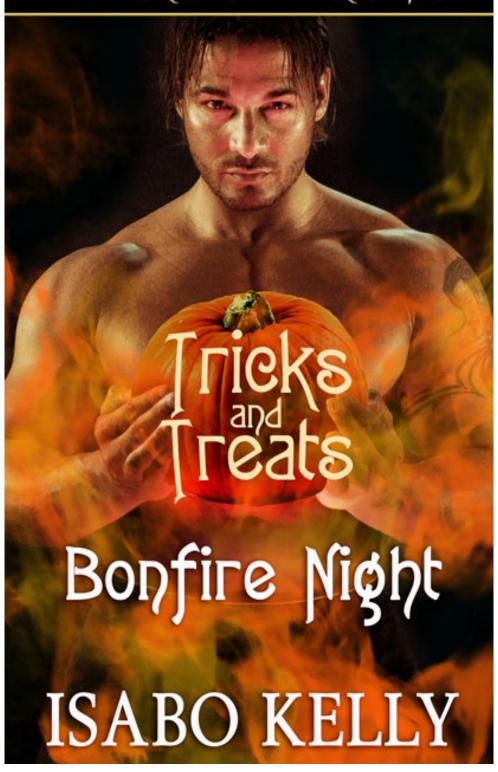
Ellora's Cave Presents



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Bonfire Night

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BONFIRE NIGHT

Isabo Kelly

Chapter One

He watched her light the final candle. Her straight brown hair brushed her shoulders as she moved. The black robe swirled around her bare feet. Pale skin and blue eyes glowed in the dim light. As her protective circle closed, the surge of power burned through him. The fire he always felt when watching her flamed hotter. She'd started later than he'd hoped. On Samhain night, she could have started at sundown. Instead, she'd waited until eleven p.m. And those extra hours had tormented him.

But now, finally, the time was near.

She sat cross-legged on her meditation pillow and lit the candles on her altar—first the four white directional candles, then the green and brown that represented her primary element, and finally the black to ward against negativity and the orange to celebrate the season. She was a solitary witch with her own habits, her own processes, and he loved watching her prepare.

On the red, glowing coal in her censer, she poured a healthy pile of frankincense and myrrh, filling the circle with the heady scent of the protective and cleansing herbs—herbs that would aid her meditation. He'd come to associate that smell with her. She lifted her athame and waved it through the incense smoke as she murmured a quiet prayer to the Lady.

Finally, she ended her thanksgiving for the year that was and the year to come. Though he could barely wait for her to relax into her meditation, her prayers always made him smile. She was special, his witch.

She settled into her pillow and started to breathe deep and slow. And his every sense came alive. Lust, love, longing, need...things he shouldn't feel but did. And he didn't care that this violated taboos.

He needed her. He wanted her. And tonight, he'd have her.

* * * * *

Tabitha Reed sank into her meditative trance, knowing what she would see. The same things she'd seen since last Samhain. The glade, the moonlight, the man.

Liam.

His name drifted through her thoughts and her thighs clenched in reaction. She let herself savor the sensation for a moment then blinked open her eyes.

And he was there, waiting for her.

Tabitha smiled. In those first few moments, she felt the smile in her physical body as well as on the lips of her vision self. Then the vision took her and she was completely immersed.

"Took you long enough," he chided as he closed the distance between them.

Floating candles brightened the area, aiding the moonlight and giving her a view of a vine-and-flower circled bed draped in dark, slippery silk sheets. "Anticipation is good for you," she said, her gaze settling on his face. "Besides, I wanted to watch the bonfire."

She'd always enjoyed that particular Irish Halloween tradition, even before she moved to Ireland. They called this night bonfire night, originally lighting huge conflagrations to chase away evil. Now they did it to see who could build the biggest flame. The lads in her neighborhood had a huge fire burning, topped with anything they could get their hands on that would burn, even a beat-up sofa. But this year Tabitha had been too impatient to watch long.

She'd needed to see Liam and feel the heat of their own fire.

He was so handsome he took her breath away. Not beautiful, not pretty. But she loved every hard plane of his face, the thick waves of his black hair, the heat in his blue eyes. He was muscular and tall and, at the moment, wearing nothing more than a pair of black silk drawstring pants.

She let her gaze wander over him, hungry for his touch and yet wanting to delay the moment. This was all they ever had, these brief encounters in her mysterious visions. She wanted the time to draw out as long as possible. She'd stopped questioning the moments, stopped worrying about her sanity or the strangeness of her time with him. Even knowing this was nothing more than a vision concocted by her subconscious, she valued this time too much to give it up.

And she wanted Liam too much to let him go.

"I experience more than enough anticipation waiting for these nights," he said, a note of scolding in his tone even as the wry quirk of his lips gave away his amusement.

"I do too," she admitted, unable to be anything but honest.

He stepped close, but instead of touching her, he walked a tight circle around her. As he finished the circuit, she felt a wash of cool air and glanced down. She stood naked now, her robe gone with no more effort than a thought.

He stared for a long moment and her skin heated, her nerves tingling. When he still didn't touch her, she raised a brow and said, "If you've been anticipating my coming for so long, why are you waiting?"

He chuckled. "Because I want you to anticipate coming too."

His voice was deep, laced with a hint of Irish accent, and his words sent a shiver down her spine.

"I've a surprise," he said after another silent moment.

As she watched, he lifted his hand and a clay pot appeared in his palm. With his other hand, he produced a small, soft-bristled brush. She leaned close to look into the pot and breathed in the scent of chocolate. "What's this for?"

"A treat."

"As in trick or treat?" She couldn't resist a grin.

"But this trick *is* a treat." He dipped the brush into the pot. "I've a sweet tooth tonight." The brush emerged coated in chocolate. "Not that you aren't always sweet," he added. "But everything tastes good with chocolate, don't you think?"

She nodded, the only response she could muster as she watched the brush sweep toward her breast. Her nipples peaked, giving him an eager canvas to work on. Sucking in a breath, Tabby watched as Liam painted first one nipple, then the other in the warm chocolate. Some dribbled down her breasts, making a trail toward her ribs. He didn't touch her in any other way—just used the small brush to coat her nipples, then the fullness of her breasts.

"Liam?" She might have been embarrassed by the desperation in her voice if this was any other man, in any other moment. But with him, she never worried.

"How does that feel?"

"Good. Warm. Wet."

"Bet it tastes good too."

Tabby waited, her every nerve jumping in anticipation of his mouth. Instead, he continued to paint her skin, moving the chocolate in a line down the middle of her abdomen, circling her navel, then veering away from her lower stomach to trace swirls on her hipbones. The tickling brush of soft bristles made her squirm. Liam was standing close enough she could feel the heat of his skin, and the sensation combined with the tease of chocolate dripping down her hip sent an uncontrollable shudder through her body.

"You haven't kissed me yet," she said, because if she didn't say something she wasn't sure she'd be able to stay standing.

"I will. Soon. But I'm enjoying this. Aren't you?"

The brush swept across her lower abdomen to her other hipbone. Tabby's inner muscles clenched. "Yes," she said, sucking in a breath. Since she wasn't sure he heard her, she said it again. "Yes."

He glanced up, and she met his gaze, held by the secrets in his blue eyes. He smiled, but his expression was too intense for humor.

"Turn around," he ordered.

She obeyed, only breaking eye contact when her neck wouldn't stretch any farther. "Lift your hair."

She pulled the shoulder-length mass together and swept it up on top of her head in a loose bun. "I'm not going to be able to hold this for long without my arm getting tired," she teased, glancing over her shoulder. An instant later, she felt a clip sliding into her hair, holding the bun in place. "One of these days, you're going to have to tell me how you do that."

His breath brushed her shoulder as he leaned in close. "Ah, but that would give away all my secrets."

"You have more than enough secrets already." Despite a year of these meditative interludes, despite the fact that he was probably a creation of her own mind, there was still a lot about him she didn't know. Oh, they talked. Those were some of her favorite moments, after they'd made love, Liam holding her close and talking quietly with her in the shadowy darkness of the glade before she was forced to come out of her meditation. But he never revealed much—only two important details. One, he couldn't get her pregnant even if she wasn't on the Pill. She'd always assumed this was because, well, he was a vision and not a real man. Two, he could only come to her when she was inside a protective circle. Despite her questions, he'd never explained that requirement.

She felt the gentle touch of the brush at the base of her neck and abruptly stopped worrying about his secrets. Chocolate slid warmly down her spine, followed by the sweep of bristles. Her back arched and her stomach tightened. She was wet, pulsing and eager for his touch. She wanted his mouth on her. And a part of her wanted him to hurry.

But knowing this moment was rare and precious, she kept quiet, letting him slowly drive her mad.

She felt him kneel behind her and glanced over her shoulder. His face was level with her ass as he let the brush slowly dribble chocolate along the small of her back. When the chocolate reached the top of the crack between her cheeks, she held her

breath. Liam glanced up, grinned, then leaned forward. His tongue flicked out and caught the chocolate right at the top of her ass. He didn't touch her anywhere else or with anything but his tongue. The wet, wicked sensation started her breathing again, hard, and she moaned when his lips settled against the base of her spine.

"I was right," he murmured. "You taste brilliant with chocolate."

He gave her another brief lick, his tongue dipping just inside her cheeks. Her muscles clenched in response. When he moved his mouth lower, dropping soft, teasing kisses over her bottom, she locked her knees to keep from dropping. A moan escaped as his fingers fluttered along the inside of her upper thigh, temptingly close to her curls. Then she felt the tingle of bristles again, dribbling chocolate down her butt. His breath brushed hotly against her flesh as he painted the area where her ass met her legs. Everything inside her trembled and tightened, anticipating his next move.

The brush slipped between her thighs and swept gently across her labia, dragging a groan from deep in her throat. She dropped her head forward and closed her eyes.

"You like that?" Liam asked.

She nodded, too focused on the soft swish of bristles against her pulsing cleft to speak. Liquid seeped down her leg, and she couldn't tell if it was the chocolate or her own juices, though she suspected it was both. Every nerve in her body seemed drawn to that one place, screaming for more. A fine tremor started in her lower abdomen. Soon. If he continued like this, her first orgasm would steal over her soon.

As if he read her mind, Liam moved the brush from her mound, sliding the bristles down her thigh. Tabby whimpered in protest.

"So impatient," he murmured, then he dragged the brush up between her ass cheeks.

Tabby gasped. She'd never felt anything quite like the tickle of those bristles stroking so close to her anus. Liam was winding her tighter than he ever had before, extending the pleasure until it teetered on the brink of pain. And she loved every second of it.

The touch of the brush vanished and in the next instant, she felt Liam's mouth again, his lips and tongue tracing the crease between her thigh and butt, slowly licking away the chocolate. She spread her legs farther apart to keep her balance, and Liam took advantage, sucking at the liquid dribbling over her inner thigh. Tabby cried out as her muscles quivered in reaction.

"So sweet," he said, then moved back to her spine.

He licked higher, harder, cleaning her skin. Each pass of his tongue left her more off balance until she knew she'd collapse. When she wobbled, Liam's hands clenched her hips, holding her upright.

"I won't be able to stand much longer," she panted, opening her eyes so she could glance back at him.

"You won't have to."

The promise in his voice weakened her further. Lady, he was driving her crazy. She kept forgetting this couldn't be real. Her body felt alive and rippling with so much sensation she wanted to scream. How could this only be a vision?

He reached her nape, kissing and licking in alternating strokes. "Delicious." He nipped the skin at the curve between her shoulder and neck. "And I have so much more chocolate to get to." Gripping her shoulders, he turned her to face him.

"Not full yet?" she asked, barely containing her eagerness for his next touch.

"Not even close."

"What does the chocolate taste like?"

He raised a brow, then knelt before her to pick up the pot he'd left on the grass. His position brought his face close to her curls, and the warm wash of his breath sent pulsing waves of heat through her pussy. His nostrils flared. Without warning, he leaned forward and licked her slit, dipping the tip of his tongue between her nether lips.

Tabby moaned and grabbed for the only solid thing she could reach. "Liam!" She buried her fingers in his hair, trying not to fall. All his teasing had left her beyond sensitive. His games pushed the ebb and flow of her arousal to ever higher peaks. The sweep of his tongue against her pulsing flesh overwhelmed her. And knowing he was lapping up chocolate from that tender skin nearly tipped her over the edge.

But he pulled away after only a brief taste, rising to his feet and dislodging her hold in the process. "You wanted to know what the chocolate tastes like," he said. Then he dipped his finger into the pot.

With the rich darkness coating his skin, he held his finger to her lips. She took him into her mouth, licking and sucking the sweetness from him even as she reached out and caressed his erection through the silk of his pants. His cock was thick in her palm, and he jerked in response to her touch. She rubbed the silk along his heated flesh. But an instant later, the barrier vanished and she felt the smooth, hard skin of his cock filling her hand.

She smiled around his finger, savoring both the taste of the chocolate and the sound of his harsh breathing. "*Mmm*." She released his finger but continued to nibble and lick his skin. "This does taste good. I wonder what it will taste like here." And her grip tightened around his shaft.

"I'm looking forward to letting you find out." His voice was raspy and deep. "But I'm not through with you yet."

She let him pull his hand from her lips, but she didn't release his erection. Glancing down at the chocolate covering her breasts, she said, "You do have quite a lot of...tasting to finish."

He chuckled, and the sound tingled over her skin. Leaning down, he captured her nipple in his mouth, his tongue swirling around her areola as he licked off the sweet coating. She dropped her head back and moaned. The pressure of his lips pulling at her nipple sent a sharp tug of sensation directly between her legs, as if her nipple and her clit were connected by a live wire. Sharp shocks of desire rocked through her, making

her feel like she might come just from the play of his mouth on her breasts. He'd left her so tender and ready, she knew she wouldn't last much longer.

His cock pulsed and lengthened in her palm as she stroked him. Her mind spun. Every time she was with him, every moment they shared, left her reeling. She wanted nothing more than to lie on the cool grass and take Liam inside her, fuck him again and again until neither of them could breathe, until there was no longer a difference between this vision and her real world. Until the only thing that existed was the two of them and this passion that defied logic, reason...even sanity.

"More," she panted as his mouth dipped lower, licking away the chocolate covering her stomach. As he dropped to his knees, she lost her hold on his cock, but she was too caught up in the pleasure of his mouth to care. She griped his dark hair in her fingers and groaned his name.

"Tabitha," he breathed against her naval. "I want you so much. You taste like paradise, like every perfect dessert ever created."

That admission forced a shaky chuckle from her. "I taste like dessert, do I?"

"The best dessert. And I've a wicked sweet tooth."

She shuddered, her skin rippling under the torturous wet heat of his kisses. He wrapped his arms around her hips, pulling her tight against his mouth even as she folded her hands around his head to keep him close. "I don't understand this. I don't understand who you are or where you come from," she murmured, using what little breath she had left to speak. "I never have. But I want it, I want you. So much."

"Tabitha."

Her name emerged as a groan this time, and the sound of his desperation made her heart swell.

His mouth dipped lower, his tongue flicking out against her hipbone. Every cell in her body jumped in anticipation of his mouth on her pussy again. *Yes*, she thought. *More.* But she was too focused on the feel of his kisses to give voice to those pleas.

And then suddenly, he jerked back. Tabby glanced down. He was stiff and still, his head turned away and his gaze focused on a spot in the shadows between the trees circling the glade. Then he looked up and caught her gaze. She fell back a step at the panic in his eyes.

"Wake up," he said, rising to his feet. "Now. You have to come out of your trance." He glanced into the shadows again, then gripped her shoulders and gave her a rough shake. "Break your trance, Tabitha. Now!"

Chapter Two

Tabitha blinked, sucked in a sharp breath and reality came crashing in around her. Her heart raced as she found herself abruptly back in her sitting room, cross-legged on her meditation pillow, staring at the burning candles on her altar. "What the...?" In the quiet room, her voice sounded harsh and strained.

She'd never come out so suddenly before, and the shock left her off balance, as if she might tumble over the edge of a cliff that wasn't really there. She blinked again as her eyes adjusted to the light. Despite the luminescent moon and candlelight in the glade, her eyes had in fact been closed. For several moments, she couldn't see past the glitter of small flames on the altar. When her sight finally cleared, she glanced around the dark sitting room of her little cottage. What had happened? Why had Liam pushed her back to reality?

Her body shook, trembling with a combination of shock and lingering lust. She sucked in several long, deep breaths. And then she tried to stand. That's when the man stepped out of a shadowy corner and into the candlelight outside her circle.

"Who...?" Her breath rushed out and her voice emerged as a squeaky gasp.

The stranger smiled. "Tabitha."

"Who are you? What are you doing in my house?" She risked a glance around the room. The man stood between her and her front door. Her gaze fell on the athame on her altar and she snatched it up. "Get out," she said. "There's nothing here worth stealing." Which was true.

The man chuckled. "I'm not here for things, Tabitha."

"How do you know my name?"

"Oh, I know all about you, love. I'm here for you."

Her stomach tightened into a hard knot. She swallowed and took a step away. She was moving farther from the door and escape, but all she could think about was putting more space between her and the stranger. Watching him warily, she eased back by careful inches.

His smile widened as he moved toward her. "Go ahead, Tabitha. Run. Makes it more fun."

Lady, help! Her hand tightened around her athame. Because she didn't dare pull her gaze from his face, she saw him flick a look to the ground behind her. She stopped in her tracks. What was behind her? She'd come out of her trance so abruptly, she'd been too disoriented to notice any changes in the room. She hadn't even seen the stranger until he'd moved.

With her pulse racing, she risked a glance over her shoulder. Nothing. Except the edge of her protective circle. She was one step, maybe two from the chalk line on her wooden floor. Frowning, she faced the intruder and caught him looking at the line. He pulled his gaze back to her face, but not quickly enough for her to miss the intensity in his expression. Narrowing her eyes, she took a half step backward, toward the circle's edge. And she saw the satisfaction, the eagerness in the tilt of his mouth.

"You want me to leave my circle? Why?"

He straightened at her question, the skin around his eyes pinching. In the dim candlelight, she couldn't see him well enough to tell the color of his eyes, but the shadows highlighted the changes in his expression. "I don't care where you are, Tabitha. This house isn't big enough for you to escape."

"What do you want with me?"

He smiled again. "It's a surprise."

She tried not to let her imagination scare away all her common sense. If he wasn't going to discuss the particulars of his plan, she didn't want to know them either. She remained motionless during the exchange, and she noticed his gaze darting to the circle edge more than once. As a test, she took one step toward the altar at the center of her

sacred space. The man's mouth twitched at one corner and his nose wrinkled in irritation.

Interesting. She moved closer to the altar.

"You in a hurry for your surprise?" he asked, inching nearer.

She held her tongue until she reached the very center of her protected space. As the man got to the chalk line, he stopped. She tilted her head to one side. "Something wrong?" She knew the question was dangerous. But there was something about this situation... Her instincts were whispering, *Stay inside the circle. He can't hurt you here.* And since she'd spent her life listening to instincts that served her well, she decided not to ignore them now.

The man glared, his smile dropping away. "Don't toy with me, witch."

"I didn't realize I was."

He snarled and moved forward, but when he hit the circle's edge, he hissed and blue light flamed in his face. Tabitha jerked as if she'd been shocked by static. The stranger lurched back and the blue light vanished.

Realization dawned. "So," she murmured, more to herself than him, "you can't cross the line." She nodded and let loose a breath as her shoulders relaxed ever so slightly. "In that case, I think I'll stay were I am."

"Bitch."

His hand shot out, bashing against the invisible barrier, and it flared blue again. Tabby gasped, feeling the reverberations of his strike in her gut. Her eyes widened when she met the stranger's. His snarl turned into a smirk, and he punched the barrier again. This time Tabby doubled over, nearly dropping her knife.

Arms wrapped around her stomach, she concentrated on breathing through her teeth. But the stranger didn't give her time to recover. He hit the barrier again, two, three times. Blue light flared, and Tabby felt each strike. The skin on the man's hands

started to smoke and blacken, but he ignored his own injury, battering the barrier again. And again.

Tabby cried out and dropped to her knees as pain radiated through her bones. She'd never experienced anything like this. The circle was supposed to keep her safe. Why could she feel his attacks? As black spots danced in her vision, panic warred with pain. She couldn't pass out. She'd be defenseless. In desperation, she started to sever her link to the circle.

No!

The order roared into her mind, in a voice she'd only heard in her visions. Every light in the room banked suddenly, plunging her into darkness. Tabby screamed.

In the next instant, the candles flared to life. And she was no longer alone in her circle.

She couldn't breathe as she stared at the man kneeling beside her, knowing in that instant she'd gone insane. Tremors racked her body. This wasn't possible. "Liam?" His name came out in a whisper she couldn't hear around the roaring in her ears.

"Don't pull back from the circle, Tabitha," he said firmly. "It's your only protection."

Then he stood and faced the stranger. A wash of something cool and soothing eased through her bones. The pain lessened. She could feel her connection to the barrier now, more than she had before. But something else flowed through her into the circle, reinforcing her own strength. With a shaky breath, she grabbed her athame again. But she stayed crouched, watching the two men.

Neither spoke for a long moment. They just stared. The contrast between them was pronounced. Now that the candlelight was brighter, she could see the stranger had blond hair and pale eyes. Liam's coloring was darker. They were about the same height, which was tall, but the stranger was slim and sleek in a gray suit. Liam was thicker, more earthen, wearing only a pair of loose black trousers and a black button up shirt.

As she studied the two men, she also noticed the stranger's skin had a pale green cast. And his eyes were starting to glow red.

The silence between the men stretched out so long, Tabby wanted to scream again. Finally, Liam spoke. "Leave. You have no business here. She's not yours."

The stranger smiled. "She said you'd come."

"Who?"

Instead of answering, the man struck the circle again, holding his hand against the barrier to draw out the strain on Tabitha. She gasped, feeling a faint hint of discomfort. But she was no longer racked with pain. Liam. He must be helping her somehow. She glanced at him, but he kept his gaze on the other man.

When the stranger's arm actually burst into flame, he snarled and jerked back, cradling his injured limb. "You can't feed her power," the blond man said. "It's against the rules."

"Attacking her physically is against the *rules* too," Liam said. "I won't allow you to harm her."

The stranger's gaze flicked to Tabby. She stared back, baffled by the entire exchange but glad she was no longer on the verge of unconsciousness. The intruder smiled -a slow, evil smirk full of anticipation.

Then he looked at Liam. "Dawn is still many hours away." He stepped toward the shadowy corner of the sitting room, fading as he moved. "I have plenty of time."

And he was gone.

Tabby watched the spot where he'd disappeared for so long her eyes started to burn and she realized she hadn't blinked in awhile.

"Tabitha?"

Warm hands settled on her shoulders. And the reality of Liam, a man she'd thought was a vision, came rushing back. She lunged from his touch as panic pounded through

her blood again. "You're real? What are you? Who are you? What are you doing here? *How* are you here? Who was that? What's going on?"

As the questions tumbled out, she was surprised to feel tears trickling down her cheeks. Fear and shock made her tremble. She kept her grip on the athame and backed as far away from Liam as she could without leaving the circle.

That's when she realized he was inside the chalk line with her. It couldn't protect her from him.

He didn't move, but his expression looked pained as he said, "Tabitha. You're safe. Please don't cry. You're breaking my heart."

"What's happening? How can you be here?" She swiped at the tears on her cheek, annoyed. She hated crying. But she couldn't seem to staunch the flow.

"There's a lot to explain," Liam said gently. "Please, come sit on the pillow where you'll be comfortable. I won't hurt you. I'm not capable of hurting you."

This last he murmured so quietly she barely heard him. For a long moment, she studied him. This man she'd known for a year, made love with, whispered her secret hopes and fears to in that quiet glade. But she'd never really believed he existed. Even in those moments when she wished differently, she'd never *believed* he was more than a figment of her imagination.

But she'd trusted him in her visions. And he'd come to her when she needed him. He'd probably just saved her life.

He was inside her circle.

A circle that sealed out negative energy.

Had he been there all along?

Curiosity nudged her forward. Without loosening her hold on her athame, she eased to the pillow and sat. Liam actually smiled before settling onto the hardwood floor less than a foot from her. That small measure of space helped her relax, just a little.

"Okay," she said, wiping the rest of the tears off her cheeks. "Explain. First, who are you?"

He took a deep breath and stared at her for a long moment. Finally he said, "I'm your Watcher."

She waited for an explanation. When he didn't say more, she circled her hand in a *continue* gesture. "And that is...?"

"Watchers are... A witch's guardian. Her...conscience."

"You're my conscience?" Given what they'd been doing in her visions for the last year, Liam being her conscience was almost funny enough to make her laugh, as bizarre as that would be under the circumstances.

"All witches have Watchers. We're...similar to guardian angels."

"So now you're my guardian angel?" She nodded even though she still didn't understand.

"I'm not an angel."

She snorted. That was true enough.

Her reaction brought a slight smile to his mouth, and Tabby suddenly remembered why he'd been able to seduce her in her visions. She blinked, utterly unable to believe this was all really happening. "I'm dreaming, aren't I?" she asked, because it was the only explanation that made sense.

"Tabitha." He sighed. "I wanted to tell you everything. But—"

She raised a hand to still further comment. She didn't want excuses now. She wanted an explanation. "What do Watchers do, exactly? Do you seduce all your...charges?"

"No!"

The violence of his reaction made her straighten her shoulders and grip the athame tighter.

"No," he said, softer this time. "Watchers help. We make sure you understand balance, consequence, joy. We're the ones to nudge you when thoughts of power and gain overwhelm your basic belief in not harming others. And we watch over you during your communes with the Lady, so you're safe."

She frowned. "How long have you been watching me?"

"Since you first started down the path to being a witch."

"Did She know I'd choose this direction?"

"It runs in your family." He smiled. "Your great-grandmother, your grandmother, your mother. You."

Liam reached out to touch her but stopped short with his fingers hovering over her knee. After a moment, he pulled back. In that instant, Tabby felt another flare of desire, the same need and longing she experienced every time she entered her visions, every time she'd seen his face in her dreams. They hadn't come close to finishing their lovemaking earlier. And now that the adrenaline from shock and fear was wearing away, her body reminded her, sharply, that she still wanted the orgasms promised by Liam's chocolate foreplay. He hadn't actually touched her much yet, in her world. But she wanted him to. And that terrified her.

"Who was that other man?" she asked to distract her thoughts. She needed explanations, not lust.

Liam leaned back and only then did Tabitha realize he'd inched closer. She felt the loss of his heat, even though she hadn't realized it was enveloping her. Her incense left the aroma of frankincense and myrrh in the air—scents she associated with Liam now. Scents she remembered fondly mingling with the smell of sweat and sex.

"He was a Whisperer," Liam answered. "They're a Watcher's cosmological opposite."

"Whisperer," she repeated. "What do they do? As your opposite?"

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He shrugged. "They whisper. Of power, glory, pain, triumph, riches. They tell witches all the things that are possible if they embrace their powers and use them—"

"Doesn't a witch use her power all the time?" Tabby interrupted.

"Not in ways that harm."

"So a Whisperer urges a witch to use black magic?"

Liam shrugged. "I don't usually use that phrasing. It's been misused throughout history. Call it negative magic. Evil is appropriate."

"Then Whisperers are evil? Like the devil to your angel."

"In a way. They're our opposite. Together we create balance. And that balance is necessary."

Tabby understood that on a level not entirely conscious. She *felt* the need for balance in the universe to keep things from flying away into chaos. It was a fundamental part of her teachings as a witch and a healer. "Can you always take physical form?" she asked after a moment.

"Only on Samhain. When the world of the living and the world of the spirit are closer than at any other time of the year."

"All night?"

He nodded.

"So... That Whisperer can come back at any time."

"He'll wait until closer to dawn."

"Why?"

"Whisperers are stronger at dawn. And he was wounded. He'll want his strength recovered first."

Tabby glanced at the clock on the mantle over her small fireplace. It was just past one a.m. "Why did he attack now, then? And what the hell does he want with me?"

"I don't know," Liam said.

But he didn't look at her. Tabby scowled. What wasn't he telling her? And did it really matter when she could barely believe what he'd revealed so far? After a moment, she shook off her unease and said, "Why did I feel his attack on my circle?"

"You're tied to it. Your energy has gone into its formation, linking you with it until you pull your energy back and open the circle."

She nodded. That made sense. Sort of. "So now what?"

"I stay with you until morning. He won't be able to hurt you once the sun rises."

The idea of spending an entire night in Liam's company, in the real world, made Tabby's stomach tighten. And this time, not with fear. She swallowed and looked away, hiding the heat in her eyes. "I guess I should offer you a more comfortable seat then. Maybe—"

"No." He reached out and grabbed her arm when she started to rise.

The physical contact sent heat rushing through her body, instantly throwing her back to her earlier state of arousal. She felt herself growing wet and her nipples hardened against the soft cotton of her robe. Under the thin material, she was naked. And in that moment, with Liam's hand on her arm, the heat of his palm soaking into her skin even through the barrier of her sleeve, Tabby was very aware of her near-nudity.

She watched Liam's throat work as he swallowed, saw his nostrils flare and wasn't surprised to see his chest rise and fall more rapidly. Her own breathing grew ragged with each passing second.

"Tabitha."

His voice was as harsh as in her visions. A sense of triumph pulsed in her stomach. She loved hearing his desperation, the need that was focused so entirely on her.

But this wasn't a vision. This was the real world.

And he wasn't supposed to exist.

Chapter Three

Tabby eased her arm away from Liam's hand, shaken by her reaction. Where had her sense of self-preservation gone? She wasn't sure she believed he existed—how could she trust him enough to want him?

"You can trust me," he murmured, as if he'd read her mind. "You've known that from the beginning. Why else would I be here now? You needed me and I came. I couldn't hurt you, ever. I'd die to keep you safe."

Breath rushed from her body. "I don't want you to die," she said, without realizing why she felt the need to say those words aloud. "Can you? Are you a living man who can be killed?"

He moved, just a little, but enough for her to feel his breath on her cheek. He took her hand and brought it to his bare chest, pressing her palm against the heat of his skin. His heart pounded strong and vital. She shivered at the contact.

"I'm real, Tabitha. Tonight, at least, I can be part of your world. If you'll have me."

How could she answer that? She wanted him so much she could barely think. And yet some niggling part of her brain, the last ounce of her common sense, *knew* this wasn't supposed to be happening.

"It can tonight," Liam murmured. "We have this moment."

"What about the...Whisperer?" Her resolve was weakening with each of his murmured words. He moved his free hand to her cheek, touching her with just the tips of his fingers, and Tabby sighed. "Are we safe?"

"For a while. And as long as we stay in the circle."

The hand pressing hers to his chest moved to her neck, down her spine, trailing in a gentle caress that made her arch toward him. "What if he...? Will he interrupt?" She couldn't even hear her own voice over the pounding of her pulse.

He smiled. "He won't risk coming back until closer to dawn." He touched a finger to her lips. "And no, he won't be watching us either."

"How did you know I was worried about that?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he brushed his thumb across her lower lip, then cupped her cheek. His mouth moved toward hers, stopping a breath away. "Do you want me, Tabitha? Here and now? When you know it's not just a dream. Do you want me?"

She nodded, not much, but enough to brush her lips against his. "I don't understand this. Any of it. But I want you."

He closed his mouth over hers.

He hadn't kissed her yet that night, and she realized just how much she'd been anticipating his kiss when their lips met. Clenching her hands around his shoulders, she pressed against him, desperate to taste him fully. She didn't even hesitate to sweep her tongue into his mouth when his lips parted, and he met her aggression with eager need. But he moved slowly. He didn't rush to strip her out of her robe, to caress more than her neck and hair. He held her close, kissing her as if his life depended on it, and nothing more.

It was the sexiest thing she'd ever experienced. She could feel the tension in his touch, trembling in his body, yet his hands never moved below her shoulders. His mouth fused to hers as their tongues tangled and played. He cupped her face in his palms, turned his head slightly and deepened the kiss still further. The friction of his lips, the scent of his skin, the taste of chocolate on his tongue combined to drive her out of her mind.

Her heart thumped, and where she pressed against the naked skin of his chest, she felt the echo of his heartbeat.

She broke away long enough to take a deep breath. Then she dove in again, swallowing his groan as she rubbed her breasts against him. "Liam," she murmured into his mouth, needing to say his name aloud.

"Again," he said, finally moving his mouth from hers. He kissed down her throat, to the sensitive spot where her shoulder curved into her neck. "Say my name again."

She smiled. "Liam."

"I love that sound. I love hearing you say my name."

"I've said it before," she reminded him. Now that he'd broken their kiss and was exploring more fully, she felt free to do a little touching of her own. She ran her hands over his shoulders, across the muscles of his arms, burrowing her fingers through the dark hair on his chest. She loved the way he felt. Hard and hot and so damned real.

"You haven't said it here, like this. In your world."

"Does that make a difference?" She gasped. Every place his mouth touched burned.

"Yes. This time you know. You understand."

She actually let loose a choked laugh. "I don't understand any of this. Not a single thing." She pulled his face to hers so she could meet his gaze. "Except that I want you. More than any man I've ever known. And I'm so glad we have this night."

He hugged her, tight enough to constrict her breathing, and buried his face against her neck. "I don't think you can understand how much that means to me," he whispered.

Then he kissed her again. Hungry and hard. His hands rushed over her body, trying to touch her everywhere at once. He opened her robe and the cool brush of air peaked her nipples. She arched into his touch, surprised by the intensity of the feelings rushing through her when his hand closed over one of her breasts, squeezing with barely restrained desperation.

He pushed her robe off her shoulders, letting it pool behind her butt, then he rose on his knees and pulled her up with him, fusing their bodies from thigh to shoulder. They were pressed so tightly together Tabby couldn't tell where she left off and he began. Her breasts were squeezed against the muscles of his chest, rubbing against his hair and firing her already tender nerves. Then his hands closed over her ass, pulling her yet closer so she felt the imprint of his cock against her lower stomach.

Tugging at the top of his pants with suddenly clumsy hands, she managed to push them over his hips. He was barely free of the material before she wrapped her fingers around his hardness, stroking his hot flesh as he groaned in her mouth.

"I wish we had a bed," he muttered as he nuzzled her throat.

She chuckled. "I'll be sure to get a bigger meditation pillow for next time."

As soon as the words left her mouth, she regretted them. She didn't want the reminder that they only had this one night in the real world. As of dawn, if she wanted to seem him again, she'd have to visit his ephemeral world. Pushing the thought aside, she stubbornly refused to think past the moment. She had now. She wanted now. And she wasn't going to ruin this experience by worrying about what would happen next.

Liam pulled back abruptly and stood, the move surprising a whimper from her. She missed his heat. He shucked off his pants, gripping her head in his hands, and Tabby leaned forward, taking his cock into her mouth eagerly. She loved the taste of him, sharp, musky and male. She licked the head, running her tongue over the opening in his foreskin, knowing it would make him gasp, then slid her lips down to his base. He was the perfect size—not too big, not too small, but thick and straight and so wonderfully hard. She swallowed him completely, sucked him greedily. The heat of his skin burned against her tongue. His hips bucked forward, making her smile as she felt his control teetering on a fine edge. She reveled in a surge of triumph and feminine satisfaction.

She was so wet she felt liquid seeping between her nether lips and down her thighs. Their play with the chocolate had left her tense and sensitive. And now that she had Liam at her mercy, she intended to take advantage of the situation. Lifting her mouth

from his cock, she sat back on her heels, staring up at him. His gaze sizzled over her skin. Just a look and she could barely breathe.

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"Now," she insisted. "Please."
"Yes."
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He lowered himself to the ground and lay down on the pillow, positioning it under his shoulders and head, then urged her over his hips so she straddled him. "Fuck me," he said. "Hard. As hard as you want."

She slammed onto him, forgetting there was nothing between his ass and the hardwood floor. She couldn't help herself. The instant she felt his cock stretching her, she lost all hope of reasonable thought. She was so ready he slid in easily, and she squeezed her inner muscles to ensure he couldn't escape. Though she might have considered making this last longer, setting a slower rhythm, she'd moved past the ability to think that clearly. She was sensation, need, desperation. She rode him hard, her thighs pumping as he cupped her breasts and pinched her nipples. The line that seemed to run between her nipples and clit pulled tight.

Groaning, Liam sat up, hugging his arms around her lower back and cupping her ass. The change of position forced his cock tighter against the upper wall of her passage and rubbed her clit against the rough hair of his groin, sending an entirely new range of sensations screaming through her body. She dropped her head back and rocked against him, clenching his shoulders. When his lips closed over her nipple, she cupped his head in both hands and slammed down harder.

Tightness built low in her belly with each shuddering movement. She could almost feel the power of those sensations swirling around them, adding to the intensity. The air grew hot, charged and electric. The tie linking her to her protective circle felt more substantial. The magic she'd always sensed now seemed a living, breathing thing. On her altar, things began to tremble as if a low-level earthquake shook the ground. The air grew thick with the smell of sex, mixing with the smell of candle wax and the lingering scent of incense.

With her body spiraling beyond her control, Tabby brought Liam's mouth to hers, kissing him hard as the tension finally broke and her body jerked and shattered. In that instant, when time stopped and nothing existed but the sharp edge of release, Tabitha felt something else blow apart, something she hadn't realized was gathering. Power washed through her, over them both. And the candles on her altar flamed bright.

Liam swallowed her cries, hugging her tight as she rocked, slowing to soak up the last shivers of release. He was still rock-hard inside her, so swollen she could feel him pulsing. But he gave her time to settle, a moment to catch her breath and savor the sweet lassitude.

When she could lift her head from his shoulder, she met his gaze and smiled. "That was new."

He nodded to her altar. While the candles were still upright, everything else had jumbled around and fallen over. The wine from her chalice dripped onto the wooden floor. She winced and thanked the Lady she didn't have carpet to stain.

"What happened?" she asked, her gaze still on the altar.

"That telekinetic skill you rarely use? When your emotions are high, it slips beyond your control."

"I know, but it's never done that—" She whipped around to face him. "You knew?"

"I'm your Watcher, Tabitha. Of course I know. I was watching when you learned your grandmother died and all the plates in your drying rack jumped out and shattered on the kitchen floor."

She swallowed but held his gaze. She'd still been living in the U.S., planning a trip to visit her Grandma Feeney when her mother called with the unexpected news. "You were there?"

"You'll never know how much it hurt me, seeing you in pain and not being able to do anything about it."

Tabitha cupped his face, remembering that awful moment. And then she remembered the feel of...something. A warmth, almost like a comforting touch. She tilted her head as she studied Liam. "You did help me, though, didn't you?"

"I tried. But it was torture not being able to hold you."

His arms tightened around her waist, reminding her that he was holding her now. "Thank you," she whispered, not sure what she was thanking him for, but it felt like the right thing to say.

With a gentleness that belied his still-throbbing cock, he rolled her over so that the upper half of her body was cradled on the pillow and the lower part was cushioned by his hands. He slid back into her, rocking against her with steady, even strokes. Tabby felt something clench in her chest, an ache that built even as her body started another slow tightening. She kissed Liam's cheeks, his forehead, his mouth. And when he started to move harder, she murmured to him, telling him exactly what he was doing to her, how he made her feel. Hot. Hungry. Cherished.

He groaned her name as his hips slammed against hers, again and again until Tabitha could no longer breathe. She watched his face as his neck muscles strained, as his jaw clenched and sweat beaded on his forehead. She held his gaze until he was forced to close his eyes. He shook and trembled and pounded into her, and Tabby felt her body tense, teetering on that blissful edge again. She held back, waiting, wanting to go with him this time. And when she felt him jerk harder, faster, when she knew from his ragged pants he was about to come, she let herself peak. They cried out together, their voices mingling in the quiet, sounding like the sweetest music Tabby had ever heard.

Chapter Four

Despite the hard floor, Tabitha savored the feel of Liam's weight on her when he collapsed. Stroking his back muscles, she sighed and closed her eyes. Even in the visions, when the sex had been phenomenal, mind-blowing and perfect, she'd never felt this content. Maybe because he was really here with her and not just a figment of her imagination, someone she'd leave behind in another few minutes.

She opened her eyes and glanced at the clock. At least he wouldn't be leaving for a few more hours. They had until dawn. The time limit was almost enough to bring tears to her eyes, but she refused to be sad. Until this moment, she hadn't realized just how important Liam was to her. And she wasn't about to ruin the only time they might have in her world.

Smoothing his hair back from his face, she kissed him. "You know, I'm almost glad that Whisperer attacked."

"Why?" He frowned fiercely, his body tensing against hers.

"Because now we've had this."

His scowl eased, but he didn't smile. "I've wanted you this way, in your world, for a long time. But I'd have sacrificed it for your safety."

Reality snuck in under her contentment. "What does he want with me, Liam? I'm nothing special. Even my telekinesis is weak. Mom is much better at it than I am. And my healing skills are still developing." Her grandmother's friend Maggie was actually helping her hone those skills since Tabitha had moved to Ireland. Tabitha had trained as a nurse and was working in the maternity ward of the Rotunda Hospital in Dublin city center. Thanks to her mother's botany fascination, she was already good with herbs. But she still needed Maggie's help with her mystical healing skills, combining

her knowledge with her instincts. And none of that made her a particularly threatening power.

"I wish I could explain it," Liam muttered. He shifted his weight to the side so he was no longer crushing her against the floor. Pulling her into his arms, they lay on their sides facing each other with the pillow beneath their heads. Almost absently, his hand stroked across her skin, over her breasts, down her waist. "But I have no intention of letting him hurt you."

"I know. And I trust you." She squeezed his biceps. "Can I ask you something?"

He grinned. "You've been asking me a lot of things."

His smile made her heart thump. He was so damned handsome. "Why did you... When you first...came to me last Samhain, why did you...?" She let out a huff of air. "Why me?"

"I couldn't resist any longer. I needed you."

"But... That first time, you didn't even touch me."

"You were understandably wary. I wanted you relaxed and comfortable with me. Even if you did think I was a figment of your imagination."

"Well you did a fine job of seducing me."

He chuckled. "I worked hard at it."

"That you did." She paused to savor the feel of his hand caressing her butt, then said, "Are you Irish? I mean, were you human once or...?"

"No, I've always been what I am."

"Then why the Irish accent?"

"You like it."

She narrowed her eyes. "You watch me all the time? Everything I do?"

He nodded.

"In the shower?"

"One of my more painful duties."

She snorted a laugh at his exaggerated long-suffering sigh. Then she sobered and said, "You've seen me date? Seen me with other men?" Liam wasn't her first lover.

"I have. And I've hated every minute of it."

She scowled at the thought that Liam had been watching her while she'd made love to other men. Especially now that she knew him. The very idea of seeing *him* with another woman hit her with a sharp stab of jealousy. Did he go through that when he saw her with other men?

The realization of just how impossible their situation was hit her hard. There was no hope for a future between them. And yet, according to him, he was always with her, watching over her. But come dawn, he'd return to his existence and she'd have to go on with hers. She wanted children someday. And a partner. She couldn't have either of those things if she spent her life in meditation just to be with Liam. And yet how could she face being with another man, knowing Liam was there, just beyond her reach? Watching her.

The futility of their future sapped away some of the pleasure she'd taken in having him here in her world. Now she knew he was real. She couldn't dismiss him, she couldn't pretend he didn't exist. And she couldn't keep him.

Where did that leave them?

"You've gone very quiet," he said as his palm slipped around to rest along the curve of her waist.

"Just thinking. About what happens next."

He nodded and looked away. "I shouldn't have started this. I knew better, knew what could happen." He faced her again and the hand on her waist squeezed tight. "But I can't regret it either. I've wanted you for a long time, Tabitha. I'll take whatever I can get."

"But-"

He stilled her protest with a kiss, only breaking contact when she relaxed. "We'll deal with the future tomorrow. Tonight I want to enjoy holding you in my arms. And I want to make sure nothing happens to you."

The reminder of the threat made her glance around the room. According to the clock, it was almost three in the morning. This time of year, the sun wouldn't rise until nearly eight a.m. They had five more hours together. But somewhere in those five hours, they'd have to face the Whisperer again.

She sat up and reached for her robe. Liam placed a restraining hand on her arm, frowning a question. "I don't want to get caught naked when he shows up again," she said. "I'll feel stronger if I'm at least dressed." She stood to swirl the black material around her body, wrapping it closed and hooking the cloth loop over the single button at her waist.

Nodding in understanding, Liam reached for his own trousers and pulled them on.

Tabby glanced longingly toward the kitchen. "I don't suppose we can risk stepping out for some food? Or a shower?"

Liam shook his head, obviously regretting the limit as much as she did. "He'll know if you open the circle. He's probably waiting for you to get impatient and leave its safety."

She sighed and sat again. Even her wine was spilled, so they didn't have anything to drink. "This real world stuff might be a bit overrated," she said with a mix of sarcasm and honesty. "At least in the visions, we could produce whatever we needed."

"I'm sorry. I wish—"

"Stop," she said, placing a hand over his mouth. "I'm just happy you're here."

"Are you?"

"Yes." She pressed her lips to his. "I'm worried about the next few hours. I'm worried about what will happen tomorrow. And I could use a drink. But none of that compares to having you here. And I don't want you to think I regret any of this."

"You're the most amazing woman I've ever known." He kissed her gently.

And Tabitha felt her heart break even as it soared.

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They talked quietly about nothing important for the next few hours, cuddling on the limited comfort of the pillow. Tabitha was exhausted but too nervous to sleep. And she didn't want to waste any of the time she had with Liam. They talked about her family, her life in Dublin, her studies. Liam even helped her practice controlling her telekinetic powers with conscious thought rather than letting her emotions overwhelm her control. She managed to get her athame four feet above the ground at one point and nearly burst with pride. Liam's support made the accomplishment that much sweeter.

At six thirty a.m., when Tabby could feel the dawn trembling just beyond the horizon and her candles had burned low, the Whisperer returned. No fanfare. No grand entrance. One moment she was resting her head against Liam's shoulder, staring at the dark shadows. The next the Whisperer stood before them.

A frisson of fear shot through her, but she'd been expecting him, so she didn't panic. Her hand did tighten in Liam's, the only outward sign of her terror. Slowly, with Liam beside her, she rose to face him.

He smiled. "Enjoyed the night, did you?" He glanced between them, smirking.

Tabitha had an awful feeling he'd been spying on them. Too late to worry about that now. So she ignored the heat in her cheeks and concentrated on making sure her circle was strong, fixing the picture in her mind of the glowing blue shield that would hold out all negative energy.

"She's safe from you," Liam said. "You'll only get hurt if you try breeching the circle. Why come back? Why bother with this one witch?"

The stranger smiled, slowly, evilly, showing sharp white teeth. "What makes you think I've been after her?"

Tabitha's heart skipped a beat then started pounding hard. She only needed a second to realize what the Whisperer meant. Gripping Liam's arm, she jerked him from the edge of the circle, practically shoving him behind her to keep him safe.

Liam's hands settled onto her shoulders. "Don't worry. He can't hurt me. He wouldn't dare."

"Why not?"

The stranger lifted a brow, as if daring Liam to answer that question.

"Because there has to be a balance. For each Watcher, there's a Whisperer. Always an even number, always a balance. To change that balance would throw the entire world into chaos, upsetting nature until the seams of reality split." He squeezed her shoulders in a quick, hard gesture of reassurance. "He risks his own existence if he hurts me."

"Not quite true," the Whisperer said. He shifted his gaze to Tabitha. "There is supposed to be an even balance between forces," he confirmed. "And disturbing that balance would cause some...changes. My existence wouldn't be in danger, though."

"Are you my Whisperer?" Tabby asked suddenly. She wasn't sure where the question came from, or why it was even important in that moment, but she had to know.

After a heartbeat he said, "Your Whisperer is too weak for this."

"What does that mean?"

"He means," Liam said against her cheek, "you aren't tempted by your Whisperer's promises. You haven't been for a long time. And the more you lean toward using your skills for good and healing, the less power your Whisperer has."

"Then why me? Why Liam? What do you hope to gain?"

"A fresh start," said a new voice.

Tabitha whipped around to see a woman standing just outside her circle opposite the Whisperer. Unlike the man, her skin color had none of the green tint and her eyes were a dark blue with no hint of red. Her blonde hair was tucked into a neat bun on top of her head and she wore a green silk skirt and blouse.

"You?"

The utter horror in Liam's voice had Tabitha shifting her focus to his face. He'd gone pale and a muscle in his jaw jumped.

"Who is she? Who are you?" Tabitha asked as her gaze swung from Liam to the woman to the smirking Whisperer.

"Why?" Liam murmured.

The woman smiled.

"Why what?" Tabby demanded, annoyed now. "What the hell's going on?"

"She's a Watcher," Liam said without breaking eye contact with the woman.

Frowning, Tabby faced her again. "So she's one of the good guys?" But that felt wrong. Liam looked too devastated by the woman's presence. And the Whisperer looked too pleased.

"You could consider me a good guy," the woman said. "If I weren't about to kill your lover. But believe me, I do so with the best intentions."

Between the threat and the woman's soft smile, Tabitha thought she might retch. "You can't kill him," she insisted, though she wasn't at all certain that was true. "Why would you even want to?"

The woman sighed and paced around the outside of the circle, slowly easing toward the Whisperer. "The balance is overdue for a shift. She knows it, Liam. And yet She does nothing. She simply lets this disaster of a world run its course."

"That's the way it's supposed to be," Liam ground out.

He pulled Tabby close and tucked her behind him, which struck her as stupid since the two strangers where there for him. Both terrified and unsure what to do, Tabby glanced around for a weapon. Her athame lay on the other side of her altar, too far to reach quickly. She had to rely on the circle to keep them safe. "You were always naïve," the woman said. "And much too loyal." She grinned and her gaze flicked to Tabitha. "But it's good to misbehave sometimes, isn't it?"

"Leave her out of this."

"But she's the reason we chose you. I imagine she'll want to know why."

The Whisperer laughed as Liam growled. The woman merely smiled.

"I hate this evasive bullshit," Tabby said into the silence. "Explain yourself." This she directed to the woman.

"Happily. I want the balance disrupted. And I'm not the only one."

"Why?"

"Because it's needed. Because I want to do more than Watch," she ground out, her pretty smile falling away to reveal an even more startling beauty. The kind of beauty Tabitha associated with sharks and poisonous snakes.

"Selfish," Liam tsked.

"Look who's talking," the woman spat. "Your vanity, your selfishness has brought you here. If you hadn't broken the taboo and fallen in love with your charge, we could never have lured you out." She smirked when Tabitha gasped. "You see, Tabitha, you're the instrument of his death."

"No," Tabby murmured, holding very still beside Liam.

"We needed to kill someone," the Whisperer said, taking over the story. "A Whisperer or Watcher—it doesn't matter which. But the general consensus was that it should be a Watcher. And of course, none of us were going to offer ourselves up as sacrifices."

"So we needed an easy mark," the woman finished.

She stopped next to the Whisperer and leaned against his shoulder. She was at least three inches taller than the man but looked elegant and willowy next to him. Her blonde hair sparkled gold in the remaining candlelight.

"Then it was just a matter of time," the Whisperer finished.

"We can only take physical form during Samhain," the woman said. "Did Liam tell you that? This is the only night any of us can die."

"Which is why we never take on corporeal form during Samhain," the man said. Then he laughed. "Unless we're forced to."

Tabby sucked in a breath. "You attacked me to trick Liam into taking physical form. You used me to make him vulnerable."

"Finally," the woman sighed. "She gets it."

"You've made yourselves vulnerable too, though," Tabby pointed out, ignoring the woman's snarky comment.

"They had to," Liam said. "They can't kill me unless they're in corporeal form too."

"They aren't going to kill you. They can't." Tabby spoke with a certainty she'd bet her life on. She didn't know how she could stop them, but she refused to let them hurt Liam. Especially after using her to put him in danger.

The Whisperer ran his hand over the barrier of her circle and blue light flickered in his wake. Then he punched the air, and Tabby took the hit to her stomach. She gasped and dropped to one knee. Though she knew what to expect, the pain still took her by surprise.

Liam dropped beside her. "Tabitha."

The panic in his voice had her shaking off the pain. "I'm okay. Just startled me. Won't happen again." And she stood.

The Whisperer smiled and slapped the barrier again. Tabby clenched her jaw together and absorbed the hit, flinching but holding steady. The man jabbed the barrier again, and again she flinched but didn't falter. She remained open to the flow of energy between herself and her circle, resisting the urge to separate from the pain. This wasn't about her life. This was about Liam's. And she refused to let them hurt him.

A moment later, she felt warmth flooding her, easing the ache. It was the same warm flow of power she'd felt earlier that night when Liam had helped her fend off the first attack. She glanced at him and took his hand, squeezing to acknowledge his help. His fingers tightened around hers once, then he faced the two outside the circle.

"A pointless effort," he said, his tone almost taunting. "And now the Lady knows who you are."

The woman frowned. "Meaning?"

"Meaning, you're not the only one capable of using bait to lure out a target."

Tabby's gaze jumped to Liam's face. But before she could ask what he meant, the Whisperer slammed his fists against the barrier and she had to concentrate on not buckling under the assault.

"Stop!" Liam shouted, wrapping an arm around her. "You won't succeed. Run while you can. Leave her alone."

The woman laughed. "Come out of the circle and we'll leave her alone. Otherwise..." She glanced at the dark window. "Well, we have time. And we can do a lot of damage to her before dawn."

Tabby felt Liam lean away, and she grabbed his arms. "Don't even think about it," she warned. "You're not leaving my side. You hear me? You're staying right here where you're safe." When he glanced back toward the intruders, she could see his indecision. She forced his face back to hers, holding his gaze even as another shock of pain rippled through her belly. "You said the death of a Watcher would throw off the balance of nature, send the world into chaos. That's a lot bigger than my pain, Liam. That's bigger than either of us."

"I can't watch you hurting," he whispered.

"Yes you can. You have before. You will again. If I can take it..." She flinched as another jolt clenched her gut. "If I can take this, you can," she said when she could speak again.

He shook his head, but she stopped him by taking his face in her palms. "I mean it, Liam. You are not leaving this circle." "I love you," he murmured. "It's killing me just watching you suffer."

She smiled, because his declaration made her heart fly. The pain of the continued attack seemed nothing to her pleasure at hearing him say those three little words. Even if they had no future, even if this whole relationship was doomed from the first, knowing Liam loved her gave her strength she never knew she had. And made her happier than she could ever remember being. "Deal with it," she told him, laughing now because he was frowning so fiercely. "Stay with me. Help me. We can do this."

He swallowed visibly but nodded.

"Lord and Lady you two are sappy," the woman said, her tone almost bored.

"Shut up," Liam snapped without taking his gaze from Tabitha's.

The blunt response made Tabby laugh again. "I don't think you'll have much luck tonight," she said to the woman. "Take his advice and run. Before the Lady comes looking for you."

The woman betrayed her unease by flicking a glance around the room. Then she straightened and said, "She'll be too busy keeping the universe from imploding to worry about little old me."

Then the woman stepped across the circle's barrier, entering Tabby's sacred space.

Chapter Five

Tabitha gasped and stumbled back a step, taking Liam with her. "How did you do that?"

"You built this circle to keep out negative energy," the woman said. "As far as the universe is concerned, I'm positive energy."

"No. You intend harm. That can't be right." Tabby stumbled around her altar, dragging Liam with her when he tried to get between her and the woman.

"Next time, build a circle to keep out anything that means harm, then."

Tabby was too panicked to understand what the woman meant. The Whisperer laughed and lashed out at the circle's edge again. Tabby grunted and this time her knees wouldn't hold her. She dropped to the hardwood floor, nearly slicing her hand on her athame when she tried to break the fall. The disruption to her circle after the woman's entrance left her more vulnerable, the barrier a little bit weaker. She could feel it, but she couldn't gather the concentration to fix the breach. Too many more hits and the Whisperer would break through.

"Poor Tabitha," the woman cooed. "But don't worry. I'm sure once Liam's gone, if you survive the upheaval, your Whisperer will be more than happy to take over where he's left off."

Tabby gagged and her stomach clenched. She watched through eyes streaming with tears as the two Watchers circled each other. The woman didn't seem to have any weapons, but then, neither did Liam. And Liam was obviously distracted by Tabby's distress. *Ignore me*, she thought, hoping to somehow project her desperation. *Concentrate on staying alive*.

The woman lashed out first, a quick backhanded strike that hit Liam across the cheek. His head snapped around, but he took the blow and faced the woman again. For

a terrifying moment, Tabby worried he might not hit back. He didn't seem the kind of man who would hit a woman. But she was obviously wrong about his self-preservation instincts, because the next punch was his and it landed squarely on the woman's nose. Blood spurted and Tabitha shouted in triumph, only to double over again when the Whisperer battered her circle.

"Tabitha!"

Liam's voice. She wanted to tell him to ignore her, but she couldn't speak as pain robbed her of breath. She looked up in time to see the woman strike again, taking Liam by surprise and dropping him to the ground with a powerhouse punch to the jaw. He caught himself before his skull hit the floor, but it was obvious in the way he shook his head that the punch had addled him. The woman took advantage of his disorientation, dropping beside him and wrapping an arm around his throat.

Liam gripped the woman's forearm, but she pulled his head back and tightened her hold. Tabby could see Liam struggling for breath, struggling against the woman's arm. And she realized Liam had weakened himself helping her hold her circle. He didn't have the strength to fight the other Watcher because he'd been trying to protect her.

In a blink, Tabitha made a decision. She pulled back her energy, consciously opening the circle, the change so quick the Whisperer actually stumbled forward. Before the others could react, she picked up her athame and threw it, knife-like, hitting the Whisperer in the neck, the blade buried to the hilt.

Shock made the woman loosen her hold on Liam. He swung back, a clumsy punch, but enough to throw the woman off balance and free himself from her chokehold.

Tabby didn't wait for the Watcher to recover. Using all her concentration, she telekinetically jerked the athame from the Whisperer's neck, ignoring the bubbling blood and the choking sounds the man made. A rumble vibrated through the air, the ground beneath her seemed to tilt and her skin felt like it was stretching tight over her bones. Tabby ignored that too and focused everything she had on the little knife. Her control was shaky, but she sent the athame flying at the Watcher. It hit the woman in

her side, slicing across her waist and bouncing to the ground. She screamed, glared at Tabitha, picked up the knife and threw it.

Tabby didn't have time to react. One moment the knife was flying toward her and the next, Liam was in front of her. She watched in horror as he collapsed, her athame sticking out of his chest.

"No," she breathed. "No!" She scrambled to him to inspect the wound. Movement from the other Watcher made her look up. The woman stumbled to her feet, looking pale and in pain. She glanced at the downed Whisperer, hissed out a curse and disappeared. Tabitha risked a quick look at the Whisperer. He wasn't moving, his eyes were wide open but unseeing and the blood from his wound pooled thickly on the floor.

"You have good aim," Liam said, then gasped.

Tabby returned her attention to him immediately. "I was aiming for his chest. Don't talk. Just don't move."

"He was dead before the other Watcher threw the knife."

"Shut up. I don't care about them. You need to save your energy." Tabby's trained eye knew the wound Liam had taken was serious. The blade was near his heart. But she wasn't about to let him die now. "I'll be right back."

She scrambled to her bathroom for her first aid kit, then hurried to the kitchen for the magically infused herbs she'd been canning over the last month. She plucked up a bottle of ointment with Maggie's special blend of lemon balm, comfrey, olive and yarrow then hurried back to Liam.

"I'm leaving the blade where it is so I don't make things worse," she told him as she took out her supplies. "I'll coat the area with ointment to help ease the pain and staunch the bleeding. This particular mix isn't supposed to be applied to deep open wounds, but in your case—"

"Tabitha," he murmured, his voice resigned and barely audible.

She refused to listen. "I'll bandage the area, too, and apply pressure." She glanced up at the window. She could almost feel the dawn. "When the sun rises," she said, "you'll go back to being incorporeal, right? This wound won't have any affect on you then." She met his gaze. "You just have to stay with me a little while longer, Liam. Then you'll be okay. I can hold off the worst of the damage until then, but you have to stay with me. Do you understand? You can't let them take you."

She felt tears leaking over her cheeks but ignored them as she rubbed the ointment between her fingers, then gently coated the area around the athame. As she worked, she poured energy into the wound, trying to use the techniques Maggie had been teaching her to aid the healing with her inner power as well as her herbal and medical knowledge. But she was exhausted from everything that had happened that night. She could barely muster enough energy to stay upright, much less heal his wound properly. But you don't need to heal it completely, she reminded herself as she swiped away the wetness on her chin. You just have to keep him alive for a few more minutes.

"Stop, Tabitha," he said. "It's too late."

He reached up and gripped her hand, stilling her efforts. She shook her head and tried to pry her hand loose, surprised when she didn't even have the strength to do that.

"No, Liam, no. You can't die. You just have to hold on for a little bit longer. Just a few more minutes."

He shook his head. "The Whisperer is dead. If I live, the balance is shifted. They'll get what they wanted. Chaos. This is the way it has to be."

"No! No. Do you hear me? I don't care about the damned balance. You're not going to die."

He smiled, a bare lifting of lips, and cupped her cheek. "I love you," he said.

The words were so simple, so stark she started sobbing. "Then don't leave me." She hiccupped. "Please, Liam. Please. Don't go." She leaned down and pressed her mouth to his. "Fight." She kissed him again, tasting his blood and her tears, willing him to live, swearing she would breathe for him if that's what it took.

"It's the way it has to be," he murmured, his breath hitching. "Was worth it. For this one night with you." His voice dropped. "Worth it to hold you."

"Don't, Liam." Her own voice burbled with the tears choking her. "I love you. Do you hear me? I love you. Don't die."

His eyes closed. "Worth it to hear those words."

She felt his last breath brush hot and weak against her mouth. "No," she said again, knowing the denial was useless but refusing to believe he was gone. She tried again to pour power into the wound, to will his heart to keep beating, but she was so drained only a trickle of energy flowed. "No." She draped herself across him, above the knife, and hugged him, hoping against hope to feel his chest move.

"I love you, Liam."

Just then, the sun breached the horizon. She felt it even before she noticed the light easing in through her window. She rose up to watch Liam's still face. He didn't move. He didn't open his eyes. He lay still, and she knew he was gone. A moment later, his body vanished as well, shimmering away as if it had never been. She curled up on the floor, wrapped her arms around her knees and cried.

Chapter Six

Tabitha didn't remember getting up from the floor, but sometime during the day she'd stumbled upstairs to her bed. She woke in the middle of the night and wandered back to her sitting room. The floor was clean except for the wine. Both bodies had vanished with the sunrise, taking all evidence of their presence with them. The contents of her altar were still in disarray. The candles had all burned out.

The athame lay on the floor where Liam's body had been.

Blinking against the grit in her eyes, she returned to her bed, crawled under the covers and slept.

She woke the next afternoon. For a long moment, she lay in bed wondering what to do now. She ached, probably from more than heartbreak, and she didn't want to get out of bed for a month. Her head was clogged and heavy, too muddled for coherent thought. The prospect of living her life without Liam seemed too much to consider at the moment.

Instead, she decided to concentrate on little steps. She pushed off the duvet and got out of bed. Then she crawled into a steaming hot shower, soaking her sore body until the tank emptied and left her with no more warm water. Next, she got dressed in a loose skirt and an oversized woolen sweater.

The thought of food made her want to retch, but a cup of tea sounded bearable so she headed downstairs to her kitchen, studiously ignoring the sitting room. She realized she would have to go in there again to clean up. But she couldn't bring herself to face the room just yet.

Flicking on the electric kettle, she leaned against the counter and waited for the water to boil, concentrating on not thinking.

A knock at the door disrupted her. She sighed and stared at the kettle, trying to decide if she should answer. She knew who it was. Her mentor Maggie and she were supposed to have had lunch yesterday. She'd slept through lunch and dinner, so Maggie was probably worried. Groaning, Tabby pushed off from the counter and headed to the door, dragging her feet. No point letting Maggie worry any more. But she had no idea how she was going to explain any of this, or even if she should try.

When the knocking grew more insistent, Tabby called out, "Just a minute," then hurried the rest of the way. Her apology was on the tip of her tongue when she swung open the door. Sound froze in her throat and for several long moments, she couldn't draw a single breath.

"Hello, Tabitha."

Tabby felt her head spin. For the first time in her life, she thought she might pass out. "Liam?" He smiled, that grin she'd come to love, and her hands shook. "How?"

"May I come in?" he asked.

So normal and polite, Tabby nearly laughed. She stepped aside, holding the door wide so he could walk into her house. Liam. Walking into her house. The very thought nearly convinced her that the trauma of Samhain had her hallucinating. But Liam was there in her entryway, alive, warm and too real to be a dream.

She stood for a long time, staring at this man who shouldn't exist, who shouldn't be alive. Finally, he reached around her to close the door, cutting off cold, damp air. She shivered in the sudden warmth. The kettle clicked off in the kitchen, and a perversely polite part of her thought she should offer him a cup of tea. Hysterical laughter bubbled in her throat, choking her when she tried to swallow the sound.

"You're pale, Tabitha," he said. "You should sit."

His voice sounded so familiar. And so damned normal. "What are you doing here? How are you here?"

"Let's sit first—"

"No. Tell me what happened."

He took her arm and the contact was like an electrical shock. She nearly jumped out of her skin.

"I don't want you falling over before I've finished explaining," he said as he led her to the kitchen and the small wooden table in the window nook.

She noticed he led her away from the sitting room and her memories of his death. For some reason, that show of compassion tightened her chest.

He set her gently in a seat at the table, then pulled another chair close and sat facing her. After a quiet moment, he took her hands in his, holding her gaze. When she didn't object to his touch, his shoulders relaxed and he smiled again.

"I'm sorry this was such a shock," he said. "I didn't know how else to let you know."

"You didn't die?" she breathed.

"Actually, I did. I promise you, though, I didn't know that was how the night would end. I was bait, you see. She knew about the plot to upset the balance, and that they'd look for a vulnerable Watcher. And She knew I was vulnerable because of my feelings for you. In exchange for that single night of being in your world, I agreed to lure them out."

"But..." She shook her head. "You said you didn't know what they wanted from me." She started to vibrate with a suppressed anger she couldn't name.

He reached up and cupped her cheek, and to her own surprise, she didn't pull away. "I couldn't hint, even to you, I knew they were after me," he said. "I had to lure out the renegade Watchers. At least one of them. Now that the Lady knows one's identity, She'll be able to find the others. She'll guarantee they don't try this again, at least not in our lifetimes." He titled his head to one side, studying Tabitha's face. "Besides, what would you have done if you'd known the truth?"

"I'd have made you leave. I wouldn't have let you stay here and get killed!"

"Exactly." His thumb caressed her cheekbone. "I had to see this through. I didn't know I'd be killed, though, Tabitha. You have to believe me. I wouldn't have put you through that on purpose."

She realized as he said those words that was exactly why she was angry. She could barely believe what she'd been through in the last thirty-six hours, and here he was telling her he'd done all this on purpose.

"I didn't expect to die. But when it happened, I knew it was meant to be. To keep the balance. To atone for breaking the taboo and falling in love with my charge."

She sucked in a breath. "So... Why are you here now? What...happened?"

He smiled again, and something both joyful and hesitant hovered in his eyes. "The Lady's very benevolent. This is Her thanks. To you. For what you went through, for your courage and strength even when you couldn't understand what was happening."

"You're alive...for me?"

"I'm not a Watcher anymore," he said, nodding slowly at whatever he saw in her expression. "The balance is maintained. I'm human now. I'll live a human life, grow old and die. The Lady gave me everything I need to blend into your world. I'm in the process of renting a house not far from here. And I'm starting a new job, my first ever new job, next week."

He moved from his seat to kneel in front of her. She stared into the deep blue depths of his gaze, frozen.

"I want us to start fresh, Tabitha. I want to take you out on dates. I want to woo you and win you the way a human man would. I love you. I want to spend the rest of this one last lifetime I've been granted with you. I know a lot has happened and you'll need time. I realize that your feelings probably aren't exactly what they were on Samhain. But I promise to spend the rest of my days convincing you to love me." He leaned in close enough to kiss. "I'll make you happy, Tabitha. I swear to you, I'll spend my every waking moment making sure you're happy."

She sat, speechless and staring at the vulnerability and passion in his eyes. She'd never expected him to be real. She'd never expected him to be so important. Now, she couldn't imagine her life without him. And for the first time in a year and a day, she finally thought they might just have a future. Slowly, she began to smile. "What job are you starting?"

His answering smile made her heart leap. "Pastry chef."

She raised a brow.

"I've always had a sweet tooth," he said with a wicked grin.

This time she didn't choke back her laughter. She let it ripple over and fill the kitchen.

Liam hugged her close, pulling her out of her seat as he stood. "I love you, Tabitha," he said into her hair. "I'll work every day making sure you love me too."

He kissed her then, pouring so much emotion into the contact, Tabitha sighed. She ran her hands across his shoulders, through his hair, savoring the solid reality of him. "Don't worry," she murmured, pulling back to see his eyes. "That'll be easy work."

About the Author

Isabo 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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