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MK MANCOS

— Tickle My Fantasy —

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Dedication

To all those who believe love is the ultimate aphrodisiac.

Chapter One

“I have needs, you know?” Cornelius Thornton sat in the client’s chair across the wide expanse of Lucilla Wainwright’s massive desk. Even in a casual suit he looked like a predator.

He shifted his hunter’s sharp gaze to look out the balcony doors. “It’s difficult to maintain a relationship when every full moon I turn into a hairy beast who wants nothing more than to run into the woods and howl.”

Lucilla planted a compassionate expression on her face and indicated the plasma screen television behind her. “After going over your questionnaire, I have compiled a short list of women I think you’ll be pleased with.”

He put his finger between his neck and collar. “I’m kind of nervous. This seems like a last-ditch effort for me.”

“Nonsense. You’re an attractive man. You hold down a good job. There’s no reason for you to believe we won’t find you a successful match.”

He let out a long breath and nodded. “I’m just so damn lonely.”

“I know, Mr. Thornton.” She hit the play button on the DVD remote and the screen filled with the image of a woman who could stop rush-hour traffic. She wasn’t just gorgeous, she was almost unreal in her beauty.

A low, seductive voice came from the speaker. “It’s difficult for a man to commit to a relationship with me when he learns of my past.” She tossed her long raven hair over her shoulder and looked directly into the camera as if making love to it. “They don’t seem to understand that, for the right man, I’ll be unbreakably faithful.”

Lucilla glanced at Mr. Thornton and nearly laughed. If he thought howling at the full moon was bad, he looked ready to shift species in the middle of the afternoon.

“You approve?”

The poor man was beyond words. His mouth hung open as if he’d been rendered deaf and dumb.

“Would you like to meet her, Mr. Thornton?”

His lips flapped a few times before a low, growling “yes” came out.

“Excellent. Here is her contact information.” She slid a postcard-sized printout to him. “I’ll tell her to expect your call.”

He stood and held out his hand. “Thank you, Ms. Wainwright.”

“Save the thanks for after your date.”

He gave her a most spectacular and devastating smile. When he was almost to the door, he stopped. “Um, what exactly is her paranormalady?”

“She’s a succubus.”

Mr. Thornton left the office with the air of a man who’d just won the sexual lottery. Oh, yeah, if he worried about having his needs fulfilled, he needn’t worry any longer.

As her insides did a happy dance, Lucilla turned to her computer and consulted her schedule for the afternoon. She had

some free time in which to review new client profiles and select possible matches.

Lucilla didn't believe in letting the computer perform that part of the service. Finding a true match for a client deserved the personal touch. When dealing with the precarious love lives of the city's paranormal element, one needed to have that special one-on-one connection. Many of the beings Lucilla dealt with on a daily basis were private in their interactions with the outside world. Having a committed relationship with someone who knew how it was to live with a paranormal lady sometimes made all the difference in the world.

The intercom sounded.

"Yes?"

"There is a Mr. Cronus here to see you."

What is he doing here? "Tell him to come in."

Jeez. She really didn't want to have to deal with him today. Things were going so well. She'd made follow-up calls on three successful matches. The possibility for a fourth still hung sweet in the air. Now, Mr. Impossible-To-Match decided to come by and complain about the lack of compatible dates he'd been on.

Truthfully, Lucilla had doubts there was anything wrong with the women she'd matched with Mr. Cronus. The fault lay entirely with him. However, in the matchmaker business, it was impolitic to point that out to a client. Especially one who paid in cash. And Lucilla didn't come cheap.

She pulled up his file on the computer. There were several women he had yet to date. There was always hope that one of those would be his perfect match.

Jager Cronus ducked his head as he entered the office. He was the biggest man she'd ever met. As the deposed leader of the Titans, he claimed the mythologies maligned him. After the trouble she'd had matching him, Lucilla was almost positive the exaggerations were few.

"Lucilla." He crossed the room in a few long-legged strides.

He looked down at her from his great height of six-and-a-half feet. Granted, when one thought of Titans, one thought of giants, but in all honesty, their height had also been greatly exaggerated in the mythos. They were no taller than professional basketball players. But his height wasn't the thing Lucilla found so intimidating about him—it was his looks.

Drop-dead gorgeous didn't even begin to describe him. Tightness centered in her chest whenever she saw him. Though the fact he was so hard to please took points off.

Lucilla forced a pleasant smile and indicated for him to take a seat. "Can I get you anything?"

"Yes, you can get me an appropriate date."

The smile slipped slightly, but she ground her back teeth together and pushed on. "If you don't mind me asking, what was your objection to Ms. Hyde?"

"With a name like that, do you really have to ask?"

The word *jerk* did a serpentine inside her brain.

“My understanding is that she isn’t in that particular form for long.”

“No, but then I don’t expect my dates to morph during the soup course.” He raised a brow as if he were lecturing an errant child.

“I can see where that would be disconcerting for you.” She clicked a few buttons on the keyboard and hit print. Two profiles sure to be doomed spit out of the printer.

“I haven’t given up and I don’t want you to either.” She rose to collect the printouts. His gaze followed her across the room.

Mr. Cronus possessed the kind of stare that made a woman feel hot and naked. Even standing in the middle of a blizzard probably wouldn’t cool the heat of his appraisal.

She looked at him over her shoulder. A connection too powerful to name passed between them. He started to rise, but Lucilla was quick to motion for him to sit.

“There are two new women who applied in the past few days. Maribon is a selkie with an impressive pedigree. Esmeralda is a djinn who has just fulfilled her contractual obligation with her master.”

The look he sent her was skeptical. “I’ll try them, but first I want you to do something for me.”

If it moved things along, she’d agree to take up clogging. “What is that, Mr. Cronus?”

“Two things, then. First, call me Jager. Second, fill out a profile on yourself.”

If she had taken a drink, it would have landed in his face. Luckily, her coffee cup was empty. “I don’t think that’s a very good idea.”

“Oh, I think it is.”

“Why do you want me to take the time to fill out a profile when I could be combing the database for more possible matches for you?” She already knew the answer to that question, but needed to hear him say it.

He leaned his big, sexy body over the desk. “I think you’re the best match for me, and I think you know it, too.”

There was no doubt in her mind their profiles would have a very high probability for a long-term match. She’d secretly crunched the numbers when he first applied as a client. The memory of which caused heat to creep up her neck and ignite the tops of her ears.

“Is something the matter, Lucilla?”

“No. No.” She smoothed her hair, pulling it forward to cover the vestiges of her acute embarrassment.

“You look like you’ve done something wrong.”

Lucilla cleared her throat. “Back when I first started the agency, I wanted to test the questionnaire software, so I took the profile quiz.”

Jager grinned at her as if he’d caught her in the middle of doing a striptease. “Do whatever it is you do to compare it to mine.”

Lucilla raised a brow at him. “I do all my comparisons by hand. It takes time and consideration. You just can’t slap people

together in a haphazard fashion. Computers can't give that personal touch my clients pay for."

"The personal touch is exactly what I'm asking for." The twinkle came back into his eyes. "But since you're the professional here, I'll make a deal with you. I'll go out with the selkie and the other, but you have to agree to go to the Legion Halloween Dance with me."

Even though she knew she looked as attractive as a freshly caught carp, Lucilla couldn't help but flap her mouth open and closed. The Legion Halloween Dance was the biggest event in Sleepy Hollow Woods. It was the one night of the year those with any form of paranormality could go out and be themselves without fear of persecution from the Norms. The catch being that most people who were true Paras attended the dance only if accompanied by another from their community. The fear of going stag and meeting a Norm, falling for them, then having to own up to their affliction was too much of a risk.

However, there was always the chance he'd hit it off with either Maribon or Esmeralda and he'd back out of going to the dance with her. As a matter of fact, it was a pretty good bet he would.

Lucilla leaned back in her chair, crossed her legs, and then folded her hands in her lap. "Very well, Jager. If you agree to go on a date with my other two clients, I'll accompany you to the Legion Halloween Dance."

"I'll hold you to it." He stood, leaning over the expanse of her desk. Sexual power radiated from him.

If he held her to it, she'd go up in flames along with the holiday bonfire. Or melt into a puddle before he ever picked her up at her door. The man was too much.

No matter how much experience she had with men, it was all on the outside looking in. She understood the male species only insofar as to match them and collect her fee.

But Jager wasn't finished. He lifted one of those big, beautifully masculine hands and ran his knuckles over her cheek.

"What are you doing?"

"I wanted to see if you are as soft as you look."

"Yes, well." Lucilla ran a nervous hand down the pearl buttons of her silk blouse. "Do you want me to email the contact information to you?"

"If you wish."

Oh, she wished. Anything to get him out of her office and on his way.

Jager straightened then headed for the door. "You are, you know."

Lucilla's heart thumped against her breastbone. Oh yeah, she better pray he hit it off with one of the other women.

Lucilla's receptionist, Janet, came in holding a bundle of the day's mail.

"Is that all?" Lucilla watched her place it on the desk. If she wasn't getting junk mail in the post office box, she got spammed in her email. She shook her head and started sorting through the contents. Half of them went directly into the circular file, the others were too bizarre not to open. Like the advertisement guaranteed to

rejuvenate hair growth on bald werewolves. What kind of a scam were they running? Most of the werewolves she knew would give their first litter of cubs to lose some fur.

That brochure went into the trash. She started to pick up the latest issue of *ParaWorld Weekly* when an ivory envelope with a metallic wax seal fell from the pages.

Her heart sank as the envelope dropped to the desk, breaking the seal into a thousand glittery shards. There was only one envelope that ever came to her in such a formal manner. She turned it over to look at the address written in ancient calligraphy.

Great. Just bloody brilliant. This was definitely the last thing she needed in her life—the annual summons for her attendance at the Witches Council’s Open Forum. It was an embarrassment for both her and her family to sit there pretending she hadn’t made a mockery of the craft.

Her failures were legendary.

She’d even heard that mothers, when confronted with a particularly hard-to-train daughter, had begun to say, “Don’t be a Lucilla.”

It was a nightmare to be considered the worst possible case scenario.

Well, this year she just wouldn’t go. That’s all there was to it.

Now, how to tell her family not only was she going to skip the forum, but that her prospective date for the Halloween dance was one of their species’ greatest enemies.

Chapter Two

Jager hadn't felt so good in years. It was only a matter of time before the exquisite Lucilla became his. He'd never wanted a woman with such a hunger before. It consumed him from the first time he'd spoken to her on the phone to set up an appointment to review his profile. Her voice had that sensual quality that made a man break out into a sweat.

He shrugged out of his jacket then hung it in the closet. After the long day in the uncomfortable human confines of his business suit, he'd be glad to don the loose toga preferred by his people. He really didn't understand how the Norms wore the things they did. A man needed freedom to move as the ancient gods intended, not hamper his motion with stitched seams and noose-like neckwear.

The cotton fabric draped loosely around his waist then over his shoulder. A brief image flashed in his mind of how Lucilla would look dressed as a Greek goddess. Heat pooled low in his groin. His hands closed involuntarily.

Her skin had been so soft. A smile spread across his face as he remembered the look in her eyes when he'd touched her. The bright green had gone all hot like the flame from a chemical reaction. It had taken all his power not to pull her from her chair and ravage her perfect Cupid's bow mouth.

Oh, she'd be sweet as the richest nectar.

Comfortable in his native clothing, Jager moved to his home office to catch up on work. He'd spent so much time lately daydreaming over his dilemma with Lucilla, he hadn't been paying much attention to his business. Fortunately, he had an excellent staff to take up the slack, but as a deposed god, he was used to a certain amount of hands-on in regards to his ventures. As a broker in his own ParaTrader firm, Jager called all the shots, but his problems of the past had taught him one very important lesson—micromanagement.

He sat down to his computer, listening to the pleasant sound of the electronics whirling to life. A lot could be said for the Technology Age. The plethora of microprocessor-driven gizmos on the market made every man or woman as efficient as any of godkind, which was a good thing, considering most of his powers were tempered after his downfall.

His computer chimed, indicating he had mail. Heat speared him. Not because of a few hundred emails he received everyday, but because Lucilla promised to send him one. He clicked the envelope icon. Would the message have a personal note? No, probably not. Even though Lucilla was the most quietly sensuous woman he'd ever met, she was also the most professional. Any letter she sent would contain directions as to how to contact the women she'd matched him with.

By the fires of Hades, how was he ever going to get through two more dates he had no want to be on when the woman he wanted might be on a date of her own?

Jager scanned the contents of his inbox. Lucilla's email was sandwiched between a budgetary analysis by his CFO and the airline ticket confirmation for his trip to Japan.

His heart gave a disappointed drop as he read the greeting. The email was addressed to Mr. Cronus not Jager. Hope for a personal message dimmed.

He scanned the note. It mentioned only the contact information for both women being contained in the attached files. How unromantic.

He needed to find some way to capture her attention. So what if she melted when he touched her? That might mean she hadn't been with a man in a while and longed for *any* male to caress her lovely skin.

The thought alone had Jager shifting in his seat. If she gave him a chance, he'd touch her all over, wherever she wanted and needed it the most.

He downloaded the files, promising himself he'd open them later and read them. Before he clicked on the next message, he hit reply and sent her off a quick note.

That's Jager to you.

He was one of the few gods who didn't mind being called by his name. It was, after all, a name he'd selected after he was overthrown by his ungrateful son, Zeus. The need to put all the unpleasantness behind him seemed easier accomplished with a name change. Yet, he insisted on keeping the name Cronus as a reminder of all he'd lost.

The phone rang, bringing him out of the swirling mass of memories from eons of a godly existence. A brief glance at the caller ID had him wincing—Rhea, his ex-wife and the mother of his egocentric son. What in all the heavens did she want? Probably half his thriving business. She was always looking for a damned handout.

He let the phone switch to voice mail. Whatever she wanted she could say to a recording. He had no use for her. After she used him for his godly seed, she'd accused him of killing their children. Not so. He'd never harm his offspring. As a matter of fact, he'd always dreamed of being a father.

The woman was a menace to the Titan race.

The vision of another woman flashed through his mind—Lucilla, with her clear green eyes and forthright manner. There was no way she'd ever play a man false. No guile appeared in her gaze. No lies fell from her lips like honeyed endearments.

He bet when she loved, she loved full throttle.

A familiar stirring under his toga made him lean back in his chair. He needed Lucilla badly. This deep aching for her wouldn't go away until he stood with her in the circle and proclaimed his heart. It was a fanciful notion that, if any of his business opponents knew, would cause him no small measure of embarrassment.

They knew him as ruthless. Cold. Unfeeling. Not the sort of man who set his sights on a woman and decided without even knowing her to confess his undying love for her.

It was true, though. Ever since the first time he'd seen her.

At the time, he hadn't known the owner of ParaMatch and she were one and the same. That realization hadn't come until the first time he'd visited her office. No, the first time he'd seen her had been three years before, at the Legion Halloween Dance.

As one of the organizers, she had been standing near the banquet table, discussing something with the caterer. She'd worn a dark-colored sheath dress that hugged her perfect figure. Tiny silver stars and moons glittered on the surface of the material, painting her like a midnight sky. Jager had taken one look at her, backlit by the bonfire, her golden hair piled atop her head, the nape of her neck exposed and vulnerable, and he'd fallen.

He'd spent the rest of the night looking for her, only to come up short. No one he asked had seen where she'd gone. No one even knew of whom he spoke. She hadn't seemed to make an impact on anyone but himself.

Jager took in a deep breath. The faint scent of burning wood clung to his senses as the memory faded.

He'd gone to ParaMatch looking for a mate—but more importantly, looking for her, hoping by some miracle she'd sought out the services of a respectable matchmaker to find her a mate. It was a long shot, he knew. But something in his gut had badgered him to take the risk, only to hit pay dirt the first time he'd walked through her office door.

He should have leveled with her weeks ago.

The phone rang again. He glanced briefly at the number. Maribon Seacrest. The selkie.

Might as well get it over with.

Jager took a deep, steadying breath and picked up the phone.
“Miss Seacrest, I was just getting ready to phone you.”

Chapter Three

Scents of brewing herbs hung heavy in the air of the duplex. Lucilla pushed aside a beaded gauze curtain, taking in a deep breath as she entered the industrial-sized kitchen of her Aunt Rebekah's apartment.

There had always been something old world about Rebekah's place. Warmth radiated from every crevice. Earth tones, red bricks and natural wood accents gave the space the look of a kitchen in some ancient castle. Plus, her aunt had expanded the room by taking out the living room and den. Now the kitchen and its massive prep area took up most of the duplex's bottom floor, along with a closet that worked as a drying room for herbs.

"Who's there?" Her aunt backed out of the drying room with her arms full of crackling stalks.

"It's Lucilla. I need to talk to you about this invitation I have to the Witches Court."

Rebekah Wainwright set the dry herbs down on a large butcher block counter in the center of the prep room. She blew a strand of bright red hair out of her face. "What about it?"

"I want to know why every year they insist on sending me the invitation when they know I have no intention of accepting? It's a waste of parchment and ink."

Not to mention, it never ceased to point out Lucilla's shortcomings as a talentless member of one of the most legendary witching families in the history of the craft.

Rebekah hitched a shoulder as if it didn't matter. "You're still a member of this family. According to the bylaws, you are more than welcome at the open forum at the annual Court."

The shade of a headache began in the middle of Lucilla's forehead then spread down to pierce behind her eyes. "Will you make my excuses to the council?"

Rebekah raised a henna-colored brow, pursing her mouth as if considering a deal. It was an expression Lucilla knew well and she had to resist a shiver. Asking for her aunt's help was going to cost her big time.

Strong, efficient hands began to untwist the ties on the herbs, working by experience. "There's a wonderful wizard who recently joined our spell circle. He's new in town and doesn't know many people. He needs a date for the Legion Halloween Dance."

Relief came at once. "Send him to my office. I'd be more than happy to find him a date. He'll have to fill out a questionnaire first."

Rebekah stopped her busy hands and looked up, stabbing Lucilla with a meaningful stare. "I didn't mean for you to match him professionally. I want you to go out with him."

Lucilla groaned. "I already have a tentative date for the Legion Halloween Dance." Not one she wanted, but a date nonetheless.

A shocked expression drew Rebekah's mouth into an "O". "You have a date for the Legion Dance?"

“Don’t sound so surprised. I’ve been known to go out with the opposite sex on occasion.”

Her aunt waved the comment away like a stink of burnt herbs. “I didn’t mean it like that. You just keep your head buried in work all the time. You never allow yourself time for romance.”

Lucilla smiled. Her aunt might be a tough customer when it came to her craft as a master level brewer, but she was also a hopeless romantic. It probably came from a lifetime spent making love potions and tonics and other magical potions for the Para world.

However, her aunt didn’t understand that being a non-talent had Lucilla straddling the fence of two worlds. If she chose to, she could marry a Norm and have children. However, the possibility did exist that a stray recessive gene would reproduce the magic in her offspring. The idea of explaining that to a Norm husband didn’t seem worth the risk. Dating and marrying a Para meant they would know of her deficiency. As they would know of her triumph with her matchmaking business. It was a respectable job, but there was nothing magical about what she did. Even Norms had a certain level of intuition they could call upon when needed. Besides, countless Para couples had her to thank for their successful marriages.

And yet Lucilla had no one.

“So who is your date?”

“Tentative date,” Lucilla corrected. “You’ll see at the Legion Halloween Dance. Or not. I’m hoping he’ll strike an interest in one of my clients and back out. I really only agreed in order to get him out of my office.”

Rebekah put her hands on her hips in consternation. “Hopeless.” She shook her head, sending her springy curls flying in all directions. “I really wonder if the fairies didn’t switch you at birth with some other child. Somewhere out there in the Norm community is a witch who doesn’t know how to control her powers.”

“Or who uses them to keep her interfering family in check.”

“We only interfere because we love and worry about you.”

“I love you, too. But I don’t need you to matchmake for me. I’m a professional.”

“Who doesn’t use her services to find herself a man.”

That damn telltale blush rose in her cheeks. “That wouldn’t be ethical.”

Her aunt noted Lucilla’s high color with a low, “Ah, ha,” then turned to the cauldron hanging over the fire in the hearth.

Lucilla picked up a lone sprig of lavender that had fallen to the floor. She put the potent beads to her nose, taking in a deep breath. The fragrance sent immediate calm through her body. “Will you call off the Court? I can’t sit through another audience where everyone stares at me, wondering why I’m there.”

“I have an elixir to cure paranoia, you know?” Rebekah spoke over her shoulder as she added some of the crumbled leaves to the boiling water in the cauldron.

“It’s not paranoia when you *know* they’re staring.” Lucilla let out a long breath. Hopelessness washed over her. She crossed the room to the hearth, placing her hands on Rebekah’s shoulders. “Never mind. I’ll send my regrets along with the offer of free

services for the annual benefit auction.” She gave her aunt a quick kiss on the cheek then started for the door.

“Lucilla Morgana Wainwright, do not walk out of this house until we settle up.”

Settle up!

That wasn’t aunt to niece speaking, but witch elder to subordinate. It was Rebekah’s way of pulling rank, using the coven bylaws’ wording to stop Lucilla in her tracks. To *settle up* meant a bargain had been made and the time had come to make good on the particulars.

Rebekah stalked across the room, stopping only a foot in front of her, way beyond the borders of Lucilla’s personal space. “Let Aramis take you out on a date. He’s a good man. He’s hardworking, respectable and handsome.”

“Aramis?” Lucilla mouthed. How could anyone saddle a beloved child with such an awful name?

It was Rebekah’s turn to blush. “I gave him your phone number. You should expect a call from him soon.”

“Fine. I’ll go to dinner with him, but I promise I won’t enjoy myself.” Lucilla started to leave, but then turned, pointing an imperial finger at her aunt. “Settle up. You have to tell the Court I won’t be there this year.”

Her aunt gave what might be construed as a nod.

Lucilla only hoped it meant the deal was sealed.

Chapter Four

Jager pulled up at the sprawling seaside mansion precisely at seven. Their dinner reservations were for seven-thirty. He only hoped she was a prompt woman. If there was one thing he hated it was waiting on the primping ritual to end while he cooled his heels looking at useless knickknacks in an over-decorated living room.

He'd often wondered why women found it alluring or even fashionable to keep a man waiting. The only thing Jager had ever found it was irritating as all hell.

The house stood on the edge of a cliff. One good mudslide and the entire structure would become one with the sea. But as a selkie, Maribon would no doubt enjoy returning to her watery home for good. Why she maintained a life on land, he didn't know. What he knew of the selkie race was that they were very protective of their seal pelts and went to great lengths to keep them from their lovers. Well, at least human lovers. Perhaps a Para lover was a different story for her kind. Even so, it wasn't a risk he'd take. His heart had already been given completely to the little matchmaker.

But a deal was a deal. He'd get through tonight, go out with the djinn, then sit back and wait for Halloween.

The door buzzer was an odd piece of hardware, shaped like a sea serpent. The chime was more of the sound of waves crashing on

the shore than an actual buzz. Any relationship this woman had with a man would have to be done in the water behind her house. It was obvious the sea still held sway on her emotions.

She answered the door with a sly seductive smile, wearing a black dress that fit like a second skin. Her eyes and hair were darker than the depths of the ocean. “Jager?”

“The one and only.”

She gave him what amounted to a dazzling smile, but it failed to do anything for him. Not like Lucilla’s smiles. “Let me grab a wrap and we can go.”

At least she wasn’t going to keep him waiting.

They arrived at Avalon on the Bay and were seated immediately. The maître d’ treated Jager with deference, showing them to the best table in the exclusive restaurant. Fine chandeliers, candles in golden glass bowls, and deep, rich wood accents bathed the interior in a romantic glow.

Men seated at nearby tables stared at Maribon as she took her seat. She looked up at Jager with an appreciative glance over her shoulder as he held her chair for her. It looked more of an artful pose to him, used to expose the gentle curve of her throat. She really was a beautiful woman.

Now came the part of these first dates he hated the most—the get-to-know-you segment of the program. Considering he had no intention of repeating this experience with her, he failed to see why he needed to sit and listen while she extolled her many virtues like items on a grocery list. But he’d listen because it was the polite thing to do.

Silence stretched between them. Honestly, for a man who spent his life enduring the constant flow of acquaintances through his existence, he should have acquired the necessary small-talk skills. But he hadn't. Probably came from centuries of being an all-knowing deity. Who needed small talk when you could pick their brains at thirty paces?

"I've never been out with a Titan before." Maribon folded her arms and leaned over the table. The low, plunging neckline of her dress barely contained her impeccably pert breasts.

"There aren't that many of us around." Jager watched the waiter try to avoid looking down Maribon's dress while filling their water glasses. The poor man almost met his goal.

She fished an ice cube from her glass, running it seductively along her bottom lip. "Is it true that the bigger the better?"

He pretended ignorance of her innuendo. "You can't tell from my ex-wife."

The tinkle of practiced laughter floated over the table. Her deep brown eyes sparkled in the light of the candle. "Your ex was a Titan?"

"As far as I know she still is."

Her perfectly manicured brows wrinkled slightly at the distinction of tense. She didn't appreciate the correction. "I've never been married before. It just never felt right."

Probably because all her dates tried to steal her skin. She no doubt had the damn thing in a safe somewhere so no man had the opportunity to entrap her. Not that he blamed her for taking such precautions.

“I wouldn’t worry about the length of time you’ve been single, Lucilla is very good at what she does.” Jager tried to sound reassuring. “I understand her success rate is very high.”

“It would have to be, right?” The words hung on the air as they gave the waiter their order. When they were alone again, Maribon picked up a roll from the breadbasket and tore it into little pieces on her plate. “I mean she’s a non-talented witch from a prominent family. If you ask me, she doesn’t have a choice but to make a go of her business. A failure would be another black mark against her.”

Check, please.

If she only realized what bad form it was to diss—was that the word he’d heard lately to indicate negativity—your matchmaker. Especially when she’d set you up with someone you were trying desperately to impress. And Maribon was trying. Too hard.

This dinner needed to move at mach speed.

“Lucilla has nothing to apologize for,” he said over his wine glass, giving Maribon a steady stare. Hearing someone make disparaging remarks against the woman he planned to marry one day put him in a bad mood.

The waiter served their salads. Jager put his glass down then stabbed the unsuspecting lettuce, telling himself to cool down.

Maribon flipped her long fall of raven hair over her shoulder. “I didn’t mean to insult her. I think Lucilla’s wonderful.”

A little too late to guard her words.

Luckily the dinner courses were served quickly. Jager continued to answer Maribon’s various questions. He didn’t expound on any topics, or offer any more information than what the

question required for him to answer. His tactic didn't seem to dull her enthusiasm for enticement.

The desserts were served. Maribon ordered fresh strawberries with whipped cream. The provocative way she licked the cream from the berries should have garnered an "X" rating in the exclusive restaurant. Waiters stopped to stare, men at other tables ogled. Jager just wanted to get the Hades out of there. The woman had no couth whatsoever. Not like Lucilla. Lucilla was a class act all the way.

Later, when he walked Maribon to her door, Jager thought to give her a quick, friendly peck on the cheek so as not to make the evening end awkwardly.

Maribon had other ideas.

When he tried to pull back into his own space, she grabbed hold of him, winding her hands into his lapels, anchoring him to her.

He tried frantically to free himself, but the damn woman had more hands than a Hindu god.

No sooner had he freed his jacket from the clutch of her hand, she put a chokehold on his privates.

"Ms. Seacrest!"

"Mr. Cronus." Her voice went all silky as she started rubbing him.

He'd never been so disgusted by a hot woman in his entire life—and that said a lot.

He grabbed her hand, finally managing to free his junk from her over-amorous clutches. Jager straightened his jacket, ran a hand

through his hair and started for his car before she took it in her mind to tackle him on the lawn.

Oh no, this date would not be repeated.

Chapter Five

Bells tinkled softly as a wind teased the chimes hanging from a tree in Lucilla's side yard. The haunting melody they played never failed to touch her in that deeply recessed place where her witch's senses were buried. It also highlighted the emptiness at not being able to perform even the simplest of spells.

There were times while growing up Lucilla prayed to all the goddesses that even a tiny flare of power would show in her. As a child, she'd failed every test to assess her ability. When all tests proved the obvious, she was apprenticed to her Aunt Rebekah to learn the art of brewing.

What a disaster that had been.

Though brewing didn't necessarily require a strong talent, the practitioner needed a certain amount of confidence while exploiting the herbs and water. Having known no success at any other craft-related vocations, she didn't arrive at Rebekah's kitchen with illusions of triumph in creating potions.

There was one particularly embarrassing incident that ended in Lucilla almost burning her aunt's kitchen down, and singeing the cat in the fallout. The Witches Council had not been amused. After that, she'd been banned from working near an open flame for a sentence of five years.

Lucilla wrapped her arms around her waist, hugging herself in remembered defeat. She'd been more than the black sheep of the Wainwright clan. Never before, in the entire family history, had there ever been a more spectacular failure.

And now her aunt wanted her to go on a date with a man who had proven himself not only as the most talented wizard to be born in over five hundred years, but whose recent innovations had him moving up the Council ladder at warp speed.

How would Aramis Blacktalon feel about going on a date with the biggest disappointment in all witchdom? Lucilla would never sanction such a mismatch in her office. But for her aunt to run interference with the Council, Lucilla would play along. She just had to remember all her failures led to the success of her business. The need to prove herself as a vital, even needed, member of the Para community ran deep.

The feeling of being stared at had Lucilla opening her right eye. Bright sunshine filtered through the red, yellow and orange leaves of the turning trees, painting the ground in dappled light. A large dog sat at her feet, looking up at her with his pink tongue lolling out of his open mouth.

"Hello." Lucilla held her hand out for the animal to sniff.

Intelligent gray eyes blinked at her. The dog wagged his tail then stood.

Lucilla pet his head. "You're a good boy."

He turned his head to lick her hand.

"Where'd you come from? I don't think you belong to the neighbors. I'd remember you."

He was an absolutely gorgeous animal with thick black fur, a muscular body and large white teeth. Whoever owned him took excellent care of him.

“Do you have tags?” Lucilla ran her hands through the slightly thicker hair around the dog’s neck. She felt no collar or tags.

“Are you thirsty? Let’s go get you some water.”

Lucilla rose from the Adirondack chair and crossed the yard with the dog on her heels. She slipped into the house to get a bowl.

The dog waited at the screen, looking in at her. He tilted his head to the side, as if trying to understand what she was doing.

She quickly filled the bowl then set it outside on the porch. The dog sniffed at it then drank with noisy laps.

“You were a thirsty boy.”

Lucilla started petting him again, loving the feel of his fur. It was as luxurious as a mink pelt.

And definitely not right for a dog.

Her hand stilled.

The dog lifted his head, turning to look at her over his shoulder. If she didn’t know better, she’d swear he had a teasing glint in his eyes.

He gave a deep bark then ran off toward the setting sun, disappearing into the lengthening shadows of the orchard.

A sinking feeling centered in her sternum—just below her heart and right above her stomach. No. He wouldn’t. Would he?

Lucilla hurried back into the house, practically diving for the phone. Thank the goddess she had Rebekah’s number on speed dial.

“This better be good. My youth elixir is going to thicken.” The words were huffed into the phone under stress.

“I only have one quick question and then I’ll let you get back to your brew. Can Aramis Blacktalon morph?”

“Lucilla?”

“Who else would it be?” Lucilla gripped the phone, looking out the door at the water dish. “I had a visit from a large black dog who mocked me.”

“Mocked you?”

“I swear on the Witches’ Codex.” She ran her hand through her hair. “I saw him laughing at me when I petted him. He had this incredibly soft black hair. I couldn’t keep my hands out of it.”

The distinct sound of a muffled snort filtered through the phone.

“Are you laughing at me?”

“Darling, don’t be so dramatic. So what if he took on an animal shape to visit you? Maybe he just wanted to get a look at you.”

“Why would he do that?” Bewilderment made her voice come out in a whine. She winced. “Civilized people call and make a date, or arrange to bump into someone at the local coffee shop. They do not show up in an alternate form to sniff out a potential date.”

Rebekah choked. “I’ll call him and find out.”

“Don’t you dare!” Why did dating have to be so hard when she was a professional matchmaker? She owned the keys to the entire dating kingdom, for crying out loud.

“Then what do you want me to do?” Pans banged around in the background.

“Just tell me if he can morph or not.” Sounds came from outside. Weird ones. Lucilla crossed the room to close the door.

“I’m pretty sure he can.” There were rustling noises suggesting Rebekah moved the phone to the other ear. “He’s one sharp practitioner.”

Lucilla rolled her eyes and looked at the ceiling. “I’m feeling exceptionally violated at the moment.”

“Just where *did* he sniff you?”

“I can’t believe you asked me that.” A sharp click interrupted the conversation. “Aunt Rebekah, I have another call. I’ll ring you back in a bit. And take care of that youth elixir, I can hear it thickening from here.”

Lucilla bristled as the café door opened and in walked a man with dark silky hair and clear gray eyes. His gaze surveyed the other customers before landing on her. A warm smile turned his face from merely handsome to truly stunning.

Her breath caught in her throat even as her temper flared. She stood, snatching her purse off the table.

Did he think she wouldn’t know?

Aramis Blacktalon held his hand out, entreating her to stay. “Please don’t leave, Lucilla.”

“Give me one good reason why.” She crossed her arms under her breasts.

He indicated the table she'd vacated with a subtle movement of his hand—one that told of countless hours casting spells and weaving dreams. "Can we sit while I grovel?"

"If you'd called me like a..."

"Like a what? A *normal* person?"

Lucilla blushed at her near faux pas. The least she could do was defend herself against the charge of nearly calling him normal. There was no worse epithet in the Para world.

She took the chair across from him. "No. I was going to say like a civilized being."

That same teasing glint filled his gray eyes, making them sparkle with devilish light. "I am sorry. It's just your aunt talked you up so much, I wanted to see if you really are everything she claimed."

"Ah, so you went to my house to trick me?"

When he smiled, he had the most charming dimple in his left cheek. "It wasn't supposed to be a trick, but you kept digging your hands in my fur and it was starting to turn me on. I had to get out of there before I embarrassed myself."

"I don't think I want to know what you mean by that." Lucilla frowned. Truly, she didn't want to know. The thought alone conjured up all sorts of visions better left unmentioned.

"My intentions were honorable. They just didn't materialize the way I'd planned."

"I find that hard to believe for the Council's new favorite son." She leaned on her forearms. "Exactly how long has it been since a magic work backfired on you?"

His movie star brow wrinkled. “Never.”

Of course he had a perfect track record. What was he going to say when he figured out she was the worst non-talent in the witching community? Her family, even with their influence, was never able to keep the glare of her defect from the rest of their kind.

Had her aunt even told him?

Maybe Rebekah misled him into thinking she used powers to match people. Would she do something so potentially disastrous to a new or tentative relationship?

Lucilla started out of her seat. “I don’t think this is going to work.”

Aramis placed his hand over hers. “You don’t know until you give it a chance.”

“Do you know what I am?”

His steady gaze studied her, as if trying to guess what she meant. Strong male fingers gripped her hand a bit tighter. “A matchmaker?”

“That sounded like a guess.” Maybe Rebekah hadn’t told him anything about her but what a wonderful person she was. If so, that should have been his first clue that something was wrong with her. No one was ever as good as advertised.

“It wasn’t. I know you’re a matchmaker. I just don’t have any idea what else you could mean.”

Oh, boy.

Time to drop the other ruby slipper on the guy. “You’re exactly right. I am a matchmaker, but that’s all I am.”

Aramis laughed. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Whether you do or do not is immaterial.” She let out a long sigh. “If it’s a date with the prodigal daughter of the Wainwright clan, you’re going to be bitterly disappointed.”

“Anyone who sees a stray dog and worries if he’s thirsty or has a family missing him is not a disappointment.”

Lucilla melted. So, Aramis Blacktalon was a really great guy. Granted, he was no Jager Cronus, but a good catch nonetheless. Lucilla didn’t doubt the wizard’s sincerity for even a moment. It was apparent in the look of his eyes and the touch of his hand on hers.

She gave a little shrug then smiled. “So, you want to get some coffee?” If nothing else he’d be a potential match for one of her clients. And after his furry prank, he owed her.

Chapter Six

Darkness flooded the neighborhood, interrupted by ornamental streets lamps made to look like antique gaslights. The street meandered along lazy curves like a blacktop river—the fact the Styx River ran along the back of the west-facing properties notwithstanding.

Lucilla drove towards her house, her mind a whirlwind of the day's events. Coffee with Aramis was the most fun she'd had in a very long time. Fun was important. Fun was what she watched everyone else have while she worked her non-talented fingers to the bone to match other people so they could have fun.

The road wound around a hairpin turn, exposing the front view of her house. The porch light of the old Victorian burned brightly, illuminating the dark yard. Out front, an unfamiliar car sat idling at the curb.

At this point all she wanted was to take a long, hot bubble bath and fall into bed. It didn't look like that was on the horizon. Who would sit in front of her house in the first place? She never gave out personal information to her clients, so it most likely wasn't one of them.

She pulled slowly into her drive, looking in the rearview mirror at the car as the driver's door opened. A tall, well-proportioned man

stood. The light from the street lamp rendered his face half in shadow, but even from where Lucilla sat, she knew the identity of her mystery visitor.

Jager gazed over the top of his car and gave a hesitant wave.

Flutters like leaves stuck in a whirlwind flew around inside her stomach. She smoothed her hand over her abdomen in an attempt to calm the flying furies. What was it about Jager that made her body misbehave?

She motioned for him to come up to the house. It took him no time to get to her with his long strides.

He looked good. The dark suit jacket hung perfectly on his wide shoulders. He moved with elegant grace for such a big man. When he reached her, she looked up into his face, afraid he could hear her heart pound.

A rich, spicy scent filled her head. *Oh, Goddess weeping, he even smells good!* How was she supposed to resist him when he showed up at her door looking like the best fantasy she'd ever had? He gazed at her as if he didn't know how he'd come to be standing on her doorstep. And for the life of her, Lucilla couldn't think of a word to say.

Then he was there, kissing her mouth like a starving man. Lucilla put her hands on his shoulders, intending to push away from his unprovoked admiration, but only managed to sink her hands into his thick hair, holding onto him, afraid he'd let her go.

Her entire body melted against the wall of his heat. His tongue brushed against hers. A faint tang of cloves clung to his mouth. Why did he have to taste good, too? Now she'd never want to stop

kissing him. But she had to. He was a client. His fees helped keep a roof over her head and food on her table. Kissing him was definitely unethical.

Lucilla managed to pull her mouth away from his. The maneuver didn't have the desired effect of stopping the kiss. It only served to give him an opportunity to run his mouth into her hairline, to kiss her temple and breathe hot breath into her ear.

Her nipples were so hard they ached behind the confines of silk and lace. Without conscious thought, she arched her back, rubbing them against him for relief.

"Lucilla," Jager moaned. "Please, don't send me out on another bad date when I already know who I want."

For a second she tensed, until she realized what he meant. She wanted to hear it. Needed to hear it. "Who do you want?"

He laid his forehead against hers. "I'm holding her right now."

"If that's true, why did you sign up for my services?"

"I didn't know it was you." He put his finger under her chin, tilting her face up to his. "I'm not used to begging. It's not in my nature. But if you make me go out with the djinn, I'll be reduced to it."

A fallen god begging? It made for an intriguing picture, but Lucilla had never been that cruel. She slid her hand in his then turned to the door. "Why don't you come inside and we can discuss what we're going to do with you."

She led him through the living room and into the den. The room was filled with earthy colors, rich and warm. It was her

favorite room in the house. Large, overstuffed furniture was grouped in the middle of the space to make for an intimate setting.

Lucilla indicated the sectional with a turn of her hand. "Have a seat and I'll bring us some drinks."

He released the button on his jacket and sat on the sofa. "You have a beautiful home."

"Thank you. I like it." She poured them both some brandy and carried it over to him.

She took a seat across from him, balancing her drink on her crossed legs. "Did something happen tonight to make you come over here and wait at the curb for me?" The words, *and kiss me*, echoed in her head, but she refrained from saying them.

He swirled the brandy around in the snifter. "I had a date with Maribon Seacrest."

A hand clamped around Lucilla's heart to squeeze. Wasn't that what she was being paid for? She'd only done her job in setting them up.

"I see." Her throat tried to close around the words. Even though it was obvious he hadn't had a good time on the date, it was like a knife going through her gut.

"The night will not be repeated."

"Oh, Jager." She hid her smile behind her hand. "You really know how to charm the ladies, don't you?"

He frowned. "What makes you think the failure of the date was my fault?"

"Your track record. You've found fault with them all." Warming to the conversation, she shifted in her seat. "How do I

know, if I go with you to the Legion Halloween Dance, you won't say the same thing about me?"

"You *are* going with me to the dance. You've already agreed."

"I *agreed* to it on the stipulation you went out with *both* of my clients. Now you're here wanting to go back on your word." Lucilla shook her head in mock pity. "I don't know, sounds to me as if I may need to apologize to my other clients for sending them on dates with you."

She watched his jaw tighten. He turned his head to avoid looking at her. "I've never gone back on my word." When his gaze connected with hers again, his eyes were hot, intense. "I want you. I don't want to wait."

His words sucked all the air from the room. That was about as plain a declaration as she'd ever heard. It was also a challenge. Stalling for time, she took a sip of her brandy.

When she didn't reply, he set his glass on the low coffee table and stood, moving around to where she sat. "Don't tell me you felt nothing when I kissed you."

She started at his feet, letting her gaze travel the long way up his body until she looked directly into his eyes. "I have no intention of denying anything. But I'm not going to let you go back on your promise either."

He went down on one knee in front of her. "Why do you want to torture me?"

Lucilla laughed. "Is that what I'm doing? I don't mean to. But you paid for my services and I'd be remiss if I didn't give you the entire benefit of my experience and knowledge."

A low rumble came from deep in Jager's chest. "I see." He plucked the glass from her hand and set it on the table next to his. He let his large palms slide up along the outside of her thighs. "I don't want to appear ungrateful, but maybe we could find another way for you to demonstrate your experience to me."

"Such as?" Heaven help her, but she couldn't think when he ran his thumbs over her hipbones like that.

"Letting me know what it's like to date a woman who is as respectable as she is sexy."

"Me? Sexy?" She let him see just how funny she thought the notion.

"Unbelievably so." He leaned forward just enough to press his lips to her forehead.

Heat speared her to the chair. This was what a woman should feel like—the center of a man's universe, doggedly pursued by him until she felt consumed.

He ran his lips over her face. "Are you going to make me go through another date? Or do I need to fire you as my matchmaker so I can have you all to myself?"

"No. I'm not letting you back out of our agreement. You never know, Jager, you might really enjoy a date with a djinn."

"Not when I'll be thinking of you." He picked up her hand from her lap, bringing it to his mouth. He pressed a kiss on her fingers then opened them to place one on her palm.

She didn't know whether to be flattered or offended. "How do you know I'm not already in a relationship?"

He gave her a cocky smile. “Because you don’t seem the type to accept an escort to the biggest social event of the season when you already have a man waiting in the wings.”

Damn, he had her there.

“You’re right. I wouldn’t.” She pulled her hand back from the steady caress of his fingers over hers. That simple gesture alone was beginning to turn her on. If he didn’t put a squelch on it, she’d end up in bed with him.

He’d already as good as admitted the fact.

I want you. I don’t want to wait.

A thought occurred to her then. He still hadn’t explained why he had such a miserable time with Maribon. Lucilla raised a brow, cocking her head to the side. “What happened tonight to make you swear off another date with Maribon?”

Jager blew out a long-suffering sigh and backed away from her. “Are you sure she’s a selkie and not an octopus?”

A comical vision of Jager trying to fend off the selkie’s eager hands filled Lucilla’s mind. “A little too forward?”

“And then some.” He ran a hand through his hair then leaned against the coffee table. “I’m not embarrassed to admit I’m a very sexual man, but I want to at least get through the first date before I’m stuck to a tentacle. I’d pretty much decided never to see her again before the salad course arrived, but when she attacked me at her door, groping me like I’m a ten-dollar gigolo, it proved she wasn’t the type of woman I’d waste my time to see again.”

Lucilla laughed. “Most men would feel privileged to say they’d taken a woman as beautiful as Maribon to bed.”

“I’m not most men. If all I wanted was a conquest, I wouldn’t be here now.”

Lucilla took a deep breath and let it out slowly. If he wanted something more from her than a few dates and a quick tumble, he’d picked the worst person in the world to pursue. She doubted she needed to remind him of the feud between their peoples, but there were aspects of it they did need to discuss.

“Have you thought at all about the ramifications of a relationship between us? I may not have talent, but my family won’t be pleased.” She looked at her hands. “I couldn’t even tell my aunt who my tentative date for the Legion Halloween Dance is when she asked.”

“I didn’t think it bothered you.” His voice had dropped to a near-whisper. “Does it?”

Her gaze met his. Emotions too potent to deny swirled between them. “Not for myself. Any woman would be proud to be with you. It’s my family’s reaction that worries me. I’ve been such a disappointment to them...”

“How?” Jager demanded. He rose again, pulling her from her chair and into his arms. “You’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met. No one who knows you could ever believe you’re a disappointment.”

She swallowed. Twice in the same night, handsome, incredible men sought to tell her of her worth. She offered a gentle smile. “I was to my family. They had such high hopes for me, and I’ve failed them on so many levels.”

“But it wasn’t your fault,” he protested.

The way he defended her against the injustice of her lot made her heart swell. History showed he knew all too well about being blamed for something that wasn't his fault. To be branded and pigeonholed for something beyond his control.

She'd blown out of the box the witching circles put her in when she'd opened her agency. Jager had started anew when he moved from fallen god to businessman. They really did have so much in common.

Lucilla rose up on her tiptoes, pulling his head to hers. Their mouths met in a kiss as hot as it was comforting. After she pulled away, she looked up into his gorgeous eyes. "You still have one more date to get through. That's the bargain. But I'll make it easy on you. I have a date tomorrow evening. If you want, we can make it a double and you might feel a bit more at ease meeting Esmeralda."

"And if she isn't available tomorrow night? Are you still going on your date?"

"Of course," she teased. "I don't break my agreements."

He gave a low growl in the back of his throat. "I'm not going to enjoy watching you with another man."

Well, if he thought he'd have a hard time watching her with another man, she wasn't going to have a good time knowing he was with a djinn. But she'd made the offer to get him through the date, so she'd follow through. And as a chaperone, she could ensure they didn't have too good a time.

Her ethics had been taking a nosedive ever since Jager Cronus walked into her office, but damn if he didn't fit her own profile match at close to one hundred percent.

Chapter Seven

Why did I let her talk me into this?

Jager looped one side of his tie around the other. A double date? What was he thinking? He didn't want to sit across the table from Lucilla and another man, pretending he wasn't jealous as all Hades.

At least he wouldn't be sitting at home wondering what she was doing and who she was doing it with. He'd already been doing that for months. However, he'd never been able to put a face to that shadowy vision he had of the man he thought she was with.

He wished he knew her date, or at least what to expect. After being blindsided by the hostile takeover of his unearthly reign, he promised never to be caught unaware again. Where did her tastes in men lie? Did she date Norms, or non-talent Paras?

The memory of her hot, sweet mouth pressed to his sent spirals of heat straight to his groin. She'd clung to him, her small delicate hands buried in his hair.

The doorbell rang, pulling him back to reality.

He walked downstairs, putting the finishing touches on his tie. The staff had the night off, so he was reduced to answering his own front door. The mighty had fallen far and wide. There was a time when he'd lived among the clouds on Mt. Olympus, before his life

turned upside down. Everything he'd ever conceived was his at a thought. Now, he had to open his own freaking door.

A brief smile touched his mouth. Lucilla didn't have servants at all, or any powers to make life easier. She did it all herself. Maybe she indulged in a cleaning service, but that was it.

He looked out the peephole at his visitor. Zeus! What was he doing here?

Jager opened the door, but stood to block his visitor's entrance. "Hello, Zeus."

"Father."

"To what do I owe this unprecedented visit?"

"You didn't return my call. We have something very important to discuss."

"I thought it was your mother. But whatever it is, it will have to wait. I'm on my way out."

"Another of your agency dates?"

Surprise stole Jager's voice. He had no idea his contract with a matchmaking agency was public knowledge. But then his perfidious son probably watched him with an eye to taking over Jager's company as he had the heavens. What would Jager do then? Turn him over to the SEC and see him in a Norm jail?

"What I do with my private life is no concern of yours. Or your mother's." He waited a beat to let the hostility of the words sink in. "Tell you what, call my office in the morning and make an appointment with my secretary. I'll be glad to discuss your problem during normal business hours."

“This can’t wait,” Zeus insisted and pushed past his father to stand in the foyer. “Please. I’ll only take a few minutes.”

The light blond hair and gray eyes were something only a godly being could possess, they appeared so frighteningly unreal. Those were the only vestiges left from his traditional appearance. The trademark long beard and hair were gone, replaced by a smooth chin and hair gel. There was a soul patch just under his wide bottom lip. A Grecian map was tattooed on his right upper arm.

He considered the man to whom he’d given life before him. Was it such a small thing for a father to expect respect from his son? Was it too much to ask of one’s progeny?

Freaking mama’s boy.

Jager indicated the well-stocked wet bar. “Help yourself while I get my jacket. I don’t intend to let you make me late.”

He hurried to retrieve his jacket from the wardrobe. When he returned to the living room, Zeus was seated on the sofa, staring at a mural of *The Odyssey* painted over the fireplace.

“I love that story. It really was Homer’s best.”

Jager raised his brow, skeptical of Zeus’s motives. “If you remember the tale, Odysseus’s son fought side by side with his father in the final battle with the suitors. He helped his father keep his house together. He didn’t dishonor him by trying to take the throne. Sons do that when they care for their sires.”

Zeus looked down at his hands, linked between his spread knees. “She led me astray, you know?”

“That’s not exactly a newsflash.” Jager shrugged into his suit jacket. “Tell me why you were so anxious to see me.”

“I think mother’s planning a coup.”

Jager paused in pulling his shirtsleeves through his jacket.

“Who does she want to overthrow now?”

Zeus shook his head in disbelief. “I can hardly get my mind around it.”

“Who?”

Clear gray eyes held Jager’s.

“The Witches Council.”

Why did everything always have to be so damned complicated?

Jager sipped his wine, looking over the table at Lucilla. Soft candlelight made her glow like the heart of a flame. He wanted her all to himself. Unfortunately, her date had the same idea. The djinn had excused herself from the table for the fifth time since they’d ordered their meal, so he was left to sit and watch while Aramis Blacktalon oozed wit and charm and all the traits her family would love in a suitor.

That was only part of the reason his mood turned sour as an unripe lemon. He needed to tell her about Rhea’s bid to overthrow the Witches Council. Granted, he still didn’t like the idea of one Para body having more power than another, but the Witches Council had done well in keeping all the Paras from being discovered by the Norms. They’d been doing so since the rise of paganism so many centuries before. As far as he knew, none of the other Para-kind actually cared that the Witches Council governed. It wasn’t like any of the other groups organized and set up any form of self-

administration. It was actually the sensible thing to do. If Rhea wanted to govern something, she should have put all her energy into organizing the Titans into their own council, rather than rallying them to war.

“Is something the matter, Jager?” Lucilla finally tore herself away from her date to notice him sitting at their table.

“I think Esmeralda had something more important to do tonight.” Not that he cared, but it was something to say so as not to draw attention to his skyrocketed jealousy and worry over the possible Titan takeover.

Lucilla frowned. She pulled her napkin from her lap and set it on the table. “I’ll go check on her.”

Damn, now he’d be stuck at the table alone with a rival. What was he supposed to say to Aramis that didn’t include a dissertation about how the wizard needed to back off from Lucilla?

Jager watched as Lucilla wound her way through the maze of tables to the ladies room.

“She’s gorgeous, huh?” Aramis caught Jager’s gaze as they turned back from admiring the view.

“Very lovely.”

Aramis smiled like he had a dirty secret he wanted to share. Jager wanted to plant his fist in the guy’s smug kisser.

“You’re one of her clients?”

“Apparently.”

“How’s it going? Is the service worth the price?”

“She’s the best there is.” It was hard to speak around the ball of anger in his throat. Aramis made Lucilla sound like an overpriced call girl, not a professional matchmaker.

“I’ve heard that about her.”

“You should sign a contract. She has a wide variety of potential matches to suit any taste.”

“Are you writing her ads? I thought you were into Paratrading?” Aramis smirked then wiped the look off his face when the women returned to the table.

Smarmy character. What did Lucilla see in the guy?

Esmeralda—no last name—sat down at the table and tucked her cell phone into her jewel-studded handbag. “I’m sorry. I promise I won’t leave the table again. The phone is turned off.”

Jager shot a look to the djinn and then to Lucilla. Her lovely face was pulled into a frown. The mighty matchmaker must have laid down the law. “No problem, I know the demands of a high-pressure job.”

Esmeralda turned a little red then glanced nervously at Lucilla and Aramis. “Yes. The job is very stressful.”

Tension clung to the air like a rancid smell. Esmeralda squirmed in her seat, avoiding everyone’s curious glance.

Lucilla returned her napkin to her lap as their food arrived. “What are you doing now that your commitment to your last master is fulfilled?”

Esmeralda twitched in her seat again. “Oh, this and that. Consulting mostly.”

The vague answer didn't sit well with Jager. There was a lot more going on with her evasive answers than she let on. "Who do you consult for?"

She looked up from her plate, her eyes wide. "I'm an independent."

Aramis raised his brow, his fork poised halfway to his mouth. "On what?"

At least Jager wasn't the only one feeling the sense there was something going afoul during the less than cozy dinner. He turned his head to watch Esmeralda's reaction.

She shrugged a bare shoulder, flipping dark hair over her shoulder. "A lot of different things. When you've lived as long as I have and served so many different masters, you pick up quite a lot of expertise on a variety of subjects."

The maître d' approached the table. He spoke in a low voice to Esmeralda.

She stood. "I'm so sorry. I have to go." The apology fell from her lips like a hasty act.

After she left, with the sharp tang of exotic spices in her wake, Jager gave Lucilla a pointed look. "You're a witness. Did I do anything at all to send her running away?"

Lucilla shook her head as if trying to process what occurred. "I don't understand it. You two had such a high probability match rate. I'm so seldom wrong about these things."

"You've been wrong for months," he reminded her.

Lucilla winced. "Jager—"

He held up his hand and gave her a slow promising smile, one that her date couldn't possibly miss the inherent meaning of. "I hope you know that fulfilled my obligation."

She lifted her wine glass and swirled the Merlot around before taking a sip. She looked over the rim of the glass, capturing him in her gaze. "I know."

Aramis raised a brow and studied first one then the other. "Am I getting in the middle of something here, because I'm definitely picking up some strong sexual undercurrents."

"Lucilla has agreed to be my date for the Legion Halloween Dance." *Take that, Spellboy!*

Aramis gave Jager a smile that only annoyed him more. "Is that right?" He turned to Lucilla. "How does your family feel about that?"

Lucilla covered her mouth with her napkin and gave a discreet cough.

"What was that?" His eyes twinkled in mischief.

With much dignity, Lucilla raised her gaze to meet Aramis's. "They don't know yet."

"That's what I thought." His words came out with a punch of laughter. "Think they'll mind?"

"I don't know. It's a dance, not a handfasting."

Jager felt the stem of the wine glass shatter in his hand. A jagged piece cut his finger, sending a drop of blood splashing on the white tablecloth.

"Jager?" Lucilla started to rise, but he waved her back down.

Jager took his napkin from his lap and wrapped his finger in it.

Stupid. He should have never let either of them see how much hearing her say that bothered him. The little matchmaker already had him tied up in knots and they hadn't even gone out yet.

Jager waited for the waiter to replace and fill the glass before he turned the tide of the night. Now that his date was no longer hopping back and forth between the table and the foyer, he was in desperate need of a diversionary tactic. He dropped the bomb he'd been holding onto all night.

"Zeus came to see me this evening."

Lucilla gave him a cautious smile. "Really? You don't look pleased."

"I'm not." He directed his attention to Aramis. "I understand you are moving up the ranks of the Witches Council."

"I'm up for the next vacancy, why?"

"Because Zeus claims Rhea is organizing the Titans into a coup to bring down the Council."

Their reactions varied. Lucilla gave him a blank stare and Aramis rose from the table with a hasty excuse, sticking Jager with the check. But it was worth it. He now had Lucilla all to himself, even if by default.

After a moment of strained silence, Lucilla leaned over the table. "Are you sure? Do you trust Zeus?"

"I'd rather listen to him on this and look a fool if it's a lie, then stand by and do nothing while the Titans rip the Council apart. Granted, I know there have always been hard feelings between the Titans and witches, but nothing to make me want to see them harmed." He signaled for the waiter to bring the check.

“It’s more than hard feelings, but you’re right. If the situations were reversed, I’d have done the same thing.”

The words gave little comfort to Jager as they left the restaurant. But maybe his honesty would see the way clear for her family to accept him into the fold. It was a huge gamble, but he hadn’t gotten so rich in the Paramarkets by playing it safe.

Chapter Eight

Lucilla stood on her porch, looking up into Jager's tense face. "You did the right thing."

"Then why do I feel like I've just let my entire race down?"

She put her hand to his face, cupping his cheek tenderly. "No, Jager. I think you saved it."

He didn't look convinced.

"Look, the only people you've undermined are Rhea and her underlings. Even Zeus came to you for help. That says something."

"I did it for you."

Though his motives might be selfish, his heart was in the right place. Hers, however, had taken flight.

"Aramis will speak to the Council and they'll take precautions." She moved closer to him. "You've given them time."

"I suppose there is that. But there's always the possibility the other Titans will side with her in this."

"You've been in that position before and come out on top."

He backed her up to the house, pressing her between his hard body and heavy oak door. "Let me come in." He nuzzled the sensitive place behind her ear. "You smell and feel so good."

Lucilla knew inviting him in would result in only one outcome—they'd end up in bed. But she'd only agreed to a date, not to an affair.

As Jager continued to kiss a line down her throat, her resistance fled. His large hands rubbed her back, moving low enough to skim over the curve of her bottom. He pulled her closer. The ridge of his erection ground into her, right under her breast. Goddess, but he was a tall cauldron of brew. He thrust his hips slowly forward, moving between her cleavage. He moaned.

This had gone too far for a goodnight kiss.

He pulled back, breath puffing the hair around her face. "Tell me it isn't serious between you and Blacktalon."

"I hardly know the man. He's friends with my Aunt Rebekah."

He sent a long finger to trace her brow, cheeks and mouth. "You two looked pretty friendly."

"He's a nice man. A good man. I think I can match him with someone from my agency."

Jager gave a throaty laugh. "So you see him as a potential client, not a lover?"

"I see everyone as a potential client. It's one of the keys to my success." Lucilla gazed into his eyes. His were full of smoldering desire.

How long had she waited to know the potent pull of a man's passion?

"Let me come inside." This time the request came out as a rough plea.

Oh, who was she kidding? She wanted nothing more than to ride him like a broomstick on a full moon.

She turned in the circle of his embrace to unlock the door. Jager's arms came around her waist. His mouth descended on her shoulder.

Why did it take so long to unlock a door? Her fingers didn't to want to perform the mundane task. All they wanted to do was turn and begin ripping Jager's expensive suit from his hard Titan body.

"Having problems?"

"Yes, and you aren't helping."

Jager placed his hand on hers. "Allow me."

They made it into the house, but stalled on the stairs. With arms and legs tangled, it was hard to navigate. Lucilla landed on her bottom. Jager followed her down.

"Are you all right?" It seemed a compulsory question since Jager never slowed in his removal of her clothing to pay attention to her answer.

Lucilla didn't mind. Her hands were full of his jacket where she'd jerked it down his arms.

He moved off her only long enough to yank it off the rest of the way then gathered her close. His mouth opened on hers. His tongue invaded and retreated, moving against hers in sinuous motion.

Was it possible to have an orgasm from kissing alone? If so, she lay on the very brink. What Jager could do with his lips should have been illegal in all fifty states and most territories.

With their mouths connected, he unzipped her dress, sliding it down until her breasts were exposed to the heat of his body. The soft fabric of his shirt brushed against her distended nipples.

“Beautiful,” he murmured then took one of them into his mouth.

Desire pooled in her belly. Jager used teeth and lips to stoke her higher, until at last she trembled.

With a jerk, he was off her and standing. He picked her up as if she weighed nothing and carried her up the stairs.

“Where is your bedroom?”

“End of the hall.”

If his legs weren’t so long, he would have been in an all-out sprint getting her to the bed. Once there, he laid her down and then stepped back, as if to admire the view. A devilish smile played along the corner of his wide sensuous mouth. His gaze drank her in as if he were dying of thirst.

Self-consciously, Lucilla began to tug her dress back up to cover her exposed breasts.

Jager shook his head. “No. Don’t cover yourself.”

She twirled her hand helplessly in front of her. “Then you have to lose your shirt. I’m not lying here topless all by myself.”

“No. We wouldn’t want that.” He unbuttoned his shirt then slowly shed it.

Goddess, how she wished she’d turned on the central stereo system before coming up here. Somehow she’d gotten a vision into her head of Jager stripping for her to Santana’s “Black Magic

Woman”. Not that she knew anyone who practiced the dark side of the craft. The song just stuck in her head.

Even without the music, Jager’s naked chest was an event worthy of applause. Her palms tickled in anticipation of touching that bronze expanse of muscular flesh.

He let the cotton slide off his shoulders. The man was a huge tease. And judging from the way he was working it, he was enjoying putting on the show immensely. His eyes sparkled with mischief.

Who’d have thought Jager Cronus was playful in bed? He’d always seemed so damned serious to her.

His shirt dropped to the floor with a final flourish. “Now it’s your turn. Shimmy out of that dress.”

Oh, hell, she should have known it was going to be tit for tat.

The hard part was struggling the rest of the way out of a sheath dress that fit like a second skin. Sexy was the last word that came to mind. She’d probably look like a fish trying to scale itself.

She took in a deep breath, holding in her stomach, and leaned against the ornate headboard. Tilting her pelvis up, she slipped the dress over her hips. Jager leaned over and tugged the fabric down her legs. She lay there in nothing more than a scrap of black lace and seed pearls.

“Those are some kind of panties, Lucilla.”

“I thought I’d dress for the occasion.”

He started onto the bed with his knee. Lucilla raised a finger and waved it at him. “This is a no pants zone.”

“Well, in that case.”

The dropping of trou was done with less finesse than the shirt. The evidence as to why shone through the silky fabric of his boxers.

Lucilla heard herself gulp audibly.

What had she gotten herself into with this man? Sure he was a Titan, and by definition he had to be big. But saying Jager was well-endowed was like saying the Golden Gate was a footbridge or Niagara Falls had a little water problem.

“Is that fear I see in your eyes?” The concern in his voice touched her. So did the hand he ran up her leg, right to the inside of her thigh.

“Apprehension. Fear is not in my vocabulary.”

“Glad to hear it.” He stretched out beside her, his hand making lazy swirls over the front of her decorative panties.

Her breath caught as his fingers moved lower and lower toward that achy place deep inside her.

It occurred to her that she lay on the bed with her arms at her sides, letting him feel her up, when she had all that gorgeous maleness within reach that she hadn’t even begun to explore yet. By rights she should be taking advantage of the opportunity before her and drive Jager right out of his ever-loving mind. It wasn’t as if she were an untried virgin. She’d had lovers.

Well, a few. Some. Not many. All right, she didn’t have that much experience, but she had enough and she had a very fertile imagination.

She rolled onto her side, facing him. How would he react if she did the same thing to his boxers as he’d done to her panties? Probably come unglued at the seams.

Lucilla started at the top of his chest, feeling the ripple of muscles and bone across his front. He was smooth, but tough. It was an odd combination she had a hard time defining. But oh, so masculine.

He had no hair on his chest. She'd always loved a hairy chest, but for some reason, on Jager she didn't miss it. He was perfection. Like a statue she'd once seen in a museum. All smooth, defined and perfect. His skin felt hot to the touch. Burning.

She ran her hand down his pecs, grazing her nails over his nipples.

He sucked in a breath, releasing it on a pleased sound.

She flattened her hand and moved it down his stomach, heading for the gold.

Just as her hand reached its goal, she looked up into his face. His eyes were dark pools of desire. His jaw clamped tightly as if he held back strong emotion.

When she wrapped her hand around his silk-clad erection, he lost control.

Lucilla ended up underneath him, her panties hanging off the bedside lamp, his big body on and in her.

She'd been wrong to be apprehensive. It was amazing.

He touched her everywhere at once. There wasn't a part of her sensitized flesh neglected as he thrust into her. She lifted her legs to rest high on his hips. His big hand held her in place. Their mouths collided in a kiss so deep and tender, her back arched in response.

How was she ever going to get close enough to him? If she lived inside his skin, it wouldn't be close enough for her.

“Look at me, Lucilla,” he murmured, tearing his mouth from hers.

Her lashes fluttered open to gaze into his eyes.

“Yes, like that, my love.” He thrust deeper, harder, hitting that special place that shattered her on impact.

“Jager.” The sound of her voice surprised her. It was raw, desperate. Hot. It was a cry for mercy and a plea for more.

“I’m here. Always.” And he followed her down into the most carnal orgasm ever.

Chapter Nine

The first thing Jager noticed upon waking was that he felt like Gulliver sleeping in a Lilliputian bed. The second was the soft female body pressed close to his. Snoring.

He smiled. Lucilla would be so embarrassed if she knew she snored.

It wasn't bad when measured on the Snore-a-Tron scale. No, on the contrary, it was kind of girly. If a snore could be considered such a thing.

All the gorgeous hair of hers had come down when they'd made love. It curled around her shoulders and down her back. Godiva hair. How in the world did she ever get all that pinned up into those tight bun things she wore? And she claimed to not have any magic.

She gave one last snort and woke. Her brows came down into a sharp "V". "You snore."

It was useless to hold back his incredulous laugh. "I do? That was your snorking that woke you. I was already awake."

"If you're awake, why isn't the coffee made? Chop. Chop. I run a tight ship here, sailor."

Instead of hopping to, Jager gathered her into his arms. "I'd rather have morning-after sex with the woman I love."

Lucilla looked around. “Is she here? Tell her to go make the coffee then.”

“You’re a grump in the mornings. Cute. Deliciously disheveled. But grumpy.”

Somewhere in the depths of the big house, a phone rang.

“No,” Lucilla whined and slid under the covers, pulling them up over her head.

“Do you want me to answer that?”

“No.” She snuggled back into the curve of his groin. “Stay here.”

She didn’t need to ask him twice. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her to his chest.

“What is on the agenda today?” he whispered in her ear.

“Sleep.”

“How about I get dressed and get us some breakfast. When you’re more awake we’ll decide.”

“Coffee.” The word ended on another snore. And she was out.

So his perfect woman had two little faults. He could work with them. After she woke up and got going, she was the most charming person he’d met in a very long time. Her bedroom skills were unparallel. Another point in her favor.

Jager gathered his clothes and helped himself to her shower. All her soaps smelled of some kind of flowers. He used them anyhow, but rinsed twice. How embarrassing was it to be the former God of your own religion and go around smelling like you just stepped off an episode of *Queer Eye*? The only way to wear a

flowered scent like a man was to have it put there by a hot woman rubbing up against you. At least that's the way he saw it.

When he went outside, Zeus had his behind parked on the hood of Jager's car. "That was one long-ass date, Dad."

"You jealous?"

He raised his brows over the tops of his sunglasses. "She's definitely hot stuff, but is it ethical to sleep with your matchmaker?"

"Is it *ethical* to overthrow your father and steal his heavenly throne?" Yes, the rebuttal was a bit childish and Jager, by rights, should have been over it millennia ago, but he had a hard time dealing with the betrayal by his own son.

Zeus hopped down off the car. "I told you I'm sorry. What do you want from me?"

"I should be asking you that. Why have you brought yourself all the way out here?"

"There have been some developments since last night." Zeus walked around to the passenger side as Jager hit the remote locks. "I'll tell you while we roll."

"I'm going to get breakfast for Lucilla and myself and then I'm coming back here to enjoy it in her company. You may talk while I get the food, but after that you're on your own."

"Fair enough."

Jager got into the car and started the engine. He turned to his son seated next to him. "This isn't going to become a habit with you, is it?"

"What?"

"You showing up at mealtimes."

He shrugged wide shoulders. “A guy’s gotta eat.”

They drove across town to a bakery that made the best bagels in all of Sleepy Hollow Woods. He had them made into breakfast sandwiches and bought some extra-large coffees. Two for Lucilla.

“Here, make yourself useful.” Jager handed the to-go bag and coffee holder to Zeus when they got into the car. “Did you really want to talk to me about the latest developments or were you just trying to get me to buy your morning meal?”

Zeus steadied the bag with one hand and ate with the other. “No. I have genuine news.”

“Let’s hear it then.” It was hell being held hostage for a sausage and egg bagel.

“At least one of the other paraspecies is going to side with Mom. I heard her discussing it on the phone after I left your place last night.”

The knowledge left a big hole in Jager’s gut. He doubted he’d be able to eat now. “Change in plans.” He hung a U-turn and started back to Lucilla’s place. “You’re going to sit and tell Lucilla and me everything you heard.”

Lucilla heard the front door open and voices in the entranceway. One was definitely Jager, but the other she didn’t recognize. She’d just finished her shower and dressed. Her wet hair was pulled back and piled up in a claw clip.

She shoved her feet into a pair of wedge shoes and headed down the stairs. When she moved, reminders of the night before’s bedroom gymnastics made themselves known in the form of muscle

cramps. Damn, it had been way too long since she'd indulged. Much too long.

She found Jager in the kitchen, sitting at the table with a man who looked in his late-twenties to early-thirties. He had that just-off-the-beach look to him, other than the overdose of product in his hair that looked more like skateboard culture or *Dragon Ball Z*.

Jager stood when she entered the room. The young man let out a sigh and followed suit, acting like it was an imposition on his personal style to show good manners.

"Good morning," Lucilla said.

"You're much more awake than when I left." Jager reached over and grabbed her hand, pulling her to him. He leaned over and kissed her tenderly.

"The thought of breakfast and coffee will do that to a girl." She glanced at the bag. "What did you bring?"

"Coffee, sandwiches and Zeus."

Lucilla gave the man a closer look. So this was the man who'd dared wrestle heaven from his father and sided with his mother in the conflict? Punk.

But that still didn't explain his presence at her kitchen table.

"He has some information about the coup." Jager pulled out a chair for her. "You might need to sit down for this."

"That bad, huh?"

"Well, it ain't good." He took a place next to her then turned to Zeus. "Tell her what you told me."

“My mother is negotiating with another of the paraspecies to side with the Titans. I think she might be going for broke on this one.” He lifted his coffee and took a sip.

Lucilla glanced back at Jager for confirmation.

He gave a slight shrug. “We have to narrow down which group is politically motivated enough to want to see the Witches Council fall.”

Lucilla had no idea. The Council had always run the affairs of the Paras. Why did the others want to change the order of things? Not that the Witches Council had a corner on the market of government. There was enough room for all of them to have representatives.

“Do you think we should open negotiations and set up a multi-species consortium? Maybe Rhea just wants the Titan voices heard.” From what she knew of Rhea, that was as unlikely as a Para being allowed to run for president.

Zeus gave her a look as if to say “*get a grip*”. “My mother wants all or nothing, though I do like your idea.”

Jager turned to her. “You deal with the gamut of Parakind. Ever caught an undercurrent that would suggest one group might be inclined to go against the Council?”

“Well, if they were, they wouldn’t be likely to tell me.” She picked up one of the unopened coffees and lifted the lid. Black and hot. She needed to blond it up a bit or it would never be drinkable.

“Maybe they did and you just don’t remember. A gesture. A refusal to date someone different—”

Lucilla cut him off. “You’re the only one in the last six months who’s refused a date. Most of my clients are looking for a long-term commitment and are willing to give their dates a chance.”

A sensual gleam came into Jager’s eyes. “If you would have matched us from the beginning, I wouldn’t have refused you a thing.”

The blush started all the way down on her chest and swept upward. She rose to get milk and sugar for the coffee. Anything so she didn’t have to sit at the table bathed in memories of Jager making love to her while his son sat across from her with that stupid knowing grin on his face.

Jager let out a low sexually-charged laugh. “Don’t run from your feelings, Lucilla. I know you enjoyed yourself last night.”

He was shameless.

“I don’t remember running anywhere.” She grabbed the condiments and returned to the table. “Now, if we can get back to the discussion.”

Jager nodded. “I’ll look at it from a business perspective, Lucilla can take the social, and Zeus...” He stopped and made a motion with his hand. “Do whatever it is you do.”

“Spy,” Zeus provided. He rose from the table, Styrofoam cup in hand. “I’ll leave you two lovebirds alone. If I hear anything else, I’ll let you know.”

He started to go out the back door, but stopped and looked at his father with a wicked gleam in his cool gray eyes. “Keep it safe.”

Lucilla's face became endangered of combusting. When the door closed behind him, Lucilla slapped her palm on the table. "He's awful."

Jager shrugged. "I wasn't much different at his age. Though I don't think I was near as arrogant."

Lucilla thought perhaps Jager had been more arrogant, but was humbled at his downfall. She chose not to mention that particular point.

She took a few steps, coming close enough to him to cup his face in her hand. "You're a good man now and that's all that matters."

His eyes went molten. "We're alone again."

"I did notice that."

Jager backed her up against the cabinet. He had a habit of trapping her against immovable objects for some reason. Like he thought she'd try to run away or something. Someday she might tell him she had no intention of going anywhere. But, for now, it was fun to keep him guessing.

"Are we going back to bed?"

He shook his head and lifted her up onto the countertop. "What's wrong with here?"

Lucilla draped her arms around his neck. "Nothing, I suppose. But sex on a countertop does have that clichéd feel to it."

"So does a bed, but you didn't complain about that last night." He began to kiss his way down her neck, pulling on the collar of her shirt for better access.

"Last night was our first time—"

“First of many.”

Lucilla gave a half laugh, half moan as he connected to a sensitive spot behind her ear. The man definitely knew how to turn her on at light speed. But then, he’d once been a god, surely he had intimate knowledge of what pleased a woman. At the moment she didn’t care, as long as she received all the benefits of his experience.

Jager raised his head from the hollow of her throat. “Where *do* you want to continue this?”

Two minutes later they were lying in the fallen leaves of the apple orchard, going at it like a couple of satyrs.

Though a light autumn breeze rustled the trees, at ground level it was a scorcher. How did Jager manage to put out so much body heat? The man must have been made out of muscles and flames. Everywhere he touched, he left burning pleasure in its wake.

A hard ball dug into her back, right above her tailbone.

“Mmm.” She arched her back, trying to get away from the pain.

Jager moved deeper, pinning her to the ground.

She twitched again. “Ow.”

He pulled away, his face awash in concern. “Sorry. Sorry.” He showered her face in kisses. The next thrust sent the object digging into her butt cheeks.

She put her hands on Jager’s chest and pushed. “Wait. Time out.”

He moved off her and sat back on his knees. “What’s wrong?”

Lucilla leaned forward, reaching behind her. Her hand connected with the remains of an apple, flattened from their ardent

lovemaking. She threw the thing out of their range and held her arms out for him. “I’m good now.”

“You’re always good.” He met her halfway then reversed their positions. “I’ll protect you from violent fruit.”

Tenderness moved through her. There wasn’t anything about him she didn’t find attractive. He was gorgeous, smart, sexy and just plain fun. So much fun. Goddess, it was the most attractive attribute he possessed.

Everyone needed to experience the heady excitement of having fun with their lovers. If laughter was the best medicine, it also was the most potent aphrodisiac. At least for her.

Lucilla stretched out along his large body, loving the feel of him beneath her. Happiness sang in her veins.

Jager placed his hand on her neck, lifting her hair. “You should see yourself right now. You’re taking my breath away, you look so beautiful.”

“I was just thinking the same thing about you.”

He smiled knowingly.

It was hours before either of them uttered another word.

Chapter Ten

The room was already crowded by the time Lucilla arrived. She hated walking in late. Hated being the center of all attention. Even now, the many eyes of those assembled spied her at the door and turned to watch her enter and take her place in the family row.

“I thought you weren’t coming?” Aunt Rebekah grabbed her bag from Lucilla’s seat, where she’d stashed it.

Lucilla leaned over to whisper into her aunt’s ear. “I wasn’t going to, but after the bombshell Zeus dropped on Jager Cronus, I thought I should at least make an appearance.”

“That’s something else we need to discuss—the fact you’re seeing a Titan.” Aunt Rebekah pursed her lips in disapproval.

“It’s a bit more than seeing him.”

Lucilla didn’t know her aunt’s eyes could get so big, or her skin turn such a color, but obviously she was wrong.

“Lucilla—”

The High Wizard took his place on the dais, calling the meeting to order. Not a moment too soon either. Aunt Rebekah would have worried the point like a dog with an old shoe. Who was Rebekah to judge? She didn’t know Jager personally. She hadn’t stood basking in the light of his admiration. No, the only thing Aunt Rebekah had were thousands of years of bitter history that had

nothing to do with Jager in the first place. He hadn't even been leading the Titans when the trouble started between their people.

Lucilla sat in her seat, stewing in indignation. She shot a frown in her aunt's direction. "Jager is a good man."

"His kind is plotting to wipe us out."

"His *ex-wife* is plotting. Not *him*. Big difference there." The words were forced out between Lucilla's clenched teeth. She crossed her arms over her breasts. Anger boiled like one of her aunt's brews right under the surface of her skin. It heated her neck all the way to her ears.

"Doesn't mean he won't side with them when the shit hits the fan," Rebekah whispered.

"As if he owed them any allegiance after what they did to him. Believe me, he hasn't forgotten or forgiven the treachery. If I know nothing else in my life, it's that Jager Cronus will do everything in his power to help us. He already is. What are you doing but hurling accusations?" A sudden sharp memory of their intense lovemaking from the night before scudded through her mind, igniting sparklers in her soul. "He's the best man I've ever met."

Lucilla hoped Aunt Rebekah didn't detect the little hitch in her voice at the end of her diatribe.

No such luck.

"You're in love with him," Rebekah accused.

"For longer than I wanted to admit."

Aramis slid into the seat beside Lucilla, effectively cutting off what was becoming an uncomfortable conversation. The

Blacktalons had seating on the other side of the chamber, where the out-of-towners sat. “You aren’t going to believe what I just heard.”

“Try me,” Aunt Rebekah said dryly. She shifted her gaze to meet Lucilla’s. Irritation remained vivid in her eyes.

“Rhea has gotten herself a djinn.”

A sinking feeling, as if someone had just pulled the plug on a drain and let all the water out, centered under Lucilla’s breasts. “I have to go make a phone call.”

One look at Aramis’s face confirmed he thought the same thing she did. Now all she had to do was verify the identity of the traitorous djinn. Granted, there were a lot of them out there running around, but Esmeralda’s behavior the week before had been odd, to say the least.

The djinn had never made it a secret they longed to have powers like the witches, who were not beholden to the whims of a master. If Jager wondered what group would be politically motivated enough to side with the Titans in the coming conflict, he need look no further.

She rose from her seat, keeping her head low, so as not to call attention to herself as she snuck out of the chamber.

The phone on the other end was already ringing by the time she made it to the vestibule.

“Hello, sweetheart. Is your meeting over?” Jager’s voice came through the line like melted butter and honey.

“No, just starting. Listen, Aramis just told Aunt Rebekah and me that Rhea has a djinn in her pocket.”

A colorful array of expletives rolled out. Lucilla held the phone away from her ear. She nodded a hello at two old witches walking by as they gave her scandalized expressions.

“Jager? Jager?” she tried to get his attention. “Whoa, honey. Slow down. What was that? Baby, I don’t think that’s possible, no matter how limber she is.”

Finally he let out a long breath and ended his tirade. “Sorry. Rhea knows exactly how to push my buttons.”

“Apparently.” Lucilla leaned against the wall between a display case of trophies from various regional witching contests and a statue of Merlin. “I think there’s a good chance the consulting Esmeralda is doing is for Rhea.”

“My thoughts exactly.” He lowered his voice. “I’m going to call in a favor from Zeus. The boy owes me big time.”

“What are you going to have him do?” Though she didn’t particularly care for Jager’s eldest son, she didn’t want to see him come to harm.

“A little recon with the rogue djinn. He’s a good-looking kid, a former god, and Rhea’s son. I think it’s pretty safe to assume Esmeralda might be persuaded to talk to him, if she believes he’s on Rhea’s side in the conflict.”

“And if we’re wrong and it’s some other djinn?” Lucilla frowned when she noticed someone had stuck a piece of used chewing gum in the folds of Merlin’s bronzed robes. She dug a tissue from her purse and picked it out. Was there no respect for authority figures anymore?

A purely male sound purled through the phone. “Then I have the satisfaction of knowing Zeus has one of my castoffs.”

Lucilla smiled in spite of the truth stretching. Let him rewrite history if he wanted. It didn’t matter to her, as long as he knew where he belonged now.

They said their goodbyes and Lucilla crept back into the chamber as the High Wizard Rowan Erlich made a mandate for the entire witching community to ready their resources should the Titans launch a surprise attack.

“What about the Legion Halloween Dance? It’s less than a week away. Will it be cancelled?” someone in the crowd shouted.

Conversations erupted throughout the room. High Wizard Rowan raised his hands for silence. Then a spotlight landed directly on Lucilla while she tried to make it to her seat undetected.

“Why don’t we let Lucilla Wainwright answer that question?”

The ground needed to seriously open up and swallow her. Now.

She straightened the front of her dress and fiddled with her hair, trying to control the nerves snapping throughout her body like frayed power lines. As the Dance Committee Chair, all major decisions regarding the annual event landed on her shoulders.

She cleared her throat. “If the Titans’ complaint were with the entire Para community, I would perhaps see a need to cancel the dance. However, we only know of them going after the Council—no offense to our esteemed leaders—” Several of the Council members shook their heads at her, whether to acknowledge they were not offended or as a reflection of her hopelessness, she had no

idea. “I have to therefore assume they wouldn’t risk taking on the other species at a festival designed to include all Parakind. The fallout would devastate their bid to rule.”

Aramis rose, coming to her side in solidarity. “I agree with Lucilla. If the Titans push too hard, they alienate the others. If they wish to rule, they can’t do it by force. Not without a full-scale war spilling out to the Norms. The question is—would they hazard discovery?”

Lucilla put her hand up in the air. “I just want to stress one point, if I may. Not all the Titans are for the takeover. History shows us Rhea has attempted this once before and managed a successful coup. We should exercise extreme caution, but not paint every Titan with the same brush.”

Whispers fluttered through the crowd.

Aramis leaned into her, speaking between closed lips. “Good way not to call attention to your boyfriend.”

“Then can we expect cooperation from your Mr. Cronus?” High Wizard Rowan placed his hand in the long folds of his sleeves, awaiting her answer.

Her face burned. Every gaze in the room was glued to her.

This time, however, it didn’t intimidate her. She lifted her head and shoulders and looked Rowan straight in the eyes. “Yes. You have his full support.”

“Very well.” He waved her to sit back down.

She remained standing. “Not so fast.”

With the entire Witches Council watching, she walked with military posture to the front of the hall. “If I may address the

assembly.” She made it a statement, not a question. Her steady gaze penetrated into the eyes of Wizard Rowan.

“Make it short and succinct, please. We’ve a full agenda.”

She turned to face the audience. She’d say what she had to say and take as long as she damn well pleased. After being the butt of their jokes for so long, she figured it her due.

“I know I’ve been the butt of jokes and ridicule for most of my existence, but I will remind you that I do come from one of the oldest and most respected of witching families. I’ve worked my non-magical fingers to the bone to make a success of my business. And I’ve succeeded. So, I demand my voice be heard on this issue. It’s that important.

“Jager Cronus, along with his son Zeus, has agreed to come to our aid and side with us in the coming conflict with the Titans. That is true. We owe them our gratitude for bringing this matter to our attention, rather than letting us be blindsided by a war we never saw coming.

“Odd how that’s possible in a group with such eminent prognosticators. Or is this the true reason we’ve been at odds with the Titans for centuries? Because you knew this day would come?” She held up her hand to halt any heckling that might spring from those listening. And they were listening—raptly.

“In my business, I come into contact with all the para species. I know their quirks and foibles and there are none of them without faults. Including us. We have an opportunity here to create something better. Let’s ensure none of the other species gets it into their heads to attempt a coup on this scale again. Enter into dialogue

with them about organizing some sort of cross-species consortium to iron out problems before they come to a head.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re dating a Titan,” someone yelled.

Lucilla put her hand over her heart. “Correction. I’m in love with a Titan.” There was a collective gasp. She ignored it. “But that’s only part of the reason. The other is because I know it can work. There aren’t any species in the Parakind that I haven’t matched. Successfully. If it can work one-on-one, I know it can work in a forum of mutual respect.”

Quietness filled the room, until the sound of a single person clapping cut through the uncomfortable void.

Aramis stood, continuing his solo applause. Soon, he was joined by Aunt Rebekah. Before long, the entire witching community were on their feet applauding her impromptu speech and the wisdom behind it.

Slightly embarrassed, but no less proud for standing up for herself and her position in the community, she started back for her seat.

“Wait!” Wizard Rowan’s voice filled the hall. The applause died.

He stood from his place, hands resting on the dais. “You do come from a unique perspective, Ms. Wainwright, that is true. Your idea has great merit and shows a great love for not only this community, but all Parakind.

“It occurs to the council that—as you so aptly pointed out—you not only have intimate knowledge of all the species, but as an

extremely successful matchmaker, you have their confidence as well. We can think of no better person to chair such a consortium.”

They could have knocked her over with a levitating feather. If she’d ever questioned their respect, she need do that no more. She had it.

Lucilla was allowed to reclaim her seat.

The rest of the meeting faded into the background as Lucilla quietly made plans as to how best to protect the Legion Halloween Dance attendees and decide how best to select those individuals for the consortium.

On the way home, Lucilla stopped off at the party store to pick up her costume for the dance. She’d thought about going elegant again this year, but since it was the first time she’d be there on the arm of a handsome man, she wanted it to be different. Fun.

And sexy.

She’d called two days before to reserve a hot Playboy Bunny costume, complete with black hose and high heels. Jager wouldn’t be able to keep his hands off her. Not that he needed much encouragement to grope her. It seemed a mandate with him. If they were in a room together, he found an excuse to capture, hold and fondle every place on her body he had access to.

Not that she minded. But one thing often led to another, and before either of them could offer a protest or catch their breaths, they were tumbling to the floor and making mad monkey love.

A hand waved in front of her face as the delicious contemplations fled.

“Here you are, Ms. Wainwright. It’s due back on Tuesday. There is a two-hundred-dollar deposit that is refundable provided you return the costume in the same condition it was rented.”

Lucilla frowned at the clerk. “Two hundred dollars? For a few scraps of material and some wire ears? I’m not renting a car here.”

The young man pushed his glasses up on his nose. “There’s a bit more to it than wire ears.” He unzipped the garment bag exposing a long white and pink furry something that most definitely did not resemble anything Hugh Hefner would have had serving drinks in one of his clubs.

“Have you lost your mind? I was supposed to be a *Playboy* Bunny, not the Easter Bunny.” Lucilla winced as a huge orange carrot that could have been seen from space rolled out of the bag, across the counter and landed on the ground with a bounce.

Goddess, this was not happening to her. She shook her head in denial.

The clerk lifted the carbon copy of the order form from around the neck of the hanger. “It says here *one medium bunny costume*. It doesn’t specify what kind.”

“Oh, so you just assumed it was the furry one who likes to hide eggs that get lost for months.” She leaned menacingly into his pimply face. “Do I look like the Easter Bunny kind, kid?”

He shook his head. “No, ma’am.”

“No, indeed. Now go back there and get me a Bunny suit.”

He turned and fled, leaving the big plastic carrot where it lay.

Lucilla put her arm on the counter, resting her face in her hand. Why did everything always have to be so difficult for her? She just wanted to be sexy and fun for her man.

Her man.

The words alone made her all warm and fuzzy. Kind of like a pink and white bunny suit.

Laughter bubbled up from deep inside her.

Should she?

Oh, it would be too cruel for words.

Mischief like she'd never known before had her ringing the service bell.

The kid returned, shaking like he'd developed a nervous tic in the last minute and a half.

"Look, I'm sorry. I've changed my mind. I'll take the bunny suit. The furry one."

He gave her a cautious look. "A...are you sure?"

"Positive."

Lucilla handed over the hefty deposit and laughed all the way home.

Chapter Eleven

The night was crisp and clear. The crowds electric.

Overhead, a full moon hung low in the sky. In the center of the park, a bonfire blazed high into the heavens. People danced around it in costumes or formal wear. Food was laid out on long banquet tables, allowing partiers to graze at their leisure.

Jager wore a light cotton shirt that draped on his wide shoulders. His pants were a dark fabric with a drawstring waist. He looked both elegant and comfortable. Lucilla leaned into his chest as she watched the crowds. Her big puffball of a tail added extra padding where she needed none.

He'd been expecting a sexy bunny, too. She'd teased him about her costume as they'd lain in bed the night before and he asked her what she'd wear.

Just let them get through this one night. That's all she asked. But something deep inside her felt off about the evening. Though the sky shone clear, it was as if rain threatened on the horizon. And not a light, refreshing drizzle, but the mother of all thunder clappers.

Jager's arms came around her to hold her tightly. "Don't worry, sweetheart. I won't let anything happen to you."

"I know." She leaned back to look up into his face. Damn he was handsome standing there with the reflection of the flames

painting his face in red and gold. She rested her big furry paws on top of his hands where they met around her waist.

A lump formed in her throat. He'd known from the first time he'd seen her she was the one for him. He'd told her that the night before, as he'd made passionate love to her.

Her breath hitched. She had to say something before it all came crashing down on them.

She turned in the circle of his arms. Screwing up her courage, she looked up into his face. "I love you, Jager. I think I have since the day I first looked at your profile."

"Lucilla." Her name had never been uttered with such raw emotion before. He drew her to him, his mouth descending on hers.

Suddenly, the night was on fire.

The beautiful bonfire exploded, sending dancers running for cover. Magic rained down from above.

A spark landed on her suit, igniting a small patch of fur. It smoldered with the stench of burnt fibers. Jager beat out the ember with his hand.

"Get out of here. I don't want you hurt," he yelled above the angry cries of the crowd.

"Forget that. Your ex-wife and her minions just cost me two hundred bucks and ruined my party. I'm going for blood." She picked up her plastic carrot, wielding it like a club.

She might not have magic on her side, but she had something a hell of a lot worse—rabid bunny hormones.

She reached up and pulled Jager down to her level. She gave him a hard kiss on the mouth. “Be careful. I’ll see you after I clean house.”

“You be careful.” She started away when he pulled on one huge padded paw. “I love you, too.”

Lucilla danced into the fray, looking for anyone who was over six feet tall and attacking the festivalgoers.

Bright sparks danced overhead, firefights exchanged between witch and djinn.

Lucilla came around the south end of the banquet tables and hopped up on them, looking for the heaviest fighting.

Oh, goddess.

Her Aunt Rebekah was busy trying to fend off a couple of djinn all by herself. Lucilla flew into the chaotic mass like the Bionic Hare, swinging her mighty carrot of terror. She fought her way over to her aunt. She kicked one djinn in the jewels, the other she dispatched with a swipe of her paw. They were heavier than they appeared and stuffed with something akin to boxing gloves.

When both djinn were down, she put her foot on one’s chest, pointing into his face. “Looks like rabbit’s feet aren’t so lucky for you, buster.”

“Lucilla, quit screwing around and help me.” Rebekah had a hold of a female Titan’s hair, holding her in place while trying to uncork a potion bottle with her teeth.

The Titan struggled to get away from the much smaller, but very agile Rebekah. One would think, with as much power and brawn behind her, she’d easily struggle out of Rebekah’s grasp. But

Rebekah had wrapped the Titan's long hair around her fist and used an enchantment to force her to stay still. The Titan fought against the magical bonds.

"Here." She threw the vial at Lucilla. "Open this and pour it down her throat."

"What does it do?"

"It'll knock her out."

The Titan shook with rage as Lucilla pulled the stopper out with her teeth and tried to decide how best to get the liquid down the throat of someone twice her height.

"Does she have to swallow it?" Lucilla sniffed at the contents and pulled back as noxious fumes made the images before her swim. "My guess is no."

Instead of attempting the impossible, Lucilla splashed it in the Titan's face.

"It burns." The Titan rubbed at her eyes then staggered. She fell like the giant from Jack and the Beanstalk. No more fe-fi-fo-fumming for her for a while.

"Excellent." Aunt Rebekah grabbed Lucilla's paw and hurried to help others. Djinn winked in and out of existence, faster than they became targets. Witches screeched overhead, dive-bombing the enemy like pointy-shoed Kamikaze pilots.

Rebekah and Lucilla hurried across the park as fast as Lucilla's fluffy feet allowed. They spotted Aramis and started for him when another Titan materialized in front of them. Lucilla looked up the length of the giant blonde woman. Her legs were longer than

Lucilla's entire body. She picked up Aunt Rebekah by the back of her cloak, choking the brew master.

"Rebekah!" Lucilla jumped up, swatting at the Titan with her paws. It had no effect on the mammoth woman.

"Put her down," came a deep male voice from behind Lucilla. She turned to see Zeus staring at the female Titan with rage. "Haven't you ever heard the expression 'pick on someone your own size'?"

The Titan let out a growl and charged Zeus. But he wasn't playing games. He lifted a hand, turning her to a block of ice. Aunt Rebekah fell from a frozen hand, landing in the dirt.

Zeus hurried to her. "Are you all right?"

"I could have handled her," she complained.

Zeus smiled warmly. "Yeah, I know. Who do you think I was talking to about picking on people their own size?"

Lucilla watched, amazed, as her aunt got a gooey look in her eyes and allowed Zeus to help her to her feet. Then her attention was diverted as something big and angry, dressed in an expensive white shirt, flashed in her periphery. Lucilla lost interest in watching the battle. All her attention focused on the man who bore down on his prey like an eagle with deadly talons at the ready.

Jager pointed to the ground. She looked to see if there was something at his feet. But there was nothing.

He stalked forward, his gaze fixed on his ex-wife.

Rhea shook her head in denial of whatever Jager meant to do.

He extended his hand again. Even from where Lucilla stood, she could see power radiating out of his fingertips. Hadn't he lost all his godly powers after his fall?

The ground shook.

Long cracks appeared like a gorge through the center of the park. Lucilla couldn't hear Jager's shouted words, but their intent put fear on the faces of those who had.

"It's over, Rhea." Jager continued to force the ground to quake under their feet. It must have been a small trick left over from his days of ruling heaven and earth, but as a bluff, it was effective. "This little coup of yours is finished."

"Cronus, how can you turn against your kind?" Fear widened her eyes.

"I owe no allegiance to you or our kind. I will, however, help to mend the rift between the witches and Titans." At her surprised expression, he sent another tremor moving through the ground and forced a lightning bolt to hit the ground. "Always you wanted more than your share. And even more wasn't enough. Your greed stops tonight."

He no longer had the power to send her away, but that didn't mean some of his newly acquired friends and soon-to-be family lacked the skill. "Aramis!"

The wizard materialized beside him as if the outcome of the evening had been preplanned. "You bellowed, your godliness?"

"Dispatch my ex to Hades. Let him worry about his mother for a while."

“No. Not Hades. He hates me.” Rhea tried to stand, but another jolt to the ground sent her tumbling back on her behind.

“Too bad. You should have thought of that before you spent an eternity scheming.”

Aramis reached down and pulled the Titan to her feet. He looked way up into her face and gave a dark smile. “Some days I really enjoy my power. This is one of them.”

They disappeared in a flash of light.

Without their leader, the remaining Titans fled the field. The djinn disappeared like mist on the wind.

A loud cheer went up through the Parakind.

Lucilla ran to Jager. He turned just as she took a flying leap up. He caught her in his arms, holding her to him.

“You. Were. Amazing.” She punctuated each word with a kiss.

“So were you. I saw some of the damage you did with that carrot. Remind me never to sneak up on you when you’re holding vegetables. You could be downright lethal with celery.”

Lucilla threw her head back and laughed.

Jager pulled her closer. “So, what do you say? You think we’re a good match now, Lucilla?”

She sobered, holding his beloved face between her paws. “Oh, yes. Close to one hundred percent, I’d say.”

“And your family? Do you think I’ve managed to put their reservations to rest?” Though he smiled, there was tension around his eyes. Worry. Her answer meant that much to him.

She smiled largely. “Marry me and find out.”

“Lucilla.” Her name said in that husky, passionate way was all the answer she needed.

As for her family, they whooped and hollered, gathering around them in a circle to perform a bonding dance.

Oh, yeah. They were with them all right. Amazing what a little cross-species cooperation could do.

They continued to kiss as the Parakind gathered more wood and built the bonfire anew. This would be one Legion Halloween Dance for the history books.

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Tickle My Fantasy Anthology

The Ghost Shrink, the Accidental Gigolo & the Poltergeist

Accountant by Vivi Andrews

Carolina Wolf by Sela Carsen

Witches Anonymous by Misty Evans

It's not smart to piss off a poltergeist

The Ghost Shrink, the Accidental Gigolo & the Poltergeist Accountant

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A Tickle My Fantasy story.

It's bad enough to be sexually frustrated. But as a medium, it means until Lucy Cartwright gets some, she's doomed. Oh no, not to death. Worse. To nightly visitations by recently deceased, wanna-be Cassanovas without the bodies to back it up. Then a living, breathing fantasy arrives on her doorstep, and Lucy thinks her dry spell is at an end.

Much as he would like to be Lucy's personal gigolo, PI Jake Cox has a job to do. He's been sent to prevent her from getting laid until a particular horny phantom—and key witness in his mob investigation—pays her a visit. The real challenge? Keeping his own hands off Lucy long enough to get the job done.

Or the lonely, geeky ghost of a murdered mob accountant could rip a hole in the fabric of the universe...

Warning: This book contains cheesy pick-up lines, amateur stripteases, and voyeuristic intentions—all by dead men. And the living behave just as badly...

Enjoy the following excerpt from *The Ghost Shrink, the Accidental Gigolo & the Poltergeist Accountant*:

Lucy slipped past the eye-candy in her kitchen, set the timer and shoved the muffin tray into the oven. Then she heard him breathing. *He's allowed to breathe, dammit*, she told her hormones, but they weren't listening. They were already summoning up fantasies involving breathing. And panting. And gasping.

So Lucy gasped, and swore, as her hand brushed the hot oven rack. She snatched her hand out of the oven, mentally cursing her stupidity, and slammed the door closed.

"Did you burn yourself?" Jake demanded, stepping forward and immediately taking control.

He caught her wrist and held it up for inspection. Seeing the vivid red welt rising on the back her hand, he tugged her over to the sink and turned on the faucet with a single-minded economy of movement that was somehow indescribably hot.

Dear God, I'm doomed. Even his first aid is sexy.

He temperature-tested the tap with his own hand before thrusting her burn beneath the cool, running water. "Keep it there," he ordered, already on his way to the freezer. He was back a moment later, a clean dishtowel wrapped around a bundle of ice. "Here, let me see."

He gently took her wrist and drew her hand out of the water, cautiously inspecting the burn. His attention was so focused, so intent, as he brushed the soft skin around the burn with his fingertips, careful not to touch the wound itself. He bent and blew cool air on her hand before gently pressing the ice pack over it, his concentration complete. Lucy couldn't help but wonder if he would

bring that focus and intensity to everything he did. A delicious shiver ran down her spine.

“I know it’s cold,” he said, and Lucy was relieved he didn’t suspect the real reason for her shivering—she was embarrassed enough already. “You need to keep it on there for twenty minutes or so.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

Jake shook his head abruptly, rejecting her gratitude. “My fault. I shouldn’t have been distracting you while you were cooking.”

“You weren’t distracting me,” Lucy lied, knowing she was blushing. Again.

“No?” He arched his eyebrows skeptically then reached up to brush the back of one finger against her cheek. “You have flour all over your face.”

Lucy winced internally. Great. Now, not only was she as red as a turnip, she had the distinction of being a blotchy, flour-coated turnip with a propensity for burning herself. Oh yeah, he wasn’t going to be able to keep his hands off her now.

She waited for him to laugh at her. She waited for him to turn away, writing her off as ridiculous. She waited...until he tipped her chin up, forcing her to meet his eyes. Eyes that didn’t look mocking or superior, but rather curiously intent.

Oh my.

He brushed at the clinging flour on her cheeks, his calloused hands tentatively caressing. Lucy gazed up at him, trying to remember how to breathe, or think, or do anything other than stare

at him with her heart in her throat and her stomach down around her toes. They were standing near the oven, but Lucy had a feeling the burning sensation rippling along her skin had more to do with the mountain of solid muscle in front of her than the oven behind. He smiled gently, his hands still cradling her face. “Even without the flour, you look pretty damn edible,” he murmured, his voice low and intimate.

The world slowed and tightened until they were the only two people in it, and time was frozen in that thick moment when she *knew* he was about to kiss her. She stood paralyzed, hopeful, but not allowing herself to hope.

He bent toward her slowly, his gorgeous black eyes shuttered by thick black lashes. Lucy’s eyes fell closed and she held herself perfectly still, desperate, waiting. When his lips finally touched hers, it was like putting a spark to a fast-burning fuse. A fuse attached to a stick of dynamite.

Lucy dove recklessly into the kiss, arching against him shamelessly. The first tentative brush of his mouth instantly became an urgent, open-mouthed exchange. She wound her arms around his shoulders and he gripped her butt in both hands, lifting her to get a better angle on her mouth, a better angle of her body pressed against his.

As soon as her feet left the floor, Lucy looped her legs around his waist, locking her ankles at the small of his back. Jake took two steps across the kitchen and pinned her against the refrigerator, the cool, smooth surface teasing her exposed shoulder blades where the spaghetti straps of her sundress left them bare. Lucy gave a little

groan of pure, unadulterated lust, her hormones throwing an orgiastic party when Jake immediately echoed it. *Now, this is how a gigolo behaves.*

Jake grabbed the knees squeezing his waist with both hands and shifted her slightly for better access. The combination of his fingers teasing the sensitive skin at the backs of her knees and the sudden, grinding friction of his jeans where she wanted it the most was nearly enough to send her off right there. Lucy let her head fall back against the refrigerator, her eyes closing in anticipation of bliss as she sent a little prayer of thanks to the gods of nookie.

All it takes is a spark of Grrrrrl power to set the swamp on fire!

Carolina Wolf

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A Tickle My Fantasy story.

Librarian Debra Henry is boring. And she's okay with that. Really. It's not as if the teensy amount of witchcraft that flows in her veins is worth getting excited about. Yet someone—or something—thinks it's worth crawling out of the swamps to attack her. Those *somethings* are werewolves.

When one of them is hurt saving her, the least she can do is take him home and patch him up. Healing him stirs more than her senses. Maddox Moreau awakens the magic that sleeps in her blood. And suddenly, life's not quite so boring.

A wildlife manager at Congaree National Park by day, Maddox likes being the BWIS—Big Wolf In the Swamp. By night, he lets his wild side out to play lone wolf. At least until he meets the one woman who can share his soul. Perhaps it's best, though, if he holds off on sharing his preference for raw meat.

Rescuing her seals his fate—but only if he can protect her from a rogue of his kind. A werewolf with a nasty stalker streak...

Warning: This story contains hunky werewolves, librarian fetishes, Southern humor, smart-ass women and men who think that's sexy, magic, medieval legends, disco music and flatulent Boxers. (The dogs, not the underwear.)

Enjoy the following excerpt from *Carolina Wolf*:

Maddox hid a shudder of lust as he watched her eat. The woman was sex on a stick and she had no idea how she affected him.

Too bad she didn't trust him.

An acrid tinge of deception colored the air sometimes when they spoke. Mostly when they spoke about magic. Debra had power, but he couldn't quite figure out what kind. Tonight, he needed answers almost as much as he needed her in his arms.

She finished her last bite, her last sip of wine, and delicately dabbed her mouth with a napkin. Close enough. He took her hand and helped her slide off the stool.

"Before we get to the part where you have to lie to me about what you are and what you're protecting, I need to kiss you."

Her eyes widened and she tried to pull away, but he wrapped his arms around her. "I've been dying to do this all day long, Debra. I can't wait anymore."

Every dominant instinct he possessed, both as a wolf and as a man, surged forward and he bent her over his arm, his hand cradling the back of her head as he kissed her. Devoured her. Consumed her.

Her lips melted under his, the tang of the dry red wine lingering in her mouth. Maddox dipped his tongue inside to savor more and tasted the overwhelming flavor of passion. Debra came alive in his arms. Not content to be swept under him, she fought his lead, vying for control, and he relished the battle.

She hooked one leg around him. Her skirt was long and slim, preventing her from moving higher, so he slid his hand down and yanked up the fabric, bunching it around her hips so he could grab her thigh and pull her in tighter to his body.

Thigh-highs. She was wearing thigh-high stockings. With garters. His knees went weak. His erection turned into a painful throb and he groaned, pulling away from her mouth to nuzzle her neck.

“You’re killing me, pretty little Debra Henry.”

“Likewise, Mr. Moreau.” Her soft, sweet drawl ripped his heart right out of his chest, but her scent changed from the spice of lust to sharp regret. She hugged him, tucking her face into his shoulder. “I’m so sorry.” Her arms sagged and the weight of her remorse pulled at him like a millstone.

He slid her thigh back down his leg and adjusted her skirt. “Please tell me what it is. I can’t help you if you don’t tell me.”

“I can’t. I’m so sorry, but I just can’t. Telling you may put us in even more danger than we’re in now. It’s...complicated.”

“You’re a witch. I know. I smell magic on you, Debra. Sweet and sparkling. It’s like champagne. I know you’re protecting something and I figure it’s got to be pretty big if you’re not telling me, am I right?”

The hitch in her breath and the way she caught her lower lip in her teeth gave him the answer he’d already guessed.

“There are rules that have to be followed. It’s not my secret to tell.”

“I understand that, but we’ll have to deal with it sooner or later.” He nuzzled her cheek. “Maybe later.”

Despite the lie that stood between them, he knew her down in his bones. It was bad enough when he’d only wanted her, when his plan was to woo her gently, but in the face of the danger and the power that surrounded them, they were well past a slow courtship. Something bigger than both of them was moving them together and he didn’t want to fight it.

“I have this fantasy,” he said, letting his hand wander down over her hips.

“Do we have time for fantasies?” Her eyes glazed, her lips parted, and she reached up to kiss him again. He licked at her mouth.

“We’ll make time. This one should be easy for you. You’re perfect for it, in fact.” Her glasses had slid down to their customary spot and she looked at him over the rims. While getting her naked and spread was high on his priority list, Maddox still wanted to give her something she needed—a loving that was fun and lighthearted.

He spun her out on the tips of his fingers. “You’re the sexiest librarian I’ve ever seen. Sharp haircut, hot glasses. Pretty blouse.” He trailed a finger down the modest V-neck. “Tight skirt.” His other hand palmed her ass. “Your shoes are a little on the sensible side. Got any hooker heels?”

She chuckled, a husky sound that fired his blood. “You have a librarian fantasy?”

“Only if you’re the librarian.” He reached into her open tote bag and pulled out a paperback. A romance novel, its cover a subtle,

sensual twining of male and female limbs. He tossed it onto the floor behind her. Her head cocked in confusion.

“Oh, Miss Librarian. I dropped a book. Would you please bend over and pick it up for me?”

Debra eyed the book, then her lips quirked up in a sexy smile. Her hips rolled as she turned her back on him. Oh yeah. She was getting into it now. Rather than just leaning down for it, however, she bent at the knees and, spine straight, elegantly lowered herself to reach the book. Not quite what he had in mind, but he’d work with it.

Then she nailed him. Smooth and slow, her legs straightened. Her arm still touching the floor, her ass rose in front of him like a mirage out of the desert. Teasing. Taunting. Right about the time she began to lift her body, he stepped behind her, hugging her hips into his, savoring the slide of heat on heat. His cock was cushioned against those luscious cheeks as she stood fully into his hold, reaching back with her arm to pull his head down to hers.

His hands shook when he took the book from her and tossed it onto the couch. His arms wrapped around her waist as he nuzzled her neck.

“Why, sir, didn’t you want that book?”

“I don’t need to read love scenes, babe. Let’s go write one.”

*Can a bad witch go good in thirteen steps? Not if Lucifer has
his way with her!*

Witches Anonymous

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A Tickle My Fantasy story.

Amy Atwood is a witch. Not the harm-none kind...the Satan-worshipping, devil-made-me-do-it kind. But after catching Lucifer in a particularly wicked hex act with her goodie-two-shoes Wiccan sister, Amy does what every self-respecting witch would do. She pops a Dove chocolate in her mouth, ends her affair with the devil, and swears an oath never to use magic again.

She wants to be normal. Human. Even if it means no more fun—and she's looking for a nice, normal guy to complement her new lifestyle. And ice-cream-loving firefighter Adam Foster looks like perfect hero material.

Lucifer, however, isn't about to be nice about letting her go. Stalked by Satan, manipulated by the angel Gabriel—and surprised by Adam's true identity—Amy finds herself up to her black hat in trouble of Biblical proportions...

Warning: Welcome to temptation. Sexy Lucifer is going to enchant you. The original Adam is going to charm you. And the angel Gabriel is going to scare your socks off!

Enjoy the following excerpt from *Witches Anonymous*:

I woke from dreaming about Adam in his fire suit to the feel of a hot body next to mine. A body too big to be one of my cats, and much too hard. And then there was the hand cupping my breast through my Snoopy sleep shirt.

Frantically, I tried to clear the cobwebs out of my brain and get my bearings. Had Adam accepted my offer last night? Had we enjoyed more than a scoop of ice cream?

An image of him waving goodbye to me from his truck surfaced, and with it, a chill spread down my spine. With sudden clarity I knew who was sleeping in my bed. I jerked away from Lucifer, tumbling to the floor in my haste.

I have only one vice in life—lust. I lust for sinful men, dark chocolate and designer shoes. For ten years, Lucifer satisfied all my desires and then satisfied them some more.

The embodiment of lust, he made me choose bad over good, dark over light, hell over heaven. I simply couldn't resist his wicked ways. Until he slept with Emilia, that is. Just thinking about him touching her, kissing her, the same way he'd touched and kissed me made me shake with disgust. Betrayal was one thing. Betrayal with my sister...well, that was more hell than I bargained for.

He rose up and peered at me over the side of the bed, his hair mussed and his eyes full of enchanting lust. "Good morning, Amy. Dream of me?"

Since I no longer had protection spells keeping my apartment off limits to demons and other magical creatures, it was no surprise Luc had wandered in.

“What the hell are you doing?” I shouted at him, even though I knew exactly what the hell he was doing. He’d been seducing me for years. I was familiar with his guerilla sex tactics.

He ran a hand through his shoulder-length, blue-black hair, mussing it into an even sexier look. “Thought you might be lonely since your boyfriend left you high and dry.”

“He did not...” I broke off, knowing it was useless to explain anything to him. Pushing myself off the floor, I grabbed my robe and shoved my arms into the sleeves, pulling the belt tight. “Get out.”

Luc threw the covers back and walked buck naked across the floor toward me. “I made your favorite breakfast.”

On cue, the tantalizing smell of French toast wafted by me. Breakfast. Adam was picking me up for breakfast.

I glanced at the clock. The blue numbers read seven-forty. Crap. I had twenty minutes to shower, make up my face and do my hair, not to mention kick a naked man out of my apartment. A naked, *supernatural* demon-man.

Who was not so surprisingly well endowed.

Taking a deep breath, I racked my brain for a non-supernatural way to take care of him *and* me. “I’m getting in the shower. When I get out, in like two minutes, you’d better be gone. Understand?”

He scratched the stubble on his chin. His eyes glowed with lust. “I could scrub your back. Massage your scalp while I wash it with that new herbal shampoo you just bought.”

How did he know about my new shampoo? Obviously he’d been snooping while I wasn’t home. “You have to leave. Now.”

“How about a pedicure? Or a bubble bath instead of a shower? Remember the bubbles I produced for you last time?” He advanced on me with each suggestion and I shook my head as I stepped backwards. The heat pouring off him made me want to shed my robe and the thought of those crazy, pheromone-laced bubbles made sweat trickle between my breasts.

Sticking my hand out to stop his advances, I hit his sculpted chest. Energy zigzagged through my fingers and up my arm. “Stop it.”

But he didn’t stop. He pried my hand off his chest and kissed the tips of my fingers. Panicking, I jerked my hand away and ran for the bathroom. Throwing the door shut and twisting the lock, I leaned against the solid wood door and prayed. *Uh, God? Are you there? Your old arch enemy is at it again. I could some help here, your Godship. A little strength to resist the Devil?*

“Amy,” Luc murmured to me through the door. “Come back to bed. Your breakfast is getting cold.”

I shook my head adamantly, even though he couldn’t see me. “No.”

The door warmed under my hands. “I brought your favorite boysenberry syrup.”

Oh, curses. Every cell in my body tingled. Boysenberry syrup and the Devil. What woman could resist such temptation? *Come on, God. Cut me some slack here.*

“There’s fresh whipped cream.” His sexy smooth voice singsonged through the door. “You know what I want to do with that.”

In the mirror over the sink I could see my flushed face. My robe had fallen open and my nipples were rock hard. *Mercy*, my brain screamed. *Can you hear me, God? I'm crying*, mercy.

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