

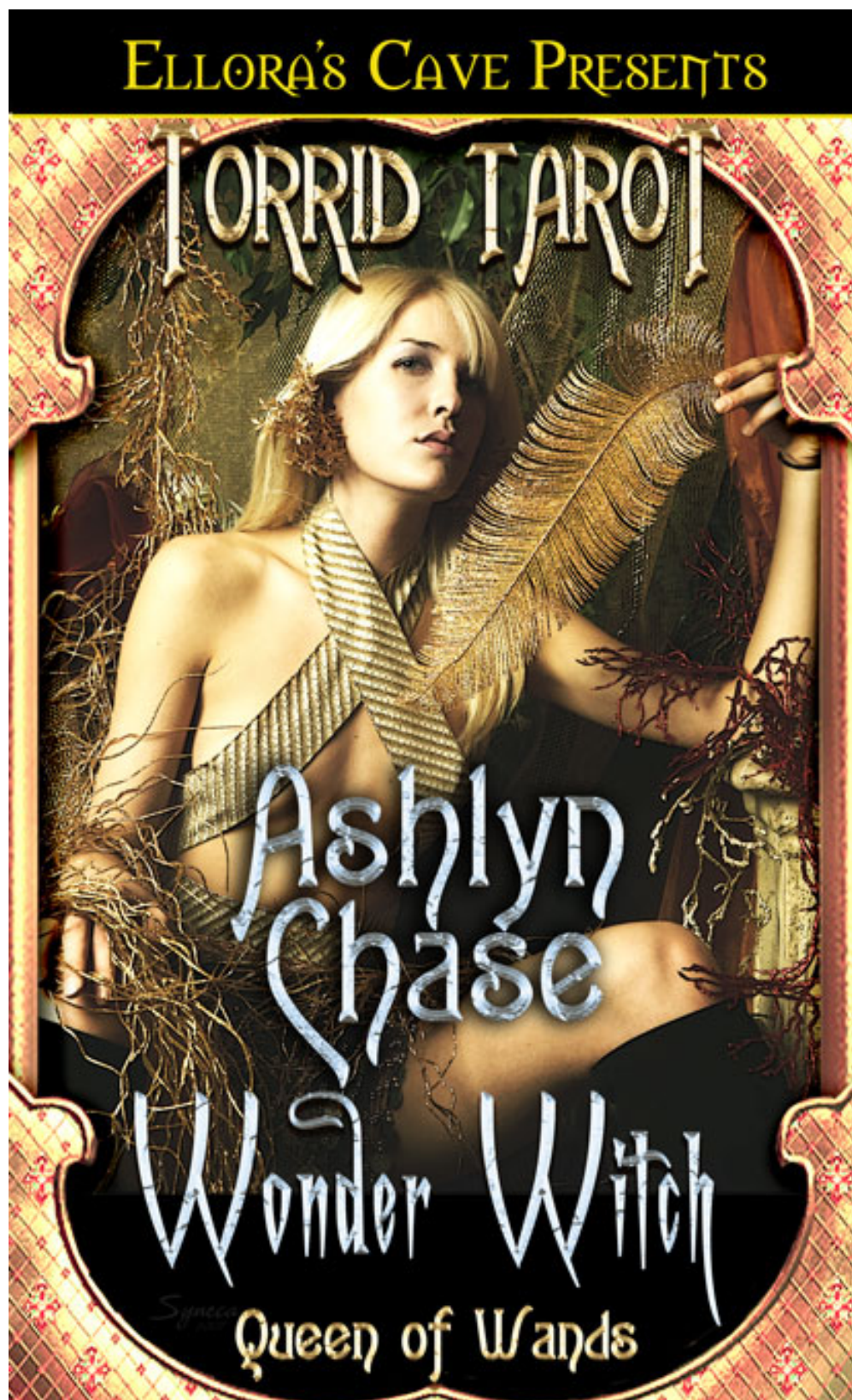
ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

TORRID TAROT

Ashlyn
Chase

Wonder Witch

Syneca
Queen of Wands



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Wonder Witch

ISBN 9781419910425

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Edited by Helen Woodall.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication June 2007

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WONDER WITCH

Ashlyn Chase

Dedication

To my friends at the League of Amazing Writers

www.leagueofamazingwriters.com

Many thanks to this group of writers and our readers. Without them I'd still write, but it wouldn't be half as much fun.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Cessna: Cessna Aircraft Company

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Meow Mix: Meow Mix Company

Ralph Lauren: Polo Ralph Lauren Corporation

Seasonale: Barr Laboratories, Inc.

Queen of Wands

The Queen of Wands represents an honorable, intelligent, friendly woman, well-dressed entrepreneur, confidante, or valuable partner – unless...

In the reversed position, she can be sexually indiscriminate, jealous and unstable. But don't we all have a dark side about once a month?

Tarot decks show the Queen standing or seated on a throne, holding the wand in her right hand, pointing straight upward, with the other end resting on the ground. Either standing or sitting, the wand is taller than she is. She may be crowned. If she is not, the deck depicts her as a well-dressed woman. A black cat sits before her.

Most decks depict her holding something in her left hand, often a scepter or more often a large sunflower. This flower denotes the power of the sun and strength. Like the King, she is relaxed and at ease with herself and her role.

The Queen should call to mind a woman of money and property. It is highly possible she earned that position herself rather than riding someone else's coattails. She displays a love of luxury, fashion and material things.

She can be generous and very loving, but even though her personality is magnetic, she also tends to be careful about the people she helps or loves. It must be sincere.

If the recipient of the reading is a male, she may represent his wife or someone he should marry. She's especially supportive and instrumental to his success while carrying her share of the burden.

If a woman is querying, the Queen of Wands represents a longtime confidante and supportive friend.

If the card represents a situation, rather than a person by its placement in the Tarot spread, then the time is right to initiate a new enterprise, especially one dealing with finances. The person whose cards are being read can expect help along the way and people to advise him or her, whose assistance will be very valuable. This card can also

indicate that the person being read has the qualities and wherewithal within themselves to succeed in their endeavors.

In the upright, that is, positive position, an honorable, friendly and intelligent woman is represented. She displays a love of luxury, but is supportive to the person receiving the reading and willing to help with money, advice or both. She may be a businesswoman, or a prosperous woman who knows how to manage her money to the advantage of her family and herself. She can be serious and a good counselor when the occasion calls for it. If the card represents timing or a situation, it indicates beneficial forces at work and time to move forward on an important endeavor, especially if it involves business or finance.

In the reversed, or negative position, the Queen represents a dangerous enemy. Since she operates from an intelligent standpoint you may be outwitted or deceived. She is especially dangerous if her business or family is threatened. If this card represents a situation, it's time to be cautious especially in important relationships, either business or personal. Don't step on any toes if you can help it!

Chapter One

"Sorry, Boss Dog, that's impossible. The League is exhausted. You've been working us too damn hard, splitting us up, sending us all over the freakin' world. We need a break." Joell wore nothing but a towel as she strolled by the mansion's pool and dipped her toes into the heated water. "Are you listening to me? I said no."

She spoke over her satellite phone to the coordinator and accountant of the League's activities. He wasn't really the boss, but she used the nickname for him once and it stuck. Joell's talents as a genuine, psychic tracking, wand-waving, astral-projecting, spell-casting witch had been good for the League. Too good. Crime sprees and unsolved cases abounded all over the world. Calls for the butt-kicking women came in almost daily and it was time to set limits.

She shook out her shoulder-length, wet blonde hair and finger-combed it. Suddenly she froze in place and her eyes widened. "Eight people kidnapped from a romance convention? Look, that's awful, but the answer is still 'no'. I won't be the one to ask the women to work another week of twenty-four sevens. We're supposed to have this week off, remember? Do you know what PMS is?"

Oh, my Goddess! It's that time? A shudder pierced my hide. I'm Crowe, by the way. In case you're wondering how I know about the League and everything that goes on here, I'm Joell's familiar and the group mascot. A black cat named 'Crowe' with an 'e,' named for Russell, of course. These babes can't keep their minds off sexy men, but you'll figure that out for yourselves soon enough.

"Look, I don't care how much money he offered us..." She paused with her mouth open and I think she stopped breathing for a few seconds. Then she staggered to a lounge chair and flopped onto it. "That much? Holy..."

I love my witch, regardless of her many faults, but they must have been offered a boatload. She's not one of those materialistic babes who'll sell her best friend for a pair of Manolo Blaniks. None of the League members are like that. Except Boss Dog, of course.

"I'm sure you know this, but let me remind you in case you've forgotten. We're superwomen, but we're women. We get PMS like every other healthy woman in her prime. I've done what I could by regulating our cycles and limiting them to four times a year with Seasonale, but during that one week every three months, we lock up our weapons and give the key to one of Rhea's men. The world's not ready for the inevitable disaster if we don't."

That's an understatement. What these women have is more like the newly discovered PMDD. Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder, or as I like to call it, Premenstrual Dangerous Divas.

She cringed and sank low in her chair. *What was he selling her now?*

"They were male models, huh? All eight of them?"

Uh oh. Now we're in trouble. He played to her weakness.

"Just so I have this straight, you want us to find and stop whoever kidnapped eight muscular men and do it unarmed." She looked at the sky and let out a deep breath in a whoosh. "Um... Let me think about it."

Didn't I tell you they can't resist a pretty face? Toss in a muscular body and it's like kryptonite. She's probably just wondering how to break it to the others. Between Joell and all her superheroine buddies, the latest challenge has been how to find time to do what they really love—writing their ultra hot erotic romance books. Their original mission? To save the world from boredom, one book at a time. You'd think that would be enough, but no. Not for these superwomen. They became crime fighters. It's one thing to talk about world peace. It's another to actually do something about it! I can't help but be proud of the important part I play.

I jumped onto Joell's lap and hoped she'd realize I had to go with her. She'd need me more than ever if she had no other weapons. She simply scratched me under the chin and... *Ah, that feels so good, I forget what I was going to say.*

I have no idea how Boss Dog found them but they haven't had a moment to themselves since. Fine for him. He lives anonymously in Hawaii somewhere, screening clients, telling other people what to do and collecting the money to pay salaries and credit card expense accounts. If the women didn't hate boring business and accounting details, they'd never put up with it. Apparently, he told them he'd take care of all the mundane hassles so that they had the freedom to write their sexy novels, fight crime and look terrific while doing it.

I bumped her phone hand with my head, trying to get her to hang up. C'mon, Joell. You can still say absolutely not and stick to your guns. It's not too late to refuse.

She heaved a giant sigh. "Go ahead, Boss Dog. Tell me what you know so far and I'll inform the others."

Damn. I should have given her hand a good hard bite.

* * * * *

Joell powered up her miniature laptop and threw a sunblock spell over her fair-skinned body while she waited. Good. They're going to teleconference. I wanted to watch. Sometimes we're lucky enough to catch the women in action, if you know what I mean. If they happen to be in compromising positions when their red lights go off, they'll answer the call anyway and more often than not, they'll just keep on rockin' and rollin' while listening with one ear.

"Ah, let's see, Crowe. Whom will we catch in the act today?" she said aloud and snickered.

Clearly, my witch enjoyed a little voyeurism as much as I did. She pushed the red button that connected the mansion with each member of the League. In seconds, her friends were answering the call.

One by one they appeared on the screen. Sadly, none of them were indisposed at that moment, although Magda, one of the Aussies, hadn't shown up yet. There was still hope. Joell probably wished this assignment had come in on someone else's leadership rotation since they had all been working too hard. I could hear the weary sighs in their greetings.

"Hi all. Sorry about the intrusion."

"You bloody well are not," said the clipped Aussie accented voice of Magda.

"Hey, where are you, babe? I can't see you on my screen."

"That's because I know you like to watch and I won't let you unless you promise I won't have to accept this assignment. I assume you're calling because you have a job for us?"

In the background I heard puffing, like someone doing impressive physical work.

Joell sighed dramatically. "Oh all right, yes. It's a deal."

Magda came into view. Behind her on the bed, a handsome blond bloke slammed in and out of her doggy style. Laughter and whistles immediately exploded from the entire membership.

"Yeah, yeah. Go ahead and laugh. I'm getting some and you all have to work. You know what this week is, don't you?"

Joell grinned. "Wait until you hear what the job is." She had an evil sense of humor sometimes. "I wouldn't have accepted this assignment, but it's a personal favor to our contact and...well, you'll understand why I took it."

"Okay," Phoenix said. "We're listening." *Man, she looked tired.*

"I'm not," Magda chirped, obviously delighted to return her attention to sex play. She grabbed a vibrator and resumed moaning as she pleased her clit while the guy fucked her senseless.

His sculpted body in action captivated me. I watched his glowing pecs contract and his biceps bulge with each thrust into Magda's happy cunt. Meanwhile her large breasts

suspended over the bed bounced each time he rammed in to the hilt. *Man, this couple was hot!*

I love to watch people fucking. If I could watch and lick my balls at the same time, I would.

For some damn reason, I decided to try it. I sat at Witchy's feet, balanced on my left foreleg, lifted my butt high enough to not only reach my balls, but also to see the screen and...

I'm afraid I made a spectacle of myself. I only caught a glimpse of the beautiful couple screwing their brains out when I fell over backward and thunked my head on witchy's foot.

Well, that didn't work.

Thank goodness nobody saw me. They were all too mesmerized by the live porn on everyone's screen.

I turned my attention back to the others. Maybe that would help me control my horniness until I could do something about it.

Phoenix is the one who originally put this band of babes together. Her waist-length, wavy blonde hair hung limp and her face had lost its rosy glow. She's always suffered from taking on too much. I may belong to my Wonder Witch, but I can't help worrying about all of them. These women are my life and I'd die of grief if anything happened to any one of them.

Phoenix may have been overdoing her telepathic skills. That exhausts her, but she'll push herself beyond her limits for a cause.

I don't know if Joell noticed or not, but she continued on as if she hadn't.

"As you know, one of the largest romance conventions in the world is taking place this weekend."

"Some of us are attending. Is that why the assignment was fielded to us?" Phoenix asked.

"Yes. Partly. Here's the scoop. Eight top male models have been kidnapped. It's up to us to kidnap them back. Well, all except Magda, of course. She's off the hook."

"Bugger! Male models? Bugger."

Joell cackled for a while, then coughed and calmed down enough to spell out the details. "Okay, we don't know why or by whom they were taken, but they all have one thing in common."

"What's that?" Victoire asked in her French Canadian accent.

Victoire looked somewhat typical of a French beauty. Long, thick, dark brown hair, deep-set brown eyes with a knowing sparkle and her skin sported a perpetual tan. She was the assertive one who'd speak up and whip the rest of the crew into a frenzy. She'd probably be Joell's best backup to get the women on board with this.

"They're all represented by the same agent. Apparently, he's desperate to get his models back, hopefully in time for the Model of the Year contest. All of them have a good shot at becoming this year's male model of the year and their agent's paying us top dollar to retrieve them." Joell waggled her eyebrows. "Cha-ching."

Yeah, the others didn't look impressed. Nice try, though.

"Does this mean they've been captured by the competition?" Sakura asked.

Sakura was taller than the rest, with blonde hair and red highlights. Combine that with a killer body and she had take-charge men eating out of her hand.

"Possibly. Listen, before we jump to any conclusions, let me do a locator spell. I'll have more information for you then."

"While the others are standing by, Joell, I'll see what I can find out about the models on the internet, but I'm not available except as backup."

"Thanks, Sakura. Your computer skills will be a valuable asset from wherever you are."

"I'm still on assignment in Egypt."

"I know I won't be able to get the whole League involved, but if I have even half of you, we can get this thing over with much faster."

"So what's the agent's name?"

"Gold. Stan Gold."

Phoenix practically gasped. "These are Gold's guys?"

"Yeah, what do you know about them?"

"Only that they're the most drool-worthy, drop-dead gorgeous men on the planet."

"Shit. I wish I wasn't in Egypt," Sakura said.

Joell smiled wickedly. "Looks like this assignment won't be so bad. I'll need a few minutes to prepare and go into trance, so that'll give you time to retrieve your pads and pencils to record what I say when I'm under."

"You'll be deeper than an alpha hypnotic trance?" Crystasha asked with just a hint of her leftover Russian accent.

Crystasha, a blue-eyed brunette, used weapons with such precision she was often called in as the sharpshooter. She was just as adept with a blade and certain magical objects like her staff. Oh, she wouldn't like the business of being disarmed. Not at all.

Joell nodded. "Yes. As deep as I can go. Perhaps I can get a description of the kidnappers. I imagine it took more than one person to carry this out. Lyonene, can you get your sketch pad ready? Your remote viewing and artistic skills could help a great deal."

"Absolutely. But what kind of group would do this?"

Lyonene was the shortest at only five foot and one inch. Don't underestimate her, though. She's skilled with swords and knives, but refuses to carry a gun. The others often called on her for their breaking and entering needs. She can slip into small spaces and if there are surprises on the other side, she can protect herself nicely with a variety of martial arts.

"I'll bet some very desperate horny women are behind it," Vesper quipped.

Ah, Vesper. What can I say about her? She often injects a glib comment or two just at the right time to keep the group from getting too heavy. She's the newest member and we're still getting to know her skills, but she's probably the only one who can write a sex scene and experience it at the same time. I know that impressed the hell out of Joell and me.

Vesper grinned from ear to ear and I knew she was up to something. "Say, how're you doing there, Mags?"

Madga's quiet moans were growing harder to hide. Vesper had to be encouraging her to let go and enjoy. The women laughed and watched as the mahogany-haired Aussie squeezed her turquoise eyes shut and started to tremble.

"Oh, God! Yeas, yeas, yeaaaaaow!"

Joell chuckled. "Vesper, you have a way of keeping us focused on priorities."

"Hey, don't rule out that horny women theory as a possibility!"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. The horny women. You're right. It's a long shot, but nothing surprises me anymore."

Clearly, we can see where Joell's priorities lay – I mean lie.

"Okay, group. I'm going to need about thirty seconds of preparation time," she said.

Magda's partner fell behind her onto the bed and she collapsed where she was, panting. "That was bloody good."

Joell placed the laptop on its patio station and dashed up two flights of wide stairs. I followed close on her heels. When she reached the third set, the stairway narrowed and spiraled up to her turret—her high-tech sacred space. As soon as we arrived, she clicked on her room's laptop, hit the red button and instantly connected to the rest.

"I'm in place, but I need absolute silence while I do this."

"We know how you work," Rhae said. "Do your thing and forget we're here."

Rhae had been playing with one of her pets so quietly I almost forgot she was online. But how could I forget a black-haired beauty adept with a rapier and dagger who can shapeshift into a panther? She could be as stealthy as one in her human form too.

Joell retrieved her tarot card deck, a red candle and her wand. That was all she really needed in an emergency like this.

During Sabbats, the interested members held elaborate rituals around the grand altar she'd had built in the ballroom. That's when she brought out all the bells and whistles, so to speak. Her incense, athame, cauldron, protection potion, precious stones...the works. A few of the women were Pagans and the rest showed up to support their friends when they chose to—like Beltane.

I especially enjoy Beltane. That's when the ballroom turns into the ball room, if you know what I mean. Oh—I'm so clever with puns. I hope you'll forgive me. I really can't help myself sometimes.

But I'll have to reflect on their orgies later. At the moment, my witch needs me to protect her circle as she gathers power. I watched as she waved her wand in a wide circle, a bluish-white light emanating from the tip. Then she lit the candle by touching the tip to it. It floated upward to a position higher than her five-foot-seven inches, but low enough to only set off the smoke detector if a sizeable fire were burning. Joell couldn't stand being jolted out of trance when the damn thing went off, so she simply disconnected it. And by disconnected it, I mean she ripped it out of the ceiling and smashed it with a hammer. That was during her last bout with PMS. She kept magic to a minimum after that and decided not to use it at all during that quarterly week except in emergencies.

Joell stood at the base of the pentacle she had painted on the floorboards and placed her wand at her feet. Her significator card, the Queen of Wands, she set on top of the deck. There couldn't be a more perfect card for her to use as her significator.

The Queen of Wands represented her practical, yet adventurous spirit, especially as it pertained to helping others. When in its upright position, it signified a sympathetic

and understanding person. Sincere, friendly and graceful. An entrepreneur, but in ways that would benefit others whenever possible. The League had their pet charity, Heifer International. Pardon the pun. I didn't see that one coming. A portion of whatever they earned went to combating world hunger, one cow at a time.

In the card's reversed position, it meant instability, fickleness, jealousy and wanton indiscriminate sexual behavior. *Hey, everyone has a dark side. Just wait a couple of days when PMS brings out the evil twin in all of them!*

She closed her eyes and raised her hands to the sky. Next, she took several deep pranic breaths, with eyes closed to connect to the energies above and below the earth. At last, deep in trance, she spoke her opening spell.

"At this time and in this place, I reach out with my mind toward space. I reach to times since time began and what shall be of Earth and clan." The nine-yard protective circle she'd cast with her wand glowed around us.

She took several more deep breaths to confirm and strengthen the connection. "I draw in power. I draw in images. I draw in words. I draw in emotions. I draw back within myself things that have never been seen not heard nor felt before. To these images, I give life so that others know the magic, the beauty, the mystery that I have sought and found within and in the world around me and in the stars strewn like jewels on the velvet-black sky. So shall it be!"

Joell crouched and took the Tarot cards and shuffled while concentrating and imparting her energy to them. At last she cut the deck and passed her hand over each half. Picking up one half and sliding the other beneath it, she stood again. It was time to declare her intentions.

"I call upon the mighty forces of Nature! I call upon all good and protective spirits! The forces of the earth, of the waters and of the air. Hear me now. Help me now. Lend power and protection to the Goddess's precious life forms that are now endangered. May the vast forces, the power and energy which I call forth grow and redouble!" The

candle's flame grew and the room glowed brighter. She closed her eyes. "Sakura, name these men while I concentrate on their forms."

Sakura stared at a different screen. Slowly, she read the names. "Tristan. Angelo. Ryan. Brett. Gabriel. Marcus. Jonathan and Scott."

Joell nodded, eyes still closed. "These men are aided and protected. Our power to find them grows and my vision is true. Lead us to them, keeping them safe until we are able to return them to their rightful place and destiny. So be it."

She opened her eyes and passed her free hand over the deck. Her significator card flew out of the middle of the deck and landed on the pentacle in the reversed position. Shit. PMS must have already started! No wonder the babes look and sound so tired.

She passed her hand over the deck again. Several cards flew off the top and landed on the floor in front of her. Some south and slightly to the left of her significator card, so southwest, the others right on top of her Queen of Wands. Her eyes narrowed and she frowned as she read the meaning of the cards. "It seems they've been split up. Four models with at least one perp, headed in opposite directions."

She studied the cards at length. On the lower left sat The Star atop four of the cards. "Rhae. Are you still in Southern California?"

"Yes."

"Half of the models are coming your way." She closed her eyes and I knew she was focused on seeing the images as they swirled in front of her third eye. "Take care. There are two perps, ugly, inside and out—and cunning. They're working with several others and their intentions are exploitive. They're heading toward the Valley."

Rhae said, "As soon as I have descriptions and anything else you can give me, I'm on my way."

"Lyonene, are you receiving the images I see?"

"I am."

Lyonene's pencil sped across her sketchbook. It always amazed me how she could capture details by remote viewing. My Wonder Witch, I call her that sometimes, says she picks up those images from some level on which we're all connected and tries to telegraph them mentally, right to Lyonene. The results are incredibly accurate from what I understand.

"Take a League sister or two with you. They have lots of backup once they get there."

"Then they can't get there," Rhae said with firm conviction. "Where do we take them once we have them?"

"To the mansion. We'll meet here, then reunite them with their agent, I hope in time for the convention. We can even provide security for the contest if we're able to solve this thing quickly. The agent will pay extra if they're back and participating in the contest."

"I'll go with Rhae," Vesper said. "I'm in Washington State. I think I'm the closest one right now."

"Good. I sense strength there. One perp is scarred and has a nose like a bird of prey. The other looks like a shaggy lion and is just as cunning as the first. Take Angel with you and take care. Angel, are you in Alaska and willing to back up Vesper and Rhae?"

"You know I would, but I'm not available. I'm still tying up some loose ends in Texas."

"I want to help, but bugger, I'm in Oz," Magda complained.

"Oh, now she wants to help..." Vesper teased.

"You can take the calls while I'm on assignment—"

Magda cursed. "You always get the sexy assignments while I have to answer the bloody phone." She turned and looked over her shoulder. "You don't mind if I have to put you on hold for official business, do you lover?" He shook his head, as much as a

sated man whose hands are tucked behind his head can. Magda grinned. "Good. I'm staying here, then."

Rhae said, "I'll be okay. I have my pets after all. They go with me everywhere." She could be seen patting a manly blond head next to her. He must be kneeling at her feet. How she inspires such worship! But I knew they'd be no help at all if she got into major trouble. They loved her and would try to protect her, but they had no superpowers other than their good looks.

Joell still in trance barely nodded and continued on, "The magician card is in the east with the other four. I'm sensing them more clearly than the ones heading west. I can tell you now, there's magic involved."

Lyonene spoke up. "I'm in Ontario. As soon as I finish these sketches and fax them off to all of you, I'll head down there."

"We'll need you if you can get here soon. I sense some dark mystical forces in play. I should get involved and not only because I'm right on top of the models here. Perhaps that's how they were able to capture and subdue eight muscular guys in the first place—with magic."

Oh, the things they'd do with a double entendre like that if only she weren't in trance! I bet she'd love to be on top of the male models.

"It makes sense for me to go to New York," said Victoire. "I know it like the back of my hand from my modeling days, from the ritziest neighborhoods right down to the poorest back alleys."

"I think you'd better concentrate on the back alleys. I'm getting a real clandestine devious vibe from that perp."

"What can I do from Saint Petersburg?" Chrystasha asked.

"Just stand by. If Vesper or Rhae need you on the West Coast, perhaps you can come across the straight and get to Alaska, then down to California fairly fast."

"But I'm in Saint Petersburg, Florida! On my way to help Phoenix with her assignment since I finished mine early."

"Why didn't we hear about that?"

Crystasha rolled her eyes. "It was supposed to be a surprise."

Phoenix offered a grateful smile. "It's not much of a surprise now."

Joell nodded. "Well, in that case, you can help her get that sewn up quickly and stand by for all of us."

"And what about the kidnapped models near you?" Sakura asked.

"They're still in New York. Hidden somewhere. That means Brigid in Pennsylvania and I are closest. My door looks out on the Hamptons at the moment. We should immediately interview and investigate the agent. Maybe he has more information he's not telling us."

There's one thing about this mansion I forgot to tell you. It's hard to explain since I'm just an uneducated cat, but I'll do my best. It seems to exist in several places. The babes can step out of their rooms, walk down the grand stairways and out into...wherever they want to be. I guess it's in another dimension. Then they can all walk back in and meet in the large conference room or the library.

You should see the library! Of course, what would you expect from a group of oversexed erotic romance authors? A huge library and loads of soundproof bedrooms. Sorry to be so vague, but that's the only way I can explain the house. Since Joell is mansion-sitting this month, she thought it would be nice to have her front door here on the East Coast, near the Big Apple.

"So Brigid. Are you available to help me take them on?"

"Officially under protest, Joell. You and I both know this is the week we lock up the weapons. That means I'll be working without my bow and arrow, spear, sword, fireballs and even my harp since I can use it to shatter objects."

"Fuck!" Rhea shouted. "You mean to say we're still going to hand them over to my pets and let them hide the key?"

"I'm sorry, everyone. We have to. How many innocents could get hurt if we're distracted and off our game, not to mention how any one of us could go ballistic and fire off a weapon come what may. Superwomen with PMS are extremely volatile anyway, but with a weapon, armed and dangerous doesn't begin to describe it."

"How the hell are we supposed to apprehend anybody?"

"We work with the police."

I heard the groans. That meant playing by "the rules".

Brigid eyed her suspiciously. "So, you're even going to surrender your cute little Derringer with the pink mother-of-pearl handle?"

The peanut gallery snickered in the background. They loved to tease my Wonder Witch about her less than five-inch, ultra lightweight gun, but she barely needed weapons for her role.

"Stop calling my physical weapon of choice 'cute'. It's easy to hide in its specially made holster inside my wide leather belt, boots or Louis Vuitton bag. And yes, my weapon goes into the safe with everything else. We'll only call the police in for the arrest. I know this will be a difficult assignment, so I won't try to coerce anyone into taking it. Still, I know you and I'm sure you won't let each other down."

More groans. "Joell, I'll get to the West Coast right away and back up Rhae and Vesper," Angel said.

"Yeah and I can get to the West Coast and help Rhea," Crystasha added. "It sounds like she's going to need it, despite what she thinks."

"Hey, I'll take all the help I can get, Crystasha," Rhea chimed in. "Now that I know what we're expected to do without."

Sakura saluted. "I can be back from Egypt in about twenty-four hours. The diplomat I'm protecting is set to give his controversial speech tomorrow."

"Good. I think the more eyes and ears we have will be important. And remember, if any of you need magic to fight magic, I'll get my ass wherever I'm needed. Meanwhile we'll all be able to infiltrate the romance convention itself. Who'll be the paid attendees?"

"Kali and I are," Lace said.

Phoenix sighed. "I wish I could jump in, but I'm..."

"No need to explain, Phoenix. I felt your drained energy as soon as you logged on. That BDSM assignment must be kickin' the living shit out of you."

"I think the best thing I can do for all of us, is to have a little talk with Boss Dog."

"Goddess bless you!"

"Plus, I'll get the phones if Magda really wants in."

"I bloody well do. Chee will probably come with me. Right, Chee?"

"Yeah, of course. I was being quiet since I thought... Well, forget what I thought. Magda and I will be on the next flight from Down Under."

I hope Joell doesn't intend to leave me behind. Knowing her, she'll try to protect me. Trying to act innocent, I licked my paw and pretended I wasn't paying attention. I would, of course, be stowing away in that Louis Vuitton bag and going with her since she couldn't get along without me.

Chapter Two

The fax machine on Joell's desk whirred and squealed announcing a transmission. Boy, that Lyonene is fast on the draw. Sorry about the groaner, folks. As I said, I can't help myself at times.

Jumping up on the shiny, walnut surface that held the usual electronic equipment, I saw that Lyonene's drawings came through with incredible detail. Her skill as an artist was well-known. The features exhibited so much detail and the shading made each figure look completely three-dimensional. If the perps were as butt ugly as their illustrations, I felt sorry for them.

Joell and Brigid's bad guys could turn a cat's stomach even if they were sculpted out of tuna. One had greasy dark hair. At least the way it hung in strings made it look greasy. He had a scar on his chin and his nose looked as if it had been broken one too many times. The other's nose was too big for his small beady eyes and his ears stuck out of his big, bald head.

Maybe I could help by running across their paths. If they were as dumb as they looked, they'd think they were jinxed. Then they might make mistakes leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy of defeat. I listened to the babes talk strategy and on occasion I helped with a bit of psychological warfare of my own. Even if Joell had me cloaked, I could run between a perp's feet as he tried to get away, making him think he tripped over his own feet. I love adding insult to injury and I'm just the cat to do it.

Meanwhile, Sakura had sent the website URLs of the model victims to everyone. Joell quickly closed her sacred circle and checked them out, hitting the print button four times. I meandered over to the printer to take a look at the models. Joell's face said, "hubba hubba" so loudly, I could almost hear her.

The four models she'd be searching for in New York were Tristan, Gabriel, Scott and Angelo. Oh my Goddess! That Angelo could make her crash her broomstick! I know how much she loves Italian men and this guy was wearing an open bomber jacket without a shirt on while leaning against a Cessna. I've never seen rippled abs so firm! His face was classic chiseled perfection crowned by thick black curly hair, trimmed neatly and short on the sides. If I'm not mistaken, a sigh escaped her lips as she picked up his printout.

Tristan had a completely different look. Almost boyish, but that physique sprouting above ripped jeans was all man. A couple of veins on his bulging biceps attested to vigorous workouts as well as a complete lack of fat on the guy. His intense hazel eyes and thick lashes were his most outstanding feature, making him resemble Josh Hartnett. He even had straight tousled light brown hair and an impish smile. Come to think of it, Tristan might give Angelo more competition than I'd first thought. Joell likes 'em young and energetic. Oh yeah. She wouldn't stop until she had these two safely ensconced in the mansion. Most likely in her queen-size bed!

"C'mon, Crowe. We have places to save, people to do and things to go! Wait a minute..." She dropped her head and shook it at the floor.

Uh huh. This assignment wasn't going to be easy.

* * * * *

Joell and Brigid met at an outdoor café in Manhattan. I was thrilled when she invited me along and I didn't even have to sneak into her bag. I sat on my witch's lap and purred proudly while they sipped cappuccino and talked strategy. She had thrown a glamour over me so that I blended in with my surroundings, making it possible to go everywhere with her. I'd ride in her Louis Vuitton bag when we had to move through crowds. That was just fine with me since I didn't want to be stepped on!

Every now and then she'd reach down and give me a scratch under my chin. It must have looked to passersby as if she was scratching her black leather-clad thigh, or

her... Well, you can guess what I was going to say, right? Her pussy? Oh, again with the irresistible pun! I slay myself. But if I know my Joell, she didn't care what they thought.

"I'm glad you were able to get here, Brigid. I really need you."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. So you want me to question the model's agent?" Brigid asked.

"Please. I'm better at picking up vibes if I can just quietly observe."

"Your built-in bullshit detector should come in handy, then."

"Is that what you call my psychic sensitivity? A bullshit detector?"

"Oh, sorry. I guess that's a little irreverent."

She shrugged. "Just direct and to the point as always, Bridge. I like that. No 'bullshit detector' needed with you."

"So, we're thinking along the same lines, then? Check out the source of the information first and be sure he's not holding anything back."

"Exactly. I can't imagine why he'd pay an arm and a leg to get his guys back and refuse to cooperate fully, but you never know."

"So where and when do we meet him?"

"He's meeting us. He should be here any minute."

"Here? Out in the open? Do you think that's wise?"

"Why not? I threw glammers over both of us. Only this time, we're far from glamorous. As far as anyone walking by is concerned, we look like a couple of elderly women. They'll probably figure we're his doting mother and maiden aunt."

No wonder she didn't care if people saw her scratching her crotch. Old ladies can get away with anything. Come to think of it, so can cats. Hmm... Maybe I'll lick my balls now.

"Here he comes. I see him. White shirt, Ralph Lauren suit at one o'clock."

Brigid turned and must have spotted the handsome gentleman with gray temples, wearing a gray tailored suit over his fit build. She made a low growl in the back of her throat and licked her lips.

"He's all yours, sweets. I like mine younger. Besides, if you can get close, you may be able to extract more from him while I evaluate the information."

Yeah, I'll bet she'd like to extract some more from him. Geez, the puns just write themselves some days.

"Well, since we look like a couple of old ladies, he's young enough for me."

Did I mention these babes can't avoid the urge to size up every guy that captures their attention? Actually, I shouldn't imply they're even trying to avoid it. I don't think they are. To them, good-looking guys are potential lovers until proven unsuitable. I think it's half sport, half religion. Of course, the women are the ones who want to be worshipped!

The gentleman approached them and said, "Good day ladies." He thrust his hand toward Joell for a handshake. "I trust you found the place easily."

"Yes, Mr. Gold." She stayed seated, but shook his hand. "Your directions were perfect."

He turned toward Brigid and I saw Joell casually flick a finger in her direction. He seemed momentarily stunned, then took Brigid's outstretched hand and brought it to his lips.

"And who is this enchanting lady?" They held each other's rapt gazes.

Since Brigid seemed momentarily speechless, Joell answered the question. "This is my colleague, Brigid. Anything you say to me you can say to her."

"Delighted to meet you, Brigid."

As he sat in the only available chair, Brigid sighed and said, "Likewise."

Joell sipped her cappuccino and waited for him to give the waiter his order. Bottled, non-carbonated water with a lemon. Blah. How boring. He was definitely not the type

of guy my decadent witch wanted. She liked men who would roll themselves in chocolate and let her lick it off.

Brigid didn't seem to mind, though. "Mr. Gold..."

"Please call me Stan."

Brigid grinned and said his name in a low, sultry voice. "Stan. Can you tell us anything that might help give a little insight into the men named Tristan, Gabriel, Scott and Angelo?"

"Why only those four?"

"We think they may still be local."

"Well..." He scratched his clean-shaven chin. "I don't know. Tristan and Angelo are far from home. Tristan is from New Zealand and Angelo is from Italy."

Uh oh. Joell was a goner for accents. She'd probably want both of them. If Brigid hadn't captured the agent's attention so quickly, I'd almost feel sorry for her being left out... Hey, I think I know what that little finger-flick was about.

She was obviously giving the two of them a jumpstart on mutual attraction and letting Brigid do all of the talking. She could concentrate on his vibes with his defenses lowered and Brigid could concentrate on him. Even my over-sexed, wanton witch had her priorities straight when it came to the job at hand. The overwhelming desire to get her hands on these guys could only help her motivation.

"They were sharing a room at the hotel," he added.

Brigid gave him an unmistakably seductive stare. "We should really have a look at that room."

That's the stuff, Brigid. Let's get right to it. My babes were always ready for action.

* * * * *

The manager, Alan Stewart according to his name tag, stood behind the reception desk and motioned for us to enter. He led us through a door at the back and down the hall, saying, "Thank you for coming. I wish there was more to tell you other than the

suspicion that eight men seem to have disappeared, but..." He opened a door marked Security. "The evidence we should have had seems to be missing."

Joell looked at him as if she'd picked up on something suspicious other than his handlebar moustache. *Who wears those things anymore?*

"This is the night security guard. He waited to speak to you."

The sleepy-eyed balding man shook hands with Joell and Brigid and nodded to Gold as if they'd already met. "The security cameras recorded nothing unusual except for a period of static between two-ten and two-twenty a.m."

"Where were you at that time?"

"I was doing my rounds. I didn't see anything as I walked around the lobby except a couple of black stretch limos that pulled away from the curb. I didn't get a look at the drivers or occupants. I didn't catch plate numbers."

"Did you find any witnesses? Did anyone see anything suspicious?"

"The clerk at the front desk said she was reading and no one came in or left or she would have looked up. I'm sorry there's not more to go on."

The manager looked mildly annoyed, then faced Stan Gold. "Why don't you take the women upstairs to the rooms. I'll come up in a few minutes with the passkey."

Joell ignored the nod from Stan and said, "I think it would be better if we all go up together," with such authority that it sounded like more than a friendly suggestion. The manager looked nervous as if he thought she was ready to take him by the mustache and drag him up there with us, but he nodded.

Gold was still talking to Brigid as if he loved the sound of his voice. "I doubt they knew each other before this. It's the first major convention for Tristan. Angelo was last year's model of the year and so it's extremely important that he be there. Scott's from the Los Angeles area and Gabriel's from some little town on Lake Superior."

The manager led the way to the elevator and pushed the button for the top floor. Joell kept a close eye on him at all times and I sensed his discomfort as any animal

could. He didn't smell like fear – exactly, but there was some kind of “Oh no” going on inside his head, I'd bet.

Gold chuckled and his lips turned up in a wide smile. “Angelo made me a fortune last year. Whoever wins it this year will guarantee a banner year for their agent. These hot romance novel covers, worldwide conventions and all the publicity generated for the model competitions on TV just get bigger and bigger. I'd like that agent to be me, but the contest takes place in three days, so I'll be doubly grateful if you can get them here by then, in competitive shape.”

“Of course,” Brigid said, breathily. The scent of money permeated the elevator air. Or was that Mr. Gold's cologne? Chanel Egoiste, I believe. Ninety-nine dollars a bottle.

Joell caught the manager's eye and held his gaze. He inserted a finger in his collar and loosened the tight shirt around his neck.

“I've really got a lot riding on this. It's more than just pride and money. I, uh—I'm embarrassed to admit this, but I was so confident of winning this year, I went and made a stupid bet I can't afford to lose.”

“Oh? Wh...?”

The elevator doors whooshed open and they followed Mr. Stewart down the hall.

Gold looked embarrassed and glanced at the manager. “I'd rather not get into that right now. If you can find them, I won't have to explain the details at all.”

Joell interjected, “If there's any information that will give us a lead and you really want these guys returned, you'll spill it.”

I could see what they're doing. They were all set up to pull the good cop, bad cop routine. I should have seen it coming. Must be slipping in my eighth life.

“I'll ah...” He jerked his head up in the direction of the hotel manager, quickly. “I'll fill you in later.”

Stewart let them into the room and stood outside as Brigid and Gold went in. Joell closed the door, staying out in the hall with him.

"So, tell me what happened. Mr. Stewart. When did you first hear they were missing?"

"Not until I arrived this morning."

Joell crossed her arms and cocked her head. "I guess you're not that important, then. Most hotel managers would be called the minute it was reported."

"I—I um..."

"I, um, what?" my witch demanded. She narrowed her eyes. "What are you hiding?"

"Nothing!" Stewart sounded a mite too defensive.

"I don't believe you. If you really are the manager of a hotel this size and something this significant happens, I think you'd demand to be told every single detail. And since this is my investigation, I demand that you tell me what you know."

The manager's skin took on a pink sheen as if warm and starting to sweat. "It—it's my first week on the job since the other manager quit."

Joell rolled her eyes. "Dandy. "

"I'm sorry but I have so much going on at once, I don't know what to do. The head chef is yelling because his budget was cut and he has to change the whole menu, I just had to fire a bartender for drinking on the job and his girlfriend quit too. Now I need to hire two more as quickly as possible and of all the things for the hotel to run low on...toilet paper! Those spring break idiots toilet papered the world last week."

"So, when did you last see them?"

"The spring breakers?"

Joell looked at the ceiling and mumbled something about strength. "No. The models."

"I didn't. They'd all arrived and checked into their rooms Monday evening. Mr. Gold arranged for a meeting room, but I never went up there."

"Did you hear any rumors? Anything that might make them leave on their own?"

"No. Nothing."

"So you're fairly certain they wouldn't have left Mr. Gold in the lurch. At least not voluntarily."

"I can't imagine it. Besides all of their things were left behind in their rooms."

"So you knew that all eight of them were indeed here?"

"I never saw them with my own eyes. Mr. Gold said he'd arranged for them to arrive Monday evening so they could relax and rest up for the hectic days ahead. I took care of the booking and checked that they'd signed in myself."

"That's considerate of you." If she came any closer to him, they'd be breathing the same air. "What aren't you telling me? I need information."

"Nothing. I—I'm just upset that this happened in my hotel. These models are the highlight of the conference. If they're not here, we could have a female riot on our hands."

Joell raised one eyebrow. "So that's all you're concerned about? Your hotel being stampeded by disappointed women?" She frowned at the hotel manager. "There's more to it, isn't there?"

"Look, if you're accusing me of something, I'll have to call my lawyer, but shouldn't the police be asking these questions?"

"Maybe. Why haven't you called them?"

Joell must be off her game. Either that or she's trying to trip this guy up. People call the League instead of the police.

"Mr. Gold wanted this to be kept absolutely quiet."

"Is that all that's stopping you?"

He looked like a trapped animal. Glancing left and right, he looked for an escape route. Joell leveled her most intense stare at the man. *It was the kind of thing that would make me confess to tipping over my litter box – even if I hadn't.*

"To hell with what he wants. I'm calling the police." He pulled a cell phone out of his jacket's inner pocket.

Joell put her hand on his wrist. "That won't be necessary. I was just leaving."

Uh oh. I'm pretty sure her intimidation tactics backfired.

* * * * *

"So, I think that went well," Brigid said when she breezed into the mansion.

"I'm glad it went well for one of us." Joell was slumped on the silk upholstered armchair in the vestibule, her chin resting on her fist, dangling a pendulum over a city street map.

"I thought you said that never works."

"Yeah I know and it's trite, but I'm desperate. Scrying in the black mirror showed me nothing."

"I'm sorry. Thanks for the dishy guy, Joell. We really hit it off while searching the rooms." Brigid tossed her sunglasses on the polished maple table, sighed and her eyes sparkled.

"What did you find?"

"Not much."

Joell sat up straight. "I thought you said it went well?"

"Well, not for a whole lot of actual clues, but he told me a couple of things that might prove useful."

Brigid headed into the industrial size kitchen and Joell followed her to the stainless steel refrigerator.

"Did he tell you what that bet was about?"

Brigid grabbed a yogurt and fished a spoon out of the silverware drawer. "It wasn't about money at all. Apparently it's more of a dare and whatever he has to do must be very upsetting."

"You don't know what the stakes are?"

"I had to blow it out of him."

Joell raised her eyebrows and then a smile crept across her lips. "Very resourceful, Bridg. So with whom did he make the bet?"

Brigid looked up from her yogurt. "With whom? Can't you stop being a writer and talk like a normal person?"

Joell crossed her arms. "No. Ending sentences with prepositions hurts my ears."

"Then that point is one with which I must disagree."

"Yeah, yeah. So come on, what did he tell you?"

"He made the bet with his best friend and his friend has no models in the competition. Seems like just a friendly dare."

"So if any one of them won, what does he get?"

"If one of them won they'd all get acting auditions. His friend said he'd have to pull some strings, but he thought he could do it."

"And if he loses?"

"Then Gold has to go on his friend's TV show – in drag. You know the one. Where they take contestants and make them do all sorts of scary, crazy and disgusting stuff? He's sure the models wouldn't shoot their careers to hell by leaving the convention just so he'd lose and they could enjoy a good chuckle at his expense."

Joell shook her head and laughed. "Don't be so sure. I would. You can always get another job, but you can never get enough laughs."

"I don't know about you sometimes."

A loud knock at the door startled them. "Who the...?"

My women gaped at each other. The mansion never had visitors, not that it was impossible. It was just never in one spot long enough. Joell headed for the front vestibule, grabbed her map and pendulum off the floor and tucked them in the drawer.

Brigid positioned herself behind the door as I scampered over right beside Joell in case she needed my protection.

She opened the door slightly, gave the hunk at the door a good long once-over and then opened it wider. Even though he was dressed like a clean bum and his dark brown hair was a bit too long, it looked intentional. Black jeans with a faded front accented powerful, muscular thighs. A spotless, white sleeveless t-shirt showed his impressive biceps and left no doubt as to the perfect abs beneath. Thick, dark brows accented caramel eyes and his dark facial hair was neatly trimmed into a goatee.

I'm sure it was inaudible to the rest, but I heard her catch her breath before she spoke. "Can I help you?"

"Jeez this place was hard to find. Couldn't locate it on any maps we had. Do you mind if I come in?"

She must have been as puzzled as I was, but there was no way my lusty witch would let this guy in, no matter how gorgeous he was.

Grasping his shoulder, she spun him around and patted him down. If you ask me, she was a little more thorough than necessary, but despite finding no weapons to strip him of, I knew she wouldn't let him in the door.

"Sure. Come on in."

I stand corrected. The guy looked her up and down as he walked by. He spotted me at her feet and crouched down. He extended his hand to pat me and I hissed at him.

"Crowe!" She gave the man a suspicious look and said, "Who are you?"

"Are you Jello?"

Her eyes popped open and her posture straightened. "Excuse me?"

"Jello? Joell? Something like that."

I could see her lips hardening into a thin line as Brigid tried to stay hidden behind the door and suppress a snicker, unsuccessfully.

"Yeah, I'm Joell. Jo—ell. Now, who the hell are you?"

He peeked behind the door and nodded to Brigid. "You must be Brigid, then?"

She stepped out from behind the door. "Okay. You're two for two. Now answer the damn question. Who are you and what do you want?"

"That's two questions."

Joell slammed the door and jammed her hands on her hips. "Did you come here to talk to us about something, or are you just going to stand there and annoy us all day?"

He raised his hands and shook his head looking mildly amused. "No, no. I didn't mean to annoy you. I just need to know who I'm talking to first. Is anyone else around?"

"To whom you're talking and no."

"Ah, that's right. You're writers. I guess if I'm going to annoy you, you might as well annoy me by correcting my grammar. But I warn you —"

He didn't get to finish his sentence before both women leaned forward with their hands on their hips and yelled, "Who are you?" *I hissed at him again, just for good measure.*

"I'm Rick Torres, a cop," he said. "I'll be working undercover at the convention. The hotel wanted to call the police in, but the agent...what's his name again?"

Joell crossed her arms and planted her legs farther apart in what I knew to be her stubborn stance. "If what you say is true, you know damn well what his name is."

He nodded and walked slowly around the vestibule glancing at everything but focusing on nothing. "Yeah, well he wasn't particularly cooperative with the guys in uniform. I wanted to see if you might be a little easier to work with."

"Work with? I don't know anything about working with anybody."

"Yeah. Apparently the uniformed guys didn't fit Gold's definition of low-key, I'm the compromise."

"Who hired you?"

"The hotel."

"What's the manager's name?"

"Stewart."

"And you're here because...?"

"Because we're supposed to work together."

Brigid folded her arms and the two of them looked like a pair of pissed off parents with an errant teenager. "We don't work with the police."

He stopped pacing and faced them with the same posture. Arms crossed and legs apart. "I don't play well with others, either. That's why I do undercover work, but the hotel insisted on a police investigation and Gold insisted on keeping it hushed up. I know he hired you. Now are we going to cooperate and get this thing over with or what?"

The three of them stood immobile and stared at each other as if it were a contest. Finally Joell said, "I'll need to step out and use the phone. Don't make yourself comfortable."

"I'll keep an eye on him," Brigid said.

As soon as Joell headed out of the room, he sat on the comfortable chair and leaned forward further and further, following her retreat with his eyes.

"Quit looking at my ass," she called out from around the corner.

I'd keep a close eye on him too. He'd better not get any funny ideas about my witch. I can maul a man when I need to. I may be small, but I have the heart of a tiger. The late afternoon sun streaming in the beveled glass door inserts created a prism effect with the sunshine that hit the floor like a spotlight. Ah, I'll just get comfortable in this warm spot on the floor while we wait. Zzzzzzz...

Wh-what?

"I can't friggin' believe it! It's a conspiracy!"

Uh oh. I must have fallen asleep. My witch was on a tear, stomping her spike-heeled boot on the hardwood floor. Oops, that's gonna leave a mark.

"Our contact, the agent and the hotel all insist we work with this idiot." She gestured toward Rick still sitting in the vestibule chair. He didn't even blink.

Brigid shrugged. "I hate to say it, but we don't have much to go on. He may prove useful if he can get some inside information from the other models. Somebody's got to know something."

Rick stood and faced Joell head-on. "So, O-Jell, tell me what you've already got so I don't waste any more time."

My witch's face turned red in vivid contrast to the white knuckles of her clenched fists and she visibly shook. "Jo. Ell! What are you, stupid? Can't remember a simple name?"

"Nope. I'm quite bright and my memory's fine. I was just testing what I was told in my briefing."

"What the fuck were you told?" she shouted.

"That none of you should be trusted with weapons at the moment. I wasn't sure why, but I can guess. If you'd been armed, I'd probably be full of holes by now. Am I right in assuming you're prone to mood swings at this time of the month?"

Joell and Brigid looked at each other and burst out laughing. My witch nodded and Brigid flopped into the chair he had vacated.

"Yeah, you really shouldn't push your luck like that or you could be tied up in a nice bow with duct tape before you knew what hit you. Why don't you call me Jo? And please tell me you're not that annoying when you're not trying to be."

He stuffed his hands in his pockets, shrugged one shoulder and smiled. "I've been told I'm quite charming, actually."

She blew out a deep breath. "Whew. That would make things easier."

"I understand you went to the models' rooms today. Did you find any physical evidence?"

"Nothing much. One thing I learned is that Gabriel Moore is a diabetic. He may be in trouble medically if he doesn't get his prescription soon."

"What prescription?"

"He has Type II Diabetes. He needs a special diet and oral medication. If someone gets a new prescription for him sent to a local pharmacy..."

Rick nodded. "We can lay a trap for whomever picks up the meds." He looked at Joell. "It's whom, right?"

"You got it." She smiled and I spotted that unmistakable twinkle in her eye. Uh oh. I know what that means. She wants him—and what Wonder Witch wants she inevitably gets. She might get more than she's bargaining for with this one, though.

"So what else have you learned?" he asked, looking her over from blonde head to pointed black toes, once more.

"The models have been split up into two groups of four. One group is being taken to Silicon Valley. The other is still here in New York somewhere. We have sketches of the perps."

"Shit, that's a huge help. Who are your witnesses? Have they given official statements yet?"

"There were no witnesses." My witch turned her back and began pacing. Uh oh. She never did that unless she was uneasy.

"No witnesses?"

Brigid sensed something too. She slowly got out of the chair and positioned herself between Joell and the cop.

"I've honed my psychic abilities to the point where I can see the perps and project the images to our sketch artist via remote viewing. If any details need to be corrected, she changes the sketch until it's as exact a match as possible. I think you'll be impressed."

"Impressed?" He walked passed Brigid and stood in front of Joell stopping her from pacing. "I'm incredulous. That's the word for 'I'll believe it when I see it', right?"

"You'll see a lot of things."

"I heard something about superpowers, but before I believe that, let me close my eyes and see if you can read my mind."

"My power doesn't work like that."

He smirked. "Of course not." He folded his arms and gave her a hard stare. "What kind of scam do you think you're pulling?"

Joell clenched her fists and her eyes narrowed to slits. If it were possible to shoot fire out of her eyeballs, Mr. Torres' tan skin would now be dark and crispy.

"Show him out, Brigid," she said in her scary-calm voice. The one where you know she's holding back a hurricane. "I'm off to see Raoul."

Brigid raised her eyebrows. "The pool boy?"

"I need to blow off some steam."

Chapter Three

“Raoul! Pool house. Now.” Joell grabbed the tall, tan, young man by the arm and continued her forced march to the pool house.

That’s not like my sweet witch. She doesn’t bark orders at people. Fortunately, he smiled and stumbled along after her. He knew what she wanted.

I tried to sneak in with them, but Raoul gave me a shove with his foot and slammed the door. Ow! That was not only rude, but he nearly knocked the wind out of me. By the time I recovered and found a way to get a nice observation point, they were already naked. They may have thought the bathhouse was private, but cats climb trees and I had a lovely view through the skylight.

Joell’s leather jumpsuit and Raoul’s swimsuit lay crumpled on the floor beside them. They looked at each other with lust, ready to fuck. Well, almost ready. Raoul needed a little more inspiration, so my witch knelt in front of him and took his half-erect cock in her mouth.

“This is for you,” she said. “You don’t need to do anything but lean back and enjoy it.” She ran her hands up his thighs and near his cock, but didn’t quite touch. Not yet. Leaning in, she trailed her tongue over the places she’d just touched. By now his nerves must be all atingle.

Then she opened her mouth and took him inside, barely touching his cock, which was now growing quickly, begging to be sucked. She only lightly scraped her teeth over his hard-on as she withdrew. Now it stared her right in the face, so she took just the tip of it with her lips and slowly pulled back, placing a gentle kiss on the tip.

Raoul moaned and begged her to stop torturing him. Wearing an evil grin, she ran her long, manicured fingernails over his thighs and ball sac before taking the base of his cock in her right hand and cupping his balls in her left. She took most of his length in

her mouth and flicked the underside with her tongue, causing him to moan louder. Again she drew him into her mouth, but this time she closed her lips around the girth and when she pulled back it seemed darkened and fully engorged. I thought I saw his eyes roll back in his head.

She massaged his balls and leaned underneath to place a few open-mouth kisses on them and exhale her hot breath over the contracting sac. Raoul's cock nudged her cheek, apparently anxious for her attention.

Finally, she started at the base of his shaft, lapping at it until it glistened with moisture. As she fully engulfed his cock in her mouth, I could see her cheeks contract like she was, at last, applying suction. To listen to his long groan I'd have to assume it was the right amount.

Then she grasped the base again and teased his hole with her tongue before going down on him again. He fisted his hands in her hair begging her to suck his cock. She must have decided to put him out of his exquisite misery and worked his shaft both forward and back. She picked up speed, eliciting moans of gratitude.

She gently twisted the hand holding his cock back and forth while felating him and massaging his glutes with the other hand. She blew him expertly and in no time he was leaning his back against the knotty pine wall, eyes closed, moaning and groaning with pleasure.

"Stop, chica. I can't take any more. I'll come if you don't stop and I want to pleasure you too."

She looked quite satisfied with herself. She gave him a few seconds to catch his breath, then stood. When he had recovered and was ready, she said, "Okay, let's fuck."

"How would you like it?"

"Fast and hard."

"No, I mean where?"

She dragged him down to the concrete floor and lay with her legs open. "Here. Now. Hurry! I'm about to explode."

He grinned at her and kneeled between her legs. "Do you want me to go down on you first? You might not be wet enough."

"I'm drenched and I want to be fucked. Don't worry about my getting the pleasure I need. I'm supersensitive right now."

Wow. She never turned down a good licking before. Either meaning of that phrase applies. She must really be ready to go if there was no spanking, blowing or hanky-panky before a thoroughly frantic fucking.

Raoul pushed his rod into her cunt and on withdrawal, he glanced down to see it glistening with her juices. "Do you want to watch me fuck you?"

"Ordinarily yes, but right now I just need you to keep filling me with your cock as deeply and repeatedly as possible. You may fuck me until you finish."

Again with the grin. He fell forward on his elbows and launched into a fast rhythm right away. "Is this how you want it?"

"Yes, dammit. Now just shut up and fuck!"

Her thighs wrapped around Raoul's twenty-two-year-young, naked hips as he drove in and out, fucking her hard, just as she requested—if you can call irritable commands a request. A few strokes later, she was moaning. The more he fucked her, the louder she moaned. I don't know if I've ever seen her so desperate for release. It must have something to do with the undercover cop and I'd bet it's not all anger-based. He turned her on and she couldn't find the shut-off switch.

Her thighs trembled and she pounded against him as hard as he thrust into her. I could tell she was about to come. Wonder Witch threw her head back, bucked uncontrollably and cried, "Oh Ri...!"

Oops. Not that these two were mutually exclusive and screaming out another man's name would be unfathomable. It probably happened to him before since he was considered the resident boy toy.

They rocked and panted a little longer before I saw Raoul's motions become less rhythmic and jerkier. He stilled, collapsed beside her and rolled onto his back. They lay there fully exposed to my view, taking deep breaths and smiling.

"Thanks, Raoul."

"My pleasure. Anytime."

My witch stood on shaky legs and headed for the shower. Now that she was feeling better, maybe she could get somewhere with her scrying. I certainly hoped so. She'd never forgive herself if she failed this mission.

I crawled back down from my tree and waited by the pool trying to look like I didn't see anything.

Wrapped in a towel, Joell strolled over to me, kneeled by the pool and scratched behind my ears while she gazed into the water.

"Did you have a decent view from your tree?" she asked casually. I looked up at her with wide eyes and mewed as innocently as I could.

"Uh huh. I saw you. Just don't tell the hunky cop I was fantasizing about him, okay?"

Like I would, even if I could talk. Really!

She lowered herself to her elbows and stared at the glassy surface of the pool. Did I mention the lining was black? Apparently, it's the best color for scrying. She had the blue tiles changed to black. I wish I could see what she sees. I see clouds reflected in the surface, but that's about all. Oh, is that one in the shape of a mouse? Cool.

Brigid popped her head around the door to the pool area. "I'm going to have drinks with Stan and wait for a ransom call, meanwhile looking for any suspicious activity at the hotel."

"Sounds like a good idea. I'll be here doing what I do until I come up with something. Got your cell phone on?"

"Sure do. Oh and Joell? Rick's still here."

"What?" Joell jumped up and held the towel together just above her full breasts. I love how they swell with PMS.

"Don't wait up," Brigid called. Then she disappeared faster than a cat at bathtime.

The cop wandered out onto the patio. "Sorry about before," he called as he approached. "I talked to Brigid. I really didn't give you a chance to explain how you work before pissing you off. I thought it might be a good idea to talk about how we can coordinate —"

"Stop right there."

He smiled like the proverbial cat that ate the canary. I wonder if he heard her shout out his name? Just as he halted, Raoul stepped out of the bathhouse with a towel wrapped around his waist, shaking his short hair dry.

Rick glanced from Raoul to Joell and back again. His grin grew and I imagined he knew something of what had gone on while he was talking to Brigid.

She glared at him. "If you have something to say, just say it."

"No. It's your turn to do the talking. Seems I've said enough."

It was what he was saying with his eyes that concerned me. They twinkled with secret knowledge. She'd undoubtedly be furious if she thought he was one up on her. I hate to say it, but my Wonder Witch can be a bit mixed-up sometimes. She seems dominating. Not with the whips and stuff. It's just that she like to call the shots. For instance, I'm sure Raoul was only on top because she wanted him there. If she wanted him to do her while she hung upside down from the towel rack, I'd have had a whole different view. But during PMS sex, she likes to let go and be ravaged.

He began to swagger toward her again. "Don't worry. I'll be quick." Then he looked over toward Raoul and said, "Well, maybe not that quick."

Uh oh. Dark clouds crossed her eyes. I think Rick's about to see the reverse side of Witchy. Her evil twin, namely, Bitchy.

To my surprise, she matched his swagger and met him halfway. She leaned forward and whispered something in his ear.

He laughed. "Believe me, sweetheart, no one's damaged me yet and you wouldn't either."

Joell attempted to walk past him and head for the house, but he grabbed her arm. "Hey, we need to talk about the case."

"No we don't."

"Excuse me, but I think we do. Unless you don't care if the League fails."

"That's not an option."

"Good. I have the same philosophy."

"I work alone." She tried to shake off his arm without success.

"Not this time."

Uh oh. He means business. They both glared and he seemed to have lost his sense of humor. It looks as if the unstoppable force that is Wonder Witch met an immovable object.

"Look, I need your help, Jo."

Her eyebrows raised. "How?"

"I don't know anything about romance conventions or how the models are supposed to act. I need to know how to blend in."

My witch's eyes glinted and one side of her smile lifted. Uh oh. I know this look. She's thinking of doing something. Something bad.

"Well, the first thing we need to do to make you blend is wax your chest."

"Excuse me?"

"You wanted my help. Those dark curls peaking out from your undershirt can be taken care of right now. I have all the equipment right in our spa room."

His eyes narrowed and he studied her, looking like he was weighing the pros and cons. "What's the worst that can happen if I let you do that?"

"Well, let's see. The very worst? Pain, redness around the follicles, but those things are both expected and temporary. I suppose your male ego could be bruised if you cry. But, don't worry. I'll never tell anyone if you do. It'll be our little secret."

"Cry? Over pain that a girl can take? Ha! Bring it on."

Famous last words, my man.

* * * * *

Rick must have felt as ridiculous as he looked. Dressed up like cupid, he strolled amongst the participants of the romance convention, feathery wings and a quiver of arrows on his back. Joell walked behind him, chuckling.

He turned to the side and murmured, "Quit staring at my ass."

"Why? You volunteered to be ogled, didn't you? Besides in that flesh-colored leotard there's nothing else to stare at."

"That's thanks to your waxing ability. As soon as the pain and redness go away, I'll gear down."

She pretended to enjoy his humiliation, but I think she was enjoying the view. The man was solid muscle. Women began flirting with him from the moment he stepped off the elevator and I sensed his discomfort melt away after a few moments of appreciation. Now he was either enjoying the positive attention thoroughly, or trying to bug Joell by faking it. I'd vote for the latter.

She was wearing a provocative low-cut red dress and getting her share of revenge, though. Whenever another male model appeared, my Witchy-poo would squeeze his biceps or run her hand over his chest seductively. When she took her leave, Rick would ask the guy why there weren't more models around. Or he'd mention that he had been forced to wear someone else's costume and wished the guy would come back and claim it so he could be the pirate he was supposed to be.

Joell didn't even need to linger close by to hear the other models' answers. Her auditory sense is her sharpest. She has the most powerful hearing of any human I know. Almost as good as mine. The built-in bullshit detector, as Brigid called it, seemed quiet so far.

Speaking of Brigid. She was enjoying a drink at the bar with Stan Gold. They were looking pretty enamored of each other and no, she didn't come home last night. At some point, Joell would need to check in with her too. Meanwhile I was enjoying our stroll through the lobby in her Louis Vuitton cat carrier.

"Joell, darling!" someone called from across the room.

We faced in the direction of the voice and saw both Lace and Kali waving madly. The three women made a beeline for each other and hugged like they hadn't seen each other for years even though they'd just teleconferenced the other day and met at the mansion the week before that. I meowed my complaint about being squished between them and almost jumped out of my ride-along bag, taking my chances in the throng. I was the filling in a triple-decker sandwich. Joell knows how I hate hugs! Thankfully they backed off before I could leap.

"What have you found out so far and how can I help?" Lace asked.

"There's not much to go on. One of the models has medication that got left behind. Someone should either come back for it or call his doctor for an emergency prescription locally."

"Has anyone contacted the doctor?"

"Stan Gold had Gabriel's parents' phone number as an emergency contact but had to get the doctor's name from his father. It was dicey without giving away the fact that Gabriel was in trouble."

"How did he do it?"

"He said he was thinking of buying a vacation home on Lake Superior but needed a good doctor who could handle his brittle diabetes and Gabriel couldn't remember his doctor's phone number."

"He didn't question your using him for the information instead of the phone book?"

"No. He said the hotel didn't have anything but New York phone books and then he went off on a tangent about how people think New York is the center of the universe, yada, yada, yada. I think the dad just gave him the number to shut him up and get his afternoon back."

"So now what?"

"Now we wait to hear from his doctor. If he gets a call, a couple of us will be waiting at the pharmacy."

"And what if the perps send someone to his room to get the bottle he left behind?"

"Lyonene arrived this morning and is camped out in Gabriel's room working on her edits."

"Sounds like all bases are covered," Kali said.

"For the moment. Can I call on you to run to the pharmacy with me if we get a lead?"

"Unless you need me between eleven and twelve o'clock. I'm giving a workshop on how to write sizzling erotica."

Joell snorted. "I wish like hell I could go to that."

Kali laughed. "Why? You're already writing stuff so hot your readers need fire-retardant gloves to read it."

"Who else is around?" Lace asked.

"Brigid is sticking close to Stan Gold. We've pretty much ruled out his involvement, but someone may contact him for ransom."

"Okay. Our cell phones are on. Call if you need us."

"I will." After they parted, Wonder Witch glanced all around the lobby. "Now where's that stinkin' fake undercover model, Rick?"

Stinking? I thought he smelled rather nice. Just a hint of aftershave. Not enough to make me think I was gagging on a pine tree.

I sensed my witch panic even before she began swinging my big bag hither and yon as she looked this way and that.

“Rick?” she called. Wonder Witch sprinted through the lobby, checking conference rooms and searching the sea of faces. How could she lose a six-foot angel with a goatee and quiver of arrows? Something was wrong.

“Damn, not another one!”

Chapter Four

"You've been staring at that cup of coffee for twenty minutes," Brigid said.

"I know. My scrying sense is really on the fritz. I can't see a damn—" Joell's posture straightened. "Wait a minute..."

I had been in her lap, but I wanted to see too, so I jumped up on the table and turned to look into the mug. That's when I saw him—standing right behind her.

"Wow! He's wearing an eye patch. I can't tell what else he's wearing, but damn, he's smokin' hot."

"Really?" Brigid asked casually.

"I hope that doesn't mean they've done something to his sexy, brown eyes. That would be a terrible shame and one I'd have to make them pay for. Now if I can just get a fix on the background...that is, if I can take my eyes off the handsome foreground."

Oh boy. Joell was going to hate herself when she realized Rick was listening to every word. His grin grew until he slapped a hand over his mouth and backed away, probably to keep from laughing.

"Well, he must not be in danger. He was smiling a second ago. Have you noticed his straight, white teeth against his tan face when he grins?"

Brigid bit her lip. She and Stan looked as if they were about to burst out laughing. What should I do? Meow? Nudge her until she looks up? Or would she shoot the messenger? I'd better just sit and wait quietly.

Rick reached out and placed a hand on Joell's shoulder causing her to jump and whirl around.

"What the—" As soon as she saw him, she leaped out of her chair and smacked him upside the head. His long hair flopped to one side, but he was laughing so hard, obviously no harm had come to him.

"You had me worried sick! I thought we had a ninth victim. Where the hell were you?"

"Changing my costume, or didn't you notice my smokin' hot eye patch?"

She hit him a couple more times on the arm as he, Stan Gold and Brigid laughed out loud. "Hey, be careful not to bruise me! I have to compete in something skimpy."

Then, Stan's cell phone rang. The group fell silent while he answered it.

"Gold." His eyebrows shot up and he reached into his breast pocket for a pad of paper and pencil. "Where was that?"

He scribbled something down, looked at Rick and handed him the paper. "Do you know where this is?"

"Yeah, it's about thirty minutes from here in good traffic."

Gold spoke to the caller asking him to wait at least an hour, thanked him, then hung up.

"What's that address?" Joell asked before he could volunteer the information.

"That's the pharmacy. Gabriel's doctor was asked to call in a replacement prescription."

Rick said, "I'll change into my jeans and get right over there." He headed for the elevator.

"Whoa. I'm coming too," Joell called after him.

She grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, plopped me back into her Louis Vuitton and ran after him.

"No, it's too dangerous." He pushed the up button a few more times than necessary.

Wonder Witch jammed her hands on her waist, sending the slinky red dress swishing around her knees. "What do you think I am? Helpless?"

"You're wearing a dress. I'm riding a Harley."

"And?"

Oh wonderful. Rick was about to find out what arguing with a brick wall would feel like, but the elevator arrived and the doors whooshed open.

"Stay here," he said "I'll be right back."

"Ha. If you think I'm falling for that, you continue to underestimate me." She stepped in the elevator at the same time he did.

They eyed each other as they rode to his floor. No glares this time. I sensed some curiosity on both sides, as if trying to size up the other. It was more than that, though. The tension had changed. No longer posturing for dominance, one would almost think they were ready to cooperate.

"So, are you going to follow me into the bathroom while I change too?"

Maybe I spoke too soon.

One side of my witch's mouth rose and she looked as if she might be picturing the possibilities. To her credit, though, she didn't answer him.

"No need to leave the room on my account."

I spoke too soon. Obviously I was missing something here. Like the throwing down of some sort of gauntlet. What is a gauntlet anyway? If it's an article of clothing I wouldn't be surprised to see these two throwing theirs off into a pile on the floor at some point.

The ding of the elevator as it reached the right floor ended my reverie. When we arrived at Rick's room and he opened the door, I noticed a big difference between this room and those of the "real" models. The small room made me feel claustrophobic—and this coming from me, in a tote bag. One double bed took up most of the room with

a dresser filling the rest. He didn't even have a small table and chairs set in a corner like so many rooms do.

Joell plopped us onto the bed, then reclined bracing herself on her elbows. At least the maid had been there, so it was neat and the linen beneath the turned-back bedspread smelled fresh. Rick reached into the dresser drawer and grabbed his jeans and t-shirt.

Hesitating at the bathroom door, he looked at Joell with a saucy smile and said, "Sure you don't want to come in with me?"

"Why, do you need help with something?"

It was at that moment when I noticed the huge bulge in his black pirate breeches. I trust my witch had spotted it long before I did.

He chuckled. "Ah, there she is."

"Pardon me?"

"The sassy, insulting woman I met yesterday. I was wondering where she went."

Joell fell silent for a few seconds. In a soft voice she asked, "Was I really insulting? I'm sorry. Sassy, yes. It's sort of my way of blowing off steam while I speak my mind, but I know how it feels to be outright insulted. I didn't mean to —"

"Forget it." Rick lowered his zipper and kicked off his shoes.

Wonder witch's eyes grew large as the undercover cop stripped in front of her. His eyes never strayed from hers. Most women would turn away to offer the man his privacy, but not my witch. His falling breeches revealed a gun strapped to his thigh.

"I wondered where you hid that thing."

He glanced down his torso. "Which thing would that be?" The grin forming on his face showed he knew darn well what she was talking about, but his question focused attention to his other—er, thing. To my amazement, her face reddened and her gaze dropped to her lap while Rick quietly removed his weapon, the one with the strap, and set it on the floor.

Wearing only his underwear, socks and unbuttoned shirt, he sat next to her and cupped her chin. "Who hurt you?"

"Pardon me?"

"Someone must have done a number on you. Women aren't usually so defensive unless they've had to defend themselves."

She shrugged. "I guess I've always had to defend myself because I've always been a little bit different. It doesn't even matter if you're different in a good way. Some people find it threatening and try to make you feel like a freak."

"They're jealous of you."

"Maybe."

"There's no maybe about it. Look at you. You're strong, smart and deliciously sexy. There are plenty of women with fine qualities, but how many have the whole package like you do? How many of them would like to have it? Trust me, they're jealous."

She looked into his eyes and held his gaze until he leaned in. It was apparent he meant to kiss her. My witch would never allow that. She's far too professional to get involved with a man while working...

Hey! She's not only letting him kiss her, but she's kissing him back! What the? Okay, Crowe. Breathe. Just breathe. The world is all topsy-turvy this week. It's got to be those hormones they talk about. That's why the guy was called in to help, remember? The babes aren't themselves right now. So what's his excuse?

I checked out the bulge in his tighty-whities and that answered my question. He could have been hiding a gun in there too, but it was no little derringer!

Before I knew it, they were breathing heavily and rolling all over each other trying to get skin to skin as fast as possible. I had to jump out of the bag and up onto the dresser to avoid getting hurt!

Witchy's red dress crossed in front and Rick was able to drag it to one side and bite her nipple through her lace bra. She arched and pushed the stretchy lace under her fullness so he had access to her erect pebble.

He latched on and suckled her breast fiercely. She moaned and pulled his head against her bosom as she shoved the other side of her dress open and uncovered the other lovely globe.

What's the matter with them? Don't they remember they have a job to do? Are they going to blow their only lead by falling into bed and screwing away the afternoon?

At last the cop came to his senses.

"Wait!"

Oh, thank God one of them has a level head, even if it's swollen.

"I promised you I was good for more than a quickie and that's all we have time for."

"I don't care. I'm burning up. You can't just leave me like this! Please!"

She jumped up and ripped her panties off, leaving her garters. Then she stuffed the hem of her dress into the top of the garter belt to expose her sweet pussy. Rick sprang to his feet and removed his briefs. There they stood, facing each other, breathing deeply, intensity of purpose written on their faces.

Rick picked her up as if she were a kid he'd like to toss into the air. The only difference was he shoved her against the wall and only lifted her high enough to grab hold beneath her thighs.

"Are you wet for me?" he asked.

"I've been wet for you since checking out your reflection in that pirate getup."

He grinned and kissed her hard as he lowered her onto his erection. Her moan muffled against his mouth sounded like relief and bliss at the same time. With that encouragement he didn't hesitate to lunge into her cunt all the way to the hilt. A low growl escaped his lips.

As if he suddenly realized his size might be a problem, he asked, "Are you all right?"

"Dear Goddess, if I were any righter I'd be flying. As it is, I'm more than ready to ride your broomstick."

He crushed her lips in another bruising kiss and began banging her against the wall in a passionate frenzy. She was hardly passive herself. Digging her fingernails into his back, she rocked against him, moaning. Occasionally she threw her head back and shouted, "Fuck me! Fuck me hard!"

Ha. Like he needed to be told.

He leaned back a little and wedged his hand between their bodies. She shuddered and shouted, "Yes! Yes! Finger my clit!"

I could see she must be trying to hold back her usual screams. Biting her lip, she shook and whimpered. His gaze bore into her. She threw her head back and squeezed her eyes shut against the onslaught.

If I'm not mistaken, I swear I saw tears straining at the corners of her eyes. I know how hormonal spikes can increase sexual response, having seen it plenty of times with all the babes during their week off. They're horny as hell and do a lot of fucking right in front of me—not that I minded! I couldn't help being very curious about the act, wishing I could experience it too. From the look on her rosy face, glowing with a sheen of moisture, I'd say quite a rush of desire had already swept through her.

"Come for me baby," Rick growled. He increased the pace and fervor with which his fingers rubbed her clit.

My witch bucked and yelped, then spasmed and bit his shoulder to keep from crying out. Her legs quivered uncontrollably and her body twitched as she rode him like a bronco. At last, she quieted and flopped onto his shoulder. She still jerked and moaned with aftershocks.

"Will you stop scratching, biting and hitting me? I'm supposed to look like a model, not the down-and-dirty cop that I am. Damn witch," he muttered.

Rick had apparently decided it was his turn. His hand came out from between them and he grasped her under her thighs again. His momentum took on a different quality. He thrust, paused, thrust, paused and before long he shivered, grunted and bucked with his own climax.

Afterward, he leaned against her, the pressure probably keeping their sagging bodies from sliding to the floor. He kissed the hair hiding her neck and whispered, "As much as I hate this to end, we have to get going."

* * * * *

"You can't take your cat on my Harley."

"Why not?"

"Are you serious?" Rick stood with his feet planted firmly in front of the revolving door leading from the hotel lobby to the street. He clutched two motorcycle helmets.

What's his problem? Is he worried because he doesn't have one for me? Hell, stick an empty can of tuna on my head and I'll be fine.

"I'm barely all right with you riding behind me in a dress."

Joell twisted her long, blond hair into a knot at the back of her neck. "Crowe goes where I go."

Rick looked at the ceiling as if mentally telling the creator that a mistake had been made when he'd given this woman free will. "And where is he going to sit?"

"He'll be tucked in my Louis Vuitton, as always."

"Oh, give me a break. You're not the least bit concerned that he'll have a hissy fit in there and jump right into New York City traffic?"

Joel patted me on the head and whispered in my ear, "He obviously doesn't know how special you are. Let's show him." She opened her bag and I jumped in, letting her zip it partway. I stuck my head out to show Detective Know-it-all how perfectly comfy I was. Hissy fit, indeed! Like I'd ever stoop to such indecorous behavior.

Joell walked through the revolving door and stepped delicately into the street where the bike was parked. She looked as if she didn't care one whit what people thought of her incongruous attire and threw her leg over the bike."

Rick shook his head and handed her the helmet. "You'll have to zip that bag all the way and wear him on your back. I won't take you with me if he's not completely contained."

She rolled her eyes and said, "Whatever."

What? No, you can't do that. I have to be able to see where I'm going. Okay, I admit it. I'm a control freak. Just don't—

Next thing I knew, she pushed my head into the bag and zipped it shut. Then I was tossed about until I landed with my side against the warm, flat surface of her back. This body bag wasn't necessary and we both knew it. I guess in the interest of saving time, she had to let the cop have his way, but it's dark and narrow in here. I think I feel a leg cramp coming on. I won't meow, I told myself. I'll prove I can take it like a tomcat.

Jostled about some more, the motor started up and revved. Then all I knew was darkness, vibration and noise. I heard Rick yell, "What about your dress?" and Joell answered, "Sit on it!" I think I heard some grumbling, or maybe that was just the motorcycle. Eventually we got underway.

The ride was okay until Rick began to swerve in and out of traffic. It was kind of like being on the deck of a rolling boat. Witchy took me sailing a couple of times, so I know what it feels like. I'm sure she wouldn't have put me in this vulnerable position if riding a motorcycle proved any worse—

Cripes. Rick must have turned a corner. I'll pretend I'm in a hammock on the boat and just let it swing. Back and forth.

Oh dear. My stomach took a little longer than the rest of me to right itself. Okay, Crowe. Breathe. Close your eyes and breathe...

Ugh! Not again. He turned in the other direction this time. Stomach no likely. Stomach taking longer to return to normal.

Use the self-hypnosis Joell taught you, Crowe. Close the eyes. Breathe deeply. Picture yourself in the hammock, gently rocking. You are getting sleepy, sleepy... No, I'm getting queasy, queasy.

Oh Gods! Another turn. This time my stomach didn't bounce back at all. In fact, I felt so sick, I thought I might— Gaaa... Disgusting! No sooner had I formed the idea in my head than it happened. My morning cat food churned out and coated the inside of Witchy's precious Louis Vuitton.

Damn. She was going to be a very unhappy witch.

Chapter Five

"So what's the plan?"

"You stay here," Joell said. "I go in, ID the perp. Then I get him to pick me up and take me to his lair. You tail us and don't let him know he's being followed."

"Don't worry. I know how to tail a suspect. But how are you planning to get him to pick you up? And what if it's a woman? Can you use magic for that?"

My witch used her best femme fatale voice and said, "No magic necessary, handsome."

I felt us move up a step, heard a bell jingle and tried to be as quiet and patient as possible, considering I was covered head to toe in my own yuk. There was really nothing to be done about it. At least all of her personal items were isolated in another zippered section. Can you imagine how upset she'd be if she had to clean her hairbrush, cosmetics and receipts? Oh, yeah. Boss Dog would really appreciate getting those receipts in the mail.

We seemed to be lingering in one spot for quite a while. At last I heard a low male voice say, "Prescription for Gabriel Moore?"

"That's mine," said a younger, gruff male voice.

When she finally opened the bag, I tried to be considerate. I leaped out as far from her as I could. I don't think I spattered her dress at all, yet she let out a yelp anyway.

"Crowe! What the fu...?"

Okay, I had only seconds before Mount Wonder Witch erupted. Where could I hide?

Dashing around the pharmacy, looking for a shielded spot to hide myself, I accidentally tripped the only other person in the store. An unfortunate-looking young

man, acne-scarred and bald. I'm willing to bet this isn't the model, but some patsy sent to fetch his prescription.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" She ran to the guy and helped him up, then promptly went into her dumb blonde routine. "My naughty pussy cat ran between your legs. Are you all right?" She brushed off his pants, subtly coming close to certain sensitive spots.

The guy gave her a sinister smile. "I suppose if I weren't I could probably sue."

"Oh! There's no need to do that. Really! I couldn't afford to be sued since I spend all my money on shoes, clothes and accessories. How else can I make it up to you?" She actually batted her eyelashes.

This had to be the guy she was looking for. She'd only play along with a ruse like that if she wanted something out of it. She spotted me behind the door.

"Come here you naughty pussy," she said. "What do you have all over yourself?"

The guy wrinkled his nose and said, "Your cat looks like she got into something pretty gross. Would you like to bring your 'naughty pussy' back to my place and wash her?"

"He's a him and, oh, could I?"

Yep. This had to be the guy. She picked me up by my neck fur at arm's length and settled me back into the zippered pouch. Now I know how a hamburger feels—at least the part covered in "special sauce".

I bounced around inside her Louis Vuitton compartment until I felt myself being lowered to a flat surface. Must be the floor of the perp's car. Yeah, I knew her plan was working when the floor underneath me vibrated and we started to move. I hope we'll be taken right back to the criminal's lair, not stopping at some fleabag motel on the way. I could hear a motorcycle's engine far off in the distance, so Rick must be following discreetly. Don't lose us, Detective Torres. I can't help my witch if she needs me and I'm still in my zip-locked baggie.

Now I know why she wasn't angry with me. I just happened to be in the wrong place at the right time. Maybe I can convince her I did it on purpose. I've tripped and slowed down perps before. Then I'll be her hero.

I rode on the floor for an uncomfortable few minutes. Joell played her role to a T. In fact I hoped she wouldn't act too dumb and give it away.

"Oh what a pretty old hotel! They don't make them like this anymore," I heard her say. "Do you live here?"

The guy laughed. "Not really. I'm just passing through."

The car turned a corner and descended. I'd guess we're about to enter an underground parking garage.

"Oh, that's too bad. I'm sure you'd like it here if you could stay. Where do you really live?"

"I'm from out of town," was all he said.

"Oh, like New Rochelle or something?"

Careful, Wonder Witch. Don't arouse his suspicions.

"No, New Jersey."

Looks like she may be arousing him in other ways. He's letting his guard down. The car stopped.

"I can't thank you enough for helping me with my naughty cat. What a mess we'd be in if I had to take him all the way back to Long Island like that."

I heard a door open and close. Then another one opened and I was airborne again.

"Is that where you live? On Long Island?"

"Sometimes. I'm just staying at a friend's house in the Hamptons for a couple of weeks. I like to come into the city on the train. Don't you just love trains?"

Wait a minute. Where's the motorcycle? Did Rick have to park somewhere else so the guy wouldn't know he was being followed?

"Oh! I'm Joell, by the way. How rude of me. I should have introduced myself right away." I bumped against her hip as she walked.

"Ah, yeah. I shoulda done that too. I'm Harvey."

"Hi Harvey. What a nice name."

"Ha. I hate it."

"Really? Oh, that's too bad. I think it's a really nice name. I had an Uncle Harvey once. He was really neat. He'd visit my mom and bring us presents. That was a few years ago before she remarried. Come to think of it, I haven't seen him since."

"I'll bet you played with your gifts outside."

"How did you know?"

I didn't like his tone. I heard a tinge of sliminess.

"Hold the elevator," Rick's voice called.

Now I felt a slight pressure pulling me down, so we must be heading up in an elevator. I don't know if they waited for the guy or not. I'm guessing not. I'll bet this young man wants to get my Witchy alone. Little does he know what he's getting into.

The elevator bounced slightly as it stopped and if I hadn't already barfed everything in my stomach, I would have again.

"I gotta stop at another room and hand off this prescription, but then we can go to my room—and, ah—wash your cat."

"Oh, you picked up that medicine for somebody else? What a nice man you are."

"Yeah. You know what? They can wait. Let's go to my room first."

"Oh, I wouldn't want anyone to wait for their medicine. It must be important if someone sent you to get it. Besides, they might wonder what's taking you so long if we, um, get busy."

Oh, nice double entendre, Witchy. She'll have him anticipating vigorous thanks and drooling if he wasn't already.

"It'll only take a second, right?"

"Right." He rapped on the door, twice in quick succession, then waited briefly and rapped once more. I heard the door open and my bag's zipper slid back, slowly as two guys were talking. I'd be needed soon.

"Who's she?"

"Just some dumb broad who needs a place to wash her cat." He probably thought he was whispering, but my acute hearing picked up every word.

"What cat?"

I took that as my cue, jumped from the bag and dashed into the room.

"Oh, no! My pussy's loose!" Joell cried.

I dashed around the suite while the guy ran after me. He stopped in his tracks and growled, "Damn. A familiar! And I'll bet your lady friend isn't just some dumb blonde. She's a witch!"

Uh oh. The cat's out of the bag—in more ways than one.

Joell jumped in and yelled, "Freeze!" She pointed her pink Derringer with one hand and grabbed the guy who'd given her a ride with the other. She tossed him to the floor, then grabbed his buddy and threw him on top as if he were an old coat.

Holy crap! Where'd she get a gun? More importantly, why'd she jump in like that? I saw no reason for her to give herself away. There was nothing going on here. She could have just denied what the guy said instead of confirming it.

Oh yeah. It was that time of the month. She didn't need a logical reason. I'd have to take it upon myself to search the other rooms while she kept her gun trained on the surprised men.

"Oh, look at the cute little gun," the guy on top of his buddy said as he started to get up.

She switched her aim to settle right between his eyes. "Yeah and it'll kill you just as dead."

He sat back down in a hurry. Taking a better look at him, I realized he looked like one of Lyonene's drawings.

I peeked around the corner and spied three doors off the hallway, but all were closed. Well that's just great. How am I supposed to open them? With my tail?

At that moment Rick burst in behind Joell and said, "Get on your knees and put your hands behind your heads." He looked at Joell. "Where are they?"

"Where are who?" the guy I recognized yelled. He narrowed his eyes, then clasped his hands behind his head. The driver stood and did the same. They both seemed begrudgingly cooperative, despite looking agitated and angry.

Rick moved inside while Witchy closed the door and kept her gun trained on the criminals in question.

Rick stood to the side of each door and pushed them open one after the other. With his big-ass gun rounding the corner of the doorjamb before he did, he'd be in a good position to stop anyone from trying to get to a weapon—if there was anyone to stop. As he shoved open the last door, his shoulders slumped.

Uh oh. Wrong suite?

He returned to the living room and spoke to Joell. "They're not here."

"What? I sensed them! Maybe their energy was here, but they were moved to another room."

Or maybe, as she suspected before, magic was involved.

One of the guys lowered his hands. "Maybe you should get out of my room." He glared at Rick.

Rick shrugged and strolled over to Witchy. "Might as well, hon."

Hon? When had that started?

He had to take her arm and pull her out of the room.

"We're not finished with you," she yelled. Then I caught her casting a quick containment spell on the room. Chances are if they tried to leave, they'd find the door impossibly stuck.

* * * * *

"I didn't have the wrong guy!" Joell looked around the hotel coffee shop, then lowered her voice. "I eavesdropped long enough to hear him ask for a prescription for a Gabriel Moore. We were the only two people near the counter. There was no mistake. That guy knows something."

"What did your psychic sixth sense tell you about the guy and what did you get from the other one in the room upstairs?"

"They were both hiding something, but there's more to it. The models were there at some point and I'll bet they know where they are now. So, why did you drag me out?"

A waitress strolled over to the couple. "What'll it be?"

"Could we have two coffees and have you seen any of these guys?" Joell pulled out the pages from the models' websites.

"Wow! If I had I'd remember it, but unfortunately, no."

"Well, thanks for taking a look. Oh and could I have a washcloth?" Joell asked.

Oh, thank Goddess. I might finally get cleaned up. My fur was almost dry enough to itch, but I couldn't handle the humiliation another second. What a terrible day this had been for me.

The waitress looked like she was going to protest, then she saw my vomit-encrusted head popping out of the bag. She rolled her eyes and said, "Sure. Comin' right up."

Wonder Witch leaned toward Rick. "So what do we do now that you've blown our best lead? Go around knocking on hotel room doors?"

He glared at her, but didn't rise to the bait. "Probably call Stan. See if they've had any ransom demands. That's the only reason I can think of for their being moved."

"Well, I'd like to poke around here a little more."

"You can't. You blew your cover when you rushed into their room, hasty-pants."

Her back stiffened. "I can still cast a disguise over myself."

Rick pushed a couple of buttons on his cell phone. He must have put Stan on speed dial. While he waited he said, "And the gun? I thought you locked up your weapons."

"Just the bullets."

Rick closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Stan? It's me. Any word?"

He looked at Joell and shook his head. Then his eyebrows rose. "You're kidding. I'm in the middle of an investigation and you want me to come back for some kind of meet and greet with the public?"

He listened a little longer, chuckled and shook his head, but it wasn't out of amusement. I think it was disbelief. "And leave her to her own devices? I don't think so. Another reason I was hired, Stan, was to keep these women safe from themselves. Without me to watch her back, she'd be dead by now."

"I would not!"

"How do I know that, Stan? Because I have five sisters." Rick put his hand over the phone. "Go wash your cat, will you?"

Oh no. Joell crossed her arms and leaned back in her seat. He clearly didn't know my witch. No one gave her orders. Now she'd sit right here and I wouldn't get cleaned up anytime soon. Well, forget that. I could see I'd have to take matters into my own paws.

I leaped out of her bag onto the table and over turned her water glass, positioning myself to take the brunt of the spray. "Meeeeooooow!" Crap, I forgot about the ice cubes. That hurt and now I'm freezing cold.

Joell jumped out of her seat and even with warp speed she caught a few drops. I was glad she moved fast enough to avoid getting soaked.

The waitress rushed over with a disgusting, dirty dishrag and caught the spill after most of it had dripped onto the floor. "Why don't you two move to a different table? I'll have to get a mop."

Witchy grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and plopped me onto a wooden chair at an adjacent table for four. "Stay," she ordered, as if I was a dog.

Rick said, "Call you back," and flipped his small cell phone closed.

Joell approached me with the dirty dishcloth. I'm not usually a soap and warm water buff, but there had to be something better than this. I'd rather wait until we returned to the mansion so I jumped off the chair and hid under the table.

Rick stood with hands on his hips, his eyes smoldering but not with lust. "I thought you said your cat was special? He just seems like a major pain in the ass to me. Why don't we go back to the convention? Maybe you can find someone to cat-sit while we figure out our next move."

"Quit knocking my cat and who did you have in mind to look after him?"

"Don't you have someone stationed in the models' room?"

"Yeah, Lyonene, if she's still there. Now that we know the prescription was picked up at the pharmacy, there's no reason for one of the perps to return to his room. She's probably enjoying a drink with Brigid or mingling with the models as they come and go."

"Look, I'm out of excuses. I just want that cat out of the way and if that means taking one of the other wonder-babes with me, so be it. I haven't seen you use anything in the way of magic anyway."

Aw, shit. Why'd he have to say that?

* * * * *

"Who knew motorcycles could fly? I've heard of flying brooms and bicycles, but not a flying Harley," Rick babbled, probably trying to sound calm under the circumstances. He wasn't.

Joell was in the driver's seat and my bag hung over Rick's shoulder. I could feel him tremble right through the leather.

"I thought you had to lock up your powers as well as your weapons during this time of the... Well, you know."

I think she heard him, even though she didn't answer.

"When we get back, I'll call the K-9 unit. They can come to the hotel, give the dogs a sniff of the models' clothes and —"

"No way," Joell shouted over the wind. "Stan doesn't want cops poking around the hotel. I'll take their clothing and meet the cops at the hotel. Crowe can do the sniffing."

"The only thing your cat can smell right now is himself. Besides this is too important to trust to a damn cat. I'm sending the dogs in and that's that."

"You really don't understand what a witch's familiar is, do you?"

"Look, you may be familiar with your cat, but I don't know him from a hole in the wall. I know the K-9 dogs and I trust them to do this."

"Well, I trust Crowe."

"You know, I'm tempted to drop this cat of yours into the Hudson River when we cross the bridge."

If we had been on the ground, she would have slammed on the brakes and given him a taste of her martial arts skills. Since we were airborne, I'd have to pray he didn't mean it.

"You'd better not, or you'll follow him and guess which one of you I'd swoop in and save?"

That's my girl. That's why I can put up with the craziness that happens for about a week every three months. No matter what, she loves me more than any other living creature. I sure hope this guy figures that out soon.

At last we arrived at the hotel as a sudden and unexpected fog rolled in off the river. When they dismounted, Rick swung the bag over to my witch. I'd never been so relieved to be back in her arms in all of my lives.

We marched up the stairs and I mean marched! Joell was steamed.

"Irritable, dear?" Rick asked. Then he flipped open his cell phone and called the police station.

She managed to hold her reaction at bay. I couldn't help but be proud of her.

"Yeah, we've got a good lead. Get a K-9 unit down to the Golden Oak Hotel right away. A woman will meet you outside with the items you'll need for scent."

We arrived at his room as he ended the call. He opened the door with his key card and said, "After you, my darling."

"What's this dear, darling and hon, stuff? Or is that just how you keep from calling your 'babes' by the wrong name?"

He clasped her arms and held her gaze with an intensity he'd never shown before. "I'm not interested in other babes. I think we both know where this is going, Joell. If only we had more time, I'd ravage you right here and now."

"Yeah, I lust after you too, but don't pretend it's leading to more."

"Who's pretending?" Rick crushed her to his lips in a bruising kiss. I thought I heard her give a little squeal of pain. Maybe it was just surprise, but if he hadn't let her go right that minute, I'd have swiped him with my claws to get him to back off.

"Look, why don't you leave your cat in my room while I do my thing downstairs and you do yours across town? Here, I'll give you my empty saddlebags. Then you'll have more room to carry the personal belongings with the model's scents on them and you can stop lugging around a mucky pocketbook. I promise I won't hurt your precious cat. I know what he means to you."

She hesitated as if thinking about it.

"You'd better hurry. I don't want the perps to pack up and leave before you and the dogs get to the hotel. Here." He handed her the saddlebags and keys. "I'll even trust you with my Harley."

Please, no. Don't leave me, Wonder Witch! I need you. You need me. What we don't need is this asshole telling us what to do.

"Okay, fine. But if you touch a hair on his head..."

"I won't, I promise. He'll be perfectly safe. I won't even be here most of the time. I'll stop at the desk and ask them to give you an extra key to my room, then you can get in as soon as you get back."

Her shoulders slumped and she gazed at me one last time. Then she pulled a packet of moist cat food from the other section of her bag, opened it and spilled it onto his dresser. He didn't say a word—probably because it wasn't his in the long run.

Oh, thank Goddess. I'm famished.

"Be good while I'm gone, Crowe. I'll be back as soon as I possibly can." She blew me a kiss instead of planting one on the top of my head. Gee, I wonder why.

Chapter Six

Rick had been gone for quite a while when out in the hall I heard female giggles and a man laughing. The door clicked and opened to reveal Rick with his arms around a couple of tipsy women.

"Here we are, ladies. It's not the Presidential suite, as you can see."

"As long as the bed is sturdy," one of them said as she tossed her ample self onto it and bounced. The other one, a middle-aged mousy-looking woman walked around the other side, tumbled onto the mattress and patted the empty spot in the middle. Then they both giggled again.

"Oh, look! A kitty. How sweet," said the librarian look-alike.

The other one pointed to the Louis Vitton bag beside me. "Hey, who does that belong to?"

"Aw, just some rich bitch. A guy's gotta eat, you know."

They all laughed again.

"So are you saying that you're a gigolo?"

"Hey, if the thong fits..."

"I'll bet it does."

He grinned and began unbuttoning his white, pirate shirt. "Let's find out, shall we?"

If he continued to be this clever, I'd gag again. How dare he talk about my Wonder Witch that way? Or was he really planning on using her?

"So are we expected to pay you back for this fun we're about to have?"

"Not unless you'd like to put in a good word with the judges..."

The sturdy one said, "We are the judges!"

"Really?" Rick gasped. "I honestly had no idea. I just thought you were a couple of hot mamas." The women laughed.

From the looks of things, he'd use anyone who'd fall for his baloney.

"Doesn't your lady friend mind you fucking other women?"

"She won't mind if she doesn't know."

"So how long will she be gone?"

"I'll have plenty of time to thoroughly satisfy you both. Don't worry. Maybe if you like my services and can provide equal enticements, one of you can take me home. Someone has to rescue me from that she-devil."

More giggles.

"So, are we going to have to fuck in front of her cat?"

Oh yes, please? That would be the only saving grace to this situation. I love to watch people fucking.

He grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, opened the closet door and tossed me inside. I'd only had a chance to let out one meow of protest when he shut the door in my face.

Sex is something incredibly mysterious to me. Such joy and bliss transforms a human's face from agony before to blessed relief and peace after climax. It's as if they visit some spiritual place that rejuvenates them like a spa for their spirits. The French call orgasm the "little death". Perhaps it's meant to be a moment in heaven. It sure looks like it, but I wouldn't know. I can only live it vicariously. My dearest wish is to someday, screw the shit out of some wanton, willing feline. The only problem is that Witchy's concerned about cat overpopulation. Why don't they invent pet birth control? Until they do, humans will have all the fun.

"Now, if you ladies want to practice judging, I'll let you have a good, long look. Just imagine some music in the background."

One of the drunken bimbos on the bed began da-da-da-da-ing the theme from Seventies stripper music. I was only a kitten in my second life then, but fucking still fascinated me. Some might remember it as Eighties shaving cream music. It has the same effect. The other woman called out, "Take it off! Take it all off!"

So there I sat, in the dark closet, next to smelly shoes, forced to listen to bad jokes, bad music, giggles, slurping sounds and plenty of moaning. It's bad enough that he treats me rotten, but to do what he's doing to women, especially Joell! Bastard.

This orgy went on until both women had screamed out a couple of orgasms and I could tell he'd fucked them both. Especially since one of them was a talker. She moaned and said in a breathy voice, "Oh that feels so good. I love your big, hard cock inside me. Plow into my cunt! Pound my cunt with your big, fucking cock." Then she screamed, "Deeper, harder, deeper. Oh yes! Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, you bad boy! Keep fucking me until you come."

I heard Rick's breathless voice say, "I'm about to. I want to pull out and come all over your friend's face."

More giggles, then shrieks and laughter.

It wasn't difficult to imagine the scene. I'd watched the ladies of the league having threesomes and thensomes. The only difference was that they weren't trying to fool anybody about being exclusive and they didn't expect anything but contentment in return. They let it be known, always, that they were fucking recreationally for the mutual pleasure it gave all.

I had to find a way to tell her. I couldn't just sit by and let her get hurt. But how?

* * * * *

"Crowe? Where are you baby? Did you hear the news?"

Joell's voice! At last! Would she find me in the closet? I meowed my loudest until she opened the door and I jumped into her arms.

"How'd you get into the closet? Oh well, never mind. I'm just so happy, I had to tell you first... We got 'em!" She held me high over her head and whirled in place. Please stop Wonder Witch. Don't make me lose my lunch too.

"I thought Rick would be here, but he must be downstairs. Let's go find him!"

Should I tell her? Could I tell her?

She set me down and peered into the mirror, checking her hair and makeup. She looked gorgeous, of course. She always does.

How can I let a louse like Rick Torres take advantage of her? He doesn't deserve her. He could never love her the way I do.

It sort of hit me like a lightning bolt. I didn't have a choice. It wasn't an easy thing to do, but I loved her enough to try. The problem was, I didn't have much time to think it over.

There was only one way to tell her everything I knew and at the same time show her all the love in my heart, but it was so drastic. I'd have to give up my role as her familiar. And if I did that, there was no guarantee she'd want me in her life in any other role. I could only shift once. What's it going to be, Crowe?

"I'll be back in a jiffy." She hummed her way to the bathroom and closed the door.

Think, man, think! At that moment, I had my answer. I wanted to be a man. Her man. I didn't know if I could truly make that happen or not. I'd been told at an early age that familiars were shifters, but was also warned that if I took my other form it was permanent and I'd have no more lives after that. I'd be a regular mortal. I'd always been so happy as my witch's familiar, I'd almost forgotten about the possible alternative. It was a risk I'd have to take.

I jumped onto the bed and concentrated on my wish. The Goddess would only grant my request if my motives were pure and I wanted it with all my heart. I didn't really have time to examine those things, so I just went on the assumption that if anything were wrong with my spiritual desire or motivation, it wouldn't happen. I'd stay a cat. Goddess, I hope this doesn't turn me into someone hideous!

Concentrate, Crowe. Give it all you've got. What would Witchy do to make this happen? I took several deep, slow breaths and closed my eyes. I reached out with my mind to the powers of the universe and tried to elevate my consciousness to the necessary level. When I felt I had made the connection, I recited something I thought she'd say if she were in my predicament.

My dearest wish, my greatest hope, is to be a good man. As I set forth this desire I feel your love drawn to me. I will not cease trying to help my witch and ask this in order to help her more. I call upon all good spirits and divinities that care about the world and its creatures to help me and my witch in the best possible way. So mote it be.

A strange sensation came over me. A heady feeling. Sudden sharp pain shot through me and I fell onto my side. Oh, Gods! It felt as if my body was pulling apart and I'd be ripped in half. Why did I wish this without asking the powers that be to make the transition gentle and pain-free please?

Just as I thought my skin would split, everything inside relaxed and my body stretched like I was made of rubber. The pulling began in my torso and stretched up to the top of my head and down to my paws—wait, feet. I had feet!

I sat up on the bed and looked down. I had feet all right and muscular calves, strong knees and powerful thighs with only a light covering of short, dark hair. And, whoa! A thatch of black curly hair with a massive shaft sticking out of it! Nice! Thank you, Divine ones.

I wanted to see the rest of me in a mirror, but didn't have a chance to get up and try my legs before the bathroom door opened. Joell stepped out. When she looked over and saw me, she jumped backward and drew her weapon from inside her boot, aiming it at me.

"Who the hell are you and how did you get in?"

I hadn't tried my voice yet and when I did, it came out as a short yowl. She cocked her head and stared at me. I had to learn to talk and fast! Then I realized that she had

left the bullets at the mansion and relaxed a bit. That act must have served to loosen my vocal cords and as I tried to form coherent speech, words tumbled out of my mouth.

"I—I know you have no bullets in your Derringer, Joell and you wouldn't want to hurt me, anyway."

She lowered her weapon and her eyes narrowed as she examined me. "I know those eyes, but..." She scanned the room as if looking for someone else. "It's impossible."

"It is possible."

"Crowe?"

"I'm here, as always, ready to serve my Wonder Witch."

She turned paler than I'd ever seen her and staggered backward until she bumped into the dresser. Then she clung to it, her eyes wide and her mouth fell open.

"Please don't be afraid of me. I'm your familiar. I can prove it. You found me on the doorstep when I was just a kitten. You took me into your town home and gave me a bowl of milk in bone china with a pink rose pattern."

She closed her mouth and swallowed. My hearing, still acute, heard the gulp.

"We've gone everywhere together. Paris, Rome, Milan. And we've done so many things. I wouldn't know where to start."

She straightened and crossed her arms as if ready to prove me wrong. "Where were we when Rhae first asked us to join the league?"

"Nice one, Joell, but it was Phoenix who asked us to join and I believe the restaurant was near Saint Petersburg Beach in Florida. You had a drink called a Hurricane. I remember thinking you were tempting fate, but we returned home without causing one."

Her eyes remained wide but she eventually relaxed, set her gun down on the dresser and came over to sit beside me.

"How is this possible? Have you been a shifter all this time?"

"In a way, yes. Certain witches who are special have familiars that are special too."

She brushed off the last crumbs of my breakfast still clinging to the hair on my head and smiled. "I've always known you were special. I really don't know how or if I would have gotten along without you."

She set her warm hand on my thigh and the contact made me tremble inside. I thought I'd better tell her everything as soon as possible.

"Once I shift, I can never shift back." I hung my head. "I must now surrender the honor of being your familiar."

"You don't want to be my familiar anymore?"

"No, it's not that at all. If it were possible, I'd stay by your side until my ninth death. I love you, Joell."

Her expression turned soft and radiant, then she reached for my hand.

"But my role as a familiar is over. I can't be a dumb cat to everyone else who looks at me. I loved my role as your secret intelligence agent, your protector and your champion. I'd never have shifted, except that I needed to speak, to warn you —"

At that moment, I heard the rattle of the key card in the door and someone turning the handle. There was only one person that could be.

The door opened to allow Rick entry. He stopped in his tracks and stared at the two of us sitting side by side on the bed. It must have seemed a little strange, she fully dressed and me fully naked.

"Oh, well isn't this a cozy scene? I'm downstairs working all day and this is what I come back to? My woman and some naked stranger. Who is he, Jello? The janitor?"

I felt her posture straighten. I had to tell her about him, even if I had to do it right in front of his face and hope he didn't shoot me.

"Joell. I think you should know that Mr. Righteous Indignation here had a threesome with a couple of women who seemed to be judges in the model contest."

Rick's face betrayed shock, then quickly turned into anger. "Who the hell do you think you are to make up crap like that? You're not too bright are you? How could you possibly know that unless you were right here when it happened?"

"He also called you a rich bitch and joked about how he needed a sugar momma. He said he'd dump you if one of the woman could offer him the same material comforts with less attitude."

Rick shook his head. "Come on, Joell. Just ignore this psycho. We need to get back to the mansion. We have a job to do, remember?"

"The job is done Rick and so are you."

"You can't be serious."

Her eyes flashed with dark storm clouds. "I'm quite serious. Crowe is a shapeshifter."

His eyes darted to me. He must have seen the last of the Meow Mix in my hair or something, because he held up both hands and backed away.

"I'd suggest you lend Crowe something to wear and we'll be on our way."

"Why should I?"

"Because if you don't, I'll sic all thirteen of us on you. I don't think you'd want the League as your enemy. Especially now."

Rick crossed himself, moved swiftly to the dresser and opened it. He tossed a pair of bikini briefs on the bed.

I just had razz him a little. "I don't suppose you have a larger size, do you? I think your underwear is too small to accommodate the—um—amount I have to cram in there." I glanced down at my nice big unit and shrugged innocently.

He grimaced and said, "Go commando." Then tossed a gray sweat suit in my lap.

I noticed Joell's grin and couldn't help smiling, as hard as I tried to squelch it. As soon as Rick had stormed out of the room, Joell and I hugged each other. What a wonderful feeling, to put my arms all the way around her warm body and hold her so

close to my chest that her breasts squished against me. To feel our hearts beating against each other. An unusual sensation flooded my body. I could feel my sex extending and thickening. I was getting my first hard-on!

Chapter Seven

It hardly seemed fair to have to wait for something so urgent, but taking her right there in Rick's room would have felt all wrong—more like perfectly disgusting, so I relented when she asked me to wait.

I still can't believe I confessed my needs to her. Even crazier, I couldn't believe she was cool with it! Now I just have to hope she won't change her mind when sanity returns in a few hours.

We had gathered the League members from the conference plus an ecstatic Stan to deliver the good news. Nine of us were huddled in a corner of the lobby away from listening ears.

"I can't believe I missed the whole thing," Sakura, still jet-lagged from flying the red-eye from Egypt, said. "So how did it go down?"

Joell took a deep breath. "We followed a lead that brought us to the hotel where we thought they were being held. I couldn't intimidate the perps into spilling their guts since pirate-boy took me out of the room too soon."

"Why did he do that?" Lace asked.

"Because he doesn't know how we work. We charm what we can out of perps, then put the screws to them until we get the rest."

A communal chuckle affirmed her assessment of the League's tactics.

"He was hung up on having no reason to barge in there without a search warrant, yada, yada... Anyway, a quick sweep of the place showed no models, but I could sense their presence. I was afraid we'd lose them if we didn't act fast, so I flew back here, dropped Rick like cargo and grabbed some of the model's possessions for the K-9 police dogs to sniff."

"Who called the K-9 unit?"

"Rick did. It was probably his only valuable contribution."

Victoire, who'd arrived from Canada sometime that morning spoke up. "I suppose it would have been easier to work with one or two of us at your back."

"Totally. But the hotel manager called in the cops and Stan at least managed to convince them to go about it undercover. By the way, thanks for doing that, Stan."

"You're more than welcome."

Brigid ran her hand over Stan's proud chest. "Can you imagine uniforms roving through the convention questioning everyone? It would have been a disaster."

"I know. We'd be so hampered by police procedure we'd wind up looking for our own asses," Lyonene said.

Group laughter said they knew exactly what she was talking about. I can't tell you how glad I am to be on this side of the law, meaning the League of Amazing Women, of course.

Sakura tipped her head to the side. "So what was it like when you found them? Set the scene for us."

"Okay. The dogs were waiting when I got there. I was glad it didn't take forever, because I would have had to bust them myself with my empty Derringer if they'd tried to move them. Since I was already pissed off I didn't trust my aggressive use of magic."

"Understandable," Stan said.

Funny how he could accept the babe's superpowers without question, yet Rick, who could have used the advantage, refused to believe it.

"I gave the officers the items and they did their thing with the dogs. Crowe could have done the sniffing, but with the absence of firepower, having the armed police and attack dogs was the way to go. You should have seen their faces when we busted in on their makeshift studio."

"What studio?" Lace asked.

"They were shooting porn movies. Now I don't have a problem with that as long as the actors are willing and paid for their work. However, these guys weren't going to be doing the "traveling salesman meets the woman of the house in her negligee" movies. They had planned to use them for gay, kiddie and slash porn."

"Jesus," Stan exclaimed. "Thank God you got there before they began shooting."

"Or slashing. Yeah, I know. The models were damn glad to see us."

"I'll bet!" he said. "And I'm damn grateful to all of you too. When I first heard you might not take the case I was desperate. At first it was only to save my own pride, but now..." He shook his head, mouth hanging open but it was as if he didn't have the words to say more.

I'd been quietly standing with my hands at my sides and no one questioned my presence since I'd arrived with Joell. They probably figured I was with the hotel or the police. I didn't want to get into a long explanation of my presence and apparently, neither did she. She turned to me and smiled briefly.

Stan was particularly anxious to be reunited with at least half of his models at the mansion.

Brigid agreed to take him there right away and the rest decided on a time to meet in the mansion's library later that evening. Joell pulled Lyonene aside and whispered something in her ear. The little artist glanced over at me, winked and handed a key card to my witch. Oh, joy! We might not have to wait much longer!

Joell took my hand and I followed her in a haze. When we reached the privacy of the elevator, I didn't know what to say or how to act. I stared at my borrowed sneakers.

"What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?"

An automatic smile stole across my face and when I looked up, she grinned and bumped my hip, playfully. I couldn't ask for a better person to fulfill my greatest fantasy. Plus I knew exactly what she liked, so it shouldn't be too hard to please her in return. My only worry was something I couldn't quite put into words yet. Some sort of

insecure, "but will she love me tomorrow?" thing. I mean, I was stuck in this body, so what on earth would I do if she kicked me to the curb?

By the time we reached the top floor, I felt as if I'd eaten a whole flock of birds. They were alive and well and flapping around in my stomach. She seemed to understand my anxiety as she smoothed my hair away from my face.

The elevator doors whooshed open and she took my hand again, leading the way to the model, Gabriel's, room. "The first thing we should do is clean you up."

"Oh, thank Goddess!"

She unlocked the door and said, "I'm so sorry it took this long to get around to giving you a bath. You must have been miserable."

"A bath?" I halted, halfway in and halfway out of the room. "You mean in a tub of water?"

She touched my arm reassuringly. "Don't worry. I'll be right there and won't let anything happen to you. Besides as a human, you might really enjoy relaxing in a tub of warm water. Most of us do."

That was true. All of the superwomen got into the hot tub or took a bubble bath once in a while and they looked almost as content as they did after good sex. "I'll try it, but I doubt I'll like it." With that, I managed to enter the room. The door closed and locked behind us.

She led me right to the large whirlpool tub in the nicely decorated bathroom, which was the size of Rick's entire room.

"Why don't you just sit on the wide ledge and I'll fill the tub with water as soon as we find a temperature you like."

I sat down with trepidation pricking my nerves. Joell turned on and adjusted the faucets until she seemed satisfied with the water running from the tap over her fingers.

"Here. Try just putting your hand under the faucet. See if you don't enjoy the feeling of warm water rolling over your naked skin."

Oh...she said naked.

Anticipating the reward at the end of the trial by water, I stuck my hand into the flow and withdrew it promptly.

"Too hot?" she asked.

"No. I think it's okay."

She put her hand on her hip and gave me that look. The one that said, "Oh, come on. Don't be a baby," without coming right out and saying it.

I reached for the water again and let it flow over my fingers for a while. It really wasn't an unpleasant sensation. Maybe I could give it a chance.

She smiled at my effort. "Doesn't feel half bad, does it, Crowe?"

"No, it doesn't. I think it might be all right."

"Good!" Joel started to walk away.

I grabbed her arm in panic. "Don't leave me!"

She seemed to understand and walked back to me, cradling my head to her abdomen. "I won't go far," she said softly. "I was simply getting the soap and shampoo from the countertop."

"Oh." I felt warmth rise to my cheeks. This must be embarrassment setting in. My cheeks were probably red too. "I—I'm sorry I'm so nervous about this. I feel perfectly stupid to tell you the truth and I don't want to act like this in front of you."

She rubbed my shoulder and spoke softly. "That's all right. Before you know it you'll be swimming in the mansion's pool."

I tried not to show it, but terror invaded my being at the thought of that big, deep body of water. Then I looked at the much smaller tub and realized it was less of an ocean than I'd first thought. Okay. I can and will do this. For my witch.

She retrieved the products she wanted and said, "Let's get undressed."

"Let us? Are you going in with me?"

"Unless you'd rather I didn't."

"I'd love you to join me!"

"Okay, then." She pulled her red dress over her head and tossed it behind her on the floor. She stood before me wearing only her garters, stockings, matching black lace bra and thong. I swallowed hard. I'd seen her take her clothes off thousands of times. Why was it suddenly so erotic?

I glanced down and noticed my rod hardening up again under the sweatpants.

"Come on, Crowe. Don't be shy. I've already seen it, remember?"

"Yeah and I've seen you too, but I've never felt so..." *What the hell was the word I was looking for?*

"Aroused?"

That's the one. "Yeah."

I stood and grabbed the hem of the sweatshirt I wore. As I pulled it off over my head, she said, "Nice pecs. I haven't seen your ass yet, though."

"You're incorrigible."

She smirked and sauntered into my waiting embrace. Her hands stroked downward until she paused at the dip in my lower back.

"I'll bet it's the best damn ass this side of the moon."

"Sweet talker."

She kissed my neck and slipped her hands underneath the sweatpants waistband. As they traveled over my sensitive flesh, my excitement spiked. I pulled her to me hard and kissed her with all the fervor I'd been trying to push aside.

I cupped and thumbed her breast through the lace with one hand, holding her fast with the other. She let go of my ass just long enough to reach behind her and unhook her bra. As soon as she'd let it slip off her arms, she went to work lowering my sweatpants.

Oh, Goddess, I was so hard my cock was throbbing!

Suddenly she let go and stepped away from me. The loss of her warmth and skin-to-skin contact left me bereft and seemed cruel. Then she pulled off her garters, stockings and panties and jumped, naked, into the tub. The devious diva relaxed in the opposite corner from me.

I stepped out of my sweatpants and placed one foot in the welcoming, warm water. Hmm. It felt kind of nice. Maybe I wouldn't drown, after all. If I couldn't get into that tub with her, however, I'd drown in disappointment. Good things were about to happen. I could sense it.

Joell leaned back and closed her eyes. Then she sighed and began massaging her breasts.

Hey, that's my job. Okay, Crowe. Be brave. Setting my foot down firmly on the bottom, I raised the other and tried to balance while I stepped in. Easier said than done since I'd been using four paws up until an hour ago. Now, bipedal, I had to practice balancing.

I guess I thought about it too much and teetered on one wet leg. Looking over at my witch I noticed she had opened her rainforest green eyes and was reaching for me. Her focus and the wisdom behind those eyes gave me fortitude. Instead of leaping out, I planted both feet in the water and swayed until she took my hands to steady me.

"Kneel down," she said.

I managed to get onto my knees and felt much more secure in that position, despite being surrounded by water and submerged to my thighs.

"See? That's not so bad, is it?"

Warm water caressed my flesh. "Not bad at all. I'm surprised."

She tucked her knees beneath her body and walked closer to me on them. Kneeling facing each other, we resumed kissing and fondling. A nasty, fleeting thought crossed my mind and I tried to push it out. I think it's what I couldn't put into words before. *What if I was just a new boy toy?*

When she broke the kiss, she poured a small amount of shampoo into the well of her palm and then spread it over my head and massaged my scalp.

“Oh, that feels good. Don’t stop.”

She chuckled and said, “I have to wash the rest of you.”

I imagined that must feel pretty good too, so I didn’t complain when she finished and pushed my soapy hair away from my face. A dollop of liquid soap in her hand became a mound of foam between her palms when she rubbed them together. Then she lathered me up. She began at my neck, spread the soap over my shoulders and chest, then rubbed everything in circles. Licking myself was nice, but getting clean like this felt infinitely better. When she’d finished there, she reached around to my back and I got another hug as she soaped me up from my spine to my ass. I took the opportunity to grab her ass too.

She gave me a quick spank and said, “Not yet.”

“Oh...cruel woman. How much longer?”

When she took my cock in her hand and stroked it, I moaned in sheer pleasure from the deep sensations her massage there created. Oh, Goddess. I needed to bury my cock in her...to experience everything.

She continued to stroke while she cupped my balls and gently massaged them. What I had imagined a man might feel with her didn’t come close to the blissful reality. I leaned back, closed my eyes and let the sensations flood my new body.

She leaned toward my ear and whispered, “After I wash you, we’ll fuck. Okay?”

Okay? Was she kidding? That would be fucking wonderful!

“But not here.”

“Why not? Where?” At least I knew who and how.

She leaned back, pushed a button and smiled. “You sound anxious.”

The tub jets sprang to life, bubbling up not only the water, but also the soap that was in it. Soon mounds of white foam surrounded us.

"Well, yes, I am. I've watched you and wished I could be on the receiving end of all that wild passion, but it was never possible before."

She giggled. "You wanted me?"

I wholeheartedly desired her and the experience of sex. I was almost afraid to take Joell. She was so special to me. What if things didn't work out between us? I'd have to leave, but where would I go? What would I do? And most importantly, how would I live without her?

Gazing at her naked breasts, the suds trickling through her cleavage down into her belly button, then spilling over her slightly rounded abdomen, I couldn't help believing that just beneath those bubbles lay my salvation.

I leaned toward her breast, ready to take the pebbled nipple in my mouth and suckle her.

She started to lean away. "You might want to wait..."

"Oh, no. I won't be denied now," I said and latched onto the soapy, slippery – "Blechhh! Yuk! What's that horrible taste?"

"Soap. I tried to warn you."

I let go of her and tried licking my hand to get the offending soap off my tongue, but I just wound up tasting more of it. "This soap is disgusting."

"You're not supposed to get it in your mouth or eyes." She turned on the tap again. "Here. Let the water run over your tongue and wash it off."

I lapped at the water until the taste was pretty much gone. "I guess I still have a few things to learn about being human."

She smiled and patted my foamy head. "A few," then stood and said, "Let's go rinse off in the shower."

The shower? She wanted to let a wall of water crash over my head and body? The very idea sent chills through me. "Can't we just stay here?"

"What? Don't tell me you're a scaredy cat." She grinned and walked carefully over to the shower room and turned on the spray.

"Certainly not."

"Be careful not to slip on the floor. Here, let me put some towels down for you."

She wouldn't do anything to hurt me, right? At least not intentionally. I grasped the edge of the tub and stood slowly as she spread a couple of towels on the floor between the tub and shower. She was there in a flash, extending her hand to me.

"Are you sure about this shower thing?"

"If you want all the soap off it's the best way. Then you won't taste it when you taste me." She raised her eyebrows and that did it.

I took her hand, stepped out of the tub and followed her to the shower, but before I jumped in, I had to ask. "Joell?"

"Yes?"

"Am I...? I mean, will you..."

"What are you trying to say, Crowe?"

I didn't know exactly. What did I want? A commitment? Sex without complications? It was all so sudden I hadn't taken the time to consider the consequences.

I hesitated, then a sly grin crossed her face and she took my erection in her hand and gently pulled me toward the shower.

"Oh, that feels good."

"So will the shower. Now come on. I don't want to get soap in my mouth either."

Soap in her mouth? That meant she intended to...

"Oh boy!" I rushed into the travertine room and lost my balance. Fortunately, I found the grab bar before falling and skidded to an awkward stop.

"Hey, be careful!"

"Sorry," I said sheepishly. "It's just that I can't wait much longer."

She set her hands on her hips and shook her head, but one side of her lip curled up so I knew she was smiling inside.

“Rinse off. Then I’ll be able to help alleviate the problem.”

“What about you? I didn’t have a chance to wash you yet.”

She sauntered up to me and rubbed her breasts against the sparse fur on my chest. “I haven’t had the chance to get dirty yet.”

“Oh, dear Goddess.”

She kneeled in front of me and cupped a few handfuls of water, pouring each one over my painfully swollen cock. Then, she licked it underneath from the base to the tip. I moaned out loud not only because that felt so good, but also because the anticipation was killing me. I was about to receive my first blowjob.

Sure enough, she fitted her mouth around my arousal and sucked the shaft, gently at first. Then she looked up into my eyes and really turned on the suction. I was glad I still had hold of the grab bar because I almost swooned.

Her eyes smiled even though her mouth couldn’t manage it, filled with my cock as it was. I think my naughty witch was enjoying the slow, rapturous torture she must have seen reflected in my face. I couldn’t hold my eyes open and my knees were about to buckle, so I leaned against the wall and let her suck, fondle and squeeze until I thought I’d die if I didn’t come.

“Wait,” I said. “I think I’m close, but I don’t want to come in your mouth or on your face. Not the first time, anyway. Let me make love to you.”

To say she ignored what I said would imply that perhaps she hadn’t heard me. She heard me all right. She just grinned around the sensitive tip and went down on me with even more suction and added vigorous strokes to the base of my shaft. I wanted to hold back, but I couldn’t. Against the expert ministrations of a shameless witch who apparently wanted me to come, I was no match.

The pleasure that had been building all along came to a head—excuse the pun—again. Spasms racked my body. All manner of delight rolled over and through me as I lost control and shot my cum. I thought she'd back away and let it roll off her tongue or spatter her pretty face. She didn't. She kept sucking and milking every drop, spilling none of it while I shook and quaked with every last jab of incredible orgasm.

At last, she released me and stood as my rubberized body slid to the shower floor. I reached for her hand, but instead of letting her pull me up, I pulled her down. Two could play this game.

"Lie down," I rasped.

Chapter Eight

She squatted to a sitting position under the spray without hesitation, then leaned back on her elbows and parted her legs. "Is it my turn to get dirty?"

"Oh, you're already dirtier than I could have hoped. And since I'm used to licking things clean..." I positioned myself on my knees, facing her. "I'm going to lick every inch of you."

She lifted her eyebrows as I slid down to her feet. I ran my tongue over the top of her foot and around her ankle. Then repeated the motion on the other side. Too anxious to continue one side at a time, I held her ankles together in one hand and lifted her legs together. My tongue lapped up her shins to her knees where I planted a kiss on both sides. Then I ran my tongue beneath and swirled my tongue in her knee-pit. She groaned and smiled. Lapping up her thighs to her groin, she flinched and giggled.

I scooted up next to her face and said, "Now I'll start at the top and go down. I want to save the best for last." We embraced for a long, deep kiss before I continued at the top of her wet head and planted kisses down her forehead to her nose and chin. Then we shared another mind-blowing kiss. It was all I could do to tear myself away but my destination was her pussy.

Water splattered my face as I worked my way down to her breasts, but it didn't bother me. I suckled each of those beauties thoroughly while she moaned and writhed. When I finally thought I might drown, I backed down further and tongue-bathed her torso and abdomen. Sliding my hands under her ass, I lowered myself to my elbows and paused. Before I started something I couldn't stop, I needed some answers. "Why didn't you listen to me, before?"

"Before what?"

"You know, when I asked you to let me make love to you?"

"I thought you'd waited long enough."

"Well, it seemed like forever to me, but I'd have waited a little longer. I wanted it to be special for you too. I wanted you to know how I really care about your happiness."

Her expression softened. I don't think it was just because I was seeing her through the mist of warm water.

"I guess we both wanted to say the same thing in different ways. I just knew you'd enjoy that experience and wanted to give it to you. Besides, we can make love in a nice soft bed later."

"Where?"

"Here. There. Anywhere, as far as I'm concerned."

I had to ask the question that had been plaguing me. I hoped it didn't ruin everything, but I had to know. "In our bed? At the mansion?"

"Of course."

Was that an answer? The answer I wanted? I dipped my head and licked her outer labia. Her pubic hair, shaved into a cute heart-shape, hinted at the romantic side of my otherwise kick-butt woman. She let her head drop back and sighed. I swirled my tongue up and down the ridges of her sex until I came close to her tender clit. I could pleasure her for hours like this, but damn it. I wanted an answer first. A real answer.

"Joell...?"

"Yes?" she answered, breathlessly.

I hesitated a moment but had to continue, even if I stumbled over my words. "Will I still sleep in your bed every night? And I don't mean on top of the covers, like before."

"Well of course, silly."

"And...And I don't mean wedged between you and some guy who was too lazy to get dressed and go home."

She laughed. Then she realized I wasn't kidding and stared at me. I couldn't read her expression.

"Crowe, what are you getting at?"

"You and me. Are we...exclusive?" There. I'd said it. Now I had to explain it. "We probably should have had this conversation sooner. It's too late now to avoid having my hopes and dreams crushed, but I don't want to share you with anyone else. Not like this. I'll put my whole heart and soul into your sexual satisfaction, protection and all-around happiness, but I don't want to be brokenhearted for the rest of my life if you take up with the next pretty face you see. I want you to be mine. Forever."

"Crowe... Come here." She reached for me. It seemed like a crazy place to curl up in each other's arms. The shower floor wasn't the softest thing I'd ever lain upon, but I'd lie with her on a bed of nails if she reached for me like that.

I crawled up next to her and sensed some uncomfortable vibes as I brushed long, wet strands of hair away from her face.

"We can't know what forever will bring. There's just no way to say anything is forever, even with the best divination skills." She rolled up onto her elbow, facing me. "I do love you, though."

I couldn't stop touching her. Soothing her. Stroking her. I let my hand wander from her cheek to her shoulder, up and down her rib cage and then to her ass. She shivered.

"Are you cold, love?"

"No. It's just your touch. No one's touch affects me like that. I want to be with you and I can't imagine letting another human being come between us. Does that help?" She cupped my cheek and looked deeply into my eyes. "Remember, you're not the only one risking heartbreak here."

So, I wasn't alone in this feeling. My impetuous witch was finally falling for someone. I was just amazed it was me.

She smoothed my hair back and kissed me on the forehead. "You've been with me through it all and you've never deserted me. You've put yourself in danger. You've stood watch as I held rituals and celebrated Sabbats. You've even watched over me as I had sex. That must have been weird for you."

"Not really. I was curious."

"Well, we're about to satisfy your curiosity without killing the cat."

At last. Someone else who couldn't let a good pun slip by – or a bad one.

"Jeez, you've even stood by me during PMS time. If I'm upset, you find me and have the guts to curl up on my lap and comfort me."

I had to chuckle. She was right. It was a little frightening to know she could send me through the wall with one kick, yet somehow, I just knew she wouldn't. Whenever she needed me, I had to go to her. "So, in other words, you don't mind if I stick around? As your lover and best friend?"

She smiled and whispered in my ear. "I'm counting on it."

* * * * *

Four or five passionate kisses later, we were in the model's king-size bed. I wanted to show her what my talented tongue could really do, so I kissed and nipped my way down to her shaved mound. She reacted with moans and giggles as if I hit every nerve ending on the way. I traced the heart shape with my nose as I inhaled her sweet musk. That and the feel of her warm, soft body against my naked skin excited me even beyond the feral anticipation that zipped through me.

I dragged my tongue down the middle of the shaved heart shape and didn't stop until it rested on her clit. Her little jump and sudden intake of breath nearly stole my own. I wanted to give her a thorough licking, so didn't make her wait long. I teased the damp, outer oblong entrance to her inner sanctum with my finger three times around before sinking a finger deep inside her.

Then, leaning down, I swirled my tongue around her clit as she moaned. Inserting another finger in her channel, I discovered how tight she was. To my surprise, I found myself trembling inside. Anticipation doubled my pulse.

The discovery of how hot and slick her center was made me want to sink my hard, throbbing cock inside her immediately, yet I knew better. She liked her foreplay and I didn't want to show my urgency.

"Beautiful. So warm. So tight." Then I went to work, lapping her clit. She arched her back off the mattress and cried out something unintelligible. Perhaps it was just the sound of her own eagerness.

I licked a staccato rhythm over the swollen nub and she moaned noisily while rocking against my mouth.

"Don't stop. Oh, you have no idea how good that feels," she whimpered.

I had no intention of stopping. Instead I tightened my mouth's grasp and added some suction to the mix. I watched her react with surprise as her body inadvertently bucked. Once. Twice.

"Oh Goddess!" Her thighs shook. Her moans turned to howls and shrieks as her body spasmed and she whipped her head from side to side. There was no faking that response. At the height of her frenzy, her vaginal walls grasped my fingers repeatedly signaling a good, hard climax.

When she pushed my head away, I sat back on my heels and gladly watched her recover. Her breath came in quick gasps at first while her chest rose and fell rapidly. Eventually, she quieted, looking as limp as the toy ferret she gave me to play with last Yule.

I eased my body to lie beside her without breaking off my stiff rod and we held hands for a few moments.

"Thank you," she said in a hoarse voice.

I propped myself on my elbow and kissed her on the nose. "Don't strain your vocal cords."

She chuckled about an octave lower than usual. "Too late."

In a sneak attack, she launched herself at me, pushing me onto my back. She kissed my lips until I opened my mouth for her waiting tongue. As she swirled her tongue with mine, she made a sound as if tasting something decadent and delicious. I wanted to savor her too.

Our long, deep kiss continued while we explored every crevice and texture not only of our mouths, but also our bodies. My hands traveled down her back, feeling the ripples of her spine, the small dip below her waist and the swell of her ass. I squeezed and kneaded the succulent orbs, wanting more than anything to hold them as I fucked her.

When she finally ended the kiss, she leaned back and looked at me with smoldering eyes. "Are you ready?"

"So ready." I stroked her arm and pictured the two of us fucking in all the possible positions. Even a few impossible ones. "I'm so hot and bothered I don't care which way we do it first, as long as we try everything eventually."

"That sounds good," she said in her sexy, low voice. "You look comfortable. Stay right where you are."

Oh good. I could cup her ass as she rode me. "Mmm. Permission to mount granted."

She rose to her knees, threw her leg over me and grabbed my erection. It twitched in joyous expectation. She leaned forward, positioning her opening in front of my eager hard-on and her sensuous smile hovered above me. With one fluid motion, she speared herself on my cock. Both of us closed our eyes and moaned in unison.

Her sultry, wet sleeve encased my shaft perfectly. Nothing had ever felt so completely right. It was as if I'd been missing this moment all of my lives and didn't know it.

I advanced my hips just as she sunk back down on my cock, stroking it with her inner muscles. We found our rhythm. I gripped her buttocks and loved the feel of squeezing it.

I couldn't believe it. I was fucking my woman at last. Nothing had ever felt so amazingly satisfying. I wanted to do this every day, three times a day even if I missed a meal. I'd have fucked her for hours if I could.

The glorious sensations leading to orgasm grew more and more insistent, so I let go of her ass with one hand and rubbed her clit with my thumb. She threw her head back and moaned. I hoped she'd climax again, maybe at the same time I did. Or not. I loved watching her face as I pleased her.

Speaking of pleasure, mine was mounting quickly. The desire for release was becoming unbearable. I kept up the pressure on her clit, determined to bring her to the brink before I succumbed to my own ecstasy.

As I continued to flog her core with passionate abandon, more and more incredible sensations shot through me and I trembled inside. Joell bent over me and I felt her channel contracting in waves as she shook and screamed out her second orgasm. That set mine free as well. We bucked, quaked and shuddered together and rode the bliss right to the end of the aftershocks.

When at last she collapsed on me, I enveloped her in my loving arms.

Her head curled under my chin and her fingers explored my chest hair. "So, did you like that?" she asked.

I laughed so hard I couldn't speak.

* * * * *

"Come, darling. We have a celebration to attend!"

My nerves vibrated as I wondered what the others would think of me. The mascot cat comes to life out of its costume. They might think Jo had lost her mind or was dreaming. But I was real, not a dream.

After making love again in the hotel, we returned to the mansion and went straight to the turret to report in. We learned via Boss Dog that Rhae, Vesper, Angel, Crystasha, Chee and Magda had rescued the remaining four models before any harm had come to

them. Phoenix had found out who was selling names to the tabloids and the guy would have a long time to think about his actions on his way back to Florida, provided he could swim from the desert island on which she marooned him.

We were so overcome with joy that we immediately fell to the floor and made love right on the protective pentacle. Then we christened our bed as we fucked again in our bedroom. Home sweet home.

Eventually we had to come downstairs, though. Everyone would be gathered together and waiting for us by now. Yet all I wanted to do was cuddle my one true love.

Two waiters circled the library and poured champagne into everyone's glasses. We were just about to raise a toast when the red house-light flashed. Joell circled the large mahogany desk, put her glass down and flipped open her laptop. Passing her hand over the monitor and red button, Rhae's countenance appeared on the screen, her dark hair in wild disarray and her face glistened.

"Rhae, I was about to check in with you. How are you and everyone on your end?"

She wiped her brow as if she'd been through a long battle, but smiled and said, "We're dancing and celebrating victory, here."

"We were victorious too. Come and join us as soon as you can. I can't wait to compare notes. I wonder if these cases were in any way related."

A male voice intruded, but no image showed on the screen. "I'm sure they were," the voice of Boss Dog said. "The LAPD just talked to the NYPD. It seems as if a bicoastal producer of pornography was behind this. He found business dropping off because all of his porn stars were butt ugly. That worked back when porno tapes were only for men and homely men liked seeing nasty-looking guys screwing beautiful chicks.

It meant they had a chance if they were unattractive and maybe a good chance if they weren't too bad. But now that women are enjoying pornography too, that won't cut it anymore. They demand higher quality writing, good-looking actors and refuse to buy into double standards."

"Let's hear it for empowered women," Joell cried and a cheer rose up in answer.

Boss Dog continued when everyone quieted down. "They were set up in the basement of each hotel. Both groups of males were bought from the perps as sex slaves. They were about to be forced to perform for the cameras as I understand it. And they had some scary plans for them already scripted. Then the League found the hotels and the K-9 dogs found the models at the same time on both coasts."

The model named Scott piped up. "Thank God. I thought I had to make love to a German Shepard for a second there!"

Two rooms of people on two coasts laughed at that.

"Listen, I'll let you get back to your party. Rhae, you'll have your four models on the east coast in a few hours. I'm sending my private jet for you now."

I heard Vesper's voice pipe up in the background on the other side of the monitor. "What about us superheroines? Some of us have been promised some pretty awesome acts of gratitude!"

"Well, You'll just have to grab some mile-high good times on the way, Vesper."

"Yeah! That's what I'm talkin' about."

My witch bumped my leg and her eyes twinkled. I knew what she was thinking. I couldn't stand waiting much longer.

"Everyone?" Joell announced. "I want you to meet the newest member of the League."

"What?" Phoenix sat in a corner armchair. I hadn't realized she was through with her assignment and up from Florida. "We all vote on new members, remember? You can't just appoint someone."

"Well, actually Crowe has been a member of the League as long as I have. Besides, we're inseparable."

I heard several female gasps.

"Your familiar?" Phoenix managed to say after a long silence.

Joell looked into my eyes with so much love my hands itched to take her again right there. "My familiar, best friend and now, my lover."

To heck with my first glass of champagne. There was something sweeter I wanted to sip. I picked her up and was about to haul her up three flights of stairs when Rhae's voice asked, "Hey! That's *our* Crowe? The tall, dark and handsome Russell Crowe look-alike is a shifter? How is it I didn't know?"

"He can only shift once and he did it to protect me," she replied.

"Oh, that's so sweet," Phoenix crooned.

"Welcome to the big league, honey," Rhae quipped.

I vaguely heard people chuckling and wishing us luck as I spirited my Wonder Witch upstairs, taking two at a time.

"Don't forget..." she called over my shoulder. "Beltane Eve... Big celebration right here! You're all invited."

Epilogue

Two weeks later

Joell and I had two weeks to learn all the finer points of pleasing each other. We'd tried dozens of different positions, experimented with various toys, even some mildly kinky stuff like bondage and spanking. Now, here it was...orgy night. We had avoided discussing it right up until the last moment.

Thirty people had enjoyed the Maypole ritual and we were sharing the last remnants of the feast. I was reluctant to bring up the particulars of the orgy at all. I didn't want to burst my bubble. Didn't want the honeymoon to end.

At our table sat the model of the year award winner, Gabriel Moore, Brigid and Stan and the two League babes from Canada, Lyonene and Victoire. The guests had all been making eyes at each other and flirting throughout dinner, so it was pretty clear they all knew what was next.

This used to be my favorite part of my favorite celebration. Now, I was afraid that if anyone touched my witch, my claws would come out and I'd spoil the party. I had to say something about what a difficult time I was having and it was now or never.

I leaned toward my darling Joell and whispered low, "So, I know what's gone on at these parties before, but do you think... Is this year? I mean...is it going to be any different?"

"I don't think we varied the Maypole ritual or dinner very much, Crowe. Do you mean the celebrations after that?"

"I mean raw, steamy, indiscriminant sex with the invited guests."

I must have spoken a tiny bit too loudly, because the rest of the guests around the table perked up and fell silent, as if waiting for an answer to something they were all

wondering. Joell smiled at me but didn't answer. Instead, she rose and tapped her glass to get everyone's attention.

As soon as the room quieted, she started giving her speech.

"I want to thank everyone for coming to this wonderful celebration of the Sabbat, Beltane. Beltane represents the joy of spring, of life and renewal. I'm so pleased to renew and reaffirm many friendships here today. And to celebrate life fully with you."

So far everything, almost every word, remained the same and my stomach sank.

"But since we have so many new guests this year, I'll take a moment to explain what Beltane is. There are four great festivals of the Pagan Celtic year and most modern witches celebrate these.

"The two greatest are Samhain, or Halloween on October thirty-first, which ushers in the beginning of winter and the second is six month later, Beltane or May Day, which ushers in the beginning of summer on May first. Being opposite on the wheel of the year, they separate the year into halves. Some consider Samhain the more important of the two since it's considered the beginning of the Celtic New Year. But May Day runs a close second.

"Some places, notably Wales, even consider May Day to be the great holiday. Here at the League we celebrate jubilantly at this time of year and more reverently at Samhain. The month of May was named in honor of the Goddess, Maia. She was originally a Greek Mountain nymph and was considered the most beautiful of her seven sisters. She has since earned the title of Earth Goddess.

"The Maypole represents the male phallus. It must be planted in Mother Earth for the joyful dance to begin. The dance either represents or is the precursor to sexual intercourse, which brings forth life.

"The word 'Beltane' refers to the great Bel Fire, the fire of the God of Light, Bel and he can be traced to the Middle Eastern God Baal. We may not have a big bonfire, but we're here in the Baalroom."

Some people tittered at this, probably knowing what a ball they were going to have as soon as Joell stopped talking.

"In many ancient cultures a young maiden of the village was selected to be the May Queen. Various ways to represent the great joining have been invented, but the original version insisted on the May Queen being fucked by every man in the village."

Great cheers went up as she spoke those words. I wanted to cry.

"If she was impregnated, the child of the May Queen was called a Beltane Baby and was considered a very lucky child. Because no one knew who the father was, the entire village raised the child. Fortunately, we Ladies of the Law are all on the Pill!"

That got a laugh and grins grew wide on all the men's faces.

"Unfortunately there isn't a virgin in the lot of us, so we don't bother trying to find a May Queen."

Groans of disappointment followed.

"Take heart. All is not lost! There's another way people celebrated the great rite which was just as popular."

You could have heard a pin drop.

"On May Eve, those who wished to participate in the ritual wandered into the woods to fornicate with whomever they wished. Long after the Christian form of marriage insisting on sexual monogamy had replaced older Pagan customs, the rules of strict fidelity were always relaxed for the May Eve rites.

"These wildwood antics have inspired writers such as Kipling:

Oh do not tell the Priest our light,

Or he would call it sin;

But we have been out in the woods all night,

A-conjuring Summer in!"

Someone from the back of the hall yelled, "So hurry up and let us get it on!"

Joell chuckled and said, "I will. I promise, but there's one more ritual I want to mention before we start. It has to do with the old handfasting custom."

My ears tingled. I hadn't heard of any handfasting on Beltane.

"Those who feel they want to celebrate, but want to make love with one other person exclusively, will find the highest point on a hill and will celebrate with each other all night long. In the morning they are considered off-limits to others and willing to be handfasted."

She looked at me and said, "Crowe?" Then she extended her hands. Without standing, I reached out and took both her hands in mine.

I gulped and hoped my voice didn't come out as a squeak. "Yes, love?"

"Will you do me the honor of being my exclusive partner tonight?"

I breathed a huge sigh of relief that I'm sure everyone heard. "Tonight and every night, my love." Applause followed us all the way upstairs as we raced each other to the turret.

About the Author

Kidnapped by gypsies as an infant, Ashlyn Chase was left on the doorstep of the Massachusetts home in which she grew up—at least that's what her older siblings told her. It seems that storytelling runs in the family.

Ashlyn worked as a psychiatric nurse for several years, holds a degree in behavioral sciences and has been trained as a fine artist, registered nurse, hypnotherapist, and interior designer. Writing is one career she wasn't formally educated in, yet by sheer determination she's become a multi-published, award-winning author.

Most writers, whether they're aware of it or not, have a "theme", some sort of thread that runs through all of their books, uniting the whole mishmash into an identifiable signature. Ashlyn's identified her theme as involving characters who reinvent themselves. It's no wonder, since she has reinvented herself numerous times. Finally content with her life, she lives in beautiful New Hampshire with her true-life hero husband and a spoiled brat cat.

Ashlyn welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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