Across the liquid base, she sprinkled the herbs: sage, hemp and a special powdered mushroom, across the top.

Gathering a small amount of earth power, she set the mixture aflame with a burst of fire from her fingertips. She recovered the vent and quickly left the basement to let the fumes do their work.

The fusion of the herbs, fungi and oil would combust quickly, emitting a colorless, odorless gas that would send the house's occupants into the *waking sleep*. They would not move or talk unless ordered to do so. Coven elders used this for humane interrogations. Witches had come a long way since ancient times.

The wolfhound still guarded the basement's exterior door.

*"How long will it take?" Igor asked.*

*"I'll give it thirty seconds."*

*"Won't it affect you?"*

*"Not with this."* Brenna showed Igor the mask of stimulant herbs she would wear across her face. *"After I find what I need, I'll go to the basement and place similar herbs to the ones in this mask into the vent to reverse the spell. They'll wake up as soon as the second set of fumes reaches them. They'll never know I was there."*

*"Well, hurry up. Boris told me the cops seem to be waiting on someone. He doesn't like this."*

*"I'll be in and out faster than you can recite the Coven's credo."*

Igor let out a doggy snort.

Brenna re-entered the house. Again, she found her way across the basement in the dark. No use tipping off the law that someone was in the basement. Finding the stairs to

the main level, she climbed them as lightly as a cat. Listening at the door, she heard nothing. No talking. Nothing but the even, relaxed breathing of the drugged inhabitants.

Plan A was working just fine. Now for the swift interrogations and a little judicious snooping.

She opened the door. Two men sat at the kitchen table, their heads lying on it, eyes open, unseeing.

They looked to be grunts; she would save them for last. She entered the main room. The blank stares of the men unnerved her more than usual. She chalked it up to the Goddess's warning, and vowed to stay alert. She sought for and immediately singled out the head man. Maybe it was the gaudy gold necklace that spelled out "The Boss" that gave him away, but she would have guessed him anyway. He had the most jewelry and the best seat in the house. Plus, all the money was in front of him. Piles of it. They must have been doing an accounting of the night's take.

She walked over to him and put a finger under his chin from where it rested on his chest and the "B" in "Boss," and lifted his head.

His eyes stared blankly in front of him. She smiled in satisfaction at how well the sleeping concoction had worked.

"Did you have Bob John Roebuck killed?" she asked.

"Uh-unh," the large man slurred, attempting to shake his head. "Bad news, that. Too much heat."

Damn, if this gang didn't do it, who did?

"Do you know who ordered him killed?"

"No. That was nasty piece of work. We shoot people. Knives are for spics."

Hecate's hangnails. Can't hang the murder on this group, but the law would be happy to put them away for drug dealing.

The impression she had of being watched increased. Something more than the men's eyes looked upon her.

Swirling around she looked for what might cause the sensation.

*"Brenna!"*

Igor's voice sounded urgent.

*"What?"*

*"Are you almost through?"*

*"Yes. They didn't kill Bob John. They don't know who did, either."*

*"Well, something is shaking out here. The cops are getting ready for something. And, my gut tells me it will entail lots of shooting. Get out of there! Now!"*

*"Coming."*

Since nothing had attacked her, whatever the danger was in this house could wait. She didn't want to be caught in the middle of any gunfight. Once the gang was roused and arrested, she would persuade Ty to allow her to check the place out first. Something was very wrong in this house, and it had nothing to do with drugs, guns or dirty money.

She retraced her steps toward the kitchen. As she was about to go through the door, a peripheral flash of movement and light caught her attention. She turned and spotted the cause. It was a crystalline globe setting on an ornate stand. Underneath it was a velvet cloth, embroidered with symbols. Symbols that sparked a recognition, which she couldn't quite place.

She moved back to The Boss. Lifting his chin once more, she asked, "Where did you get the globe and the cloth?"

"The Seer gives it to Big Mo. They's tight, them two. The Seer be the one who hooked old Mo with that Roebuck dude to launder our take. Seer is damn scary."

"Who's the Seer?"

"Don't know. You be the witch the Seer talked about?"

Stunned by his question, Brenna released the man's chin and stepped back. Beelzebub's breath! This Seer had to be the source of the dark magick she'd sensed. The orb was the immediate source, possibly a visual and auditory conduit, but not the ultimate. She had to find out who the Seer was, and stop him or her before the evil sowed got out of control, fed upon itself, and grew even greater in strength.

Brenna headed for globe. It and the cloth were the only way to trace the unknown sorcerer.

As she moved, the memory of where she'd seen the symbols finally hit her. Warrick Bettencourt's followers had used them in their dark rituals.

Most of Bettencourt's followers had vanished into the night after the loss to the Wolf Coven in the Battle of Lincoln Park. All the other covens in the continental United States had been put on alert to keep an eye open for the rogue witches, just in case some of them attempted to regroup under a new leader.

The ultimate source of all the malevolence in the air had to be one of Bettencourt's rogue witches. Drake had to be informed at once; she was very afraid she would need help to defeat the dark chaos magick.

As she turned to grab the globe and the cloth, a low humming began to reverberate throughout the room. The globe's clear visage turned a nauseating color of grey-green. Alerted to the activity by the globe's behavior, she dropped to the floor just as a flash of golden-red light shot from the now murky depths of the crystalline ball. The light struck the wall fifteen feet behind her and set it aflame.

Whoever the Seer was, the magician was very powerful if he could project such power through a proxy. Brenna had never heard of a scrying globe being used as a weapon before now. Thank the Goddess, the use was not totally silent or she would have been immolated.

The fire burned rapidly. She had to get the gang out of the house before the fire and smoke overtook them. Then she had to destroy the globe. It was too dangerous to leave it behind and intact, just in case the fire did not destroy it. She would have to find another way to trace and identify the Seer.

*"Boris! Igor! Keep the cops away from this house. I'm sending the gang out. Call the fire department."*

*"Brenna!" cried Igor. "What's going on in there?"*

*"Black magick. Just do as I say."*

As she issued the warning, she'd crawled at an angle along the floor in an attempt to narrow the line of sight of whoever controlled the globe. Her mind worked on how she would destroy the damn thing.

*Fire and ice, my child. Fire and ice.*

Fire and ice. Well, the fire was not going to be a problem. But first she had to get these guys out of here.

"Everyone within the sound of my voice. Get up and leave the building with your hands up." She turned to The Boss, who'd immediately stood. "Boss, take the money with you. The rest of you carry out the drugs."

Might as well give the law the evidence needed to put these men away.

A humming noise like that of a swarm of bees filled the room. The Seer prepared to attack once again.

Another flash of fiery light came Brenna's way, just missing her. It hit one of the gang members, who burst into flame and was reduced to ashes within seconds.

Conjuring up a protective shield, Brenna moved away from the globe, diverting the Seer's attention away from the escaping men. She slipped behind the door into the kitchen. As she went through the door, another bolt of fire hit the spot she'd occupied, setting another wall on fire.

Through the crack in the kitchen door, she could see the globe bouncing on its stand. As if it was angry at being deprived its prey.

"Wi-i-i-tch. I'm co-o-ming for you. You can't hi-i-de."

"I won't have to hide for long," Brenna whispered. "Bye-bye. We'll be meeting soon."

She let loose a fireball toward the globe, setting the cloth and the tabletop on fire. Gathering power from the flames around her she poured even more energy into the next fireball. The metal stand super-heated, adding to the intensity of the voracious flames lapping at the crystal.

The globe began to glow from within: grey-green, purple, red, and gold. Again, the angry humming preceded another shot of energy from the globe. The shot was wild, unfocused.

"That takes care of the fire," she muttered. "Now for a little ice."

*I am Brenna of the Wolf Coven.*

*I call upon the North wind,*

*Send a winter gale to strike within.*

*So mote it be.*

The breeze started out slowly, then quickly built to a wailing crescendo. The room and all its contents were buffeted and soon covered in an icy frost. Brenna's protection spell kept her from the worst of it, but still it was the coldest she'd ever remembered being.

Despite the wind spell, the house fire still raged. The globe turned blue from the icy winds. Just as it turned white, it started to crack.

"I'll get you-u-u, bi-i-tch."

As the Seer's words died out, the globe exploded into minuscule pieces, which then evaporated into a cloud of blue-white dust.

*Transport, child. Now!*

Brenna began her transport spin, mentally chanting her spell. The house contracted, then expanded. As the room began to blur in the beginning motions of transport, the world exploded around her. Then darkness.

## Chapter Ten

*All destined complementary couples have, at the minimum, empathic and, at the most, telepathic abilities in common. The first conjoining serves to increase and nurture the abilities.*

*- "Complementary Mates: How Will You Know?" Modern Witch Monthly, December, 2003.*

Ty checked on his men's positions.

According to the telephone records Toby had gotten that afternoon, something big was coming down tonight. Big Mo was expected. The team suspected a new shipment and a changeover in the local personnel.

From past experiences with the D-Town Gang, Ty anticipated lots of resistance so he had borrowed a SWAT team from the State Police and several uniforms from the Paoli PD to supplement his deputies. Probably more firepower than he needed, but he'd rather be safe than sorry.

His deputies were in place to blockade the escape routes from Haughville once Mo and his entourage were inside the perimeter established by his teams. The local cops would provide firepower and backup for the SWAT team. The SWAT officers would cover him as he made the attempt to get the people in the house to surrender.

If Mo and his people did not come out, the SWAT team would go in and get them.

Ty hoped it wouldn't come to that.

If he had the chance, he would like to end it all tonight. Then, at least, if Brenna sensed that evil still remained in the area, it wouldn't be from Big Mo.

At that point, he would accept her offer of magickal assistance.

But not with Mo.

The vicious drug lord was his problem; one he had botched. It was his job to see the bad-ass put away for sure, this time.

As he visually checked his surroundings, he considered who or what the other evil might be. God knew, the more his people dug into Bob John's background, the more evidence they found that Roebuck had tweaked one too many tiger's tails. If the Detroit gang had not done the son of a bitch in, then they would find that it was the Russians from Chicago or the still unknown gang from Florida. Bob John must have had a death wish.

"Sheriff?" Toby's whisper came from his left side.

"What is it, Toby?"

"The guys at the road block sites just reported a big black Hummer and a stretch limo inside the outer perimeter and heading this way." Toby's voice crackled with excitement.

"They want to know if they should put up the barricades now."

"Yes. No one goes in or out without my say-so. No one."

"Yes, sir."

Ty listened as Toby relayed the message to the perimeter teams. Then he spoke into his shoulder mike, "Company's coming. Be alert. Copy that?"

Each team reported in. All was ready.

In that instant, the air around him had gone preternaturally still. He scanned the area, wondering what had caused the sudden cessation of ambient noise. The absolute stillness reminded him of the reactions to the magickal barrier he'd breached just that morning near the pond.

Brenna! No! It couldn't be. He'd left her asleep in his bed. Safe.

His little witch couldn't be here, meddling in a police matter. Could she? He hadn't told her about tonight's action. Or, had he? Would her empathic abilities have caught a stray thought or two? He'd been angry enough—and scared—at the thought of her coming into contact with Mo. And, then there'd been the mind-blowing sex. Could he have inadvertently sent her a thought about tonight as they flew to the heights of passion?

That she might be able to read his mind chilled him. He'd be sure to clarify that very point as soon as possible.

Then it came to him how she knew. Ted, the unknown male quantity in the equation. She'd all but told Ty she knew about this place, that her employee informant lived in the damn neighborhood. God, he'd underestimated her innate woman's curiosity.

If she was in the area, he had to find her and get her the hell out of Haughville before they took out the drug gang.

"Teams, check in. Alpha-order. Is there anything unusual going on out there?" Ty paused then clarified, "Have you seen a woman, or two or three dogs in the area?"

"Alpha checking in with a negative."

"Beta, also negative."

"Charlie checking in, sir. We have three dogs roaming around the suspect house. Two long-hair dogs and a mixed breed of some sort, looks like it might be part wolf. No woman that we can see. Want us to grab the dogs?"

Ty cursed. He would blister her sweet ass. At least she thought to bring Star and the Russians to cover her.

"Negative, Charlie. Stay away from the dogs. I'll be over there in a few. Watch for me."

"Copy that, sir."

Ty turned to Toby. "Keep a lid on this until I check back with you. There is the possibility we have a civilian in the middle of all this. No one moves until Mo is in the house and I've given them the chance to come out quietly."

"Yes, sir. But a civilian?" Toby looked shocked. "That can't be. We checked in with all the neighbors, sir. They've all been taken to the Methodist Church for their protection. The area was secure as of an hour ago. How did this person get past our perimeter?"

"I'm not sure, Toby." Ty shook his head, but had a very bad feeling that he didn't know the total extent of his little witch's abilities. He was very much afraid he would soon find out.

"Sheriff. Team Charlie, here. Something just flashed in the house. Hell. The house is on fire!"

A mixture of adrenalin and fear pushed Ty into motion. Mo was forgotten. He raced toward the house. Behind him, Toby called for fire assistance.

"Status, Charlie. Do you see anyone leaving the house?" He meant any woman, but couldn't say it. Too afraid that he knew who was the source of the flames he could now see flickering out the open window and up the wooden siding.



"Only some bad asses with their hands up." A pause, then Charlie checkpoint came back on. "Hell, these guys are carrying out the drugs and giving themselves up just as calmly as you please. Something's really weird, Sheriff."

You don't know the least of it, Ty thought. He ran to the front door, but the heat and flames forced him back from the opening. A tug on his pants had him whirling around, his hand reaching for his gun.

Star released his grip, woofed, then headed around the side of the house.

Where Star was, Brenna would be.

As he followed the wolf to the back of the house, a cold, icy wind swept across him from one of the blown out windows.

Icy wind from a burning house? He shook his head. It was like a nightmare world where the laws of physics did not apply.

But he wasn't asleep, and he had a feeling that Brenna's magick was of a level that he couldn't even begin to conceive.

As he turned the corner he saw the twins in their animal form sitting in front of a darkened, smoky entrance that led to the house's basement.

Was Brenna down there? Why hadn't the bastards shifted and gone in to get her?

He ran toward the house just as a tremendous explosion occurred. The ground vibrated as if an earthquake had struck the area, and it was all he could do to stay standing.

Then the building imploded on itself, and the fire burned even more furiously than before.

"Brenna!" he roared in anguish.

He took a step toward the almost totally flattened house. The back wall and the basement entrance were miraculously still clear, although dark, deadly smoke poured from the basement opening to the surface. No one could possibly live through that, but he moved forward anyway, tolerating the heat in the slim chance she might still be alive. She could be lying, hurt and overcome by smoke, somewhere down there. If she had made it off the main floor before the explosion. It was a mighty weak "if".

As he moved forward, Star knocked him to the ground, then began to drag him away toward the alley. Away from the conflagration. Away from his love. He fought against the wolf holding him. He refused to believe she was gone. She could have found shelter in or under something. She could still be alive. Wouldn't he know if she were dead?

"No," he shouted as he struck out blindly. "Let go. She's still in there. Help me get her out."

In a surge fueled by rage, he threw the wolf off him. But Star returned to grip him once again and struggled to drag him away from the conflagration. The two shifters added their strength to the wolf's and finally managed to drag and shove him to the alley.

A noise like the scream of a banshee filled the night air, quickly followed by a loud explosion and the subsequent crash of the back wall of the house into the basement.

Cops and firemen shouted orders but Ty didn't hear their words. Numbly, he sat and watched as the flames destroyed the building, Star and the twins at his side.

"Sheriff?" The Paoli police officer who led Team Charlie approached at a run. The cop petted the wolfhounds, but kept his hand away from Wolf. "Good, uh, dogs. They saved your ass, sir."

Ty took the hand the young officer held out to him and stood up. Turning he viewed the spot where he'd stood only moments ago. It was covered in the burning remnants of what had once been the back wall of the house.

The basement entrance was gone as if it had never existed.

Brenna was gone. He shivered. His insides turned to ice as grief swept over him. He wished the damn animals had just left him. Death had to be better than the emptiness he now felt.

"Sir, we need to get out of here. We're blocking the fire trucks. They need to keep the fire from spreading to the other houses." Somehow Toby had arrived at his side without his knowledge. His deputy pulled on his sleeve. "Come on, sir. You okay? You need medical attention?"

Ty followed where Toby led. He couldn't answer the younger man's questions. He was afraid if he opened his mouth he might start to scream and never stop.

He was aware that Star and the twins followed Toby and him. The animals' heads turned side to side, their noses sniffing the air, as if they were seeking something or someone.

Brenna!

He observed their movements and demeanor. They were alert, but not upset. Maybe Brenna had not been in the house, but that didn't make sense. Why had the twins and Star stayed in the area, guarding the house, if she weren't there? Had she gotten out at the last minute somehow? But how? And if she had, wouldn't she be somewhere near the burning building? Not out here away from it?

How could he communicate with them? The shifters would not revert to their naked, human form with strangers all around. And Star, smart though he was, could not talk.

A shimmering light in the trees to the side of a house drew his attention. His spirit guide appeared.

*Alemwa, your woman is alive. Let the creatures at your side lead you to her. She is in danger still. Evil has not left this place.*

At the sound of running feet, Ty whipped around, his hand reaching for the gun on his hip. One of the deputies on the road block team approached.

"Sir, the limo and Hummer have parked down the block. They're just sitting there, watching. Should we approach?"

Ty turned to Toby and asked, "Where are the gang members who left the house?"

"We locked them into the backs of the squad cars." His deputy anticipated his next question by adding, "We locked the money and the drugs up into the trunk of one of the cars. There was quite a bit of crack and meth. Think their lab blew up? They're all acting like they're stoned, except they're really docile. Not violent like meth users get."

"Maybe." Ty wouldn't bet on it though. As sure as he was standing there, his witch had caused the explosion. "Get the prisoners and the evidence out of here. Now! Big Mo could have a small army in the Hummer and the limo. They'll want the money and drugs ... and to free or eliminate their buddies."

"Sheriff, this is Team Beta. Some men just left the limo and are heading for the side of a house adjacent to their vehicle. It looks like they are after something. You want us to follow?"

"Hold your positions. Watch them. Do not let them leave. I'm coming over there. Give your exact position."

"Six houses down and on the other side of the street from the suspects' house."

One of the twin's ears twitched, he turned his head in the direction relayed by Team Beta and sniffed, then let out a loud howl and took off for the position. His twin and Star followed, letting loose eerie howling cries of their own.

They knew where Brenna was, and he was very much afraid the bad guys did, too.

"Sheriff, do you want me to come with you?" Toby asked.

"No. Get the prisoners out of here and the evidence away. I'll be down to headquarters later. You're in charge until I get there." He couldn't risk his team seeing any magick the twins or Brenna might unleash.

"Yes, sir."

Ty moved at a stealthy run, following the twins and wolf toward Team Beta's position. The Hummer and the limo sat parked, the wrong way, on the street. No motion came from within them, but he sensed that a driver was in each of them, ready to drive at a moment's notice. That would not happen. The barricades were up. They were cornered like the rats they were.

Speaking into his mike, he ordered, "Any available team. Take out the drivers and disable the suspect vehicles. Take up defensive positions at that position."

"Team Delta copies. We're on it."

Star and the wolfhounds had stopped by a house bordering a small park. Suddenly one of twins growled low in his throat. He grabbed Ty's sleeve and tugged.

"What is it?"

The shifter looked around, then pulled at him. The shifter wanted him to go over there.

"Is Brenna there?"

The wolfhound nodded his shaggy head, then started for the direction he'd indicated.

Ty didn't question the believability of Brenna transporting to the park from a burning building. Instead, he ran full-out for the park in question. The three animals kept pace then soon outstripped him. When he'd passed a small picnic shelter, several burly men led a small procession back in the direction of the Hummer and limo. They had guns at hand. Behind them, his nemesis, Big Mo, carried an unconscious Brenna in his arms.

The filthy bastard had his big ugly hands all over his little witch.

Ty saw red and shouted, "Get your hands off her, you fucking bastard!"

Then he and the three animals leapt into action. Ty and one of the shifters attacked Mo as the other two went after the armed men.

"What the fuck!" Mo shouted as he dropped Brenna on the ground and went for his own weapon. "Yo, brothers. Shoot these mother-fuckers."

Guns sounded behind him, but Ty paid no heed. He had only one goal ... to rip the throat out of the foul scum who'd touched his Brenna.

He roared his rage as he tackled Mo low, taking him to the ground. The shifter leapt for the drug lord's gun hand.

Mo screamed in pain, dropping the weapon, but still fought Ty.

Ty sensed the twin leaving him to go to the aid of Star and his twin.

Behind him, he barely heard the shout of Mo's men and the sound of their gunfire. Soon other gunfire and his men's shouts added to the background noise. No bullets hit him, so he kept on fighting, pummeling the man who dared touch his precious witch.

He slammed Mo's head again and again against the ground. Eventually, Mo did not fight back.

Only when Mo made no more attempts to dislodge Ty, did he stop. Breathing in great gulps of air, he rolled off the beaten man.

His first thoughts were to get to Brenna, see if she were seriously hurt. He struggled to his feet and glanced to where Mo had dropped her. One of the shifters stood guard.

Ty headed in that direction.

*"Ty. I'm fine. The evil is still here. Be alert."*

*"Brenna? How did you get out of the building?"*

*"Not now. Trust me. I'm fine. Secure your scene, Sheriff."*

She lived. But the danger wasn't gone. Subliminally he was aware of this fact, but in his fear for Brenna and rage at Mo, he'd overridden his instincts.

But where was the evil? The drug lord's men were captured. Mo was down. Or was he?

Ty knelt by the drug lord, felt for a pulse and found it. Damn, the bastard had a hard head. He reached for his cuffs, but couldn't find them. They must have fallen off in the fray.

He stood and checked on the other battle to see if the threat might come from that direction. But it was over. Some of the Paoli police officers from Team Delta were cuffing and reading rights to the thugs lying on the ground.

He nodded at the law officers, signaling he was okay, then indicated the man at his feet. One of the officers nodded and yelled, "We'll get him, sir."

Seeing no immediate danger, he turned to go to Brenna. As he walked, he spoke into his mike, "Have someone send some more assistance over here to help Team Delta. I need a status report."

"We got the drivers from the vehicles, sir. The fire is under control. The other prisoners are already at the jail. And we are sending officers and medical personnel to your position now."

The area was as secured as humanly possible. He reached Brenna. Star and the shifters were there, licking her face and guarding her.

He knelt down. She was so pale, with only a little bit of soot to show that she had escaped from a burning house. No burns that he could see. She was so still, too still, as if she were in a coma—or dead. If he hadn't heard her voice in his head, he wouldn't believe she still lived.

"Brenna?" he whispered.

*"Yes, Ty."*

"Why are you unconscious?" He reached out to touch her face. It was warm with life.

*"I need to recover. I used a lot of energy. Trust me. I'm okay."*

One of the shifters shoved him away then growled. Igor. The shifter loved her and would take her away from Ty if he could.

Ty wasn't about to let that happen.

As he started to tell Igor so, the air around them grew brisker as if a storm approached. The birds that had been chirruping in alarm at the activity in the park quieted. The only sounds Ty heard were his own breathing and the low, unearthly growls emanating from Star and the two shifters.

Something was coming. Something not of the earth.

Behind him another sound reached his conscious mind. Mo moaned. Ty looked at the big man still lying on the ground, hands cuffed behind his back. But no one guarded him. Damn. The bastard was coming out of it and whatever was coming, Ty's gut told him that it had to do with Mo.

He got to his feet. "Guard her," he shouted at the three. The shifters covered Brenna with their bodies as Star took up a position in front of them.

Ty ran back toward Mo. As he reached the man, a black whirlwind descended from the night sky and knocked him away from the criminal.

Ty struggled to his feet and dove for Mo's legs to take him back to the ground. The whirlwind grabbed at him, pulled him away, then tossed him several yards to the side.

"Co-o-me to me, Mo-o-o-o." The dark wind cried as it swooped down to carry the drug lord away.

Ty covered the ground in several leaps and grabbed at Mo's cuffed hands, then attempted to pull him away. But the dark wind was too strong.

One moment, Mo was within his grasp, the next, the bastard was sucked into the center of the vortex.

"Di-i-e, cop," the dark wind wailed.

Lightning shot from the swirling cloud.

At the same instant, something tackled Ty low.

The lightning bolt missed him. He fell to the ground and felt the shimmers of electricity travel over his skin as the ground dissipated the energy from the strike.

Then all was dark.

## Chapter Eleven

*Stasis on the astral plane is the most efficient method for a witch to regain his or her strength after an excessive use of magick power.*

*- Witch Physiology, 15th Ed., p. 100.*

Brenna awoke from her self-imposed stasis on the upper levels of the astral plane. Feeling fully recharged, she propped herself up on the hard bed and looked around. She was in a hospital room. The light through the window indicated it was daytime—late afternoon by the look of the sun's angle. It seemed like mere seconds ago that she had transported from the exploding house. She must have used more energy than she'd realized for her recharging to last this long.

"Brenna!" Igor's concerned voice came from her side. She turned and saw him, sitting in the shadows by the head of the bed.

"Why am I here?" she whispered as she checked for any hospital personnel that might be listening. "Are you nuts? I was okay. You knew that."

The risk that the ER doctors might have placed her on life support was really high. When in stasis, her vital signs would have been almost non-existent, near death for mere mortals. Witch mortals, although they could age and die, tended to live to a ripe old age because they had ways of self-healing, especially after an excessive use of magick.

"We had no choice." Igor indicated Boris, who lay asleep on the floor near him. "The paramedics took both you and the Sheriff and shoved you into ambulances before Boris and I could shift and get clothed."

"Ty?" Brenna sat up more fully, then swung her legs over the edge of the bed. "He's been hurt? I thought I told you to protect him?"

"I did." Igor sounded aggrieved and put upon. "I knocked him out of the path of a lightning bolt coming from that infernal black twister. Singed my fur to do it, too. But the energy dissipated into the ground and he caught a jolt. He's okay. Just a little scorched around the edges."

She closed her eyes. Using her empathic connection to her lover, she concentrated on finding him. He wasn't far. Maybe two rooms away at most. He was unconscious. He was hurt. He was afraid for her.

"Igor," admonished Brenna, opening her eyes and glaring at the shifter. "Tell me how he really is."

"Ty's fine. Really," Boris said as he sat up and socked his brother on the thigh. "He has a slight burn on his back where he landed and a knot on his head, and they are monitoring him for any signs of heart arrhythmia. The last I heard the nurse had to sedate him so he wouldn't come looking for you."

She stood up and looked around. "Where're my clothes?"

"Over there." Igor indicated a small cupboard near a sink. "You can't just get up and leave. You have to be discharged."

"I'm getting dressed and leaving before some doctor takes it into his head to do extensive tests." Brenna headed for her clothes. She pulled on the dark pants under her hospital gown, then turned her back on the twins, let the gown drop to the floor, and

pulled on the matching black turtleneck. "By the way, what did you tell the doctors about my lowered vitals? Just so we can keep the stories straight?"

"We didn't have to tell them anything because Jenn Mason was on duty in the ER and she took them. You'll be glad to know that you have perfectly beautiful vitals." Boris grinned. "Your unconscious state was chalked up to a combination of smoke, shock and a bump on the head from when the bastard dropped you. We got here soon after and have guarded you ever since."

"Yeah, and we told Jenn to alert the other Coven members." Igor paused, then said, "We took the liberty of calling Drake. Elders are on their way. That dark cyclonic wind was dark chaos magick if I ever saw it. Whoever we're dealing with is either one of Bettencourt's acolytes or a new dark witch on the block."

"One of Bettencourt's rogues is more like it," Brenna said, as she headed for the door. "I'll tell all when we get to Ty and back to the house. I don't want to have to tell this more than once. And I'm not talking about coven business in a public place."

The twins followed her out of the room and down the hall.

She walked straight to Ty's doorway and entered. Jenn Mason was checking his vitals.

The nurse turned at their entrance.

"Brenna!" The young coven member's face lit up. "Even I was beginning to get worried. I knew you were in stasis after what Igor and Boris told me about the amount of magick expended, but you were out so long."

"I'm fine," Brenna reassured the younger woman. "How soon can I get Ty out of here? He's not safe. Also, you need to leave and get back to the coven safe house. The evil that has been loosed will need the strongest wards the members can put in place. It will take the combined energy of all the Coven members. The stones the Goddess blessed at Litha will help somewhat, but you'll have to be vigilant."

Before Jenn could respond, Boris called out from his post by the door, "Brenna, Ty's deputy is coming."

The young witch nodded that she understood Brenna's instructions. As she left, she whispered, "I just reversed the calming spell I placed on the sheriff. He kept wanting to get up and find you. He needed his rest. I knew you'd come to him as soon as you were awake."

"Thanks for watching over us." Brenna placed her hand on the woman's shoulder. "Oh, and I like your Ted. I would be honored to approach the elders if you are serious about him."

"I am." Jenna's face lit up.

"Make sure you get him and Stacy's Chad into the safe house, also."

Jenna nodded, then hurried out of the room as Ty's deputy entered. He stopped abruptly at the sight of them. "Uh, should you all be here? The Sheriff's seriously hurt."

"That's okay, Toby. I'm fine. And ready to leave."

Brenna whipped around then rushed to his side. "Ty?" She lovingly cupped the side of his face. "How are you feeling?"

He smiled as he reached for her and pulled her to him. "Fine. More than fine now that I see that you're okay."

Ignoring the three men in the room, he pulled her across his body and took her lips in a plundering kiss. As with their lovemaking of the day before, her body was so

completely in tune with his that it soon hummed and sang for a more intimate joining. As he deepened the kiss, his hands stroked her, finding the spots that would stoke the flames of her lust.

As she climbed the peak to the little living death, he broke away as if he knew they were going too far, too fast, and in a too public manner.

He whispered against her lips, "I will want an explanation ... for all that happened tonight. When we get home. Right now, I'm just so damn glad that you're all right that I can't seem to find the energy to give you the spanking you so richly deserve for placing yourself in danger."

Brenna's outraged "Ty" was swallowed by her lover as he took her lips once more in a gentle kiss of cherishment and love.

\* \* \* \*

Ty surveyed the people assembled in Brenna's great room.

Boris and Igor sat on the couch, shoving food into their mouths as if they feared they would not see another meal for a long, long time.

"You guys getting enough to eat?" Ty asked with more than a hint of sarcasm tingeing his words.

Boris grinned at him around a mouthful of potato chips, whereas Igor just scowled. "We need to refuel. Shifting takes a lot of energy," explained Boris after he'd swallowed. "While we could go to the astral plane and do stasis like Brenna did, it would take too much time. And we would be vulnerable while we were unconscious."

Ty glared at Brenna, who just smiled at him sweetly and shrugged her shoulders. "I knew Igor, Boris or Star would find and guard me. So, I went into stasis. Plus there wasn't any food where I landed, and I wasn't sure how long I could remain conscious in a normal way. The trip out of the house and the landing were kind of rough."

Ty growled, "We'll get back to that in a bit." He turned to look at the three older gentlemen in casual pants and golf shirts who'd arrived at Brenna's soon after they had. "And these men are who exactly?"

Brenna introduced them. "Meet Joseph, Harry and Tom. They are three of the top-level witches in the Coven of the Wolf, or elders as we call them. They were on a golf vacation with their wives at French Lick, just down the road. Drake sent them as soon as Igor and Boris notified him about the dark magick we'd encountered." She smiled at the older witches. "We're very lucky they were so close. They can help ward the Coven properties and protect the Coven members."

"So tell me, what happened out there last night?" Ty asked.

"Where do you want me to start?" Brenna asked.

"Why don't you start with why you didn't stay put, where you were safe?" he said harshly. Ty hadn't meant his anger to come through, but each time he remembered Brenna lying on the ground so deathly pale and then in the arms of that foul monster Mo, he wanted to kill somebody.

Brenna moved closer to him on the sofa, then placed her hand on his thigh and stroked him as if she could absorb his anger. And funnily enough, he did feel calmer at her touch.



"Ty, you have to understand. I had a vision. The Goddess warned me there was death in that house for you ... and your men. When I got to the house, I sensed it was more than just gang members with guns. I had to check it out." Brenna shuddered, her hand clenching his thigh. "If you, or anybody, had gone into that house, you would have died before you ever knew what hit you. The bolts of energy that came out of the scrying globe set the house on fire. One bolt hit one of the gang members and turned him into ashes in a split second."

"So, why wasn't it dangerous for you?"

"It was, but not as much. I have protection spells and other magick that can counter the danger."

He snorted his disbelief. "You were so drained that you were helpless, lying on the ground for Mo to pick you up. If we hadn't reached you in time, Mo would have taken you away."

"If he had, I would have reversed my stasis and escaped. I'm not powerless against a man like Mo. And I did counter the immediate magickal danger; the globe is gone, destroyed by my counter spell."

"And with it, Mistress Brenna," interposed Tom, "the way to trace the evil directly to its source."

Brenna turned toward the older witch. "I couldn't take the chance that the globe would survive the fire and some innocent fireman would come upon it."

Tom bowed his head. "I understand and do not scold you for your actions; I merely meant to express my regret. It will be harder to track this Seer down."

"Seer?" Ty asked, puzzled. "How do you know its name?"

"One of the gang members told me," said Brenna. "Said the Seer was Big Mo's special friend."

"How in the hell did you get one of those hardened criminals to talk to you? I have waking nightmares, thinking of you in the same room with that murdering filth," Ty said as he pulled her closer to his side.

"I used a waking sleep spell," said Brenna.

Ty shook his head in wonderment. A waking sleep spell. She walked into a house full of stone-cold killers and treated it as if it were nothing. But then again, compared to the dark wind that stole away Mo and almost killed him, maybe a bunch of mortal crooks were nothing to be feared.

"So, tell me about this Seer." Ty scanned the faces in the room. They all looked as puzzled as he felt. "Okay, let me put it another way. Why is the Seer here?"

"That's easy," Joseph replied. "The Seer is out to harm the Coven of the Wolf, because our leader Drake Morgan defeated this dark witch's leader, Warrick Bettencourt. This dark witch has to be one of the rogues that escaped after the Battle of Lincoln Park. All the covens in the United States have sworn to find the miscreants and bring them to justice. It is illegal to practice dark chaos magick," Joseph explained.

Ty couldn't conceive of one coven large enough to have laws of magick, let alone a network of covens all over the country. How could these witches operate on a daily basis in the real world and no one know about them? Another thought struck him. "How does Mo fit into this equation?"

"Uh, maybe I can suggest a reason?" Harry said. "The Seer used Mo as a tool. From what I've gleaned tonight, this Mo is an enemy of yours, Sheriff?"

Ty nodded, then wondered how the elder had gleaned the knowledge.

"Don't worry. He can't read you," Brenna whispered. "I told him."

Harry continued, "As I read it, the Seer would want to create as much disharmony in this area as possible, because evil feeds upon evil. So, the dark witch scouted out the turf and found a dishonest person in Bob John. The Seer used him to stir up trouble and bring crime to this county. Most likely, Bob John was already mixed up with the Russians in Chicago or the other gang in Florida when you came onto the scene. The Seer then checked into your background and found Mo." Harry paused as if to allow the people in the room to process his theory.

Breaking the silence, Brenna said, "I just remembered that The Boss, the gang leader I questioned, said the Seer had ensnared Mo in some way. The Boss was scared of the Seer."

Harry nodded, "Sounds like something one of Bettencourt's followers would do. Like Bettencourt, the Seer enslaved a human tool with an emotional binding spell. And Mo is the perfect tool. He is a killer, one who deals in the morally reprehensible act of dealing drugs. This upped the chaos quotient in your community. What was even more attractive to the Seer was that he or she realized before we did that the Sheriff is a distant relation to the Coven. Mo was his sworn enemy, thus making Mo the icing on the cake."

"And all the while," Igor interjected, "the threats escalated against the Coven and the Coven's interests. Finally, the Seer used the local eco-terrorists to perform extraneous acts of violence in order to add even more confusion."

"Then the Seer killed Bob John," Brenna concluded, "on the Summer Solstice, when the dark witch knew the balance between dark and light was at its most precarious."

"Exactly, my dear," Harry nodded. "Chaos, but with a dark pattern underlying it all. You just had to know where to look."

"So, bottomline, we need to find this Seer," Ty said. "Anybody have an idea on how we do that?" Although, he thought he knew where to start. Vanessa Hardon and Dan Porter were two people who had intimate contact with Bob John and his illegal activities. If neither of them was the Seer, they might know who was. He'd have to get to them soon.

"We won't have to," Brenna said. "The Seer will come after us."

Ty groaned. "I was afraid you'd say that." He shoved his fingers through his hair, then sighed. "What do we do next?"

"Sheriff," Tom spoke up. "This Boss person that you have in custody. He's seen the Seer according to what Brenna has related. Maybe one of us, using the same spell Brenna used, can ask him for a description?"

"Just what is this spell?" Ty looked around the room. "These men are in my custody and they do have rights."

Brenna smiled at him. "It's harmless. The Boss did just fine with it. He probably doesn't even recall the fire or how he got arrested. It won't hurt him. Trust me."

"I do trust you." He stroked a finger down her cheek.

Igor muttered "Oh, please" in the background.

Both he and Brenna glared at the Russian, who had the grace to look shamefaced. "Okay, Tom, you go down to the station. I'll call ahead and arrange for you to talk with The Boss, alone. I'll be along as soon as I can." He looked at Brenna. "I have some things to straighten out here, first."

Harry stood up. "Joseph and I will check out the perimeter wards on this property, then go along to the coven safe house and inform the members there about what's going on. I wouldn't be surprised if the Seer had some tricks up his or her sleeve for all of us."

Brenna smiled at the three older witches. "Thank you for coming to our aid."

"Thank you, Brenna, for realizing what was going on so quickly. If you had not recognized those symbols, we might not have known a Bettencourt follower was here," Joseph said. "By the way, Drake and his wife, Rhea, are on their way. Rhea is the one most expert in dealing with the dark chaos web of death. There isn't time to teach your coven members how to ward themselves from it."

Brenna shivered and leaned into Ty. "What is this dark web of death thing?" he asked.

"Simply put, it's a psychic web that strangles the life out of a person." Brenna said.

The three older witches' grim expressions conveyed that Brenna had sugar-coated the situation. "Then let's hope this Seer doesn't know how to use it," Ty said.

"So mote it be," the witches in the room intoned.

\* \* \* \*

After sending Igor and Boris to patrol the area with Star, Brenna finally found herself alone with Ty. It was time to pay the piper for what he probably characterized as her risky actions of the night before.

It also worried her that he'd been very quiet since the discussion of the dark chaos web of death.

She sighed.

Ty looked up and reached out to rub her back. "You okay? From what Boris told me, this transporting thing you do takes a lot of energy, and you did it more than once."

The last statement had somewhat of an accusatory intonation, but his eyes held only concern.

"I'm fine." She took his hand and held it to her cheek. "Really. It was the last transport as the house exploded that did it." Ty's hand jerked in hers and his muttered "fuck" told her that he realized that she almost hadn't made it. "I did fine, and I made it. The Goddess watched over me, just as your spirit guide watches over you."

Ty caressed her fingers. "I saw him last night. He told me you were alive but still in danger." He kissed the fingers he held. "Funny, I've gone years without ever seeing him, and since I've met you, I've felt his presence more than ever. Why is that?"

Brenna snuggled into his side and laid her head on his chest. She had to tell him what she suspected about his heritage, but was afraid to see his eyes when she revealed her suspicions about their bond. "You know I have a wolf marking on my hip?"

"Yes, I remember tracing it with my tongue." Ty's heart beat faster. "You seemed to like that."

Brenna blushed and rubbed her cheek against his chest. "Yes, I did."

"I plan on doing it again soon." He kissed the top of her head. "Today."

"Ty, pay attention." She tapped his sternum with an admonishing finger.

He captured the finger in question and sucked it into his mouth. After releasing it, he said, "Today. Count on it. Now, go on. What does your tattoo have to do with anything?"

"It's not a tattoo. It's a birthmark. You have a wolf birthmark, too." Brenna paused.

His answering grunt could mean anything or nothing, so she continued, "Earlier in the kitchen, I spoke with Harry, one of the Coven's hereditary experts, about your wolf marking and your Miami heritage. He related that during the French and Indian wars, many of the witch covens, but especially those with the marking of the wolf, spread inland to escape the war."

His heart faltered, then accelerated until she thought it would beat its way right out of his chest, but still he said nothing.

She continued, "Because the Indians of the northern and eastern woodlands believed in earth spirits and shamanism, the witches and the Indians often intermarried. He agreed with me that at some point in your lineage, one of your relatives was a witch in the Coven of the Wolf."

His continued silence scared her. At least, he hadn't laughed or, worse yet, thrust her from him in disgust.

"So, you're saying that I not only have Miami Indian blood, I also have witch blood?"

"Yes." She looked up and stroked his face. "Does that bother you?"

"No, funnily enough, it doesn't." He smiled at her, and love shone from his eyes like sun breaking through the misty grey of morning. "So, what does that mean in the grand scheme of things?" He kissed the fingers that stroked his face. "Is the fantastic sex we share the only benefit I get from it? Which, mind you, I'm not knocking at all. Or, will I be able to do other things?"

She laughed at his easy acceptance of a truth that might send some men into shock. "Well, most witches aren't born knowing how to perform magick or to transport or to do anything else we witches do. We train. Just as you must have trained to be a shaman when you were younger, right?"

"I did just enough to make my grandfather happy and to find my spirit guide. I'm sure the listening to nature lessons helped my survival skills in the service and as a cop, but I don't recall any of the chants or herbal lessons he gave me. Well, not until yesterday morning anyway, when I pulled one out of my ass to counter that spell you put on the glade." Ty smiled. "Do you think my grandfather knew about the witch blood?"

"I'm betting he did." She smiled at him. "And I'm betting he lives on through your spirit guide and helped you pull that counter spell out of your very fine rear."

Ty bent his head until their foreheads touched. "You are still so not off the hook for not telling me about your plans to go to that house. When I sensed you there..."

"What?" She raised her head and stared at him. He was serious. He'd sensed her. She hadn't expected that this soon. The empathic bond between them must be growing stronger since they conjoined. "You sensed me in the gang house? How strongly? I mean, from how far away?"

"Is that important?"

At her nod, he thought, then said, "I sensed you soon after I arrived on the scene. At the time, I connected it to your use of magick, like the protection spell I crossed at the pond. The world all of a sudden seemed to hold its breath, then I knew you were out there. Somewhere. In danger." Ty frowned. "I wanted to find you, beat your sweet butt for putting yourself in danger, and then whisk you away to safety."

"Well, I felt the same way when I sensed you there." She poked him in the chest. "You left me in your bed and went out to confront that drug gang alone when you

suspected they could be part of the evil that killed Bob John. The evil that we have to conquer together."

"Yeah, but you didn't tell me, either." He shook her. "So, what does that say about your argument about doing things together?" Ty countered, his voice filled with anger and, Brenna thought, hurt.

She didn't fear his anger, just the blinders on his reasoning. Maybe she'd approached this situation all wrong. She'd have to try to explain her point another way. "Ty, you work as a part of a team in law enforcement, right?"

"Yeah?" One dark eyebrow arched. "What of it?"

"So, each member of the team has a job to do, and you trust and even bet your life that your teammate will carry their share of the load. Right?"

"Right."

"From the beginning, you've seen me as a woman, not a partner. Someone to protect, not someone with whom to share the danger. Yet, just as your law enforcement team members, I have a part in this battle. Mine is to handle the magickal aspects of the evil. Yours is to do your regular job as a law officer, or as a warrior, as the Goddess would say. Do you see my point?"

"So, let me get this straight. I was supposed to take you into my confidence about the stakeout based on blind trust and on your word?"

"That's right. And if you had, I would've been at your side to warn you about the evil the Goddess told me about; the evil that was not related to Mo and his drugs. Then, you wouldn't have been preoccupied with me being in the house and would've stopped Mo and his people before they ever got out of their vehicles."

He still didn't look convinced.

"I had to go. It was my share of the job. I'm sorry if you can't accept that. With the other witches here and Drake on his way, you won't have a choice. The witches will do what is necessary to stop the Seer and Mo."

Grim-faced, Ty nodded, then pulled her down onto his chest and nuzzled the top of her head. "I was afraid to expose you to Mo. He was one of my bad past experiences. And I was afraid ... afraid that he would find out about you and hurt you to get at me. I told myself that after I put him away and he didn't prove to be the evil in the area, that I would work with you."

"Really?" She hugged him. "So you do trust in my ability a little bit?"

"Yeah, more than a little, but..." He inhaled sharply.

It sounded suspiciously like a sob.

"God, Brenna, I could've lost you last night. When I saw him carrying you off, I wanted to ... I wanted to tear out his throat for just touching you. I'm amazed that I didn't kill the bastard."

She pushed away from him. Tears streamed down his face. Her warrior *was* crying. Out of fear for her.

"Darling, you are not a stone-cold killer. You follow a higher code than people like Mo." She raised her head and kissed his chin, then licked the pulse beating at the base of his throat. "You stopped him. I'm safe."

"I love you," he whispered. "Let me show you how much."

"Yes, please." And I'll show you in return.

## Chapter Twelve

*Oneness in true complementary mates is defined as when the couple breathes, their hearts beat and their minds think as one.*

*- The Male-Female Witch Connection, p.90.*

Ty stood up and held out his hand. With a smile as hot as a seven-alarm blaze, Brenna gave him her hand. He pulled her to her feet then swept her into his arms.

"Ty?" she whispered in a low, sultry tone. She stroked a finger in ever-decreasing circles around the hollow of his throat. His pulse threatened to beat its way out. "How soon do you need to go into work?"

He looked down at her upturned face. God, she was sexy ~~and~~ hot. For him, only for him. Her eyes glinted with smoldering flames of passion. Her face flushed with rosy desire. And her lips were moist, begging to be kissed.

He swallowed the lump that suddenly had lodged itself in his throat. "Why do you want to know?"

She pulled his head toward hers, stopping just before their lips actually touched. "I just wanted to know if you had time to take a bath with me. Both of us had a rough time last night, and I just thought..."

"What..." his voice cracked. He coughed and tried again. "What did you think?"

She brushed his lips with hers, punctuating her answer with moist, deliciously hot kisses. "That ... I ... could ... wash ... your ... back ... massage ... your ... shoulders ... or ... something."

"Or, something?" he rasped, as she nibbled on his chin.

"Yeah," she drawled, "something." She traced his lips with a finger.

"Darling, I think I can make time," he took a nip of the finger teasing him, "as long as we're efficient about it."

"My darling sheriff, I just love efficiency in a man. It's so sexy."

Ty threw back his head and laughed. Yeah, he should go in and help with Tom's interrogation of The Boss, but he wasn't really needed. The elder could handle that with one hand tied behind his back. Until they knew who the Seer was, or at least what the witch looked like, there was no way of seeking the miscreant out. And if the Boss identified either Vanessa or Dan as the dark witch, well, he knew where to find them. And lastly, security was as tight as they could make it between his and the Coven's people.

Hell, who was he kidding? He could rationalize his absence from doing his job all day long. What it really boiled down to was that he'd almost lost Brenna, no matter how much she downplayed the danger she'd been in. And he needed to make love to her to reassure himself that she was real ~~and~~ his.

"Ty?" Her hands stroked his chest. "I'm fine. Really, I am. And I'm yours, no one else's."

"What?" He placed her on a chaise in the large master bath. His gaze swept over her face filled with loving concern, and he knew.

"So, you *can* read my mind. I wondered."

"Not all the time," she said. "Just when your thoughts are emotional. And more so since we made love."

"Is that why I sensed you at the stakeout? Why I heard you when you were unconscious?"

"Exactly. We are, in coven terms, complementary mates. It doesn't happen all that often, but when it does the couples have various levels of telepathic communication. Drake and Rhea Morgan are complements. The fact that you and I met and conjoined was destined." She held his eyes with her own as she stood and stepped out of her slacks. "Does that bother you?"

His arousal grew even harder as she pulled her turtleneck over her head and tossed it to the floor. As at the pond, she stood proudly before him, naked but for a pair of minuscule panties. "No, especially if it allows me to keep track of you."

She stepped forward and began to unbutton his shirt, stroking the naked skin she exposed as she moved to the next button. Each stroke brought an answering reflexive jerk of his penis, straining against the confines of his trousers. "The more we grow to know one another. The more you learn to seek and use your inherited witch traits. And the more we make love," she pulled his shirt free from his pants and smoothed it off his shoulders, "then the more our telepathic abilities will strengthen."

Ty allowed the shirt to slip down his arms and fall to the floor. Brenna smiled and kissed her way across his chest, from one nipple to the other, all the while stroking his chest vertically from the base of his throat down to his navel.

He almost groaned his disappointment aloud when she stopped and turned away, giving him a perfect view of her firm, round butt.

"You're over-dressed, Sheriff," she threw over her shoulder as she proceeded to fill the large Jacuzzi tub. After lighting some candles, which produced a warm glow in the day's waning light, she threw some powders into the tub. The water turned green, reminding him of the azure waters of the Caribbean.

She removed her last piece of clothing, then walked to a chest to pull out some towels, which she placed on a warming rack near the tub.

Ty stripped off his pants, remembering to retrieve his gun, which he placed on the edge of the bath within reach. Although Star and the shifters patrolled the area around the house, he didn't want to risk being found unarmed.

And he didn't put it past Igor to break in on their privacy. He might not shoot the jealous man, but he would not be adverse to firing a warning shot.

"Ty, you're naked. And I see you're armed ... in more ways than one." Brenna's gaze swept from his gun to his jutting cock. "So, why are you just standing there?"

She sat in the tub, her arms open to welcome him. Her generous breasts floated on the undulating surface of the water. To feel those breasts pressed against his naked back as she bathed him was the most important thing on earth.

He climbed into the Jacuzzi, sat down and found himself surrounded by Brenna. Her arms pulled him back against the very globes that had called to him. Her legs circled his waist and held him firmly in their female softness. As he leaned back, she nibbled his neck and shoulders as she soaped and washed his chest and throbbing cock with a soapy sponge.

"Little witch," he breathed in the hot, moist scents enveloping him, a combination of soap, bath salts and Brenna. "Touch me."

"I am." She laughed. The low, sexy, self-satisfied purr of a woman who knew she had her man right where she wanted him.

"You promised to massage me *somewhere*," he growled as he grabbed one hand and took a nip out of the soft fleshy part of the palm, then licked it when she squealed in mock pain.

"Oh, that kind of touching," she said with just a hint of laughter. "You mean like this?"

The sponge floated in front of him as she grasped hold of his cock in a firm, two-fisted grip. She slipped first one then the other hand to the top of his penis, only to begin again. As she milked him, she nibbled the back of his neck and from time to time took a loving nip of his shoulder. Any words he might have spoken fled as every aspect of his being focused on her hands and what they did to him. Every so often she would pause and very gently stroke the glans with one finger as the other hand massaged his balls. Then she would begin her milking of his cock again.

"Harder. Do me fast and hard, little witch." He thrust his hips up and down in an attempt to increase the friction. At which point, she stopped and smoothed the fluid on the tip of his cock over his purpled helmet with a gentle finger until he ceased thrusting his hips.

"Patience, my love," she whispered against his ear, as his head lay back against her shoulder. "I want you to fly, just as you make me fly."

The memory of the last time they soared to the heights of passion broke what little self-control Ty had left. Surging forward he broke her hold on him, then turned and pulled her into his arms. "Enough teasing. If I fly, you'll be right there with me." He sealed his promise with a deep, plundering kiss.

Setting her on one of the carved benches alongside of the tub, he knelt in front of her. He found the sponge and soaped her body as she had his. In gentle swirling motions he covered her front with suds, then dropped the sponge. Cupping her breasts, he massaged the slippery wet skin with firm strokes, paying special attention to the nipples. Leaving one hand to care for her chest, he moved the other down to the nest of dusky curls at the juncture of her thighs. Searching with one finger, he found her passage hot and slippery with more than water and soap. Stroking his finger in and out, he thumbed her clit, finding it hard and prominent in its arousal.

Teasing him had his witch hot and ready for him. But he asked anyway. "Are you as hot for me as I am for you? Are you ready to fly with me, little witch?"

Her answer was to moan and reach for his shoulders, to pull her to him as she positioned herself at the edge of the seat, her thighs opening even wider.

Moving forward, he nestled himself between her legs, bringing his penis in line with her opening. "Put me in, witch."

Her eyes glowed with green fire as she used one small hand to ease his tip inside her.

"Ty?" she wailed. Her smoky gaze questioned him as he held still.

"Look at me, little witch. See my love for you as I take you."

As his gaze held hers, he took her with one smooth thrust of his hips. Then he held still, the only movement her muscles contracting around him. With their eyes locked in time and space to only each other, he whispered, "Breathe with me, baby."

Her breathing soon paced his. The pulsing of her loins found and matched the rhythm of their breathing. As they inhaled, her vaginal walls clenched him; as they



exhaled, her muscles relaxed. So they continued for what seemed like hours, but could only have been a matter of minutes.

As he stared into Brenna's eyes, he sensed a part of her mind opened a door and let him inside. He'd never felt anything this intensely wonderful in his life.

As he began to thrust, their hearts beat as one.

\* \* \* \*

Brenna had heard of the oneness of true mates, but had never imagined she would encounter it. The experience humbled and strengthened her at the same time.

Then Ty moved, and the intensity of before was as a microbe compared to the enormity of the feelings his movements now brought her.

At first, his thrusts were slow. But as the pressure inside her increased, he somehow sensed her need and his penetration increased. Harder. Faster.

Her excitement escalated quickly now as she moved to a level of existence she'd never known before, in either the real or astral planes. Their senses, thoughts and feelings mirrored one another. Everything she saw, everything she felt, flowed through him, and his through her. Their sensations fed their passion and pushed them higher.

As he made love to her, Ty held her gaze with his. His silver-grey eyes gleamed with the light of their union and his lips whispered harshly beautiful words of possession and love. "It's so fucking good. You're mine. You make me whole."

"Yes. Yours," she panted, clutching his slick shoulders and wrapping her legs tightly around his lean waist.

"I'll fucking kill the man or woman who tries to take you from me."

"I wouldn't let anyone take me," she cried. "Trust me."

"I trust you, witch." He held her head and drank from her lips. "But I don't trust others. You're mine." He ground his hips into her as if to emphasize the point.

"Take me, Ty, all of me," she moaned into his mouth as she answered his circular, grinding thrust with one of her own.

"I am," he muttered as he took her breath into him. Then throwing his head back, he cried to the skies, "God, I can hear you think. Feel you feel me. How can this be?" Panting, he plunged even deeper until he shouted, "Hold me, witch. Love me."

And she did. With all her body and soul, she held onto him and returned the love he'd brought to her, double-fold.

As they reached the peak together, a light, brighter than a thousand stars encased their souls as they died the living death.

\* \* \* \*

The sound of pounding roused him. His arms were around Brenna, who lay limply against his chest. Shivering, he realized they were still in the tub of now rapidly cooling water.

He gently removed his witch's legs from about his waist, then stood up, taking her with him. Shifting her weight, he braced her against his body, then snagged a warm towel and wrapped it around her. Swinging her into his arms, he carefully climbed out of the Jacuzzi and carried her to the chaise.

"Ty?" She roused as soon as he lay her on the couch.

"Right here, little witch." He stroked a damp lock of hair from her forehead. "Just lie there and rest. Someone's knocking on the door."

She opened one eye. "Better dry off and put on some clothes before you answer it."

"Why? It's probably just the shifters, and they've seen me naked before." He grinned at her. "Besides I want Igor to know what we've been doing. He's still got an idea that he can have you."

His little witch muttered under her breath. He caught just enough of the words and tone to know that the male species had just been insulted.

"Maybe it's one of my coven," she said. "And I sure as Hecate don't want them to see my man in the altogether. Got it?" She arched an eyebrow.

She was cute when she was mad ... and possessive.

He laughed and pulled a towel off the rack and wrapped it around his waist, then strode out of the room.

"Who is it?" he asked after he reached the front door.

"It's Boris."

Ty opened the door. It was almost dark. The sun had slipped so low in the western sky that its aura showed golden-red through the trees surrounding Brenna's house. The cooler evening air chased over his damp skin and he shivered. Something was out there, waiting, plotting against them. He could almost smell it, feel its foulness in his gut.

Boris and Igor, in their human form, and Star stood on the front step, patiently waiting for him to acknowledge them. It was as if they knew what he sensed and waited for him to fully appreciate the seriousness of the situation.

"What's the situation out there?" he asked, indicating Brenna's property with a slight angling of his head.

Boris sniffed the night breeze. "Something's coming. You know that though, why ask?"

Ty nodded. "Just confirming. Come in."

Star sniffed his legs, then, through the towel, his crotch. The animal licked one of Ty's legs and rubbed against him before brushing past and running toward the bedroom and Brenna.

Well, one animal out of three had accepted his place in Brenna's life; now for the other two.

"What else is going on?" he asked as he stepped aside and let the two inside.

"You're needed at your headquarters. Tom has gotten a description, and your men aren't quite sure what to do next," Boris said. The Russian headed for the kitchen.

Igor just stood inside the door and glared at him.

"Thanks, Boris." Ty turned to stare back at Igor. "Are you coming in? Or, are you going to stand there and occupy space all evening?"

"I smell her on you. All hell is about to break loose and you stopped to take the time to fuck her."

"No," Ty said through clenched teeth. "I took the time to love her. To reaffirm that we both still lived. Nothing, and no one in this world could have stopped me. No one, not even this Seer. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to get dressed and go kick some evil butt."

As Ty left the room, he heard Boris hoot at his brother, "You are so pathetic, Gor.  
Give it a rest why don't you?"  
Ty couldn't have agreed more.

## Chapter Thirteen

*Dark chaos magick steals energy, causing an imbalance, whereas Wiccan magick seeks always to maintain a balance in energy.*

*- Dark Chaos Magick: A Learned Approach, p.25.*

"So much for trust and understanding," Brenna muttered as she hastily threw together another meal. Boris sat at the kitchen counter and watched her food preparations intently. Star was at her feet, his tail wagging furiously with almost as hungry a look in his eyes as the shifter. Igor sat and sulked in front of the fire.

"Brenna," chided Boris, "he does trust you."

Igor's loud snort of derision reached them from the far corner of the great room.

Boris turned and glared at his brother. "I repeat for those of us who are too dense to live that Ty does trust you, Brenna, but he can't have all of us preternaturals marching into his headquarters and doing our thing. Paoli is just not ready for that. Tom is taking a chance in using the waking sleep spell in a county jail."

He swiveled back around and picked up the sandwich she'd made him. "Besides, Drake and Rhea will be here soon. And you need to be here. You dealt with the globe and the Seer's power last night. They'll have questions, and plans to make."

Okay, so he was right. It still didn't make her feel any better.

*Child, all things happen for a reason. So stay alert.*

"Frog's toes," she muttered. "I hate it when she goes all cryptic on me."

"Who?" Boris asked around a mouthful of turkey and cheese.

"The Goddess." Brenna slapped another sandwich on a plate with some chips and fruit and walked over to deliver it to Igor. "She's talking in my head again."

"Saved your ass last night, didn't she?" Igor said, speaking for the first time since Ty had left. "If it hadn't been for her, you wouldn't have gotten out of the house in time."

"Well, there is that. Here," she said, thrusting the plate at him, "eat. Who knows when you'll get another chance? Once Drake and his wife get here, we may have to go out on roving patrols. I'm betting the trouble will come to us here."

"Why not at the safe house?" Boris asked, coming over to join his brother on the couch.

"The Seer wants me now."

"Great," mumbled Igor, not questioning her conclusion. "Did you tell the sheriff that?"

"I didn't have to. He knows ... he sensed it," she said. The twins exchanged surprised looks. "He only left because you told him Tom needed him. He plans on being back as soon as he has a description of the Seer."

"Lucky us," muttered Igor.

Brenna glared at him, but decided her heart really wasn't into scolding him for his attitude. He had, after all, saved Ty from certain death last night. So, if he wanted to make snide remarks, she'd ignore them, just as long as he did his job. Besides, she felt sorry for him. It was hard being a shifter, whether in the mere mortal or witch mortal world. Shifters were a dying breed after years of intermarrying with those not of their

kind. His interest in her wouldn't have lasted beyond the initial lust. The twins were pure-blooded shifter and were expected to perpetuate their bloodline. They had to find shifter wives.

Star growled from his spot in front of the fire. His nose lifted, sniffing the air. His ears perked up and twitched. Finally, he stood, staring at the French doors to the deck. His body readied itself to attack.

Brenna turned and followed her pet's line of sight. She saw nothing except the deck lit up by security lights and the darkness beyond, but knew something was out there. She felt it now, just as Star did.

Igor came to her side. He touched her arm and whispered. "Can you smell it?"

While Brenna's sense of smell was probably better than the average mortal, it was not as sensitive as her wolf's or the twins'. "No, what is it?"

"Evil," Boris stated in a flat, grim tone as he stood on her other side, slightly in front of her body. "Be ready."

"I am." She conjured her staff up from the other room, then patted the pocket of her jacket, checking on her athame and the powders she'd placed there earlier. These would be the only magickal instruments she would need if they had to make a stand. The rest would be up to her training and innate abilities as a white witch.

The French doors flew open, crashing into the walls and shattering the glass. A dark maelstrom whipped into the house and sent the shards of glass and anything not nailed down flying about the room.

Boris pushed Brenna out of the path of a flying end table. "So much for the protection wards," he yelled as he dove to cover her with his body.

Rolling out from under him, she gathered as much energy as she could and let it loose at the dark twister wreaking havoc in her house. As quickly as it had appeared it stopped. But the darkness remained.

As the room settled into an unearthly silence, the darkness the wind had brought began to form into multiple solid objects.

"Brenna, be ready to move at my order," Boris pulled her to her feet, then shoved her behind him. Shimmering, he shifted. Igor shifted next to him.

The excess energy from their transformation, instead of dissipating into the atmosphere as the laws of physics decreed, was sucked into one of the developing dark figures just as a black hole absorbs matter. This was chaos magick of the highest level.

Star came to Brenna's side and nudged her with his head. He wanted her to leave. And she was pretty sure that was the smart thing to do, but first, she had to see what she was up against. Then, she'd take to the woods where she would have nature on her side against this aberration of matter and energy.

As the black matter continued to coalesce, Brenna gathered small amounts of energy, so as not to attract the attention of the dark mass. Then she cloaked herself, Star and the twins in an invisible, positive protection field. The protection web might not hold, she had no way of knowing, but it was better than nothing.

As the forms took shape she saw that there were three large men and one woman. The woman's mass was the one that had taken on the shifter energy.

*"So, this is the Seer," Brenna stated.*

*"Must be. Do you know her?" Igor asked.*

*"No, but I don't go to town much and she has never been to the store."*

*"The man to her right is the one Ty calls Mo," said Boris.*

*"Yeah, the last time we saw him, he was going up in a dark cloud," added Igor.*

*"Well, he's back now," Boris said. "And he does look like a bad-ass mother-fucker."*

*"The other two?" Igor asked.*

*"Merely mortal," Brenna replied. "Probably more of Mo's gang."*

Brenna disregarded the man called Mo and the two men. They were mere mortals and she could handle them if she had to. It was the dark-haired woman who concerned her. The Seer now had a face and form, but no name to put to her.

"So, Seer, we finally meet," said Brenna. "What do I call you?"

"My name is none of your business," replied the dark witch.

So, her name was important, a potential handle on controlling her. Maybe Ty would know who she was when he got here, if he got here in time. They should have practiced telepathy outside of sex. She wanted to contact him ~~now~~.

The Seer stood, watched and waited. Well, two could play that game. Brenna would be damned if she would open the duel of words and magick. Until she had some idea of how to twist the chaos magick back upon the practitioner, Brenna would play a defensive game.

Using her empathic abilities, Brenna examined the creature in front of her. If the woman had ever been a full-fledged witch of the earth, there was no evidence of it now. She was cold to the bone, totally devoid of warmth, kindness or love. She was like the black hole she mimicked—deep, dark and hungry for power.

"Yes, white witch. Power. I crave it. Need it. And you and yours have so much of it," the Seer said, breaking the silence first. A minor victory for Brenna, because it told her the woman in front of her was impatient. A weakness Brenna would capitalize on. "I'm here to take it from you."

"Not without a fight," muttered Brenna. Cautiously, she pulled a surge of earth power from the ground at her feet and sent it through the invisible shield, strengthening it and causing it to glow with a green-white light.

"Protection spells, Brenna?" The dark witch arched a perfectly groomed eyebrow. "How unoriginal ... and typical of an earth worshiper."

*"Hold your positions," she cautioned the twins.*

She placed a hand on Star's head, staying his movements.

"Let's see how you like this?" the dark witch sneered. Raising her arms, the Seer pulled atmospheric energy from the skies and threw it at them.

But Brenna was ready for her. As the lightning-like bolts reached her shields, she placed her staff firmly on the floor and chanted,

*Gaia, mother of us all,  
Here my plea,  
Ground this foul energy,  
So mote it be.*

The dark witch's forceful shot hit the shields like a rampaging herd of elephants, causing an immediate surge in the power shield surrounding the foursome. Brenna felt it as a mere raising of hairs on her skin, before the attack energy swept into the ground and fizzled away.

"You little bitch," spat the Seer. "You think you're really cute, don't you? I really don't have time to waste on this. We need you as bait for your boss."

"Don't forget that bastard, Buchanan," Mo said. "You promised me."

The Seer turned to the big man at her side and smiled. The man looked down at her with what Brenna perceived as adoration. The Seer's feelings for the man were harder to pin down. Did the Seer feel something akin to love for Mo? No, the woman had no softer feelings. But there was some feeling there on her part, even if it was just possession.

"Yes, my darling Mo," the Seer purred as she stroked the man's cheek. "You'll get him. I promise."

A small glimmer of a spell had chased across the man's skin upon Vanessa's touch. So, she'd glamourised the man. As long as Mo was within the dark witch's sight or touch or the sound of her voice, she controlled him. That was why the globe had been in the house. He might also be wearing a conduit crystal on his person. To break the glamour, all Brenna had to do was gain control of Mo.

*"Why, Brenna? He's not important in the grand scheme of the battle we face," said Igor. "The bitch doesn't care for him. He's nothing to her, but a tool."*

*"Maybe. There's something there that I'm not reading. But, I want him out of the mix as far as Ty is concerned."*

*"Screw, Ty. Take care of yourself first," insisted Igor.*

*"Taking care of him is taking care of me. Deal with it."*

"Okay, Seer," Brenna said, interrupting the interchange between the Seer and her mortal consort. "What do you do now? Or, is pulling energy from the atmosphere the only trick you know?" she taunted. "I learned to do that before I got my first tooth."

One of the twins growled, *"Really, Brenna, tweaking the tail of the serpent? Is that wise?"* and nudged her leg with his head.

The Seer smiled archly. "I'd listen to the shifter if I were you, white witch. You don't know what you're dealing with."

Brenna moved to the left, narrowing the angle, inches at a time, toward the open doorway to the deck.

The Seer and her minions watched and mirrored the movement.

Surreptitiously gathering power as she moved across the floor, Brenna said, "Oh, I know exactly what I'm dealing with. A washed-out, dark chaos magick reject. Without Warrick Bettencourt's leadership, all of you followers dissipated to the four winds just as so much trash blowing along the side of a road."

"Why you, you, bitch!" The Seer raised her arms and waved them wildly about as if she were a windmill gone loco.

She had counted on the Seer's short fuse, and the dark witch did not disappoint. As the Seer let loose with a mixture of junk energy, Brenna threw everything she'd collected at the witch and her minions in one pure, pristine stream of potent force.

The four were blown back into the wall. As they fell to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs, she, Star, and the twins fled the room.

As Brenna's mother had taught her, magical power used with a lack of control is weak or junk energy. As long as she could keep the Seer off-balance and out of control, Brenna had an advantage. But she doubted in a one-on-one battle of strength that she could beat the dark witch. To beat dark chaos magick, Brenna would have to outsmart the Seer. So, as the four of them raced toward the woods, she planned her next moves.

\* \* \* \*

Ty entered the Sheriff's Department and pushed his way through the throngs of press occupying the small waiting room.

"Sheriff Buchanan, would you like to make a comment for the evening news about this major drug bust?" The comely reporter from the local channel's News at 10 shoved a microphone in his face. The other television reporters shoved theirs right alongside hers.

"No," he chided them. "Talk to the news liaison. You guys know the drill. Now, excuse me, I'm needed inside."

He pushed the microphones away and headed forward. The crowd gave way. Toby stood at the security door, holding it open for him.

As he passed through the doorway, he whispered to his deputy, "Find Sergeant Soames and tell her to get rid of these people. We're not done yet, not by a long shot."

"Yes, sir." Toby ushered him through and shut the door against the eager news media.

"Where's The Boss being questioned?"

"In Interrogation Room 1. That Tom guy you sent is getting all sorts of cooperation out of this thug," said Toby as he hurried to keep up with him. "Where did you get him? FBI?"

"It's not important. Have we gotten any useful info, yet?" Ty asked as he peered through the one-way glass into the room.

"Yeah. Like you suspected, he was selling drugs for the Detroit gang. They were waiting for Big Mo last night. We're following up on the local contacts right now," Toby said.

"Thanks, Toby," Ty said turning toward him. "Go find Soames and get those reporters out of here."

Toby hurried off.

Ty entered the interrogation room. Tom looked up, but the gang member sat, motionless, staring out into space as if no one was in the room.

"Sheriff. Glad you're here. This man can describe the Seer, but I hesitated to share any more information with your people than necessary, so I only gave them the details on the drug operation here and the people involved. I understand that warrants have been issued and arrests are being made based on this information as we speak."

"So Toby told me. What does the Seer look like?"

Tom turned to the gang member and said, "Tell the Sheriff what you told me about the Seer, please."

"Like I says before. She is a nasty bitch, but mighty fine. Long, black hair. White skin. Grey eyes. A booty to fill a man's hands, but good. Red fingernails. Long sharp things, them nails. Worked for that dead dude, that Bob John fella."

"Vanessa Hardon!" Ty shouted. So, it was the succubus and not the boss-wannabe who was the Seer. Made sense. Dan Porter was weak. He wondered what had happened to the man. He feared the worst.

"Yeah, that be the bitch. She done give me a hard-on just to look at her, but never gave me the time o' day. Nasty piece of work. Don't know why Mo loves her."

Tom waved a hand in front of the man's face, and The Boss closed his eyes and began to snore.



"This Vanessa Hardon must have used a glamour spell on Mo. That would explain why Mo loved her. It would also explain the globe in the house," Tom mused aloud.

"Why?"

"She needs contact of some sort, touch, visual or sound, to keep the man under her thrall."

"Can she keep more than one man under her control at a time?" Ty asked, never having heard of such a power before.

"Maybe, but not as effectively. Which is why she chose a leader for her tool. She controlled him, he controlled his men."

Ty picked up the phone in the room and dialed out to the dispatcher. "Hettie, get me Dan Porter on the phone. Patch it into Interrogation Room 1 when you get him." *If you get him.*

"Brenna needs to know the Seer's name," Tom urged. "If Vanessa Hardon is her real name, then Brenna can use it if she has to confront the woman in battle."

"What good does knowing her real name do?" Ty asked as he used his cell to dial Brenna's home phone.

"A name is power, even in dark chaos magick," Tom said. "Is there anyway we can check on her full real name?"

"The other call I'm having placed, Dan Porter ... he might know. She worked for him. If she didn't change her real name, she must've had some sort of government identification to get the job. Plus, he might know where she is at the moment. He was under her thrall at the time I met them."

Brenna's phone had rung ten times. No one picked up. Not even a machine.

"Damn!" He hit the table with his fist.

Tom's face formed into stern lines. "Sheriff, what is it?"

"They're not answering at the house."

Tom's face grew even more serious. "You are her complement."

It wasn't a question. "You know this?" Ty asked. "How?"

The elder nodded, "Brenna told Harry, and he told Joseph and I. The point is that you don't need phones to communicate. You have the ability to seek her out with your mind."

"God, I know that ... she told me, especially during times of strong emotion, but I," he hit the wall with the flat of his hand and shook the pictures hanging there, "I don't know how. It's too new for me."

"Sheriff," Tom reached for his arm and tugged him to a seat at the table. "It's not something you try to do, you just do it. Relax. Look at me."

Ty looked at the elder witch.

"Now, take a deep breath, hold it and let it out."

Ty did as the man asked, not sure how breathing would help, but he was willing to try anything to find out what was going on with Brenna.

"Good. Now do it again, and as you do it, imagine all the tension draining from you."

Ty took the long slow, breaths as the witch instructed. It brought to mind his sniper training in the Special Forces. The instructor had always taught them that control was the most important thing in accurate sniping, and you could not be in control if you allowed your emotions to control you. Maybe it was the same thing in communicating with Brenna; he had let his emotions get in the way.

As he continued to breathe, the fear melted away as he gained control over his mind and body.

"Good, good, Ty," the elder intoned. "You are a strong man in both body and magick. Now, imagine Brenna in your mind. See her. Hear her."

"Yes, she's there. I love her, you know."

"Yes, my son. I know. She loves you, also. Very much."

As Tom spoke in low soothing tones in the background, Ty breathed and sought Brenna with his mind.

*"Brenna?"*

*"Ty? You're communicating! How?"*

*"Tom helped. Vanessa Hardon is the Seer. Don't let her near you."*

*"But is that her real, birth name?"*

*"I'm working on that. Is she there?"*

*"Yes. Don't worry. We'll be fine until you and the others arrive."*

*"I'm coming. Hold on."*

*"Always. Got to run. Hurry!"*

As suddenly as Ty had found her, she was cut off as if a large metal door had slammed in his head.

"She shut me out!" Ty yelled, smacking his hand on the table and causing the older witch to flinch. "How can she do that? Why did she do that?"

"She has more experience. She probably had to concentrate on something else," Tom opined. "She does communicate with the shifters and to a lesser extent the wolf in that way."

Ty nodded as he redialed the dispatcher. "What about my call to Dan Porter?"

"He's dead, sir," the dispatcher replied. "I was just about to call you back. When I called the house, his wife answered. She screamed that Dan was dead. She sounded hysterical, so I figured she might have been mistaken. I sent a unit and an ambulance over there. They just confirmed it; said Mrs. Porter had come home to find the place in a mess and Dan dead."

"Thanks. Find Toby and have him pull my car around front."

"Yes, sir."

"Damn," he said as he jammed the phone into its cradle.

"What's wrong?" Tom had come to stand next to him.

"Dan Porter is dead. His house torn apart. Sound familiar?" Ty arched an eyebrow.

"The Seer. So, maybe he did have her real name. She eliminated him as a source."

Tom shook his head. "How will we find her name now?"

"We probably already have it," Ty said. "Follow me."

He ran to his desk and pulled the file on Bob John's murder. In it he found the employee printout that Toby had gotten from Roebuck's real estate company.

"Yes! Her full legal name is Vanessa Rhiannon Hardon," Ty said, his finger underlining the name on the sheet.

"Good." Tom smiled and rubbed his hands together. "Try to reach Brenna. Tell her. She'll know how to use it."

Using the techniques Tom had taught him, Ty sought Brenna. All he got was an image of a large wooden door, shut and locked against him. "She's blocking me."

"She must have a reason. Try again later," Tom said in the calm voice Ty had begun to associate with the elder. "So, tell me about this Mo. Just how dangerous is he?"

"Tell me something first?" When Tom nodded, he continued, "Can witch mortals die from wounds that would kill what you call mere mortals?"

"Yes, of course we can."

"Then, Mo is a nightmare of epic proportions. He'll kill without even thinking about it. He is pure evil, mere mortal variety."

"Then, my son, we'd better make tracks," Tom intoned. "Brenna and the others will need our help. Even an upper-level witch can't fight a battle on all fronts."

## Chapter Fourteen

*Law of Identity:*

*Knowledge of a person's full name gives the user of the name greater knowledge and power over the person so-named.*

*- Magick Laws.*

Brenna led Star and the twins into the woods toward the spot where Bob John died.

"Why are we returning to the scene of one of the Seer's crimes?" asked Boris.

"Because what goes out, comes back. It's the magick law of returns. Trust me."

Since neither twin bothered to reply, she had to assume they would take her on faith. Yet, truth be told, even she wondered if what she was about to do would work. If nothing else, her plan would be a diversion until Ty, Drake, and the others got here. Not even the Seer could beat out the power of Drake and Rhea, added to hers. The power of three would win out.

Reaching the pond on her land, she halted momentarily. Turning to the twins, she urged, "Go to the tree where we found Bob John and find places where you can keep an eye on things. Don't come out unless I call you. I need to give the Seer something to think about, something to keep her off-balance."

The twins hesitated. "Go," she said. "I'll be fine."

They woofed, then leapt for the boundary between her and the state's property.

"Star, go with them."

The wolf blinked his eyes in understanding and left.

Divide and conquer was an age-old battle plan. Ridding the Seer of some of her mortals wouldn't stop the dark witch, but it would piss her off, neutralizing some of her power.

Brenna rotated slowly to each of the four directions. Arms out-stretched, she sent the night air gently blowing across the glade, readying the four winds in case she needed them later. Then she called to the woodland sprites and animals that she'd given offerings on the night of Litha:

*Creatures of the glen,*

*Here my plea.*

*At my call,*

*Come to me,*

*Hinder evil's path this eve.*

*So mote it be.*

Taking a position on the side of the glade leading to the public forest lands, Brenna waited with what she hoped was a calm and commanding demeanor.

She didn't have to wait long.

The Seer rushed to the edge of the glade with her three male companions, then stopped. The men brandished automatic weapons. The sight of the lethal guns chilled Brenna, and she recalled her brave reply to Igor's comment about getting shot and dying. She hoped she wouldn't live to regret her bold words.

"So, white witch, you didn't run far. Where are your mutant friends?" The Seer sought them out in the bushes surrounding the opening in the woods. "Hiding to attack me? As if they dared."

A mist of darkness fell over the area as the Seer conjured a counter spell to any latent traps.

Brenna hid a satisfied smile. So far, her little demonstrations of magick had made the dark witch wary. Good. Wariness was a part of imbalance. And magick practiced out of synch was weak.

Finally, the Seer entered the glade fully, halting on the far side of the pond. The night breezes, agitated by the black magick laid over the glade, gently lifted the Seer's long, black hair like bat wings around her head. "Nice trick with the energy back there. Which law of magick was that?"

"Oh, some corollary to the law of greater balance, I think." Nonchalantly, Brenna waved her staff across her front, mentally calling the creatures to her aid. "I call it fighting half-assed power with pure potency."

"Half-assed power?" screeched the Seer, her bosom heaving. "I'll show you half-assed power, right up yours."

As the Seer moved to cross the pond, the forest denizens attacked. Owls swooped in to peck and claw at her head as sprites and small furry creatures dove and nipped at her legs and feet.

Likewise, the woods' inhabitants attacked the mortal men, but with more effect. The cries and screams of the three grown men would have been laughable, if they hadn't shot off their weapons at the same time.

As the dark witch reacted with oaths, counter spells and flashes of energy from her fingertips, Brenna, fearing for the safety of the forest creatures from the men's guns, sent them back to their hiding places until she might need them again.

As the animals heeded her silent orders, Brenna was hit from the side.

Star, who obviously hadn't listened to her, hit her just as a man fired in her direction. The bullet splintered the tree behind her, at the level where her head had been just moments ago.

Petting Star on his neck, she cried to the night skies, "*Winds, blow; tempest, blow.*"

The previously gentle zephyrs erupted. Swirling and screaming like banshees, the four winds continued the attack on the lethal intruders.

The Seer handled the winds easily, as if it were only child's play to contain them. But not before they'd taken their toll on the mere mortals in the woods. One man was gone, carried to who knows where in the arms of the North Wind. Another man dropped his weapon to hold onto a young tree, but was torn away by a southern zephyr.

As for the Seer's erstwhile lover, Mo had lost his gun to one of the four winds, but had managed to hold onto the Seer. Consequently, he was protected by her calm eye in the midst of the storm.

"Very good, little white bitch." The Seer bowed her head in acknowledgment. "I may have underestimated you. My research only told me you were a master herbalist and a healer. It hadn't disclosed that you commanded some of the more potent earth powers. Guess it's no more Ms. Nice Guy. Let's see what you do when real chaos magick is used. Now, where are those shifters? Here doggy, doggy."

With a sweep of the Seer's hand, the winds died down to nothing.

Brenna raised her staff and called upon them, but not even a wisp of a breeze ruffled the air around her. It was an unnatural situation unlike any she'd ever encountered. Wind energy was the easiest of the earth powers to master, and now she couldn't conjure up even a gust.

"Don't waste your power or breath, Brenna. You're gonna need them later," chided the Seer as she slowly walked toward her. "The winds are in my control now. Find another weapon, little white bitch, and you'd better do it fast. Because after I find your shifters, they're dead, and then I'm coming after you."

The Seer brushed past her as if she were of no consequence. "Come, my darling Mo. We've some dogs to kill."

Mo followed, hesitated, then paused at Brenna's side. He licked his bulbous lips as his dark eyes leered at her. "You're mine, sweet meat. She promised that I could take you in front of Buchanan. Think he'd like that?" He reached out a swarthy finger to stroke her face. She moved away before he could touch her. He grinned. "No, huh? After I do you, then I'm going to kill him."

Brenna replied, forcing a calm she didn't feel into her voice, "Well, I'd like to see you try." Flicking him a tight grin of her own, she gathered ground energy, which lay plentiful and surging all around her, and shot a pure flame of blue-white fire at the man with the snap of her fingers.

He jumped back, the flaming bolt just missing him, and cried out, "Vanessa! She shot at me!"

So, the woman's first name was Vanessa? Now all she needed was the rest of it. It would add more control to her plans for the Seer. Brenna would need all the advantages she could get in the final showdown.

Vanessa turned and frowned at her consort. "Stupid man! I told you not to taunt her. And I especially told you not to use my name. Now, come here. Help me find the shifters."

"Sorry, Vanessa." Mo fearfully kept his eye on Brenna as he backed away.

Brenna smiled at him and shrugged. "Not very sympathetic, is she? Haven't you figured it out yet, she has a one-track mind. You'd better run, little man, or I just might turn you into a pile of ashes." She wiggled her fingers at him, and he flinched.

Vanessa appeared at Mo's side and grabbed his arm, "Come on, you're under my protection field. She can't harm us—either of us."

"But she hurled fire at me!"

"Are you hurt?" Vanessa asked, her eye twitching with what Brenna hoped was barely contained anger. Anger at whom, she didn't care. As long as the Seer was off-kilter, she would be happy.

"Well, no," Mo admitted.

"That's because," she hissed, digging her red claw-like nails into his arm. "You are in my protection field. Now, come on."

She pulled him along, letting loose a flash of yellow-green lightning at Brenna.

Brenna dodged it, and sent a small amount of counter-energy through her protection web to reflect the Seer's attack. The repelled energy crackled and fizzled in dirty green and ochre sparks against the dark witch's shields.

Brenna laughed when Mo yelped and Vanessa's muttered "idiot" reached her ears.

Snapping her fingers, Star came to Brenna's side. Rubbing her pet's head, she said, "Thanks for saving my hide. Come on, let's go see if we can show that bad ole witch a thing or two."

As she followed, she immediately stopped, frozen by what she could've sworn was Ty's voice calling to her. In her head! Shocked by the purity of his telepathy, she forgot all about the twins, Vanessa, and Mo. Instead, she savored his mind touch. It warmed her. His message conveyed his love and concern for her. And some information.

So, Vanessa was Vanessa Hardon. If that was her full name, it would be enough. Somehow Brenna doubted it was.

As she was about to ask Ty when he would arrive, another voice broke into her head.

*"Brenna! Help us!"*

The twins! They were in danger. Deadly danger.

Ty's communication had distracted her just long enough to allow the dark witch to get to them.

Brenna slammed the door on her lover and ran. The twins needed her now.

She hurried to the tree, the scene of Bob John's death and the catalyst to all that had ensued.

At the base of the death tree stood Vanessa and Mo. At their feet lay the twins, in their human form, writhing on the ground.

She ran to them and knelt. She saw no marks of any kind that would cause the pain she sensed they experienced. They were dying, slowly. The life was being squeezed out of them.

"Too late, Brenna. Nothing your namby-pamby white witch powers can do to stop their death." Vanessa pushed up her sleeves and wriggled her fingers. "Now, it's your turn. Mo can have at you while you slowly die from the web of death. Sort of a pre-necrophilia experience." The dark witch's eyes reflected her sadistic excitement at the thought.

"Nessie," Mo shouted. "Buchanan's not here yet. She can't die until he sees me rape her. I want him to suffer like I suffered every single second I spent in that prison he put me into."

Clearly exasperated with her erstwhile lover, Vanessa turned away for a single second to blast him with words, or more likely, as evidenced by the look of ire on her face, just to blast him.

The dark witch's momentary inattention gave Brenna the opening she required. She whisked herself away from the spot. Vanessa would be forced to follow.

Opening her mind, she called to Ty. He was there, in her mind, instantly, as if he'd been waiting for her call.

*"Help the twins. Base of Bob John's death tree."*

*"Brenna? What's going on?" His concern trumpeted through her head like a big brass band.*

*"I'm leading Vanessa away. Get the twins to Rhea Morgan." She sent him images of a dark web and death.*

*"Brenna! Wait, you need to know ..."*

Ty's anguished cry as she cut him off brought tears to her eyes, but she couldn't leave herself open to him right now. She had to concentrate on outfoxing evil. Her plan for a final showdown at the death tree would have to wait until the twins were safely away.

\* \* \* \*

"Arrgh!" Ty screamed, pounding the wheel of the car, as he sped his way to Brenna's house.

"What?" Tom cried out next to him. The elder's calm finally frayed at the edges.

"She's leading Vanessa away from the twins. They're down, dying from that death web thing. She cut me off before I could give her Vanessa's full name, and she's blocked me again! Damn her little hide."

"Then, we'll just have to find her and tell her in person. Are we almost there?" Tom asked, his eyes closed as if he were seeking something within himself.

"We're at her house now." Ty pulled the car into the circular drive and shut off the engine. "Someone's waiting for us on the front porch."

Tom opened his eyes. "Ah, I felt the power, and there they are."

Ty opened his door. "They, as in the boss and his wife?"

"Precisely." Tom smiled. "Things will shake now."

The two of them walked toward the porch. Drake and Rhea met them halfway.

Rhea reached out and touched Ty on the arm. An electric current sparked between them. "Yes, Harry said you had power." She turned to Drake and pulled his hand to join hers, "Feel him, Drake. All that latent power rumbling in him like a long-dormant volcano."

Drake smiled. "Reminds me of your unused talent when I met you. Good thing Brenna didn't conjoin with Ty first, or he might have challenged me."

Ty shook his head, angry that these two could waste time like this. "Fine, whatever. We can get to know one another and have a magick-power pissing contest later. My little witch is out there alone, facing down what everyone has told me is Hell come to earth in female form. And I want her safe. Now!"

Drake threw back his head and laughed. "I don't blame you. Tell me what you know ... and sense. Here and now."

Drake Morgan radiated confidence and power. Brenna trusted him. Ty guessed he would have to.

As he led them to the pond, he brought them up to speed. "She's leading Vanessa away from the shifters who are down. I'm to bring Rhea to the twins and get them out of there." Ty shook his head. "I sensed that she wanted to use the area where Bob John died to trap the bitch, but couldn't risk the twins to do it. But that wasn't clear, just an impression I got. I didn't sense that even she knew exactly how she would use the murder scene."

"I do, though," Drake said, as he kept pace with him. The coven leader's satisfied smile lit up the night sky. "It'll work. Even never having dealt with dark chaos magick, she sensed that control and balance would beat outright chaos every time. That's how Rhea, I and our unborn child defeated Warrick Bettencourt. Must be an instinctive female thing."

Ty glanced at the slender red-headed witch who ran to keep up with the men's longer strides. "You defeated Bettencourt?"

"Yes," she said. "I did it on the astral plane. I sneaked up on him and let loose the power of three while he beat on Drake whom he'd ensnared in a chaos death web."



"Then how is Bob John's murder site going to help her defeat Vanessa?"

"My guess is Brenna has been in contact with Bob John's spirit, right?" At Ty's nod, the leader continued, "The vengeful spirit will act as a diversion on one level of reality. Brenna then, theoretically, can work her magick on the other levels of time and space and seek out the dark witch's vulnerable spot and kill her.

"Theoretically?" Ty asked, not liking the sound of that.

"Well, it should work," Drake explained. "But we are still learning about dark chaos magick. It has so many shapes and forms."

Ty cursed under his breath, then asked, "Would having Vanessa's full name give Brenna an advantage?"

"It wouldn't hurt. The third law of magick is the power of names. Knowing how someone or something is named gives the user more influence over the named person or object," Drake said. "Do you know the full name?"

"Yes." Ty nodded as they reached the glade, and the twins.

"Good," Rhea said, "then send it to her. Tell her to use an alternate level on the astral plane to attack the dark witch."

Ty asked, "But what if she won't open to me?"

Rhea replied, as she went to her knees to help the twins. "She will when one of these shifters tells her they're out of harm's way." She turned to Tom. "Take one. I'll take the other. We'll transport to the house." Turning back to Ty and her husband, she said, "May the Goddess be with you."

Rhea bent over and lifted Boris into her arms with a strength that belied her slight build. Then, she twirled in a circle and was gone like a white tornado. Tom followed with Igor.

"Call to Brenna, Ty," urged Drake. "Have her lead the dark witch back to us. We can aid her."

"Not if I have anything to say about it, bud." A voice from behind them cut off Ty's reply that Brenna still blocked him.

He knew that voice. A snick, the familiar sound of a weapon being armed, echoed loudly in the deathly silence of the night.

Ty turned slowly, aware that Mo would use any quick movements on his part to shoot.

The bastard stood ten feet away, a semi-automatic weapon in his hands. And, as he'd suspected, it was aimed in his, and Drake's, general direction.

They stood too close together.

Ty started to move slowly away from the witch as Mo eyed the spot where the twins had lain.

"Too bad I got back too late," Mo said. "I was going to shoot those freaks of nature and put them out of their misery. Took me longer to find my gun than I thought. That bitch of yours sent my men and our guns all over the damn place."

"Good for her," Ty said, as he continued to move cautiously. Drake must have realized what he was doing, because the witch moved in the opposite direction, forcing Mo to choose a primary target.

Mo chose wrong.

As he swung the weapon toward Ty, a flash of golden-white light originated from Drake's hands. Mo's weapon discharged straight up, into the sky. The spent bullets returned to earth like metal raindrops.

Ty dove to the ground, rolled to the side, and came up behind a tree with his weapon drawn.

By the time Mo had recovered control of his weapon and turned it to shoot at Drake, the witch had vanished.

In his anger and frustration, Mo swung the gun wildly back and forth. Ty took a couple of shots at Mo. One missed, the other grazed him on his shoulder.

"Buchanan! I'll get you, you mother-fucker." Seeking cover, Mo moved noisily away from Ty and toward the spot where Drake had once stood.

Ty quietly shifted position to meet him.

Movement above caused him to look up. Drake waved at him from the limb of a large oak. He motioned for Ty to stop. The witch wanted Mo positioned under him.

Ty nodded, halted where he stood ... and waited.

"Buchanan," shouted Mo, as he thrashed his way through fallen limbs and undergrowth. To Ty's eyes, the forest floor's foliage seemed to get thicker and deeper with each step the drug lord took. "Nice piece of ass you found yourself. Yum, yum. She tasted real good. Gives good blow jobs, too. Maybe we can have us a threesome before I kill you." Mo paused, then added a sly look crossing his face, "Oh, and if you want her back, you have to come and get me."

The gangster laughed, but stopped abruptly when a limb he'd shoved out of the way came back and smacked him in the face.

Fear struck Ty more accurately than Mo's wild shots ever could. Did Mo have Brenna hidden somewhere? Was she hurt? Was that why Brenna blocked him? Ty forced air into his lungs, then he gasped as his mind leapt to the next logical question. Was she already dead?

Rage boiled deep inside him like molten lava, then erupted. His body moved forward in a lethal, stealthy crouch. His hands curled into claws, ready to tear Mo's throat out.

Then, a voice called to him with calm urgency: *"Ty! I'm fine, darling. Still leading Vanessa on a wild goose chase through the woods."*

*"Brenna!"*

Relief swept over Ty like a tsunami, halting the fiery instinct to kill. He moved back into his hiding place, where he finally registered what else she'd told him. She still led the dark witch away.

*"No, no, lead her back here to Drake and I. Her name is ..."*

*"I know her full name. Igor and Boris told me. I'm already heading that way."*

The relief he felt at those words eased the rest of his tension.

*"Be careful, little witch. I love you."*

*"I love you, too. Now, watch for me! We'll be coming from the north."*

*"Gotcha! Mo will be toast before you're here."*

"Buchanan!" roared Mo. "Did you hear me, you piece-of-shit excuse for a cop? I nailed your woman."

"You're such a liar, Mo," taunted Ty, as he waited to confront the drug lord. "You bet on the wrong horse, you bag of shit. My little witch will turn Vanessa into a worm and send her to Siberia. Then, who'll protect you, you dickless piece of scum?"

From above, Drake snorted back a laugh. His voice carried to Ty's ears on a gust of air, "So, the twins have been telling tales again. Do you want me to turn old Mo into a worm? I'd be happy to oblige."

Ty thought a second. "Give me a rain check?" he whispered back.

He jumped when Drake appeared next to him. The witch shrugged. "Sure. But, Goddess knows, your justice system didn't contain this guy the first time you put him away, but I can guarantee the frozen tundra of Siberia would hold him."

Ty smiled at the image. "I'm almost convinced."

"Buchanan!" Mo roared, as he attempted to escape from the now thigh-high underbrush. "Come out here where I can see you and face me like a man."

Ty contemplated the foliage which now grew rapidly. "You making things grow faster, or have I gone completely around the bend?" he asked Drake out of the corner of his mouth.

Drake chuckled. "You're not crazy. It's just a little earth magick. Thought I would slow Mo up a bit."

Ty nodded. It was evident in Mo's voice that he was afraid of being stuck in the woods. The thug from the streets of Detroit was a city fish out of water.

"Mo, since when is a semi-automatic face-off against a hand gun, 'fighting like a man'?" Ty asked.

No sound came from the Mo's direction, but the sound of clumsy city feet stumbling over rocks and fallen limbs. The sounds slowly approached their hiding place.

Drake pointed to his chest, then upward. He mouthed the words, "He's all yours."

Ty nodded.

Drake vanished on a wisp of a summer night zephyr. The creaking of a limb and the rustle of leaves told him that the witch was above him, covering his back.

Ty saw Mo now. The large man had scratches on his face. His shoulder bled from where Ty had winged him. His hands clutched his gun as if he were a drunk and it was his last bottle of booze.

With a whistling of the wind and a surging updraft, Mo's gun was gone. Up into the hands of Drake.

"What the fuck?" Mo looked at his hands as if they'd also vanished.

As Mo stood frozen in shock, Ty tackled him. Taking him out at the knees, he reached for Mo's head. His goal? To beat the crap out of the man who even dared to think about harming Brenna.

But it seemed the drug lord wasn't having any. Mo might not be Sven the Woodsman material, but he'd grown up in a gang on the mean streets of Detroit, and knew how to fight dirty.

Mo swept out one beefy arm and caught Ty under the chin on the upswing, tossing him back and off.

"I'm going to tear your head off, cop," promised Mo, an ugly smile curving his lips.

Ty didn't bother wasting his breath on answering taunts. This wasn't a fight for street corner bragging rights. This was a fight for survival, and he would need all his breath and energy to win it.

Rolling over and coming to his feet, Ty swept his right leg into a arcing round kick aimed for Mo's chin. He connected, but was too off balance to put full force and effect behind it.

Yet, the glancing kick must have had enough power, because Mo roared in pain. He managed to back off and regain his equilibrium. Glancing around, Mo grabbed a large branch. He used it to swing at Ty.

Just in time, Ty managed to jump back and out of the way.

Mo pursued his advantage, swinging the branch back and forth in front of him. He wielded it like a cane in the hands of a blind man, jabbing and testing the space in front of him. Except his target was Ty and not a sidewalk or a curb.

As Ty moved backwards, he stumbled over the rough terrain.

Taking advantage of Ty's fall, Mo surged forward, brandishing the limb in front of him like a broadsword.

"Yo, Mo. Heads up!" Drake dropped a handful of acorns on top of Mo's head as the drug lord paused to seek the new danger.

The distraction was enough for Ty to regain his balance and grab the branch from the distracted man. He threw the limb to the side.

Disarmed, Mo roared, then rounded on Ty, throwing a wild punch.

That was all Ty wanted or needed. The punch brought Mo into Ty's kill zone.

He reached for Mo's fisted hand and grabbed it, pulling the man off balance. Then, he bent Mo's arm up and around his back, pulling the gang leader against him, Mo's back to his chest. The tearing of the ligament was loud and sounded like the snapping of a dry stick. Mo howled in pain, but still struggled against what Ty knew to be a stomach-sickening hold.

Using his grasp on Mo, Ty lifted him up, then rammed the thug head first into the trunk of an oak. Once, twice and finally a third time, until Mo stopped yelling and struggling.

Drake dropped down lightly to the ground, eyeing the limp and silent man. No sympathy shone in the witch's eyes. "He dead?"

Ty shook Mo, and a low moan of pain was the only response. "No. Just out of it."

Drake took Mo into his own firm grasp. "I'll take this guy back to the house and restrain him for your men. Rhea and I will meet you and Brenna back at the tree."

Before Ty could even assent to this plan, Drake and Mo were gone in a twisting wind.

\* \* \* \*

Staying three jumps ahead of Vanessa hadn't been possible. It was as if the dark witch sensed Brenna's moves. So, she'd settled for one to two jumps, and accustomed herself to feeling the other witch's cold, foul breath down her back.

The creatures of the night had helped somewhat. After the flurry of action at the pond, the woods' inhabitants had waited and watched, only coming out to impede Vanessa when she'd anticipated Brenna's moves too closely. The simple earth magick they threw into Vanessa's path had disordered her plans, forcing her to adjust continually.

But, the woodland creatures' actions and Brenna's erratic movements were only temporary measures. Unless Drake and Rhea Morgan appeared now, a final face-off between Brenna and Vanessa was in the cards.

Brenna's only hope was the scene of the crime, the place where the veil between dark and light had been torn on the summer solstice. Ultimately, another dark force, vengeance, was her ace in the hole.

But could she count on Bob John's spirit?

He'd been there when she found the twins, dying from the death spell placed on them by Vanessa. And he'd done nothing. Said nothing.

Yet, in the air, his anger had simmered and stewed ... right alongside of the cowardice and the selfishness that had colored his living spirit. It seemed that death didn't erase the faults of the living.

The meandering chase now over, Brenna raced in a straight line for the death tree, Vanessa only mere seconds behind her. There would be no time to debate with Bob John. He either would enter into the fray and help divert Vanessa's attention ~~or~~ not.

The difference could be Brenna's death.

She arrived at the oak, still covered by Bob John's blood. The atmosphere around the spot was deathly quiet, yet not.

Bob John's spirit was there, hovering over the place where he'd died in excruciating pain.

*"Help me, Bob John."*

*"Why? What good will it do me?"*

As in life, he examined the scene about to be played out. First, he twisted it one way, then another. Should he help the white witch? Or, should he help his murderess?

Even in death, Bob John had to figure out what was in it for him.

*"You'll be avenged. You can rest in peace," Brenna argued.*

*"But I'll still be dead."*

"Tsk, ts, ts, little white bitch." Vanessa's taunting voice broke through Brenna's thoughts. "The scene of the crime? How gauche. But it's as good as anywhere to die, my dear. It served me well with my Bob John. Poor little man, he was amusing for a little while."

The atmosphere changed instantly, from a low, indifferent simmer to a rapid, angry boil.

The dark witch had to be blind, deaf and dumb not to hear the angry roar coming from above them as she continued to hang herself with her own careless words. "When I tired of him, I pointed my Mo in his direction." Vanessa floated to the ground, about six feet from where Brenna stood. "Mo didn't like the fact that old Bob John was laundering money for more than one set of drug gangs. Mo liked exclusivity in all things."

"Including his women?" Brenna asked. "Mo loves you. But did he know about your other men? Did you dominate Mo, Vanessa, like you later did with Dan Porter? Or, did you let him be the master in your sex games?"

Bob John's angry rumblings quieted, but the tension, just waiting to erupt still overlaid the area. The icy, seething silence at the mention of Dan Porter's name was even more deafening than his pained outburst at the initial knowledge that she had other lovers.

Vanessa laughed, a foul and nauseating sound, hinting at the depravity of the acts she'd committed with Mo. "Yes, Mo dominated me. I must say the man was creative, far more so than old Bob John. Mo was hung, and I did get some enjoyment from the sex acts. Although, there were times that I could barely contain my anger," she paused and an

even nastier smile crossed her face, "but I took it out on Danny boy later. My little pain slut loved me, too." She sighed. "Too bad I had to kill him. He was going to tell the sheriff all, and that would have spoiled my fun."

Bob John bristled. *"Ask her."*

*"Ask her what?"*

*"You know. I heard it in your mind. Ask her about Dan. Was she doing that weasel behind my back?"*

*"I heard you topped both of them, so what difference does it make?"*

*"She was mine, that's why. She only did Dan when I said so."*

*"Sounds to me like she was spreading herself around you, Dan, Mo, probably the other criminals she dealt with."*

*"No! She was mine."*

Obviously, Mo hadn't been the only man in Vanessa's warped world who liked to think he was "the one and only".

"So, you fucked Dan when Bob John wasn't looking?"

"Sure, I did. And why not? I got tired of playing the submissive sex slave," sneered Vanessa. "I have more power in my little finger than those weaklings had in their whole ugly, merely mortal bodies." The dark witch radiated power. "My real lover, Warrick Bettencourt, was killed by your coven, Brenna Lindsay. And for that act, each and every one of you will pay!"

*"You've got my help, white witch."*

Brenna barely registered Bob John's acquiescence as Vanessa let loose a stream of dark power in her direction.

As she moved to throw up a protection shield, she taunted, "Nice try, Vanessa. But that's not my whole name. Try again."

Brenna whirled away in a controlled cloud of earth and water energy. She was close enough to the glade to pull reserves from the scrying pond's static power. The air near the glade remained under Vanessa's control and would not heed Brenna's call.

Vanessa screeched when her shot missed. "You lucky bitch of a witch. But luck won't help you forever."

The dark witch hovered. Her eyes glued to Brenna, who used a temperature inversion to bounce around the area like a dust devil on speed. Vanessa let off a surge of power from time to time.

So far, she'd missed.

But, sooner or later, Vanessa would hit her. It was just a matter of time.

As she thought it, another bolt of ugly green energy came from the dark witch's hands. It singed the edge of Brenna's twister, leaching some of the energy.

"Brenna!" Ty's voice called to her from a distance ... in the real world.

*"No, Ty. Stay away. Get Drake and Rhea here! Go back."*

Too late.

Vanessa had turned at the sound of Ty's voice and spotted him. He ran toward Vanessa, who still hovered near the death tree.

As Vanessa turned her sights ~~and~~ ~~magick~~ on easier game, Brenna fumed. Where in Hecate's Hell were the witch reinforcements?

She couldn't wait. Ty's entrance on the scene was a diversion, just not the one she wanted.

Landing a few feet away from the tree, Brenna called out, "Vanessa. I'm over here, bitch."

As Vanessa switched her attention back, Brenna sent Bob John a message: *"A distraction now would be good."*

The area around the death tree grew darker as if someone had turned off the moon and the stars in the night sky. The command of the winds was torn screaming and wailing from Vanessa. Under the control of death now, the winds blew erratically, tossing the living to the ground.

Sulfurous flames erupted from the tree, and the pattern of those flames outlined the figure of a man staked to the mighty oak. His dead eyes opened in dark anguish, windows to the infinite span of death. Windows to his immeasurable anger and need for vengeance.

"Vanessa, you unfaithful bitch," roared Bob John's fiery ectoplasm. "You killed me. And now you'll die."

"No! You're dead," Vanessa shouted from the ground where she lay. She shot her particular brand of foul, negative energy toward the tree. "I consigned you to Hell. No one returns from the lower regions. No one."

"Wrong, bitch." Bob John laughed, then launched himself at her in a flash of angry flames.

At Bob John's distraction, Brenna crawled to Ty on the real plane. Reaching him, she covered them both with a web of positive earth energy. Simultaneously, she projected onto the astral plane and found Vanessa's astral self, also fighting Bob John's spirit.

"Brenna, can Bob John's spirit kill her?" Ty asked, as he held her in his arms under the green-blue glow of the protection web.

"No. I have to," Brenna said. She laid her head on his chest and placed her hand over his heart. She took strength from the love lying within that frail human organ. "I have to kill the evil on the astral plane like Rhea did with Bettencourt."

"But she had the power of three," Ty said. "You're just one little witch."

"No," she kissed him, sealing his words. Projecting into his head, she continued as she deepened the kiss, *"I have the power of two and the knowledge of her full name. That will do."*

*"Where are we?" Ty asked, as he looked around.*

*"We're on the astral plane. See? Bob John fights her astral body. If I can kill her here, she will die on the real plane, also."*

*"Tell me what I need to do," Ty said.*

*"Just hold on and love me."*

*"Always," Ty breathed, as he took her into his arms on the astral plane.*

*Pouring everything she had into a stream of positive energy, she aimed it at Vanessa's astral body. As the stream hit the dark witch, Bob John's astral body left the plane, his job done.*

*Vanessa's astral body turned and sent out curling threads of dark gray and green at Ty and Brenna's astral selves. While on the real plane, the dark witch pummeled the protection web with streams of negative power.*

*Feeling the drain on her protection web, Brenna dug deep, and before her appeared a golden glowing key. And next to it a locked box shimmered in all the hues of the universe.*

*"Take it, my child," the Goddess said. "He's already given you the key to his heart and soul. This is the key to his power, freely given. Take it. And use your combined strength for only good."*

*"Forever and ever, so mote it be," promised Brenna, as she reached for the key.*

*"So mote it be," echoed Ty's projector as he placed his hand over Brenna's and guided it to the box.*

*As they opened the lid, Vanessa increased the tendrils of evil seeking them out, but the energy from the box burst forth in a thick stream of golden-white light that swirled around, then vanished into Ty's astral body.*

*His arms tightened around Brenna. She felt his newly freed power. Better yet, she could access it—and did.*

*As they faced the dark witch together, they projected a stream of energy made up of their combined potency. It shone ruby red and amber gold. and it was purely positive and good.*

*"No!" screamed Vanessa. "You are only two. I sense no third. I will defeat you, and corrupt your power for my own." She poured more negative energy from the universe on both planes.*

*As the web of protection began to fail on the real plane, Brenna played her last card.*

*Using every atom of positive energy she and Ty could draw from the universe, she countered the dark witch's power, then intoned:*

*"Vanessa Rhiannon Hardon, I consign thee to the furthest regions of Hell, never to darken the real world or any world known to witch and mortal man again. So mote it be!"*

*The astral plane shook and wavered with the force of the explosion from the meeting of positive- and negative-charged magickal matter.*

*On the real plane, the effect was far less dramatic.*

*As Ty held Brenna protectively within his arms, they watched as one moment Vanessa was there, sending all the foul magick she had at her possession against them, then poof. She was gone.*

*The light of the waning moon and nighttime sky constellations once again shone down on them as if nothing had stolen away their light just moments ago. A warm southern zephyr blew across their skins. The sounds of night creatures chittered, chattered, and chirped around them. The majestic white owl sitting on a limb of the oak tree blinked once, then twice at them before she flew away.*

*"Is Vanessa really gone," Ty asked.*

*Brenna looked into his eyes. "What do you feel?"*

*"Love for you." He kissed her lips.*

*"Besides that," she said, nibbling on his lower lip.*

*"For the lack of a better word, everything feels fine."*

*"Exactly," she said. She laid her head on his chest and stroked the spot where Mo had shot him. "Things are the way they were before Vanessa came to this place. The veil between good and evil has been repaired."*

*"Not everything is as it was before," Ty reminded her. "We found each other."*

*"Well, that's a demonstration of the law of synthesis," Drake said, as he and Rhea stepped out from behind the oak. "Two realities join together to create a third one more powerful and real than the two. You are now full complements."*



"Strong enough to kick your butt for not coming back to help us?" Ty asked.

Rhea laughed out loud. "He's got you there, Drake."

Drake frowned, then smiled. "No, not quite that strong, but strong enough to get the job done." He held out his hands, one to Brenna and one to Ty. "Welcome to the Coven, Ty."

"Well, I did promise a power-pissing contest after it was all over, but could we take a rain check on that?" Ty asked. "I'd like a moment alone with my girl."

"No problem," Drake said. He gathered Rhea into his arms, whirled then vanished into the night sky.

"Will I be able to learn to do that?" Ty turned to Brenna and pulled her into his arms.

"Eventually," she said. "Ty, what are you doing?"

"I'm undressing you, little witch," he said.

"Why?" she asked.

"Isn't that obvious?" He pulled her shirt off and threw it to the ground. "Until I learn to fly the magickal way, I have to make do with the flying I already know."

And he proceeded to take her to the heights several times before they made their way back home.

The End.

#### **About the Author:**

Rae Morgan is the pen name for a multi-published author of suspense/thrillers. She's been married to the love of her life for far longer than she cares to remember. Her home is in Central Indiana.

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