



BLAZING PENTACLE

EDEN RIVERS

Loose Id

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Chapter One

Moans rose above the fevered pitch of the wind, and the sound of blows, slaps, and muffled cries tore at Serena's senses. Flattening herself against the rocky soil, bits of sticks and pebbles biting into her stomach, she peered through the screen of wind-gnarled brush she hid behind. Forcing herself to breathe evenly, Serena used every meditative technique she'd learned over the past five years to slow her racing pulse and restrain her panic.

Horrified, she peered through the screen of tangled brush at the hellish scene beneath her. Five pairs of witches lay entangled in frantic embraces within the glowing boundaries of the giant pentacle, some of them already fucking. The otherworldly light that sealed the cursed circle cast violet shadows over the writhing bodies. Love, tenderness, and mercy held no place in this ritual.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Serena didn't recognize any of the witches within the eerie circle, but then, she hadn't expected to. She would have recognized the rogue witch, though. His conspicuous absence sent her pulse racing and left her knees weak, her relief was so profound. Serena suppressed a shudder. Whatever the purpose the violent storm rites served – and she'd bet her meager savings that the rogue witch had found a way to augment his power through the chaos raised by the storms – Jaimis's style hadn't changed. He'd been delegating his dirty work for almost as long as she could remember. To that end, he'd recruited the dark lords, witches so evil that "harm none" meant nothing to them. These dark lords would just as soon carry out a ruthless blood rite as cast a simple finding spell.

The three witches anchoring the rite in the center held long leather whips, which they brought down indiscriminately on the backs of their peers. Being near some of the most frightening witches on the planet dragged Serena back in time, toward memories of blinding terror. Fighting the inevitable, she pushed back further, to a time when a pair of strong arms held her so tight, it seemed nothing could hurt her. *Sweet, whispered*

endearments. A kiss brushed across her forehead. The salty scent of his skin and crushed grass beneath their backs. Sun warm on her bare skin...

Below her, someone screamed, shrill and piercing, and as the reassuring image shattered, fear catapulted her headlong into her own personal hell. *Sun splintered through the windowpanes, playing across the floor in prismatic patterns. The cat batted a toy mouse across the floor, and she laughed as it pounced...but the sound died partway in her throat. Air left her lungs in a sharp whoosh. "No!" Too far away to do anything, helpless, she gasped for air as she felt the death spell engulf the man she loved. The dark magic sucked up all the air, until he lay gasping on the ground. Suffocating. Her lungs burned, and bursts of light exploded behind her closed eyelids. She felt her own nails raking at her skin, clawing to free herself from the horror. Just before passing out, she felt him die as surely as if she'd been beside him, cradling him in her arms.*

Given the strength of the psychic link they'd shared, the shattering of their bond had all but ripped her to pieces, and a part of her had died with him. Forcing her eyes open, Serena wrapped her fear around her like a cloak. Because that fear, that loathing and dread of magic she'd carried with her from that moment forward, had fostered in her a unique gift—the ability to quell other witches' spells. *No other witch can do what I can. No one else can drain away the force of the dark lords' magic, protecting those in the path of the storms. No one else can stop the dark lords' storm rites, without risking the same horrific fate...*

Another scream tugged her out of her thoughts. Several sharp whip cracks followed the desperate shriek, and she ground her teeth and clenched her fists so hard, her nails dug into her palms. Though she'd sought higher ground to avoid detection, she could almost smell the sweat, blood, and fear in the deepening twilight. The pain and anger in the scene unfolding below her took on a palpable presence. Wind tore at her hair as the storm gathered force, and she pushed the tangled mass away from her eyes as the first fat drops of rain hit her cheeks. Unaccustomed to the autumn chill, she shivered, wishing she'd worn a jacket over her denim shirt.

She'd lost vital time locating the site of the dark magic rite. She'd torn along the rural roads in her battered Honda as the wind rose, while her instincts screamed for her to turn around and make the three-thousand-mile journey back home to San Francisco, as far away as possible from the New England chill, dark lords, warped magic, and killer storms. Now, with the perverse weather-working spell pulsing around her, she worried that she might be too late. What if the power proved too strong for her to ground at this stage in the rite? What if it burned through her and seared away her mind, leaving a hollowed-out shell?

Pull it together, Rena. No point in being here if I'm too paralyzed to use my freakish knack for dissipating other witches' magic. Could anything be more godsdamned ironic? I'm so fucking terrified of the teeniest bit of power, that I can't even kindle a glow sphere for light. But I'm the only fucking one who can make the dark lords' energy lie down and be still, who can make it dissipate back into the earth.

Serena shifted in search of a more comfortable position, moving with agonizing precision so as not to make a sound. Something as small as a pebble knocked off the ledge could be enough to alert the witches below to her presence, their senses heightened by the rush of energy they'd channeled. Right now, she'd give anything to be anywhere, absolutely *anywhere*, but here. With every moan and utterance from the ritual circle, the little hairs on the back of her neck stood on end, and goose bumps covered more of her body.

So what was I supposed to do? Ignore the pull to cancel out power so freaking evil, it's already killed a few fishermen and enough marine mammals to make national news...and leave me weeping over the morning paper? Not an option. The fucking power pulled at me from three thousand miles away, begging to be put to rest. So here I am, in the middle of hell, scared shitless, and more likely than not to get myself killed. From marine biology student to opponent of the dark lords in just a few terrifying steps. She shuddered as she contemplated her collision course with hell, facing stark perversions of the magic she'd worked so hard to avoid.

She ought to have her head examined. But with a force she couldn't ignore, all the way across the country, safely tucked away in her San Francisco apartment, she'd felt the dark lords' power swell. The onslaught of their magic-induced, hurricane-force winds pounding the small Massachusetts towns along Cape Ann hammered at her in a series of psychic blows. She couldn't *not* do everything possible to stop it. Because along with her self-protective ability to quash spells came a king-size heaping of *compulsion* to cancel out destructive magic. She hadn't asked for the ability to negate spells. And she fucking hated the fact that she couldn't ignore the summons to put a halt to this dark magic.

Lucky me.

If she managed to stop this latest storm rite without being discovered, maybe she'd spare some people the same kind of hell that Scott... *Nope, not going to go there.* Swallowing hard, Serena opened herself up and took hold of the power emanating off the dark lords. Avoiding the torrent at the center of the rite, she focused on the peripheral energy. With a series of deep breaths, she made herself into a willing channel and coaxed the energy back toward the earth, grounding the black magic under layers of soil and rock.

Her skin stung as if she'd bathed in acid, and the mother of all migraines exploded along the left side of her head. But the small piece of power she'd drawn away from the rite sank into the earth, taking the edge off the howling winds. To succeed, she'd need to let them have their storm. Hell, she didn't have any illusions that she could negate an entire pentacle rite—not without dying in the process. But if she played this right, the winds would fall short of hurricane force, waterspouts wouldn't play havoc with the lobster boats and marine wildlife, and the rogue witches would think the failure to create greater devastation lay in their own inadequacy.

As she reached outward, drawing tendrils of the feral power into herself and sending it earthward, taming the rising chaos, she felt herself pulled toward the center

of the ritual. On some level, she mastered her body and will, keeping her breathing steady as she continued to siphon off power. But as lust, fury, and fear spread through the clearing beneath her like some fierce, hungry beast, she felt herself tugged loose from her moorings.

No longer glimpsing the action through a screen of tangled bushes and saplings, her perspective shifted, as if she hovered, airborne, over the glowing pentacle the witches had etched in the soil. Torn free of her body, she became one with the energy she sought to direct, swirling above the rite in a cloud of frenzied energy. To negate a portion of the magic, she'd meshed with the fierce rush of power so completely, she'd gained a dizzying bird's-eye view of the horrors below.

As she found herself caught up in the swell of emotions—hate, fear, lust, anger, avarice—she clung to the last vestiges of her separateness. *Keep breathing. In. Out. I can survive this. The worst of the pain's not my own. I'm not part of the gore spattering the earth. The evil spinning through me can't claim me, can't...* Agony ripped through her, fiery tendrils tearing across her flesh. *Not real...* She panted. *Not my skin being shredded.*

The montage of erotic horrors scalded her senses, and the coppery scent of blood mixed with the smell of wet earth and fallen leaves left her feeling ill. Bent on anarchy, the dark lords fed on suffering and chaos. Serena felt the energy rise with each strangled cry, each drop of blood that fell with the pounding rain. As if the bite of the anchors' whips on bare flesh wasn't enough, each crack of the whip was followed by a spray of red droplets and choked cries. It seemed the witches were intent on torturing their partners to add to the fury.

Goddess help her, one of the witches couldn't be more than sixteen. Her long, pale hair, rain drenched and splattered with mud, reminded Serena of her sister. As the man paired with the girl—she was hardly old enough to claim womanhood—slapped her hard enough to send her head reeling back, her neck arched at an impossible angle, Serena wanted to cradle the poor thing in her arms. Never mind that the teen had given herself to evil. Or that Serena would be ripped to shreds by the dark lords. When the girl's partner grabbed her breast and twisted until she screamed, Serena bit her lip until she tasted blood.

Someday, Jaimis, I will see you dead! For this, and for every other horror you've commanded or committed! Her fury overrode common sense, and her anger swelled stronger than fear. Without the rogue witch, there'd be no dark lords. No death rites. No luring decent witches onto the path of darkness.

As the girl screamed again, Serena cursed the rogue witch with the full force of her will. Cursed him for Scott's death five years ago at the hands of his dark lords. Cursed him for the girl's loss of innocence. Cursed him for every drop of blood he'd spilled in his insane pursuit of greater and more fearsome power.

Channeling her fury with a renewed focus, Serena rode the currents of energy, whirling closer to the focal point of the action as she grounded larger portions of magic and drained the rite of its force. Horrified, she watched a woman rake her nails along a man's back until his flesh bore deep gouges. The blood glistened as it formed thick

rivulets with the rain and ran down his sides, more black than red in the violet light of the pentacle spell.

The violence here made a mockery of everything she knew about the act of love, a perversion of every remembered caress, every satisfied cry, every passionate kiss she'd ever tasted in the arms of her lovers. Her mind balked, refusing to recognize the frenzy below as sex. Instead, it was power gone wild. Evil manifesting itself in warped magic. That the dark lords would twist something sacred, use the act of coupling to raise death magic... She shivered and blinked back tears.

When a man wrapped his hands around another man's neck, choking him until his face turned red and then pale in the flickering light of the pentacle, Serena choked back a scream. She struggled against the vortex of memory, trying not to see Scott's face superimposed on the man's oxygen-starved features. As the man gasped for air underneath the weight of his partner's body, he smiled a sickly grin. Her mind balked at the spectacle of witches willing to abuse themselves and each other like this in order to summon chaos magic.

She couldn't stop shaking as she wondered if the man would die here. She realized with a sinking heart that there was nowhere to run for help – no one capable of rendering aid. Thousands of miles from home, she didn't know a soul in northern Massachusetts. The secluded clearing in the middle of godsdamned nowhere made summoning police a useless fantasy – not that she was foolish enough to call humans into a nest of witches hell-bent on using their power for destructive purposes.

Just when she thought the man couldn't possibly survive another moment without air, the victim's partner removed his hands from his neck and dug his fingers into the panting witch's shoulders. Even as she hovered formless above the rite, tossed by the power streaming through her as if she were no more than a leaf on the wind, on some level, she retained enough connection with her body to feel the warmth of tears on her cheeks. Not for the dark lord who'd just escaped death, but for Scott, who hadn't been so lucky.

Her skin sizzled as she forced more and more power earthward, and the freak show continued. To the left, a woman sat astride her partner, her dark hair rain drenched in the fading light, rising and falling to drive the man's cock deep inside her. With long, lacquered nails she dug at the flesh around his right nipple, and with her other hand she reached behind her, feeling around until she found his balls. *No!* Helpless to stop it, Serena watched as lines of blood appeared along the man's sac as his partner raked her nails along the paper-thin flesh, as if she were peeling the skin from an orange.

She tasted the metallic tang of blood again as she bit down on her lip in a desperate attempt to keep silent. Beyond panic, she fought the rush of power that threatened to strangle her before she could direct it earthward.

Hold it together, Serena! Fall apart now, and you're as good as dead! If she cried out, the dark lords would be on her like a pack of wolves. They'd drag her into the rite and shred her limb from limb, adding her death cries to the chaos they raised. Their blood

rites had claimed so many victims in the past several years that Serena's stomach churned at the thought of the carnage. An exchange of blood, of witches' lives, for power.

Hell, what made me think being able to nullify spells would be enough to take on these freaks...and walk out of here alive? One thing she knew for sure. She didn't want to die, shivering in her rain-drenched jeans and denim shirt, with her chin pressed into the muddy soil. Unable to disengage while raw energy coursed through her on its way into the earth, she fought to remain conscious.

Too much! Fuck! Too much! Blinding pain shot through her, the physical part of her, anyway. Her magical self still rode the vortex of power above the rite, unable to pull free, unable to look away. As she watched a man drive his fist deep inside a woman's pussy, flesh stretched impossibly tight around the man's wrist, the unthinkable happened.

Arrows of heat flicked through her belly, driving darts of pleasure toward her clit. *No. Holy fuck, no!* Beyond bearing, desire welled deep inside her, stiffening her nipples where her flesh pressed against her sodden bra, pressing the swollen peak of her clit against her soaked panties and jeans. *Oh goddess, no!*

Fierce need tore her away from where she hovered formless above the rite and catapulted her back into her body. Serena rocked against the packed soil, seeking relief in movement and friction. As she peered through the sheets of rain and wind-thrashed branches, she experienced a moment of vertigo as she observed the ritual from the hillside above the clearing rather than from her disembodied vantage point directly above the spectacle.

But the flashes of shadowy movement—arms raised to wield whips, fists raised to punch or slap, bodies twisting together in a mix of pain and ecstasy—still conveyed the range of deviant acts unfolding below. Worse, as the power seeped through her into the earth, it tugged at her flesh like a caress, interweaving desire with the relentless pain.

No longer able to limit herself to squirming and rocking against the earth, she arched her back and slid her hand under her mound, desperate for counterpressure. But no matter how hard she rubbed against the sodden denim, release eluded her. She whimpered against the onslaught of lust.

Freeing the snap of her jeans, she wedged her hand under the soaking cloth, sliding her fingers beneath the soaked fabric of her panties until she found her clit. Frantic moans rose from the clearing as a pair of dark lords achieved climax, but her own panicked caresses did nothing to drive her closer to relief. The disturbing image of the man's fist buried deep inside the witch he'd been paired with spun through her thoughts, distracting her as she sought to maintain control of the threads of magic she fought to neutralize.

Panting against the power clawing at her mind and the searing need that tore through her belly, she wondered again if she'd die here. The rite should be nearing a close, judging by the increasing frenzy of orgasmic cries. But the intensity threatened to

drown her. With wind tearing at her hair and shirt, and lightning punctuating the darkness in blinding bursts, she had no way of knowing if she'd achieved her goal of sloughing off enough of the magic to weaken the storm.

As she struggled to disengage from the energy, it dug its claws into her and shook her like a limp rag. *Is this it? Am I really going to die here?* Somewhere in the distance, she heard something like a gunshot. *Hunters? Or just a branch cracking in the wind?*

Serena thought of her sister and nephew as blackness closed in, and the prospect of never seeing them again made her struggle harder to free herself from the chaos. Time stretched into an endless wash of red, blinding hurt, but no matter how hard she fought, she couldn't break free. Her body became a passive vessel, a conduit between the power and the welcoming earth.

As icy claws of energy ripped through her limbs, tearing her apart, she came so hard, she moaned aloud, beyond caring if the dark lords heard and found her, or if they used her body for their own purposes.

* * * * *

Keeping low, Joel crept through the wet underbrush toward the clearing. As far as he could tell, the dark lords had cleared out soon after Trey fired a few warning shots. His friend had hunted these woods since he was a boy, and Trey considered his shotgun something of a security blanket. Good thing, too, since witches wouldn't touch the damn things. Until they figured out what in the blessed world Jaimis was up to, their current plans depended on convincing the dark lords these woods were filled with good ol' boys who liked to hunt raccoons at odd hours. At some point, the group of witches and humans Joel was gathering to fight the dark lords would be strong enough for a direct confrontation. But not yet.

For now, they relied on the convenient fact that Jaimis didn't seem to want strangers, whether witch or human, stumbling across his dark lords' rites. Tough part was locating the dark lords' circles, located so deep in the woods, they had to leave their cars and hike in on old deer paths. Once their scouts pinpointed the location, a few nearby shots generally did the trick, chasing off the assholes before they completed the storm rites.

But the times they failed to find the pentacle rites in time... Joel dug the toe of his boot into the earth and clenched his jaw. He knew a couple of the fishermen who'd drowned, not to mention the families who'd lost homes. And he'd be damned if he'd let Jaimis keep fucking with the people of Little Harbor and the nearby towns.

Joel tensed as branches thrashed against each other in the wind, letting loose a sharp series of cracking noises. At the top of his list of worries right now was whether they'd run across any of the departing witches, because if they did, they could still end up on the wrong end of some lethal spells. This soon after a chaos rite, their power would be magnified well above normal levels. As a group, the dark lords were lethal under the best of circumstances. But after a rite powerful enough to raise gales that

capsized boats and wrecked houses, he wouldn't want to stumble across even one of them, punch-drunk from the energy rush. Never mind the fact that his own abilities outmatched most witches'.

Trey scooted up next to Joel, pushing through the branches half blocking the overgrown deer path. They moved without a glow sphere or flashlight to guide them, relying on flashes of lightning to expose anyone who might be hiding in the maze of trees. His witch's night vision provided a decent view of Trey's face, his forehead creased with wariness as he scanned the area for signs of movement. Trey's jacket collar had been turned up against his neck to keep the rain out, yet the rain still plastered his sandy blond hair into a dark mass against his skull. Every time the sky lit up, Trey's eyes flashed dazzling blue with the reflected light.

Why couldn't you be a witch, friend of mine? Unable to resist the urge, he reached out and touched Trey's wrist, ostensibly to get his attention. "Looks like they're gone. Blessed good thing they don't want to be caught out here. Wouldn't want to risk a confrontation yet—not until we've got the people from Seal's Haunt ready to fight alongside us. Gods, if anyone had told me a few months ago I'd be organizing something resembling a militia..."

Trey chuckled, low and deep, and Joel shivered at the disturbance. Never mind the rumble of thunder, the wind, and the slash of rain against the trees, the sound seemed to echo through the wilderness. Or maybe the problem didn't have anything to do with their need to stay hidden. Maybe the real problem lay in his hopeless reaction—like Pavlov's fucking dog salivating over food—to the warm rumble of his business partner's laugh.

Right, not the fucking time to dwell on that. Bless it, it's not like he'd ever been able to ignore Trey's presence in his life. Working together like they did, Trey thought nothing of tugging off his shirt and revealing his hard, suntanned chest as they put up a wall, rewired a house on a hot day, or hammered shingles onto a roof. But lately, the sense that events were rushing headlong into some kind of fucking disaster made him want to crawl under Trey's skin and hide, safe in his arms.

Give it up. Trey's human. Human, as in not prone to crawling into bed with someone when the swell of power turns his head, regardless of the person's sex. Hell, he's my best friend and business partner besides. So not going to happen.

"May as well get on with this and head back before it gets any colder and we start collecting ice. Feels more like late November than September tonight." Trey swiped his hand across his eyes to clear away the rain. "Let's get this over with."

Times like this, he'd give his left nut for his friend to be able to touch his thoughts and communicate without risking drawing attention to their presence. But then, if Trey were a witch, chances were he wouldn't have been lugging along the damn shotgun that frightened off the dark lords. Joel nodded and started slogging through the mud toward the top of the ridge where they'd have an unobstructed vantage point of the abandoned—*Please, gods, let it be abandoned*—ritual ground.

By the time they reached the top, cold rain had also seeped under the collar of his waterproof jacket and slicked his shirt to his back. His socks had long since soaked through where rain had worked its way into his hiking boots. And he'd give anything for a blessed cup of coffee.

"Gone." Satisfied that his eyes confirmed what his senses insisted was true, Joel stared down at the churned and trampled mud in the clearing. Lightning rippled in wide sheets between the clouds, illuminating sickly dark stains on the flattened weeds below.

"Holy shit." Air hissed through Trey's teeth as lightning flashed again, glinting off various pieces of metal abandoned below. He swiped his hand across his face to shove his dripping hair away from his eyes. "I recognize the knives, but what the fuck...?"

"Sex toys. And that's a bullwhip draped over the fallen log over there." Fighting nausea, Joel scanned the surrounding area for a body. As far as he and the other witches from Little Harbor could tell, the dark lords had found something other than blood rites to augment their power, but with enough blood coating the clearing that they could see it from here every time the sky lit up...

"Doesn't seem to have been a blood sacrifice." Trey looked around the clearing. "No signs of a body left behind." The edge to Trey's voice hinted at a mix of fury and fear. "Unless they dragged one with them. And I don't think they had time, quick as they cleared out after I fired off those few shots. They made so much fucking noise running headlong through the forest, I could have tracked them blindfolded."

Out of the corner of his eye, Joel thought he caught a furtive movement past the tree line, and he motioned to get Trey's attention. For the next several minutes, the two of them stared so hard into the forest, the trees started to look like crazed dark lords with each flash of lightning. His heart pounded out a tense rhythm against his ribs.

No point waiting around any longer. Whatever he saw, it probably belonged there. A deer, a black bear, or simply a fallen branch. Pointing to the left, Joel started picking his way along the edge of the ridge. The low arc of hills formed a rough horseshoe around the clearing. Taking the roundabout way would give him a chance to watch for signs of life awhile longer before heading back toward the old fire access road, where they'd left Trey's Land Rover. Of course, the higher ground exposed them to the full brunt of the storm. Misery didn't begin to describe the feel of icy rain pelting his face and neck, and the wind cutting through his soaked clothes.

"Oh fuck!" Trey's voice split the night like a warning siren, and Joel wondered what could have jolted the seasoned tracker into revealing their location to whoever might be lurking in the woods.

As Trey knelt down by a brushy hollow, his broad shoulders hunched against the wind, Joel came over and crouched beside him. Scooting closer, he wished he dared risk a glow sphere. "Oh fuck." He kept his voice to a whisper, but he felt like screaming until he rocked the blessed hills.

Trey reached up to check the woman's pulse, moving aside her soaking-wet hair to touch her neck. "Blood rite? Oh my God, she's still alive!"

Right, no point being quiet now that they'd already alerted every badass in the area to their presence. Not like Trey to forget himself and call out like that. Stumbling across the half-dead woman had rattled his friend beyond his usual caution. Joel stared down at the crumpled form. Even with one side of her face pressed against the earth, and the other spattered with mud, he could tell she was beautiful. Each flash of lightning shone on wavy dark hair, slicked down against her face and shoulders. Her full lips were parted, as if she'd been about to speak.

"Not a blood rite." Joel knelt beside the woman, leaning over her as he tried to shield her face from the driving rain. "Never heard of the dark lords allowing one of their victims to live. And every bit of intelligence we've got indicates Jaimis has found some other way to enhance his powers." *Something to do with the energy from the storms, if my gut instinct proves true.*

"Jesus, how'd someone so young get mixed up with this lot? She looks like the freakin' girl next door." Trey rolled the woman gently onto her back and took off his jacket to cover her chest and belly. "Think she's one of the bad guys?"

Joel had been wondering the same thing, but it made no sense to find her here, in a spot where she would have been able to observe the rite without being caught. With the next flash of sheet lightning, he tried to make sense of the fact that she'd shoved her hand down her pants. "Look at that."

Trey shook his head and tugged her hand free of the front of her jeans, then pulled the zipper back into place. "Didn't seem decent, leaving her like that. Fuck, you think she stumbled across the twisted little sexfest down there and decided to get off as she watched?"

"Not sure what to think, but I know she's not going to make it if we leave her out here in the freezing rain all night. No choice but to bring her back with us and ask questions later—assuming she pulls through." At the very least, she'd be at risk for pneumonia, wearing no more than jeans and a shirt with the rain pounding down like it was and temperatures dropping fast. If it got much colder, they'd see the season's first snow flurries.

Careful not to hurt her, Joel felt along her skull for signs of injuries, but no bumps or cuts hinted at why she was unconscious. He checked her arms and legs for fractures, but everything seemed to be in working order. "No signs of anything broken. I think it's safe to move her. It sure as hell won't do her any good to lie out here much longer."

Finding her with her hand tucked inside her pants made him wonder if she'd been involved in the rite somehow. Whether as an innocent bystander or a dark lord was anyone's guess. Bless it, he couldn't even make the call—witch or human? If she had had even a hint of an aura around her, he'd assume she'd been caught in the backlash of magic surrounding the rite, helpless against the sexual tones of the dark lords' power. But she lacked any trace of energy shimmering around her limp body. Though, of

course, that could have something to do with whatever trauma had rendered her unconscious.

“Can’t imagine she’d be human, messing around out here near the dark lords.” Trey set down his shotgun, then stood and hoisted the woman into a fireman’s carry. His body hard and toned from years of construction work, he moved with an ease that made the unconscious woman appear weightless, never mind she must be at least five feet seven and the sturdy lines of her shoulders and legs ran more toward athletic than delicate. “Maybe she’s a witch, and she’s injured badly enough that she can’t kick out any energy to aid healing.”

For a human, Trey possessed an uncanny ability to mirror Joel’s train of thought. Most likely, his psychic tendencies were part of what made him all but irresistible. Never mind that he wasn’t a witch, power called power – and Trey had his own set of gifts. Talents Joel found as every bit as seductive as a witch’s spells. “You know too damn much for a guy whose best attempt at magic is pulling a coin from behind your ear to amuse your nieces.” When a bolt of lightning hit so close that the thunder came almost simultaneously, shaking the ground beneath his feet, Joel spotted an unmistakable form near the tree line. “Fuck, don’t look now, but we’ve got company.”

Some days are just destined to turn to shit. Joel ran through their options and found them lacking. “Get her back to the Land Rover and take her back to Little Harbor. I’ll find my own way back. If you come across anyone, make sure to let them know you’re both human. Even this crowd’s likely to think twice before using spells against people with no magic of their own. Too much risk in revealing themselves. And the last thing Jaimis wants is for his dark lords to leave a trail of corpses pointing back his way...when he doesn’t even gain a power transfer, like he would if they killed a witch.” *Cheerful thought, that.*

Joel tracked the path of movement across the clearing with his eyes. “I’m going to go see what our visitor wants. Maybe just another witch out here keeping tabs on the troublemakers.” *Like hell. But he could always hope.*

“And if she’s a witch?” Trey shifted the woman’s limp form across his shoulder. “Possibly one of theirs, run off from the rite when it got either too kinky or too violent for her?”

“Then hope like hell you don’t run across any dark lords – and that she doesn’t wake up before you get her back so the Little Harbor witches can keep an eye on her.” Joel picked up the gun Trey had set down when he hoisted the woman and slid it into his friend’s free hand. “Hate these damn things, but it’ll improve your odds. Move fast, and good luck.”

Joel grasped Trey’s shoulder for a moment, then took off at a jog, relying on a mix of night vision and lightning to show him the way. Heading full tilt toward where he’d seen the most recent signs of movement, he wondered if he might be plunging headlong into a death spell. *Only one fucking way to find out.*

If nothing else, he'd draw attention away from Trey and give him a chance to get the woman to safety. Bless it if he could say why that seemed so important, but his instincts insisted that saving her might tilt the balance of this little war in their favor. *In the name of the Horned God, it'd be fucking helpful if my hunches came with a bit more information.*

As he scrambled down the rocky slope toward the clearing, a green orb of light moved through the trees. Whoever was out there didn't give a damn if Joel saw the glow sphere. Which pretty much guaranteed someone had identified him as a witch—and wanted to get his attention.

Chances were the witch out in the open meant to distract him while a handful of other dark lords planned a stealth attack. The back of his neck prickled as he reached flat ground and took off into the trees. Branches slapped his face and neck as he ran, and he knew he risked breaking a leg plowing through the woods at this speed at night. But if he played this right, he could double around and meet up with one of the other Little Harbor witches farther down the access road, drawing his pursuer far enough north to let Trey drive off unnoticed.

By now, he had no doubt he was being followed. Even with the thunder, he could hear sticks snapping behind him. Unable to resist the urge to glance back over his shoulder, he caught his foot on a fallen branch and pitched forward onto his face. Spitting out a mouthful of mud, he scrambled to his hands and knees, sucking in big gulps of air.

As he staggered to his feet, favoring his left ankle, a knife lodged into a tree just to his left with an ominous *thunk*. *Shit, shit, and again shit.*

"Sucks to be outmatched, doesn't it?" The youthful voice sounded scornful rather than threatening, and a burst of laughter followed the wisecrack. "Read the message, asshole."

As Joel scrambled sideways, seeking shelter in the underbrush, a chorus of breaking branches and scattering stones marked the man's passage back the way he'd come. Leave it to the dark lords to fuck with his pride. Evidently he didn't present enough of a threat to merit anything more than derisive catcalls from a witch who'd sounded young enough to be sporting more pimples than stubble, and more bravado than dark magic.

Once he'd verified that the knife embedded in the bark of a scrubby pine didn't have any spells attached, he removed the plastic-wrapped packet taped to the handle and shoved it into his pocket. Whatever message it contained would have to wait. If he hurried—and didn't come across any more dark lords lingering in the woods—he should be able to travel fast enough to catch up with Trey. An unconscious passenger slowed a man down more than a twisted ankle—he hoped.

Chapter Two

"...not a witch, as far as I can tell. Though I'll admit, her body's reacting like that of a witch who's overextended the limits of her power. Can't begin to figure out what's wrong with her. No obvious injuries. No sign of illness, other than the fact that she's flushed and feverish."

The woman's voice droned on, and Serena lay stone still, trying to make sense of her surroundings. A blanket covered her legs, and shirtsleeves draped down past her knuckles – not her own clothes, though the cotton felt soft against her overheated skin. Beneath the blanket, her legs were bare.

Light flickered behind her closed eyelids, green, violet, and yellow. Most likely, the odd light show went along with the blinding headache, not to mention the pain that shot from the base of her skull down to her tailbone. As nausea warred with her struggle to feign sleep, she remembered a haze of pain, then blackness. No mud on her skin now, and her hair smelled like herbal shampoo. Someone must have bathed her while she was out cold. That thought, more than anything, spurred her rising panic.

"If we call a doctor, and it turns out she's a witch..." A man's voice, deep and soothing.

"I know. We can't risk it until we're sure." The woman sounded energetic and self-assured, though elderly. "If we had a psychic healer available, no doubt they'd be able to sort out whether she's witch or human, but as it is, we'll have to wait until she regains consciousness and ask her."

Witches. If she'd landed in a nest of dark lords, she'd be better off unconscious. Damn, I'd be better off dead.

"Witch or no, if she had something to do with that rite in the woods..." The man trailed off as a door clicked open, and despite her best efforts to fake unconsciousness, Serena moved her head a fraction of an inch toward the sound of footsteps.

“She’s coming around. Look, her eyes are moving toward noises.”

The man with the soothing voice rested his palm on her forehead, callused and warm against her skin. Never mind the gentleness of his touch, the contact burned through her like a prairie fire, and she moaned under her breath. She wanted the hand gone, and at the same time wanted to feel the touch on her belly, on her thighs... As scenes from the dark rite flooded back into the realm of memory, she winced, struggling to block out the disgusting images. Though the hand pulled away after a moment, the riot of horrifying mental snapshots remained.

Discomfort gave way to pain, then desperation. “Please, help me.”

Serena forced her sleep-crusted eyes open and swallowed hard against the confusion of blurred images. She lay in a large bed, the only piece of furniture other than a white-painted dresser in a large room with white walls and wood floors. The bright light shining in through the window set the hour at sometime past noon.

Of the three people in the room, the man who stood closest captured her attention. Tall, lean, and muscled like someone who worked with his hands, he looked like he’d be more at home holding a hammer or saw than standing at her bedside. *Fucking gorgeous*. But when a faint hint of violet energy flashed around him, her heartbeat sped up, and her palms started to sweat.

Spots flashed in her peripheral vision, and her headache tightened its hold. Blinking against the light, she took in the satiny dark curls brushing his shoulders, his sculpted cheekbones, honey brown skin...and an expression filled with a mix of concern and mistrust which drew his otherwise perfect features into a stark scowl. Every nerve tingled as she waited to find out what he and the others had planned for her.

“We’d like to help, but we’re not sure how.” The elderly woman sat in a chair beside the bed. The telltale flicker of her aura, soft, buttery yellow, identified her as a witch as well.

Two against one – and I don’t use my fucking magic. How’s that for crappy odds?

As slowly as witches aged, the woman must be damn near ancient to have earned the sun-weathered skin and wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, not to mention the head of striking white hair. Her simple striped shirt and jeans contrasted starkly with the air of authority she projected. *Dark lords don’t recruit elderly witches, do they?*

Despite the feverish state of her body, that thought sent a chill directly through her soul. If they’d captured her after the rite...

“My name’s Mel.” The woman held out a cup. “Now let’s see if we can get you more comfortable. For starters, do you think you could handle a sip of water?”

Her tongue felt like dried leather, and she’d give anything to quench the fire racing across her skin, but she had no idea who these people were. They could drug her, poison her...

“You’re safe here. You have my word.” The gorgeous guy who’d had his hand on her forehead a few minutes ago moved around the bed to stand near Mel, and Serena

blinked as she tried to bring him into focus. "I'm Joel. And that's Trey." Joel inclined his head toward the sandy-haired man leaning against the wall. Never mind his relaxed stance, Trey regarded her with wary scrutiny, and in a gesture that felt almost protective, Joel leaned down and touched her forehead again. "Mel's right, we just want to help. Unless you mean us harm, no one's going to bother you."

As if I could hurt a fly, in my current state. She stared at Joel until her vision presented her with a cohesive image rather than scattered bits of color, shape, and light. His warm brown eyes didn't reflect so much as a flicker of ill intent, and his smile seemed genuine. Though a soft haze of violet flickered around him, he didn't seem to present an immediate threat. As he took the cup from Mel and slid his hand between the pillow and the back of her neck, lifting her head a couple of inches, the stinging sensation increased tenfold where he touched her.

"So hot...I'm burning up." Desperate, she accepted the cup he pressed to her lips and sipped at the cool water.

"Child, tell us, are you...one of us?" Mel laid her palm across Serena's forehead, as if testing for fever. "We can't help you unless we understand your needs."

Serena blinked, and she didn't have to work very hard to adopt an expression of dazed confusion. *If they can't peg me as a witch with my powers tamped down tight and weak from lack of use, best to keep it that way.* Even if they were working with the dark lords, a human would be useless to them. Serena gave silent thanks for years of self-discipline and her rock-solid determination to live without magic.

"You mean a New Englander? No, I'm from California. Just visiting."

Stupid, stupid, stupid! As soon as she saw Joel's eyebrow rise in response to her assertion, she knew she'd made a fatal error. Fuck, there were at least two witches in the room. She hadn't come to a decision regarding Trey, all blond, blue-eyed innocence, his broad shoulders stretching the seams of his denim jacket. But even if he was human, Mel and Joel possessed a witch's innate sense of honesty – and would have instantly picked up on her attempt to dissemble.

"So you're not...*a New Englander*, then." The man's voice held a hint of amusement interspersed with the irony, and after he lowered her head back to the pillow and set the cup down on a low table beside the bed, he stroked her hair away from her face.

The touch awoke a riot of need, and Serena curled in on herself, clutching her stomach as she whimpered against the unbearable heat. "Dying! Help me."

"I've never seen anything..."

"...not that warm, fever's not high enough to..."

"...a magical backlash, assuming she's a witch. But no visible aura to speak of."

"Doesn't make sense..."

"Please, help me!" Licks of fire raced from her belly to the tender skin of her inner thighs, and her breasts felt impossibly swollen and heavy. Her throat constricted, too

narrow to take in enough air, a fact that hurtled her directly into the panic zone. Any second she'd lapse into flashbacks of Scott's death. *No! Breathe in...out. One shallow breath after another. Just don't panic. Not now. Not here. Don't. Fucking. Panic.*

"Right. No more fucking around. Form a glow sphere, now! This has got to be some sort of magical backlash." The man's hands framed her face, cupping her chin in his palms, and she felt his power calling to her own. "If you're not a witch, I'll... Never mind—just vent the pent-up power, *now!*"

"Noooooooooo!" As the pressure mounted, she rocked her hips helplessly, seeking counterpressure. "Make it stop!"

"Everyone out!" Joel's tone left no room for argument. "I'm afraid we'll lose her if I can't call her power to the surface and help her get rid of the leftover energy from whatever spells she used up on the ridge last night."

"What do you plan to...?" Mel's voice trailed off, and she frowned, her eyebrows pulling toward the center as she scowled.

Serena knew the two had connected with each other's thoughts, continuing the discussion on private turf, but at the moment, she didn't give a fuck. All she wanted was to die and get it over with. The layers of sensation under the surface of her skin seemed intent on flaying her alive, separating her flesh from bone and leaving a mass of bleeding pulp.

As everyone but Joel cleared out of the room, she struggled to take even breaths, her fingers digging into her palms as she clung to the small pain to ground herself in the present. Joel sat close to her on the bed, and something deep inside her keened to rub up against him. His brown eyes reflected nothing but gentleness, and never mind he was a witch—he looked anything but threatening in his blue cotton shirt and faded jeans. She couldn't place his background, maybe a hint of Africa combined with a touch of Asian heritage. One thing she did know—every instinct insisted that this stranger represented her best shot at surviving the frenzy clawing her apart.

"Look, I don't know what you were doing up on the ridge last night, but I'd bet a year's salary on the fact that you absorbed a good dose of the residual power from the rite. And now you don't have the sense to ground it."

"So hot... Hard to breathe..."

"Since whatever the monsters did in that circle involved a lot of blood, knives, a whip, and more sex toys than you'd find in a BDSM club, I'm guessing the specific nature of the energy is making you blessed uncomfortable." He formed a violet sphere above his palm and held it close to her face. "If you'll just give it an outlet—a glow sphere, a simple spell..."

Serena tossed her head against the pillow. After all these years, she doubted she could summon power if she tried. For six years, she'd blocked the hum of energy, denying skills she'd loathed since the day Scott died. As a fresh wave of pain ripped through her, she arched her back and screamed.

Joel grasped her around the waist and held tight, lifting her against his chest so her head drooped onto his shoulder. When he let his aura rip free, encompassing her in a web of violet energy, she struggled to escape.

"Let me go! Stop!" Her skin itched, and she felt like her spine would split if her own aura didn't break free. "I can't... Please...oh, please!" Giving up on words, she wailed, beyond caring who heard, and managed to struggle free of his embrace.

The door banged open, and Trey stepped into the room. "What gives, Joel? Mel's about to barge in here if this keeps up."

When Joel called his aura home, she sobbed with relief, and sweat broke out across every inch of her body. She felt as if someone were trying to turn her skin inside out, and the heat...oh goddess, the heat!

"She's a witch. I'm sure of it. But she's fighting her power...tearing herself apart. Bless it, tell Mel to clear everyone out – give her some privacy. She's in pain and doesn't need half the town listening in on her screams."

"Gets much louder, Mel's going to be in here herself. But I'll relay the message. I'm sticking around. Call if you need me."

When the door clicked shut behind Trey's retreating back, Joel scooped her into his arms again and laid her flat on her back, her head nestled on the pillow. She opened her mouth to speak, but the wave of heat and fury washing through her took away the ability to do anything more than draw breath. Her nipples stung as if someone had scraped the top layer of skin off, and her belly cramped so hard, she rolled to her side and curled up with her hands around her knees. Worst of all, energy crackled across her clit, driving her wild with no hope of release.

"Look, I don't know if you're in any shape to make decisions right now, but if we can't ease some of the dark power that's ripping through you, chances are you'll either die or go mad – and not necessarily in that order."

When she reasoned out what he meant by that, hope surged even as she gasped for air. She wouldn't – couldn't – raise magic to free herself of the energy she'd absorbed when she'd messed with the dark lords' rite, but if sex could provide some release...

"Yes. Please. Anything to stop the pain." *Anything. Just so long as I can breathe again. So fucking scared...*

"I can call someone else in here if you'd rather..."

Wild to be free of the stabbing sensation at the back of her skull, she reached out and grabbed his wrist, holding tight enough that her fingers pressed against bone. "Now!" She panted, unable to suck enough air into her lungs. "Please!"

"Shh. You're going to be okay." Joel undid the top button on the shirt someone had dressed her in and touched her cheek. "Moment of truth here. As a witch, I can't give you any diseases. But unless I know for certain you're one, too – that you have not only the ability to resist disease but to control your cycle – I'm going to have to go and find a condom so we don't create a child."

Fuck! Pain rattled through her head and exploded behind her eyes. She trembled with the onslaught of need, and the cotton shirt clung to her sweaty body. "I'm not..." Damn, she'd die waiting for him to find protection. "I don't use my power. But the rest, the genetic traits... I promise – pregnancy's not a concern."

The words tasted like lead on her tongue, and she resented having to own up to even that much of her birthright. She panted as energy tore along her spine, desperate to break free.

"Okay, since the 'I'm not...' bit you started out with registered as a lie, and the rest rang true, let's see if we can get you more comfortable. Later on, you can tell me why you're determined to suppress your gifts and pass for human." Slowly, Joel unbuttoned the next button on her borrowed shirt, as if afraid to spook her. "Gods help you if this doesn't work."

Having chosen a course of action, Serena grew impatient and ripped at the shirt, sending buttons flying. At least her panties were her own, and she slid out of those in seconds, shivering as cool air hit her overheated skin. Once he saw her intent, Joel didn't waste any time either. Within moments he'd stripped off his shirt, jeans, and briefs.

As he settled back beside her on the bed, she draped her leg across his hips. Her skin burned hotter at the contact, but something about the proximity promised relief from the fiery sensations that rocked her loose of her moorings. "Please...promise me, no magic?"

The note of little-girl pleading in that request shamed her, but even if her life depended on it, she couldn't face the prospect of two bodies wrapped in a cocoon of energy. That kind of intimacy belonged to a past so distant, she'd almost managed to block the memories.

Almost.

Joel took her in his arms and settled her deeper into the pillows. "None of this makes sense, but sure, I promise."

As he lowered himself onto her, his erect cock pressing against her thighs, the prospect of being pinned beneath him as she fought to fill her lungs with air seemed intolerable. She pressed against his chest, and though he raised one eyebrow in an unspoken query, he shifted off her. No sooner had he settled back onto the mattress than she pressed against his chest with both hands, urging him onto his back.

Need rode her hard, and she straddled him in a heartbeat, using her hands to guide his cock inside her. She hated that she planned to take him as a means to an end. But objectionable as she found that prospect, her body demanded relief from the tainted power ripping through her.

"It's okay." He grasped her hips and pulled her down against his pelvis until she sheathed him completely. "This is my choice. I want to help."

Shaken, she checked to make sure he hadn't slipped into her thoughts unnoticed amid her pain and confusion. But her defenses held strong. Rising a few inches, she let

his cock slide almost free before sinking down again, desperate to ease the burn. With each movement her hunger grew, and she leaned forward and pressed her hands to his chest for leverage, rising and falling so fast that Joel gasped at each downstroke.

Fierce concentration gripped her, as if she needed to get this exactly right to save herself. Every detail seemed important. The hard ripple of his abs under her hands. The way his satiny dark curls framed his face on the pillow. The musky scent of sex. The fact that he reached up to stroke her face each time she cried out, brushing her sweaty hair away from her cheeks and forehead. If she focused hard enough, maybe she could save herself.

"You're going to be okay. It's better already, isn't it? Less pressure? Less energy pounding inside you, hunting for a way to escape?"

"Mmm." Compared to a few minutes ago, she thought she might live. "Touch me?"

Her body cried out for contact. If she could rub every inch of her skin against his... Easing forward, she let her upper body settle against his chest, reveling in the press of firm muscle against her breasts. When he slid his hands between their sweat-slick skin and cupped her breasts in his palms, she nearly wept with relief.

The first orgasm shook her as she threw all the force she could into her thrusts, pounding downward as he arched up to meet her body with his. She screamed, gasped for air, and screamed again. When he rolled her nipples between thumb and fingertip, the sensation pushed her higher, drawing spasm after spasm out of her frantically clenching pussy.

"Remember to breathe. Keep breathing through it." Sliding one hand free, he rubbed her back as she shook against him, stroking from the base of her head down to her ass and back again, soothing her with long, even strokes as her climax stretched on and on—each pulse tighter, hotter, more intense than the last.

Her body ached with the relentless shock waves, but at least the dull throbbing replaced the desperate feeling that her aura might explode, shattering her spine in the process. Clenched so tight around Joel's cock that she felt as if her skin would tear, she abandoned herself to a final series of hot and furious shudders. Throwing her head back, she let loose a long, desperate wail as a patchwork of saffron, azure, and vermilion flashed behind her closed eyelids.

Through an act of iron will, Joel held himself in check. He suspected she'd need him for a good while yet, and didn't expect she'd have a lot of patience with even a witch's quick rebound time. When she collapsed against his chest, limp and panting, he stroked her tousled brown hair away from her face, taking time to toy with the sweat-damp curls where they clung to her back and shoulders. She responded to the tender gesture—probably as much of a surprise to her as it was to him—by snuggling closer.

Whoever she was, no doubt she'd been through hell and could use a moment of peace. *Goddess help her, she's a mess.* Whatever she'd been doing up on the ridge last

night had all but killed her, and sex served as a poor substitute for the thorough power cleansing she needed. Pressed this close to her, he felt the imbalance in her cloaked aura like a hive of angry bees, humming with shadowy energy he sensed didn't originate with her.

"Take a minute and breathe easy. No one deserves as much trouble as seems to have found you." When her body shook rhythmically, he knew she must be crying, but didn't want to embarrass her by drawing attention to her tears. Never mind her apparent rejection of her powers, witches were a proud lot, and he suspected having a stranger witness her anguish heaped an additional layer of hell onto her misery.

Every few seconds, her pussy twitched around his cock, and he forced himself to breathe deep, fighting for control. Her breasts pressed tight against his chest, round and firm. Just the right size to fill his palms. When he'd played her nipple between his fingertips, the silkiness of her skin had blessed near made his mouth go dry.

She lay stretched out on top of him, her legs twined with his and her hands gripping his shoulders, and he guessed she must be about five feet seven, just a bit less than half a foot shy of his six-one. Her body bore the allover tan of someone who liked to sunbathe without a swimsuit, and she had the muscle tone of a natural athlete. Slowly, he traced her spine and then let his palm cup the tight curve of her ass.

"Oh!" She wriggled on top of him, as if trying to find a comfortable position, and he sucked in air as her pussy slid along his straining dick. "I... The energy, it's building again. I need..."

Damned if he'd make her beg, after all she'd been through. Although, bless it, other than finding her passed out in the freezing rain with her hand shoved down the front of her pants, he didn't have the first inkling what she'd been through. *I don't even know her name.*

"Sure thing. Raising your power to slough off any dark energy you picked up near the rite would work better. But since you don't seem willing or able to play it that way, it'll take a lot more than a quick roll to serve as a pressure valve."

With one hand on her bottom and the other pressed to her upper spine, he rolled her onto her back, still buried deep inside her. She gasped, but the welcoming arch of her hips and her hands clenched tight at the small of his back told him his instincts hadn't been wrong. Even though she kept her own power suppressed with the determination of a Zen master, he felt a tug on his aura, as if the unwholesome magic she'd taken on last night was...hungry.

"There's something more going on here than using sex to bleed off a heap of unwanted energy from the rite." But by the Horned God, he'd be damned if he'd pursue the point while she hummed beneath him, warm with the scent of honey and rocking her hips to match his rhythm. "Later...we'll sort it all out later."

For now, the rush of anticipation as she threw her legs around his back and pressed her heels into the curve of his spine crowded out his ability to think. "Your name... Tell me your name."

“Rena.” She grabbed around his neck and held on so tight, her short, rounded nails bit into his skin. “Rena Hennessey. Faster...please!”

Picking up the pace, he luxuriated in the silky brush of her body around him, sweet smelling, warm, and so wet, he felt like he’d melt inside her. But bless it if the woman didn’t present a complete mystery. Her words rang with truth, but he’d never encountered a witch who’d use a surname around her own kind. Just wasn’t part of the culture.

“You keep moving like that, sweet Rena, and you just might be the death of me.” His dick twitched in appreciation as she swiveled her hips beneath him, and her nipples brushed hot little paths against his chest.

Never mind the honeyed pleasure of sweet skin on skin, he couldn’t shake his confusion about her origins. Thoughts drifted through his mind, intrusive and damned distracting. *Fuck, I’m a crazy man to be thinking about anything but the pressure of those little heels digging into my back and the sound of her sighs.*

But things just didn’t add up. Maybe she’d been adopted—raised by humans—and hadn’t discovered her talents until they surfaced in force around puberty. He couldn’t imagine the hell he would have gone through if Mel hadn’t facilitated his adoption by his mom, another witch. Bless it, the social worker with a heart as big as her magic had been elderly even back then, but Mel had more than saved his ass by placing a witch baby with his own kind—she’d treated him as family. Still did.

As Rena drove him half out of his mind with her hot little body, she avoided his gaze every time she opened her eyes, green pools of light hiding behind impossibly thick lashes. What had those eyes seen up on that ridge? What secrets was she hiding? Being raised by humans would explain her reticence concerning magic, though not her knowledge of witch genetics or her presence near the dark lords’ rite last night.

“There—sweet goddess...oh fuck—right there!”

As he hit the same spot in a quick succession of five strokes, she cried out beneath him. Overwhelmed by the sheer mystery of her, he couldn’t resist the urge for a bit of intimacy. Caution be damned, he lowered his head to kiss her. Half expecting her to turn away, he let a low growl escape when she opened her mouth to meet his lips.

Never mind that her proximity to the dark lords’ storm rite cast a heap of suspicion on her motives, the brush of her mouth annihilated his last bit of sense. The creature that came crawling up inside him wanted to possess her, keep her here as his own, and spend eternity with his cock sunk so deep inside her, his balls brushed against her ass. Bless it, he’d challenge any witch who argued for turning her out in the autumn chill to fend for herself.

With a groan, Rena broke away from his kiss. “Drowning... Not enough air.” Tilting her head to the side, she gulped in a few deep breaths, each inhalation pressing her nipples to his chest—tiny points of heat. After a moment, she turned back and found his lips again.

Careful to support his weight on his elbows so he wouldn't make it harder for her to catch her breath, Joel slowed his strokes, rotating his hips to search for her sweet spot. When she jolted as if she'd touched a candle flame, he knew he'd found it. Again and again, he hit the same spot, his breath hissing through his teeth as his balls pulled up tight against his body. A slow burn started at the base of his cock and threatened to spill upward to the tip.

Unable to maintain the finesse required for a kiss, he lifted his head and flexed his cramped shoulders. Rena let her legs slide free of his back and threw them open so wide, her heels pressed close to the edges of the king-size bed. He found himself wondering how else her body could stretch and bend.

Which started an inferno along his spine as his aura rioted to be free, eager to dance around him in a blissful orgy of magic when he came. "Having trouble..." Air hissed through his teeth as his power rose, urgent and unwilling to be denied. "Losing control...my magic..."

"No!" She clutched at his shoulders, her hands clawlike, her grip beyond desperate. "I'm begging you, please don't!"

Fuck! He'd never held back his power in bed with another witch, and bottom line, at this point he didn't know if he could. "Please, let me touch your thoughts, then. If I can join with you, it might be easier to control my power."

A panicked sob followed close on the heels of his request, and Rena thrashed her head back and forth in an emphatic "no."

"Shh. I'm sorry. I won't do anything you don't want me to." And gods help him, he meant it. He'd sooner let Trey shoot him in the foot with that damn shotgun of his than endure another moment of Rena's panic. "Give me a minute to get myself under control. I promise—I'll keep my power under wraps."

For several heartbeats, he remained motionless, willing the blazing pressure at the base of his cock to recede. Gods help him, the only way he'd see this through without his magic breaking free would be if he didn't allow himself to come. All but whimpering at the thought, he wondered how many rounds she'd need to go to bleed off enough trapped energy to buy her a little sanity and more than temporary relief from the pain.

By the grace of the Green Man, he didn't know how he'd survive this.

Chapter Three

Serena experienced raw terror at the prospect of Joel's aura crackling around them while her body remained locked tight to his. Worse yet, she dreaded the possibility that he might forget himself and reach out to touch her thoughts, a liberty she hadn't allowed even her sister since the day Scott died. But his earnest reassurance steadied her. For whatever reason, he seemed determined to protect her...even from himself.

Though she yearned to arch and roll her hips beneath him, pulling him deeper inside her, she remained still while he collected himself. She'd worked for years to suppress the last remnants of her magic, resorting to meditation, martial arts, yoga, sports, acupuncture, self-help books, and anything else she could come up with to quiet her power. But for someone accustomed to letting his aura rip free during sex, suppressing the urge had to present a tremendous struggle.

"Tell me something about yourself." If she could help distract him...she owed him at least that much. "Where you were born, what you do..."

A throaty chuckle greeted her request. "Think that'll help, do you? With you as hot as melted honey around me, and my balls stinging with the urge to sink my teeth into you and give up the fight?"

"I'm sort of dying here, too, remember. But if we talk a few minutes, I figured it might..."

"I guess that's as good a plan as any." He laughed again, but she got the sense it was more at himself than her.

"Right then, to answer your first question, I don't know where I was born. To answer the second, I do a lot of things." From the strain in his voice, his battle for control wasn't getting any easier. "After college, I had a high-power job as an electrical engineer. But I'm a small-town boy, not cut out for Boston life. I came back here, and Trey and I started our own business. Construction, electrical work, roofing and repairs,

custom orders for handmade furniture... You name it, we've done it. I'm good with my hands, enjoy working with them."

That bit about being good with his hands undid all her resolve. She clenched around his cock, and he let out a long, low moan. The weight of his hips on hers proved almost too much to bear without resuming their impassioned dance. The burn had started again when they stopped moving, but nowhere near as bad as earlier. Still, though she felt reasonably certain her skin would stay attached to her body, she'd give anything to have him resume the slow slide of delicious friction back and forth across her throbbing clit.

"The first part" —she heaved an enormous sigh of frustration at the effort it took not to fuck him senseless and damn the consequences —"you don't know where you were born?"

"Mmm." Joel shifted to the left, wiggled lower, then muttered, "Fuck this," under his breath. "Maybe if we try a slow dance. My balls are going to crawl up under my skin and burst if I hold still another minute."

With careful movements, he made a few exploratory strokes, and when she shuddered beneath him, he traced his thumb along the curve of her cheekbone. "And yeah, no idea where I was born. Can't even tell you what countries my ancestors might have come from. On forms, I check multiracial and leave it at that. I'm adopted. Sort of a long story."

That raised her curiosity. Her adoptive nephew Eric had a long story of his own, and she had a soft spot a million miles deep for adopted kids with sad stories to tell. Any inclination to press for more information disappeared when Joel shifted his left arm so his palm covered her breast and slid his cock a few inches back, then an inch forward, teasing her with the shallow thrusts.

Serena tossed her head in frustration. "I need more, deeper. Feels so good."

"You're not hurting so much anymore, are you? Not sure when, but at some point, your body softened up — not so rigid with pain — and you started enjoying this."

"Mmm." Serena arched upward in a blatant plea for deeper penetration. "Not sure why this is helping, but it seems to be feeding a deep, driving need...easing the hurt. I'm not sure what's wrong with me, never experienced anything like this before. Damn! Come on, please?"

"When we're done here, I have some questions for you about what the hell you were doing near that rite last night. As for the rest, I'm trying, but if I come, there's no escaping the fact that my magic's going to break free. So if you don't want a big light show, you're going to have to be patient with 'slow and easy' for now."

Shivering at the prospect of his aura tearing free with her snuggled beneath his warm, slick body, Serena shook her head. "I'm sorry. The magic... I just can't..."

"Right, we'll discuss that part later, too. You're the biggest mystery to stumble into my life since I was a few months old. With all hell about to break loose in these

parts, and you passed out right near the center of the action last night, you've got a lot of explaining to do."

"I..." Serena choked back a panicked sob. "There's a lot I can't tell you."

"Shh." Humming under his breath, Joel stroked her hair and eased a little deeper, though he stopped far from hitting the spot that craved contact. "Later. No problem so big we can't sort things out."

Great, the lie in that last bit shone through like a warning siren. But she appreciated his attempt at reassurance. The next few thrusts rippled through her with all the delicacy and tenderness of butterfly kisses, and she growled under her breath with frustration.

"Believe me, sweetheart, I'm having a hard time here, too. You may opt not to use your gifts, but the magic's there, all the same, calling to mine like a mermaid luring sailors into forbidden lands with her sweet song." Abruptly, Joel pulled free and sat back between her legs, pressing a hand to her belly to keep her from scrambling into a sitting position. "Man can only stand so much, witch or no. My balls feel like a Samhain pumpkin—as in, someone's been at them with a carving knife. Three more strokes, and I'm likely to lose control. What followed would involve lots of pretty lights, more like than not a thought bond between us, and a startled witch with a heap of terror showing in her pretty green eyes."

"I'm sorry, I..."

"So we go to plan B." Still holding her down, Joel scooted down between her legs and lowered his head.

"Oh!" The first few strokes of his tongue were heaven, and Serena whimpered when he lifted his head. "Don't stop!"

"Here's the thing. I'm not used to being with a witch determined to keep me out of her thoughts. Makes me wonder if I'm getting things right down here. So here's the deal. I'll give you what you need, but you've got to talk to me." He offered an exploratory lick before raising his head again. "Tell me how I'm doing down here. What you're feeling, what you want. Everything I'd know without even trying, if you weren't so damn scared to let me into your thoughts. Hard not to assume you're hiding something. Though your fear seems real enough."

"I'm..." *Hiding so much, he'll hear the lie in my voice if I finish that sentence by insisting I don't have anything to hide.* "I don't let anyone into my head. Not ever."

"Subject for later discussions. For now, time to start talking." Swirling his tongue in slow, lazy circles, he spiraled inward until she lifted her ass off the mattress and pushed into his face. "Tell me what this feels like."

When he darted his tongue inside her pussy, she grabbed his hair and hung on as if her life depended on it. His curls felt warm against her palms and surprisingly soft. Just enough coarseness in the texture to tease her fingertips. She found herself wondering what it would feel like to rub her breasts across his hair. When she tugged a

little, he grunted and shook his head to loosen her grip, brushing his curls against the tender skin of her inner thighs.

"Tickles."

"You're going to have to do better than that, if you're going to keep my mind off my aching cock. Come on, distract me a little." With that, he began a pattern of three strokes of his tongue across her clit, followed by a deep, penetrating thrust inside her.

"Hot! Like melting wax across my clit. And wet. Every time you thrust your tongue inside me, I get wetter." She waited for a response, then realized he didn't plan to keep interrupting his task to chat with her. Which worked fine for her, because whatever the hell got messed up inside her when she attempted to channel energy away from the storm rite, for some reason, sex eased the pain. "Slippery. And your hair sends little shivers along my skin every time it brushes my thighs. Your hand on my belly, it feels...strong. A bit rough, callused at the fingertips, and sort of...commanding?"

When he chuckled against her clit, red flashes shot behind her closed eyelids, and she cried out. "Hot. Oh, fuck, the vibrations when you laughed..."

Joel took her clit between his lips and hummed, the sound coming from deep at the back of his throat. Each vibration elicited a gasp of approval, and she pressed so hard against his mouth that he moved his other hand onto her belly as well, pinning her to the mattress with firm, steady pressure.

"So close! Just a little... Unh!" She tilted her head back, arching her neck until it ached, and moaned, long and low. When he let his teeth graze her clit, just enough to send sparks humming from the epicenter of pleasure up her spine to her breasts, she wrapped her legs around his neck and screamed.

Liquid fire raced through her, and as she clenched and released around nothingness, she wanted him inside her so bad, it hurt. "Need...need..."

Unable to get the words out, she pictured his fingers lodged deep inside her. Three of them, scissoring outward to stretch her tight as she came. When Joel made a surprised noise, removed one hand from her stomach, and drove three fingers into her needy flesh, it hit home that she'd reached out to convey the image, brushing his thoughts with hers.

Terrified at the lapse—something she hadn't done in so long, she'd suspected she no longer possessed the ability—she clamped down on her thoughts even as he pressed upward toward her sweet spot and dragged another orgasm out of her, leaving her bucking, grunting, whimpering, and begging for more. Her stomach ached with the intensity of the spasms, and her nipples burned to feel his mouth on them. Liquid heat drove through her like a summer tide under the full moon, forceful and irresistible. The tang of sweat and something sweeter—his scent, rich and wild like a forest of trees under the summer sun—filled her senses.

Dragging his tongue across her clit again, he hummed some more, and she pressed against the mattress, trying to lessen the intensity of the vibrations against her

oversensitized flesh. "Too much!" She twisted to the side, and Joel grabbed her hips and pulled her down under him.

Although she expected him to fill her with his cock, she crooned with pleasure when he held back, his swollen shaft pressed hard against her thighs, and settled in to feast on her nipples. The supple contours of his mouth on first one throbbing peak of flesh and then the other drove her near the edge again in seconds. When he sucked and tugged, stretching her nipple enough that she whimpered at the pain, she wondered if she'd come again, just from this.

Though her ex, Gwen, had been more than skilful with her mouth, Serena hadn't come from breast stimulation alone since Scott... *No!* Putting up a mental stop sign, she pulled back from the discomfort of the still-fresh breakup with Gwen, and the older, more profound pain of remembering how it felt when Scott made love to her. Swallowing hard, she tried to get herself under control—and failed. Worse yet, Joel abandoned his work on her left breast just when she felt sure she'd slide off the edge into the abyss and come until her teeth rattled in her mouth.

"Hey, what's wrong?" He reached up to touch her face, and his fingers slid easily along the damp slopes of her cheeks.

Serena shook her head. "Better question would be, 'What's right?' World's turned upside down. I've ended up with a bunch of witches I don't even know, who the hell knows where, after slipping into unconsciousness last night. Something is very fucking wrong with me. And although sex seems to ease the suffering, I don't know when or how I'm going to shake off the aftereffects of some serious shit that seems to have fucked with my mind and body."

The last thing she expected was his deep, resonant laugh—or the tangy kiss that carried her past doubt and fear and into the land of dizzy bliss. Fuck, she hated it when someone managed to take over her emotions with a simple kiss. And yet when he lifted his head and stared at her, his brown eyes so dark they seemed to swallow light, she had to resist the urge to pull his head back down toward hers.

"You're in Little Harbor. How everyone deals with you will depend on why you were hanging around the rite last night. We all realize that the dark lords can be...persuasive. We'll assume you had a good reason for being there, unless evidence says otherwise."

Serena's stomach clenched. She wondered just how much trouble she'd gotten herself into, given that she couldn't tell these people why she'd been lurking near the storm rite. "Little Harbor?" *Might as well steer things toward safer ground.*

"Not all that far from where we found you last night. Tiny town about thirty-five miles north of Boston, on the coast." Joel reached under her and grabbed her ass, his torso pinning her hard to the bed. "Now do you, or do you not, want one last orgasm to take the edge off for a while longer?"

"Yes—please." The pain may have dulled to bearable levels, but the hunger flared fierce and furious. "A little..." Damn, not something she felt comfortable asking a man

she'd just met. Not something she'd ever asked anyone she'd just met. "A little rough, this time? The hunger... I don't know what's going on with me, or why, but I need..."

"Right. Got it." Sliding one hand out from underneath her bottom, he moved it to her breast and grabbed hard enough to elicit an immediate gasp. His other hand slid farther beneath her until his fingers teased the hot little whorl of flesh guarding a very eager, very tight channel. "A little roughness, coming up."

Serena gritted her teeth against the pressure as he played her nipple between the fingers of his left hand, squeezing until darts of pain sizzled across her breast. "Yes!" Fuck, whatever force rode her, it seemed determined to drive her to the brink—*again and again and again.*

"This okay?" Sliding his right hand forward to wet his fingers in the plentiful juices dripping out of her pussy, he then moved it back into position and pressed his forefinger against her anus until the flesh started to give. "You've played like this before?"

Like this and then some. Not an activity suited to Gwen's tastes. But the memory of Dane facing her with a mischievous grin and giving the much-anticipated "flip onto your belly" order sent a wave of prickly heat up from her chest to her face. For the thousandth time, she wondered if she hadn't fallen apart so completely after Scott's death, if maybe she could have held on to Dane, the third member of their little love triangle. *Enough! No point torturing myself about something that happened so long ago.*

"Yes. Please, I need..."

Evidently not interested in making her beg, Joel eased his finger into her ass. Though she would have liked to savor the intensity of penetration, he pinched her nipple so hard with his other hand that through all the gasping and moaning, she didn't sort out the sensations and give the deep, steady pressure inside her the attention it deserved until his finger had claimed every possible bit of depth.

From there, a few wild, heady minutes of him finger fucking her ass while he pinched and tugged her nipple had her thrashing against the heat. One final, devilishly hard squeeze delivered to the sensitive flesh of her already overstretched and smarting nipple sent her crashing over the edge into a pit of blue-black fire, fierce pleasure radiating through her breasts and ass.

Miracle of miracles, by the time she caught her breath and he slid his finger free, then pulled her into his arms with her head cradled on his shoulder, the beast slept, sated and still. No pain. No unquenchable desire. Just weary, sore, deliciously relaxed flesh. Joel, on the other hand, sported a raging hard-on that she suspected ached like hell.

Trey waited outside the door a minute to make sure the lust-filled serenade had indeed come to a stop. He grinned and raised his hand to knock, balancing the pizza box on his other hand, his thumb looped through the plastic rings of a six-pack of soda. The door flung open before he could so much as tap the wood, and he swept his eyes

down Joel's glistening chest to the obvious protrusion in the blanket his friend had tied around his waist. *Hell, what are you trying to do, kill me?* Forcing his eyes away from forbidden territory, he held up the pizza box and offered an innocent grin.

"I've got food." *Brilliant. If all else fails, state the obvious.* Trey stepped aside as Joel brushed past him, hobbling as fast as possible down the long hallway, given he'd been grumbling about twisting his ankle in the woods last night. Moments later, Joel slammed the bathroom door behind him, and the sound of the pounding shower drifted down the hall. Curious, he turned to the woman who seemed to have gotten under his friend's skin. "I guess this meal will be for two. What did you do to get him into such a state?"

The mystery guest looked calmer now, and her face had lost the pinched quality he associated with intense pain. Wearing one of Joel's white cotton shirts with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows and the shirttails coming low enough over her thighs to serve as a dress, with a mass of wavy chestnut brown hair draped over her right shoulder, she didn't look like she could be much older than twenty. *Hell, how had a baby gotten mixed up with the assholes causing the monster storms across the New England coast?*

When she sat staring at him with wide green eyes, he set the pizza box on the end of the bed. Never mind Joel would pitch a fit about the grease seeping through the box—man wanted him to treat the bedding with kid gloves, he could damn well abandon his mania for minimalist furnishings and put some bedside tables in the guest rooms.

"Hey. We met briefly just after you woke up earlier, but I'm not sure you remember me. I'm Trey, Joel's business partner and friend since, well, since forever." Offering his best charm-the-pants-off-a-date smile, he reached out to shake her hand. Her fingers felt warm and dry against his, her grip surprisingly firm. "And you're?" *Someone I sincerely hope isn't mixed up with the dark lords, because if Mel doesn't get to you first in her role of Little Harbor's most respected witch, otherwise known as She Who Tolerates No Bullshit, then Jaimis's people will hunt you down and serve you up for dinner.*

"Rena." Even as she spoke, her gaze darted from the open bedroom door to the second-story windows, as if evaluating her chances for escape.

"I'd recommend you stick around awhile, Rena. Given where we found you last night, it's a good guess you're in some kind of trouble. Odds are you've got a longer life expectancy here than if the dark lords get ahold of you." When she paled beneath her golden tan—he wondered where she'd picked that up this late in September—he felt like somewhat of an ass. "Sorry, didn't mean that to sound like a threat. Just wanted to let you know we'll watch out for you here, and for now, safety in numbers seems your best bet." *As long as the numbers don't consist of dark lords intent on flaying the skin off your back and a crazed rogue witch with a hankering for torture.*

When she sat stone silent, he made himself comfortable beside the pizza box at the end of the bed, flipped open the top, and handed her a slice dripping with gooey mozzarella, pepperoni, and sausage. If she had a hankering for veggies, she was out of

luck. The only real pizza, in his opinion, came topped with cheese, meat, and a good deal of grease.

When she waited to take a bite, he grabbed a slice of his own and dug in. *See, princess. Not poisoned.* Obviously reassured to see him try the food first, she ate like a starving woman, and he didn't interrupt the process with undue chatter. Only after she licked her fingers and settled back against the heap of pillows did he give in to curiosity.

"Now that you've got a full belly, tell me how someone who doesn't look old enough to be out of diapers came to be messing with the dark lords."

Heat flared across her face, and she glared at him. A temper, then. All the better. Assuming she turned out to be one of the good guys, no doubt a bit of anger would prove a useful resource if the bad witches came calling.

"Last I checked, twenty-three gets me the right to vote, hold a job, rent an apartment, drink, and not take any shit from testosterone-laden guys with more ego than sense. Hell, you're all of, what, twenty-five?"

Okay, so she looked young for her age. "Twenty-six. Good guess. So tell me where you got that sexy tan in late September. Last I checked, temperatures on the beach were hovering near fifty with a wind that'll cut right through you."

For a moment, she seemed to consider, staring out the window at the red-gold leaves of the maples Joel loved so much. "Beaches in San Francisco are tolerable enough, if we get a rare sunny day, but if I'm going to play beach bum, I generally take a weekend off and drive south to the land of sun and slackers."

"And you traipsed across the country just to do some sightseeing of dark supernatural rites?" *No way she's going to answer that, but hell, sue me for trying.*

"Joel mentioned he's adopted. Said it's a long story." Her steady gaze gave no indication she'd just chosen to ignore a difficult question. "One you can tell?"

"No secret there. Whole town knows the story. Most likely, he just didn't have time to share it with all that screaming and moaning going on in here." Despite himself, he grinned when Rena blushed. She might not be a baby, but there was a sweetness to her that made him want to find out what those kiss-swollen lips tasted like.

Or the schoolgirl sweetness buried under a heap of world-wise and weary could be the best damn act in Little Harbor, and he could be sitting across from a dark lord. In which case, Joel had bought himself a heap of trouble, because from the look on his face when he'd fled the room, what started out as a mercy fuck – literally – had rattled his friend to the core.

"So, are you going to tell me, or should we play Twenty Questions?" When she raised an eyebrow, the effect mixed one part cute with two parts seduction, and Trey felt his cock swell against the seam of his jeans.

Not like he and Joel hadn't competed for a pretty woman before. So why did he have the sense that making a move on Rena would earn him the ass kicking of a lifetime? "Right, the story. They found Joel when he was about three months old. No

one knows his age for certain... He's shared my July birthday since about a year after Lana — that's his mom — adopted him."

"Your moms are close, then?"

"Everyone in this town is close. And yeah, they're best friends. My mom suggested the shared birthday. Figured it was the one thing she could give a baby who'd survived a horrific fire with no more than a burn on his leg — no people to be found, no name, no date of birth, not even a clear ethnic or racial background. He had a heap of magic, though, and it's damn lucky for him Mel — that's the white-haired witch with the air of a drill sergeant and a heart of gold who you met briefly when you woke up — was the social worker assigned to his case."

Wondering if Joel would be pissed he'd shared so much with a woman who could well turn out to be mixed up with the badasses, he dismissed the concerns for three reasons. One, against his better judgment, he trusted her. Two, everything he'd shared qualified as common knowledge. And three, every new witch he met presented the faint hope of stumbling across someone who might have an aunt or distant cousin who knew something about a baby boy who went missing twenty-six years ago.

"I can't imagine." Her deep green eyes reflected a hint of sadness. "It must be awful for Joel, not having basic information about his family background."

She didn't know the half of it. "It's a bitch. He loves his mom to distraction. She's off on vacation this month. He made sure she'd be far away, clear of..." Well, hell, with that he'd almost gone and said too much. Quickly, he picked up where he'd left off. "Anyway, much as he loves Lana, he's always been obsessed with finding out who he is. Far as we can tell, everyone who knew anything about an orphaned witch baby died in the fire at the old farmstead. He must have been near enough to a door or window that someone managed to grab him and toss him clear. The scar on his ankle and calf surrounds a handlike shape, if you look close enough."

Rena shuddered, and worry lines appeared on her forehead. At least he'd distracted her from the fact that Joel had placed himself right at the epicenter of an earth-shift so huge, he didn't dare have his mother in the area until the world stopped shaking and the dust settled.

"I know, not a pretty story. According to Mel, the community of witches knew about a gathering of some sort at the old farmstead with all sorts of potent magic going on up there. Official report said arson — and damn good chance a vigilante could have tossed a homemade firebomb, if he caught wind of the goings on at the farmhouse — but Mel suspected a powerful spell gone wrong."

Again, Rena shivered, and color seeped out of her tan until she looked as pale as a kid out in a cemetery after dark. Shifting on the bed, she wrapped her arms around her knees, adding to the illusion of youth and vulnerability. Trey struggled with the temptation to scoot up there by the head of the bed and wrap his arms around her.

Right, enough with the gory bits. I'm scaring the pants off my audience. Although of course, she wasn't wearing any, and her long, athletic legs made a pretty picture drawn

up close to the oversize shirt she'd borrowed from Joel. "Fast-forward a bunch of years—Joel spent hours as a kid, thumbing through an old-fashioned set of encyclopedias Mel kept in her study. He'd flip to the page on Egypt, point to the people in the photographs, and ask, 'I look anything like that, Trey?'"

Taking advantage of Rena's rapt attention, Trey risked moving up near the headboard to sit beside her. "And no doubt I'd be able to pick out a few characteristics in common. Then he'd grab another volume and find another country—could be Kenya or Pakistan, Chile or China, Senegal or Korea—and he'd ask again. And again I'd say sure, because damned if the handsome witch doesn't resemble people from dozens of countries, without being able to trace his roots to any."

When he glanced sideways, she had tears pooling at the corners of her eyes. But just as he reached out his hand to comfort her, the sound of footsteps in the hall brought him up short, and he let his palm drop back to rest on his thigh.

Joel burst into the room, minus the conspicuous hard-on, wearing a pair of frayed jeans and a green work shirt that clung to the contours of his chest and shoulders. The clothes he'd worn earlier lay in a crumpled heap on the floor beside the bed. Hell, that must have been one wild party in here. Later, Trey intended to do his best to pry the story out of his friend.

Rena's head jerked up, and she fisted her hands around the down comforter. "I'm sorry. I mean about..." Her voice wavered, and she shook her head.

"Good as new. Nothing a long, hot shower and—well, I'll spare you the details, but I'm a lot more comfortable now." After moving the pizza box to the floor and shifting the remaining soda cans to the dresser, Joel sat on the other side of Rena. "This asshole giving you any trouble?"

Rena's eyes got so wide at that, Trey had to stifle a laugh.

"I thought the two of you—I mean, the way Trey talked about you—and him knowing so much about witches—you're not partners?"

Hell of an assumption, that. Trey's face prickled, and he professed interest in Rena's deliciously bare legs, going so far as to let his fingertips stray within an inch of her tan, toned thigh. With any luck, that would get enough of a rise out of Joel to distract him from any outward signs—rapid heart rate, sweaty palms, stiffening cock—that Rena had just pushed the conversation into dangerous waters.

"Hands off." Joel cuffed Trey's hand away from Rena's leg before turning his attention back to her. "As for the rest, 'asshole' more or less counts as an endearment where Trey and I are concerned. We like each other well enough, but no, other than our business, we're not together. Blessed frustrating thing about living among humans. You can't assume the men are as likely to lust after your magic—and your ass—as the women."

God help him, if Joel only knew. Besides the weirdness of having grown up together, he could just imagine the conversation with his family. *Ah, Mom, Dad, in case you happen*

to see Joel and me holding hands on a construction site... Right, sturdy New England conservatives that they were, they'd be sure to take the news well.

"First matter of business" – Joel got up, landed wrong on his twisted ankle, and swore under his breath, then crossed the room to the dresser – "I found a few things in your car after Mel had someone track it down and drive it back here late last night. Nothing to explain why you passed out in the rain near a circle of dark lords. But I wonder if anything in here might offer clues as to what you were doing out there last night."

When he pulled a brown leather purse out of one of the dresser drawers, Rena exhaled sharply. "That's mine! Give it here."

"Which is why I waited until you were awake to go through it. Bad manners to paw through a purse when its owner's passed out cold." Joel approached the bed and dumped the contents of the purse onto the comforter. "No wallet?"

Rena's hand darted out to capture the purse, tugging it behind her.

Joel made a *tsking* sound with his tongue. "Sorry, I know this isn't pleasant, but I need to go through that. I know you won't use your gifts, so I could finagle it from you with a bit of magic. But since I'd rather not frighten you, how about you pass it back to me?"

Her face red, her jaw set in a stubborn line, Rena tossed the purse to him. Joel's quick exploration unearthed a roll of mint Lifesavers, a coin purse full of quarters, and about five hundred dollars in cash from an inner pocket. No license. No credit cards. Rena sat rigid with her hands clasped in her lap. Trey was about to advise that her posture indicated Joel must not have found everything in the purse when his friend located a hidden compartment and pulled out a photo of a small boy with a few interesting scars on his face.

"Give. Me. That. *Now!*" The ice in Rena's voice conveyed a world of anger, and although Joel seemed convinced she wouldn't use magic, Trey shifted over to the edge of the bed, putting some space between them, all the same.

After studying the photo, Joel handed it and the rest of the contents of the purse back to Rena. "You move in powerful circles for a witch who's afraid to do so much as kindle a glow sphere. Either that, or you're carrying this picture because you and your cohorts mean this child harm."

Oh, hell. Joel wouldn't hesitate a second to summon a heap of energy when he saw the need, and the icy anger in his tone indicated he had a less-than-perfect hold on his temper. Feeling inexplicably protective toward Rena, Trey moved over to put his arm around her shoulders. Any luck, Joel wouldn't peg her with a spell with him too close to avoid the backlash. Next step, they'd talk like civilized adults and figure out what in the fuck Rena was doing with a photo of a child who Sorren, the elder witch, loved – and protected – like a grandson.

Before he had a chance to react, she threw herself off the bed and made a dash for the window, cracked open to let the September breeze into the room. Joel intercepted in

time to prevent her from throwing herself out from the second floor, but she slipped through his arms and made it past the bedroom door. Damn, the woman was a natural athlete. If circumstances were any different, he'd take a moment to give Joel shit for not being able to catch a dizzy, half-naked witch with more attitude than sense. But given present circumstances, he might as well poke a crocodile with a stick.

"Some days just seem destined to turn to shit." Scowling, Joel plopped down at the end of the bed and massaged his ankle, just to the left of the old burn scar. "Don't bother to chase her—likely I'll say things I regret if you drag her back here right now. Let Mel and the guards deal with her for a while."

Joel looked like a man grappling with a serious headache, and Trey knew better than to say anything. Hell, worse than a headache, he looked like a man who'd give just about anything to turn back the clock and *not* hop into bed with the desperate, beautiful witch who'd just cast a heap of doubt on her motives for being near the rite last night.

"Not like she'd get far anyway, wearing nothing but an oversize shirt, and barefoot in the bargain." Joel reached back for a pillow and heaved it at the wall. "Bless it, until I found that photo, I was almost certain Rena was one of us. *Not* one of them."

Unwilling to place her in league with the dark side just yet, Trey offered a noncommittal grunt.

Chapter Four

Serena flew down the stairs and sped through the house in search of the back door, figuring they'd keep a closer watch on the front. As she raced down a long hallway, two elderly women looked up from where they sat reading on a bench near the door. No flicker of a witch's aura, no glimmer of magic reflected in their eyes. *Human, then.*

Their companion, a pimply teenage witch with the hint of a green aura playing around him, jeans that barely stayed up on his hips, and a double piercing in his nose, hopped up and stood between her and the door. "Sorry, not supposed to let you wander off. They've spotted suspicious characters in town, and it's not safe for any of us to..."

"Enough of that." After directing a scowl at the chatty teen, one of the women got up and joined Serena at the door. Her tidy white bun looked out of place with the gun tucked into the waistband of her khaki pants. "No need to hurry off. No one here means you any harm."

The other woman hefted herself to her feet. "Not often a pretty young witch wanders in from out of town. Problem with a town this size, the young people don't have much chance to meet others with similar interests. Especially hard on the witches. You take Joel, for example..."

Her words drifted off as Rena edged toward the door. As the pimply teen's fingers moved as if itching to form a spell, her heart pounded double time, never mind she didn't sense enough power in him to do any real harm. Bigger problem—too many humans in Little Harbor knew about witches. Damn. What if she'd stumbled into a nest of dark lords, rather than just some ordinary witches?

Ignoring the fact that the white-haired woman had pulled her gun free, Serena dived past the teen and bolted out the door, running so hard, her feet stung as her bare soles pounded against the cold grass and fallen leaves. Better dead with a bullet in her

back than captured by dark lords. That had to be why Joel's friend knew so much about witches, never mind a sane witch would only reveal himself to a human where love was concerned. The whole damn town seemed to be living the rogue witch's crazed fantasy—witches coexisting openly with humans. Damn the risks, and damn the consequences.

Still shaking, Rena let out a sigh of relief when the woman guarding the door failed to take shots at her retreating back. Fear gave way to cold reason, and she tried to remember everything Gwen had taught her about fleeing a potential attacker. Who in hell knew her ex's mania for self-defense would come into play with a nest of dark lords and armed humans breathing down the back of her neck?

First things first. She needed to get herself hidden. Veering away from the small orchard surrounding Joel's home, she flung herself headlong toward the tree line, beyond grateful he'd settled out in the middle of nowhere. The forested area would offer decent cover. First damn place they'd look for her, of course, but with all the hiding places a forest offered, at least she stood half a chance.

Best bet would be to go to ground and burrow down under a heap of leaves in a hollow or behind a fallen log—and hope like hell none of the local witches had a knack for tracking and finding spells. Wincing as she stepped on a sharp branch, she swore under her breath but refused to slow her pace. Next order of business would be to creep out after nightfall and steal some clothes and shoes. The area seemed rural enough that someone had to have an unlocked barn or stable with a pair of work pants and a muddy pair of shit kickers sitting out in the milking area or tack room.

Air stung her lungs, and she forced herself to focus on movement in the surrounding area as she plunged past the tree line and into the shadows of the wooded area. Goose bumps sprang up along her arms as the wind moaned through the trees. About every third step, she hit a sharp rock or branch, and her feet hurt like hell and fury. *Please, please, please, don't let them be bleeding!* A trail of blood would lead anyone who followed right to her.

With that in mind, Serena listened hard for the sound of running water. Never mind the cold, a stream or the shallows of a river would mask her trail. But she didn't know the area, and the sound of the wind in the trees didn't help worth a damn. When she felt the telltale surge of a spell forming, her heart all but stopped.

Not behind her—not a pursuer—but ahead, deeper in the forest. Veering off to the east, she set a course well clear from the ominous swell of power. Years of aversion to magic had honed her unique skill to detect power spikes to levels of sensitivity so exact, she could taste the overtones of evil in the energy. She slowed, afraid to alert whoever called the dark magic to her presence. Running, she made a dangerous amount of noise. Walking, she risked being overtaken by anyone who followed from the house.

Well, shit. Just shit!

Serena cursed the fact that she'd ever left San Francisco. Not like she wasn't in danger of failing her marine biology seminar, even without missing a chunk of classes.

Fuck it. Not like I didn't try to ignore the dangerous energy calling to me, begging to be put to rest. Even so, I wonder if I would have had the guts to come if it weren't for the whales? She'd sobbed over the news report after two humpbacks died in the last storm. Then, enraged beyond reason, she'd climbed into her battered Honda and headed east to sink the storm magic into the earth, where it couldn't hurt anyone – marine mammals included.

Oh, fuck, who was I kidding?

At the moment, she doubted her ability to save herself. What made her think she could stop the storms? Witches able to raise storm magic, she could sense all the way across the country, were so out of her league, their power defied description. Serena froze when a branch cracked in the distance. *Behind her.*

Could be the wind. Could be a deer. But most likely, she'd picked up a follower. Who would they send? Joel had been favoring his ankle when he fled the bed for the shower. Not likely they'd send the pimply faced teen or one of the elderly women. She'd put her money on Trey.

Breathing in shallow pants, she risked a few steps and scanned the area for a hiding place but couldn't come up with any better plan than ducking behind a pine tree. Trey had looked so damned fit as he'd sat at the end of the bed, his shoulders fairly bursting out of his shirt, that she had no doubt he could outpace her without breaking a sweat. And unless she resorted to magic...

Not an option! Even considering it triggered memories of how she'd lain on the floor, screaming and gasping for air, as she'd felt Scott's life essence slip away in the grasp of a dark lord's death spell. Magic meant death to her. Nothing she could do would change that. After his death, the only way she managed to face magic and stay sane was to use her newfound, freakish ability to render spells ineffective.

Simultaneously, power swelled again off to the west, and another branch cracked back the way she'd come. *I am so screwed.* Evaluating her options, she opted for an all-out sprint toward the east. Running hard, she winced as the forest floor reduced the soles of her feet to the consistency of hamburger. No point worrying about a blood trail now. Whoever followed her hadn't had any trouble tracking her down. As she ran, she listened for telltale sounds of her pursuer. But except for the wind rustling through the trees, the forest remained silent. No bird calls. No animal sounds.

Had the rising magic to the west spooked the critters? When the end of a broken twig lodged in her right heel, she bit her lip to choke back a yelp and stopped to pull the splintered wood free. Cuts riddled the ball of her foot, and the gash in her heel looked like it might need stitches.

"No!" Serena screamed as someone tackled her from behind and sent her crashing face-first onto the forest floor.

Her arms pinned against her sides, she did a quick inventory of her remaining resources. Kicking upward, she drew a grunt from her assailant when her heel connected with his shin. Encouraged, she rocked back and forth, determined to throw

him off her and free her arms. If she could just twist around a little and bite his arm...
"Fuck! Get off me! Let me go!"

"For Christ's sake, shut up." Trey hissed under his breath as she continued to struggle, and she felt moderately better once she identified the man who had her pinned.

Better a known problem—and a human one at that—than a badass witch with unclear motives. Hopefully, Trey's goal didn't extend beyond returning her to the house. From there, well, the rest depended on whether she'd correctly identified Joel's alliances, and how far he and the other Little Harbor witches intended to go in revealing themselves to humans—not to mention his motives for doing so.

"A bunch of witches have a campsite off to the west, and I don't mean the nice guys. Keep hollering, and you'll bring them breathing down the backs of our necks."

The prospect of drawing the attention of a bunch of Jaimis's dark lords cut off any desire to make noise. Evidently, the witches in town didn't mix with the group Trey feared running into. Biting her lip as he bound her arms behind her back with a length of rope, she tried to make sense of the prospect of warring factions of dark lords. Never mind her suspicions—Joel just didn't seem like a monster. Whatever his alliances, she'd bet good money on the fact he had nothing to do with the darker aspects of Jaimis's plans, like blood rites and summoning rogue storms.

Better to risk the town than the unknown dangers that lay off to the west in the woods. Not that she had any choice at the moment. Tears streamed down her face as Trey wiped blood off her battered feet with his shirtsleeve. That *hurt!*

"Next time you run off, take a minute to find a pair of goddamned shoes first." Stripping off his shirt so that the only thing between him and the fall chill was a white undershirt, Trey started a tear with his teeth and ripped strips to bind her feet. His sandy blond hair fell across his eyes as he worked, and tension radiated off his rigid shoulders like heat. "You think I'm carrying you back to the house, you're dead wrong."

Her feet tended to, he slid his arm around her waist to help her stand and steadied her. When he touched her, something hot and violent clenched up in the center of her belly. Her nipples tightened, and cold sweat coated her skin. All of a sudden, what Trey and the others planned to do with her seemed like the least of her problems. Shivering so hard she felt like she'd come apart at the seams, Serena whimpered under her breath.

"Oh, shit. It's happening again, isn't it?" Trey touched her trembling arm. "Whatever messed you up after you got too close to that badass magic last night, it's starting again?"

Not bothering to dignify that with a response, Serena pitched forward and vomited onto the leafy ground. When she finished, Trey wiped her mouth with the hem of his shirt, then picked her up like a sack of flour and tossed her over his shoulder. Hanging upside down against his tightly muscled back, she felt the fire inside grow to a raging conflagration.

* * * * *

“Where the fuck is Joel?”

Serena winced as Trey dumped her onto the leather sofa, untied the rope around her wrists, and rounded on Mel as if the elderly witch had contrived for Joel to be absent upon their return. She felt as if her body might spontaneously combust, and she wished everyone would just go away and leave her to die in peace.

“Off dealing with some people who got too close for comfort.” Mel frowned and pushed her hair back behind her shoulders, her agitation enough to indicate that something was terribly wrong. “As for our guest, I’m afraid the aftereffects of whatever happened to her before you and Joel found her last night are surfacing again. If Carmen were here... Well, no help for that at the moment. And without a witch healer...”

“Right. So if Rena’s a dark lord, then I’m messing with the devil. And if she’s not, then I’m messing with someone Joel got to first, and I’m a dead man anyway.”

“What do you care if I’m...?” A wave of nausea crowded out Serena’s ability to speak.

As she closed her eyes against the splintering light, she tried to make sense of this mess. Trey knew about dark lords but didn’t want to have sex with her if she counted herself among them. Did he know about Joel? No witch would announce his presence to humans without subscribing to Jaimis’s insane plans for a world where witches coexisted openly with humans. The rogue witch made that his campaign platform in recruiting new bad guys—“Come hang with us, and I’ll help you work to secure laws to guarantee the safety of our kind.” *Secure nooses around witches’ necks when he outed them to hate-and-fear-filled vigilantes, more like it.* Jaimis had never been what she’d call sane, but his appeal to logic won him a lot of followers among witches tired of hiding their gifts from humans.

Desire sizzled across her skin, and she clutched her belly, doubled up against the pain. *Focus, damn it!* Chances were, staying alert could mean the difference between survival and, well, things too awful to think about. Maybe her earlier speculation about warring factions of dark lords had hit the mark. Could the storms be an attempt to draw vigilantes down on a rival group of witches by drawing attention to their presence?

“Don’t supposed there’s any chance I could convince you to try a simple spell and see if that helps bleed off any of the sexual energy?”

Serena ignored Mel’s entreaty in the face of her rising misery. As pain crept up her spine and her aura shivered inside her like the phoenix about to rise from the ashes of her destroyed flesh, she curled into a fetal position and ripped at the minidress of a shirt that suddenly felt like a down coat in August.

“Your call, Trey. I can’t tell you how to proceed.” Mel’s voice hammered at her like a series of screams, ripping through her head and leaving bursts of pain in the wake of each word. “But you were the one holding her when this started, and I’m guessing her proximity to you set the problems in motion again. I’ve seen you and Joel fight over

what you each wanted since you could first grab at the same toy truck. I suspect your friendship will weather this, too."

"Right." He knelt beside her and placed an arm on her shoulder to get her attention. "Tell me one thing, then. The picture of the boy – Eric. You have to know he's practically family to the elder witch, or you wouldn't be carrying that photo. Did you have it with you because you or anyone you know mean him harm?"

Shaking so hard she bit her tongue, Serena shook her head.

"Out loud!" Trey's ruggedly handsome face hardened into a frown, his blue eyes steely with determination. "You have to say it so Mel can tell me whether or not it's the truth! And don't even try to dodge the question with an evasion. A witch as powerful as Mel – she'll know in a second if you're scooting around the truth."

"No!" Red bursts of pain exploded at the back of her skull, and her mouth felt like cotton. "I'd kill anyone who tried to hurt him!"

"It's the truth, Trey. Whoever she is, whatever she meant to do on the ridge last night, she means no harm to the child."

Quick on the heels of Mel's words, Trey scooped Serena into his arms and carried her through the living room to the stairs. As he took the stairs at a brisk pace, each jolt jarred her vertebrae and pressed her throbbing nipples against the heat of his chest. The pain flared white-hot, eclipsing the throbbing of her bloodied feet.

"I almost hope it turns out you're one of the bad guys, because otherwise, Joel's fucking going to kill me for this." Trey shifted her weight to one arm so he could open the door, then kicked it closed before carrying her across the same guest room she'd woken in earlier and eased her onto the bed.

Though the deepening twilight cast the room into shadow, he didn't bother to switch on the light, for which she gave thanks. In her current state, light might tilt her headache into the vomit zone. Despite the throbbing behind her eyes, hunger ripped through her as Trey brushed his hand across her belly and unbuttoned the tattered shirt. Her feet remained wrapped in the strips of torn fabric, and no doubt she'd get blood all over the snow-white comforter. But all she cared about at the moment was the fact that Trey seemed willing to help her sate her need.

Need? More like a raging inferno of lust. As he bent to brush a kiss across the top of her head, she wondered at the unexpected tenderness of the gesture. But then he flipped her onto her belly, and she gave up trying to reason out his motives.

"Don't move. Back in a minute."

Although she almost screamed in frustration, she lay still – except for a desperate wiggle or two against the bed when rising lust got the best of her. She sighed in relief when she heard Trey's footsteps, but rather than dive on top of her, he sat near the end of the bed and worked at the knots in the makeshift bandages around her feet.

"Later, please, I can't..."

“Can’t walk if we don’t care for your feet, let alone run. With Little Harbor crawling with witches who don’t seem hung up on the finer point of ethics—like that they’re not supposed to use magic to hurt anyone—tending to your feet may tip the balance between life and death if you’ve got to get out of here fast.”

Well, shit. Hard to argue with that. As he tugged away the crusted strips of cloth and cleaned her torn soles with a damp washcloth, she hissed under her breath. *Fuck it all, that hurts!* By the time he patted the skin dry with another cloth, she managed to work complete thoughts through her mind again. For one thing, she wondered how much trouble they’d had from the group of witches she’d almost stumbled onto in the woods. Were the dark lords bothering humans, as well as witches? She shuddered at the thought of the chaos that could ensue if that last cornerstone of ethics broke down among Jaimis’s followers.

“Ow!” Tears dripped down her cheeks as Trey forced the corners of the deepest gash together and applied a bandage across the cut. To her surprise, the hunger abated in the wake of the icy-sharp pain. Something to remember, though the technique would hardly be her first choice for controlling the lust-filled episodes of energy overload.

“Deep breath, here comes another one. Butterfly bandages. Work nearly as well as stitches. But I’ve got to press the wound tight, or they won’t work. Keep breathing, princess.”

Damn good thing he had the bandages around and didn’t get the inclination to pick up Mel’s sewing kit and do a little stitching of his own. With as well as he knew Joel, no doubt Trey would understand that witches couldn’t just head into the ER and risk their unique genetics showing up in routine blood tests.

Hell, with Little Harbor’s healer missing—she’d known the town didn’t have one as soon as she saw the teen witch with acne, and Mel’s comments had confirmed her suspicions—they’d be vulnerable to any sort of attack the dark lords might launch. No doubt part of Jaimis’s plan. Her belly tightened with a fresh spasm of need, and her breasts stung as if someone had brought a bullwhip down across them.

Right, planning later – reducing the energy surplus and wild hunger, now. “I’m sorry—I can’t wait much longer. Oh, fuck—hurts!”

As Trey carried the first-aid supplies over to the dresser, she shivered so hard, her teeth chattered. Resigning herself to the worst, she forced her eyes shut against the onslaught of exploding white light. *How in hell am I going to manage to diffuse the energy the next time the dark lords hold a storm rite, if this is the price? And if I can’t manage it, what the fuck’s going to happen to these small towns on the coast, since I’m the only godsdamned one who can nullify magic?*

“Joel said rough is better.” Trey swatted the side of her ass. “Feeds the need more efficiently.”

“Glad you boys”—she struggled to gulp air as he touched the swollen lips of her pussy—“had a chance to talk after I took off.” Damn Joel for sharing that information and whatever other embarrassing bits he’d bragged about to his buddy.

"Seems you're not in the best position to be offended. I need to know, Rena. What do you need?"

Her breasts felt so raw where they pressed into the mattress she almost wept at the feel of the sheets against her tender skin, and her pussy ached like fury. Earlier, with Joel, the rough parts had eased the pain like nothing else. "Skip the foreplay and go for intensity. Make. Me. Stop. Hurting!"

She twisted her head around to watch as he stripped off his clothes, the glory of his muscular form, shaggy blond hair, and deep blue eyes at odds with her misery. She whimpered at the delay when he snagged his discarded jeans, dragged his wallet from one of the pockets, and located a condom packet. Given her genetic advantages, the waste of time seemed too much to bear.

"I know, I know. Been told often enough by the witches in town that I don't need protection when I'm with them. But some habits are tough to break, all the same."

When he grabbed her hips and pressed his iron-hard cock against her backside, she thought for a moment he meant to enter her ass without so much as a dollop of lube. At the moment, with her skull imploding and wanton need raging through her, damned if she wouldn't let him.

But instead, he lifted her hips and angled the head of his cock against her swollen folds, then drove into her soaking pussy. Taking her doggy fashion, he hit her sweet spot on the first pass, and the pain dulled to the point where she could take three consecutive breaths without gasping.

"Yes – better now – hurts less." The scent of him drove her higher, rich and musky and tinged with pine. "Deeper!"

Even in the midst of her torment earlier, sex with Joel had been deep and easy, a slow, steady rise to a place she could have stayed all day, coming over and over in long, rippling waves. With Trey, the rapid ascent left her breathless, and the steady, athletic pounding had her clawing the bedsheets and biting her lip so she wouldn't scream his name. Bad policy to cry out someone's name when they'd been tossed in bed together by circumstance. For all the hell she knew, he'd allied himself with the bad guys.

"Oh, fuck – so – close! Trey! Now! Oh my gods, Trey!" With her eyes screwed shut and her hands digging into the backs of his forearms, she arched her back to beckon him deeper and crashed into the climax of her life. "Sweet goddess – fuck – more!"

First time she'd called on the goddess since...a long fucking time, but at the moment, the lapse seemed the least of her problems. If Trey stopped now, if he came before wringing every last moment of shuddering release out of her body, she'd die. Simple as that.

Explosions of blue and black flashed before her eyes, and she tensed her back so hard into the blissful arch that she could swear she heard her spine pop. Through it all, Trey kept up the driving rhythm, pushing her body forward a few inches at a time until her head dug into the mound of pillows piled against the headboard, and she couldn't move forward another inch. Through it all, she refused to let go of his arms, twisting

her hands around to hold on, never mind the awkward position with her plastered flat on her belly and his full weight pinning her to the bed.

Trey drove so hard against her cervix that she dug her teeth into her lower lip, hoping beyond hope he wouldn't stop moving *just like that*. Whatever drove her needed this like breath and food. On some level, she knew this would buy her a good deal of time before the hunger built up again, and the beast within whipped her into a frenzy, desperate to feed.

When the door banged open, she strung together a list of curse words so elaborate that by the time she got to, "...hope your fucking grandmother bites the ass of a bastard ape and sucks shit..." Trey laughed out loud.

Joel, on the other hand, seemed less amused. As he flipped the switch to turn on the overhead light, slammed the door closed, and crossed the room to the bed, Trey withdrew so fast, she yelped. He rolled to the left, landing on the floor and springing to his feet in a fight-ready stance. Joel ignored him and grabbed Serena's hand, and Trey seized the opportunity to discard the condom they'd hardly had the chance to use, tossing it in a corner wastebasket.

"She's got fucking chafe marks on her wrists where you tied her arms!"

Okay, so Joel must have gotten briefed by Mel on what went down while he'd dealt with whatever threat had demanded his attention. Why he gave a damn about her safety – let alone a bit of chafed skin on her wrists – eluded her.

Stark naked, covered with sweat from head to toe, and sporting a raging hard-on, Trey rested his hands on his knees, bent at the waist and ready to spring into action. Joel, for his part, didn't seem able to take his eyes off his friend. She may have been wrong about them being partners, but it seemed like Trey's poorly hidden affection toward Joel – plastered across his face like a neon sign while she'd talked with him over pizza earlier – wasn't unreciprocated. These two had it bad. But from all appearances, they were about to beat the shit out of each other.

When Joel sprang, he moved so fast, she scrambled to get out of the way. One second he held her wrist cradled in his hand, and the next, he had Trey pinned to the floor, swinging punches like a prizefighter. Damned if the beast that had taken up residence inside her didn't sit up and lick its chops at the blatant eroticism of the muscular witch – his face fixed in an angry sneer and his black curls flying wildly as he lunged at Trey – pinning the rock-hard, naked human to the floorboards.

Trey landed a punch and threw Joel off him, sending him crashing into the wall. Blood spattered the floor, but she couldn't tell whose. Their limbs were hopelessly tangled as they engaged again and wrestled each other to their knees. Serena felt a rush of power and whimpered under her breath, only now entertaining fear. As if the comforter could provide a layer of protection from whatever magic she sensed, she pulled it around her and clasped it to her chest.

The door banged open, and Mel stood there with wind whipping around her, lifting strands of her snow-white hair in a wild dance against her blue shirt. When the

witch formed a glow sphere, as yellow as the sun and damn near as bright, and then compacted it down to a ball of spun energy, Serena cried out and concentrated on not shaming herself by wetting the bed.

Everything in her ached to use her ability to siphon off the power, diffusing it into a harmless state. But if news of her knack for negating magic got out, chances were she'd have Jaimis himself hot on her heels, seeking the means to make himself invincible in his ongoing battle with Sorren, the elder witch.

"This stops here! I'd be inclined to let you two fight it out and deliver your own punishment." Mel tossed the gleaming orb from hand to hand. "But Rena's scared to death over there. We've got a ring of dark lords breathing down our necks on the outskirts of town, and we can't afford to have either one of you out of action because of a misguided pissing match!"

Joel shoved Trey back against the wall, and they scrambled to their feet. Swearing under his breath, Joel shifted his weight to favor his injured ankle. Witches healed fast, but not quite that fast.

As soon as they separated, Mel dissolved the compact sphere of energy, drawing the power back into herself, and Serena let out a long, shaky breath. Without saying anything further, Mel glided out of the room with her aura crackling around her – the psychic equivalent of a cat arching its back, puffing out its fur, and spitting its fury – and slammed the door shut behind her.

Joel wiped his nose on the back of his sleeve, blotting at the blood. Breathing hard, he reached up to feel the curve of his nose, frowning intently. "Don't think it's broken."

"Didn't hit you hard enough, then." Trey glanced at the pile of clothes on the floor by the bed, as if considering whether to grab his pants and flee. But after a moment he sat beside Serena, gorgeous with the remnants of his summer tan still marking out the clear lines of where his trunks would have been. His sweat-slick hair appeared more brown than blond at the moment, and a delicious assortment of muscles rippled beneath his skin every time he moved. Deep inside her, the beast purred and licked its lips. For once, she agreed with the dark magic that had embedded itself somewhere in the vicinity of her libido following the storm rite. *Fuck Joel for interrupting before she'd had her fill.*

Figuring the scuffle had a lot more to do with Joel walking in on Trey in bed with her than his professed anger that Trey had marked her wrists when he'd tied her earlier, she resisted the urge to lean over and nip Trey's shoulder. But damn, she wanted to taste him. Made no sense, seeing as these two might be involved in something dark and terrifying, mixed up somehow with a faction of dark lords. But evidently one orgasm didn't cut it in terms of quieting the lust that crowded out reason when energy levels hit tilt.

With blood still dripping onto his upper lip, Joel unbuttoned his shirt, crumpled it into a ball, and used it as a makeshift bandage. Serena drew in a little breath of appreciation at the view as he sat on the edge of the bed and applied pressure to the

base of his nose. Even injured, and as angry as a witch facing the wrong end of a spell, Joel looked like a fallen angel. Six-feet-plus of trouble with sculpted cheekbones, dark lashes shrouding his impossibly dark brown eyes, a sensual mouth begging for kisses, and more lean muscle packed under his honey brown skin than any man could build in a gym. The mere sight of him had her licking her lips. Trey clapped Joel on the shoulder and sat beside him, Serena all but forgotten in the moment of male bonding.

Well, screw that. "Hey, remember me?" Great, now where the hell do we go from here?

Chapter Five

Joel pulled the wadded-up shirt away from his nose and felt with his finger to see if the blood flow would resume. When no red droplets appeared, he tossed the shirt over onto the dresser.

"You two do that a lot, don't you?" Rena reached up and smoothed her hair away from her face, looking very small, and bless it, sexy as anything, all huddled up in the white comforter. "You don't know what in hell to do with your feelings, so you pound on each other every chance you get. I bet this isn't the first time you've fought over a woman, either."

Right on. Damn the little witch's insight. His feelings for Trey had been a vulnerable spot for longer than he could remember. Another witch wouldn't have presented a problem. Power draws power, and sex follows. *Nothing simpler.* But Trey was blessed human, and his childhood friend besides.

"So, you think you've got us all figured out." Joel threw all the disdain he could into that statement, but Serena only scooted closer to Trey and laid her head on his shoulder.

"You, I'm sure of." Serena reached up and touched Trey's cheek. "Your feelings came through like a cry in the night when we ate pizza earlier."

Joel's stomach grumbled. He'd missed out on their late lunch, and the sun had long since set. Hunger added to his aggravation that he'd been forced to spend dinnertime chasing off a cluster of overcocky dark lords near the edge of town, aided by three other witches and a dozen armed humans. After dealing with Jaimis's thugs, they'd searched the camp for some sign of Carmen, hoping beyond hope they'd find a clue as to where Jaimis's people might have taken Little Harbor's witch healer. Their failure to find anything didn't improve his mood at all. *And neither does Rena's determination to poke at sensitive topics.*

"But the witch over there..." She inclined her head toward Joel, her expression a mix of pity and disdain. "Witches lie by omission, spinning partial truths rather than risking other witches detecting an outright lie. I bet he's an expert at masking his feelings by now."

What the fuck does she want from me? With a deep breath, he slid his hand into his pocket to finger the note delivered via the tossed knife last night. His problems ran blessed deeper than walking in on his friend screwing a woman he'd claimed first. *Problems run so fucking deep, I'll be lucky to live through the next few weeks.*

"No times for games." Bless it, if an apology would appease her, he'd swallow his pride. "I'm sorry – I lost my temper. Now, we have things to discuss, starting with why you have a photo of a boy Sorren counts as close as kin."

Rena focused on Trey as if no one else had just spoken, and Joel felt his anger rise again. "So, if I asked Joel how he feels about you, it's a given he'd have a handy evasion. But if I ask if you love Joel..."

"What the fuck are you playing at...?" Okay, so she'd figured out he had a thing for Trey. *Fucking Achilles' heel, that.* Chances were she just intended to stall, avoiding questions about how she got Eric's photo, and why they found her passed out near the dark lords' rite. "Not going to work, sweetheart. We have things to discuss."

"As I was saying, if I asked you how you feel about Joel..." Rena stared at Trey until he flushed and looked down at his hands, and all of a sudden, bless it if Joel didn't want to hear his answer. "No doubt you'll crack under pressure. Because he fucking *matters* to you, and having me thrown into the middle complicates the hell out of whatever's going on between you two."

Some simple facts guided his life. The world was round. A morning cup of coffee presented a simple pleasure. Magic remained the one gift he'd received from his birth parents. He might never know what nations his ancestors called home. Couldn't say what brought his mother or father to the farmstead that burned the night police found him outside on a bed of damp leaves. Good and evil were harder to define than ever before. *And Trey doesn't have any interest in men.*

"Come on, Trey. Tell him what you let me see earlier. Explain what he's too scared to tell you himself."

"Enough!" Trey got up and paced across the room, then circled back and sat at the end of the bed, fucking gorgeous with sweat still glistening on his bare chest. The paler skin where his swim trunks had blocked the sun's light all summer created an enticing contrast with his golden back and belly. "Joel doesn't have time for this. I don't have time for this!"

Trey clenched and unclenched his fists, his blue eyes colder than ice. But then Rena scooted forward and touched his back. For an instant, his glance darted in Joel's direction – and Joel knew.

"Why are you doing this, Rena? I know you're pissed off that I sent Trey after you, and having your wrists bound didn't help any." Weary, Joel pulled his legs up close to

his body and rubbed his hand along his ankle, massaging the old scar. “Bottom line, we can’t let you leave until we sort out who you are. Why you have the photo. What you were doing near the rite. Beyond that, we dragged you back for your own protection. This area’s crawling with witches who ditched the ‘harm none’ ethic a long time ago.”

“I’m not trying to make trouble for you!” Rena’s eyes reflected more anger than some people summoned in a lifetime. “Fact is, I’m stuck here. With my body reeling from some sort of magical overload after...being near the storm rite, I’m going to either spend a lot of time in pain – or rely on regular sex.”

Trey made a *shushing* noise and moved closer to Rena, curling his arm around her shoulder. Bless it if Joel didn’t want to be the one comforting her. For all her tough exterior, when her childlike vulnerability shone through, he figured he’d kill to protect her. *Makes no sense, but there it is.*

“A long time ago... Hell, I was just seventeen when it started.” Her voice broke, and she exhaled sharply before continuing. “I fell for two guys. Spent one of the best years of my life with them. But the way our little triangle worked, they scuffled over me too many times to count. And I *hated* that. They’d been friends before I came along, but each of them wanted me so fucking bad, they couldn’t put aside their hurt and jealousy and do the logical thing.”

Trey rubbed slow circles over her back, and when tears trickled down her cheeks, Joel ditched his pride and moved closer to wipe them away. She ignored the gesture, her gaze soft and unfocused.

“Would have been so easy if the three of us could have crawled into bed together. Even at seventeen, I could figure that much out. The only path to peace lay in a mess of six arms, six legs, and one big fucking mess of love. But neither one would back down. They kept competing, pushing me to choose.” She lowered her head, pulled her legs up to her chest with her arms wrapped around her shins, and rested her head on her knees. “And then it was too late.”

Trey leaned over to kiss the side of her neck “What hap –”

“I. Will. Not. Relive. That.” Shoving Trey away and tugging the comforter up under her chin, she choked back a sob. “Do you understand? If I have to rely on each of you to help me ease the burn and stay sane, I *can’t* deal with you flying into a rage every time one finds the other in bed with me. And unlike Sc – the guys in my sad little story, you two want to jump each other so bad, it’s killing you, so if you could just –”

“That true?” Unable to dance around his curiosity any longer, Joel reached out and touched Trey’s arm, uncomfortably aware of his friend’s nudity. Witches had a casual attitude toward bare skin, and for a human, Trey hardly counted as modest. But at the moment, the unencumbered curve of Trey’s spine, his muscular shoulders and thighs, and the unmistakable swell of his cock held Joel rooted in place, hardly able to breathe.

“Hell, if my parents find out, they’ll disown me. I couldn’t live with that. That’s why I’ve never... You’re too close to home. Too risky. A night in Boston with a guy now

and then, that's one thing. But here, with my sisters and little brother popping up all over the place, and my father lurking around like a one-man New England version of the radical Right..."

Trey's outburst upended Joel's world as surely as if someone had proven, beyond dispute, that the pancake-flat earth served as the focal point of the sun's orbit.

At a loss for words, Joel withdrew the dark lord's folded note from his pocket and turned it over and over in his hand. *At what point did I lose control of the course of this discussion?*

"Look, I'd never tell your folks. Flaws and all, I understand how important they are to you – wish I'd had even a few years with my birth parents." Joel rested his hand on Trey's knee and allowed himself a few seconds to imagine where things might go from here – in a very different world. "The rest... I'm sorry, I'm not one to crawl in bed with someone at night and pretend we've never kissed if I run into them on the street. Not how I'm wired."

"Right, so from here...?" Trey shrugged and fidgeted with a corner of one of the sheets.

"From here, we get this conversation back on track, and Rena starts answering some questions." Joel gave her a look designed to intimidate the hell out of her, but bless it if she didn't move in close and snuggle up next to him. "You know, a lot of decent witches cave under Jaimis's pressure to join his supporters. The blackmail he resorts to can be near impossible to fight. Not to mention threats to family members and the like. We'd understand, if someone forced you..."

"Are we discussing me? Or you? Because I'd been wondering if maybe the dark lords threatened your mom, seeing as Trey mentioned you'd been careful to ship her off on vacation while things are dicey here."

Well, shit. Seeing as neither of them could trust the other, getting information sorted out would be a real picnic. "Anyway, I thought you should see this." Not bothering to respond to Rena's implied accusations about his alliances – *fucking can of worms, that* – he unfolded the note and tossed it on the bed.

"What the..." Trey lifted the scrap of paper, scowling as he read. "You mean for Rena to see this, too?"

Her hand darted out, and she tugged the note from Trey's fingers, tearing the corner in the process. Her face clouded as she read. "Common ends can make for a valuable partnership, my friend. Meet me in Boston in front of the aquarium, Friday afternoon. I have something of yours. Something valuable. J."

"Trey, you and me..." Joel shook his head. "You can see from the note that anyone close to me right now would be at risk..."

Rena took a long, shuddering breath, and the color bleached out of her tan. "You have proof this is from Jaimis?"

“Delivered last night near the site of the storm rite. Taped to a tossed knife, courtesy of a dark lord who seemed young enough to be home playing Nintendo. Seems like Jaimis’s style. Heaping insult upon intimidation.”

Trey slapped his hand against his thigh. “When Jaimis says he has something of yours, he means Carmen. Damn it, the sick fuck has Little Harbor’s witch healer.”

“Or maybe she wandered off to join the dark lords on her own, and he’s using the illusion of a kidnapping as leverage.” Joel had put his heart and soul into this town, but this cloak-and-dagger shit left him wanting to pick up and move to Canada. Not like sharing space on a rumpled bed with a naked witch and his very naked best friend helped his ability to reason this through, either. “Or she could be somewhere else entirely, and when Jaimis heard about her absence, he decided to use our assumptions about his involvement to force a meeting.” *Fuck, the more I try to convince myself otherwise, the more I believe the rogue witch really did kidnap Carmen.*

“You mentioned the message came after the rite. Did they succeed in raising a killer storm?” Rena’s voice quavered, and she clenched her fists at her sides. “Were there more deaths?”

And didn’t that line of inquiry just bring them right back to the “what in hell were you doing out there last night?” question. “No. Nothing more than a squall. Some small-craft warnings, but no ships lost, no waterspouts, no high winds like the other times. So, since you know what’s been happening with the storm rites, tell me why you were...”

“Fuck, will *someone* explain what in hell’s going on here.” Trey sounded like a man on the edge. “Rena, honestly, we’re on your side. We want to *help*. And Joel, I get that Jaimis wants to meet with you because you were instrumental in convincing the Little Harbor witches to—”

“Enough!” More than Rena needed to know until they sorted out her motivations. Joel massaged his temples, tension mounting by the second. Then Trey clasped the back of his neck and pulled him in for a kiss, and his world stopped.

Serena forgot everything else and watched, captivated. For over a year of her life, she’d spent most of her waking moments trying to figure out how to engineer a moment like this between Scott and Dane and wash away the tensions tearing them all apart. And then it was too late. Now, seeing the two heads pressed together, dark curls and sandy blond strands mingling as they worked at each other’s mouths like starving men, she choked up with a mix of past regrets and...hope.

Any rational reason why that feeling should flutter inside her, eager and full of life, eluded her. For all she knew, Joel could be mixed up with the same crowd that produced a witch crazed enough to kill Scott. Hell, the note from Jaimis—not only the world’s scariest witch, but someone who’d messed with her family before and would love to get his hands on her—proved Joel walked in fucking dangerous circles. By choice or not didn’t matter for shit, if it brought Jaimis sniffing around here.

And yet as she watched Trey stroke Joel's back, the motion rhythmic and soothing, she sat there grinning like a fool. The hunger she'd picked up while channeling the dark lord's storm magic sat up and salivated with approval as she watched Joel's tongue dart deep inside Trey's mouth. The prospect that she might be able to feed the searing need by simply observing gave her something to celebrate. Until she figured out what in hell went wrong and found a way to set things right, she didn't fancy the notion of hopping into bed with Joel or Trey every time her body sent darts of pain searing deep into her belly.

When Trey pulled back and glanced her way, she let out a sigh of disappointment. If they let reason take over instead of going with the moment, she suspected she'd be one very desperate, disappointed witch. And with the hunger rearing its head, she'd have to do something about that before she approached the point where she'd rather die than draw another breath.

"Those two guys you mentioned, the three of you never...?" Trey paused and shook his head. "Because if I'm not mistaken, the situation here seems to beg the question."

When Joel chuckled, Trey cuffed his shoulder.

"No." Her voice came out way too serious, a counterpoint to Joel's nervous burst of laughter. "I said 'triangle,' remember? Not 'triad.' It was always me and Da — one of them, or me and the other. If one walked in while the other had me naked in his arms, the fistfight that followed often included the two of them tossing some mean-spirited spells each others' way."

Well, fuck, she'd almost said either Scott's or Dane's names twice now, and she knew it wouldn't take Joel long to string the facts together and figure out who she was if she let much more information slip. Every witch had heard the tale, the whole godsdamned horrific thing—what happened to Scott, Serena's epic grief, Dane's inability to cope. *Impossible to walk in the elder witch's inner circles without the whole fucking world of witches knowing her business.* Craving privacy, she'd become Rena and left the world of witches behind. Now, given Joel's uncertain allegiances, hiding her identity — and her connection to Sorren — was more important than ever.

"Why'd you break up?" Joel still had an arm around Trey, but he reached out to grab her hand. "Not to pry, but when you talk about them, you get all misty-eyed, as if the love's still fresh."

Just like that, her eyes filled with tears again, and she lost control. Trey stared with the frozen horror of someone watching a train wreck. But Joel used his free hand to grab her around the hips and scoop her into his lap, managing the maneuver with one arm still lodged around Trey's waist. Crumbling in on herself, she sobbed as Joel crooned to her and stroked her back.

"Old wounds hurt more with the world crumbling around us, don't they?" Joel took Trey's hand and placed it on her back, then placed his own over it, so that they

rubbed along the path of her spine together, fingers splayed out to soothe her. "Seems like nothing these days makes sense."

Didn't it fucking figure the guy with possible connections to the dark lords would end up being the sensitive one? Damned if she didn't want to forget all that and focus on the heat of Joel's hand on her naked back.

"My ex, Gwen, used to do that when I couldn't sleep—rub my back like you're doing now." *Bad move.* Images of Gwen's sun-kissed body stretched out beside her, strawberry blonde hair cascading over her naked breasts, brought on a fresh round of sobs.

"Is that another question Joel shouldn't ask? Because I'd like to do anything we can to move things back onto more cheerful ground, and if you want me to punish him for asking the personal question that got this all started, I'd be glad to kick him around a little."

Despite herself, Serena choked out a laugh. No one would ever mistake Trey for Mr. Sensitivity, but his humor worked better than Joel's tender caresses and well-intentioned inquiries.

"No. Gwen just ditched me because she figured out I'm a witch—or rather, because I'm a witch who won't use my goddess-given talents, even in the face of hypothetical rape, mutilation, armed robbery, or terrorist attacks."

Trey snorted. "Sounds like your girlfriend was the cheerful sort."

"Black belt, owner of a security firm, ex-military, and self-defense instructor. Not very trusting of mankind in general." All Gwen's flaws—her inability to compromise, her tendency to bully people in arguments, her paranoid view of the world—came flooding back, and she felt a bit better. "She could make me come in seconds flat, though, and you can't imagine how beautiful..."

Too much information. Not like they needed to know any of that. Most of all, Gwen had provided a solid attachment in the wake of unimaginable loss. A solid *human* attachment. Hell, bottom line, she'd loved her like crazy. Faults and all.

Serena glanced sideways at Joel. Never in a million years would she have predicted she'd end up in bed with another witch, with as hard as she'd worked to separate herself from her own people. Let alone, one who'd gotten mixed up in some seriously scary shit.

Then he leaned down to kiss her, and she tasted Trey on his lips, and all her doubts gave way to a flash of heat that had more to do with her own wants and needs than whatever magical shit messed her over last night. When Trey lifted her hair out of the way and brushed a line of kisses down the back of her neck, following Joel's lead, she all but came unglued.

In the ensuing chaos of movement, she couldn't say for sure if she or Trey lunged first to unzip Joel's pants. As it worked out, they got in each other's way so much during the process that Joel shoved them both to the side and tugged off his own jeans and briefs. Until that moment, she'd been afraid either Joel or Trey would decide this

was too weird after a lifetime of friendship and back out. *Most likely Joel, with his uptight list of reasons he and Trey shouldn't get together.*

But having three naked people on a sex-stained bed upped the heat to the point of no return, and as Joel's cock sprang free, thick and long with moisture beading at the tip, Trey sat back on his heels and stared.

"Sweet Jesus, I've dreamed this so often, I have the moves memorized." Leaning forward to brush his fingers along the curve of her ass, Trey laughed. "Except for you, of course. Adding you into this moment makes it wilder than anything I could have imagined."

Joel moved forward and locked his arms around Trey's waist, pressing into his body so that they rose on their knees, their cocks pressed together. "All humans talk this much in bed? Because I can think of better things..."

Trey pressed a hand to the back of Joel's neck and kissed him with enough passion to melt wax, long and wet, with a good deal of tongue. Again, the hunger sat up and panted, eager to see more. Whatever dark magic lodged inside her during that fucking rite seemed as keen on voyeurism as it was on rough and rowdy sex. Short of figuring out how to fix the problem, understanding how things worked seemed like the best she could do for now.

Her body radiated warmth as Trey reached down to circle his fist at the base of Joel's cock. *Oh, yeah, the hunger likes to watch.*

"Get over here, princess. Don't think we plan to leave you out of this, do you?" Trey snarled as Joel nipped his shoulder. "More than enough room for three here."

The overhead light sparkled across the gleam of sweat on Joel's wide shoulders, and his curls clung limply to his neck. Trey's face twisted into something just shy of a grimace as Joel shoved him onto his back and straddled his hips, his weight pressing down on his friend's cock.

Hell, since Joel seemed to have plans for the other end... Serena scooted over and straddled Trey's mouth, shivering when he moaned against her hot flesh. Careful to support her weight on her knees, she pressed her hands against his moisture-slick chest, enjoying the feel of his skin and the feather-soft covering of golden hair. She cried out at the first pass of his tongue.

Following Serena's lead, Joel slid down and nestled his face close to Trey's cock, nuzzling him like a puppy. Facing toward Trey's chest, she had a perfect view of the action, but when Trey circled his tongue and ended the move with a gentle nip to her clit, she gave up her inclinations to play voyeur and fell forward.

Her hair spread out across Trey's stomach as she snuggled close, and her breasts pressed tight against his body as he worked some very human magic with his tongue. She clenched her thighs close to either side of his head, holding him tight—not that he seemed to have any inclination to escape. With her head pillowed on Trey's belly, she could hear every delicious, slippery, wet noise as Joel lapped, sucked, and teased his friend's cock.

Trey fisted his hand in her hair, and she moaned at the pressure when he tugged in rhythm with each pass of Joel's mouth. At least he hadn't insisted on a condom this time. *Man's going to play with witches – he may as well accept the basic facts of the game. No disease or pregnancy risk – no need for added protection. Damned if I want to suck on latex when my turn comes to pleasure Trey, and right now, I want my mouth on him more than I can say.*

Joel released Trey's cock and sat back, a look of awe on his face. "Well, don't let me stop you."

When she realized she'd connected with Joel's thoughts, she panicked and wiggled away from Trey's mouth. "I never... I don't..." Fear all but choked her, and she gave up her attempt to explain.

"Felt good, feeling you brush against my mind like a timid kitten. No shame or fear in that. Just part of your nature as a witch."

As Trey sat up and pulled her onto his lap, Joel moved closer, and they sandwiched her between them. Her heart pounded so fast, she felt dizzy, and she tried to accept the fact that she'd slipped and forged a psychic connection for the first time since Scott's death.

"Don't know what happened to you that you're so terrified of using your gifts, sweetheart. Might as well be a fish afraid to use its gills." Leaning in close, Joel lifted her hair out of the way and brushed a line of kisses along the curve of her neck, then along her shoulder. "More like than not, your fear of magic's partially to blame for the hunger, seeing as you're too frightened to slough off the unwanted energy you picked up with a few spells, as nature intended. Rather than being scared half out of your head, why don't you view touching thoughts with me as a baby step toward healing?"

Problem with sensitive guys is they're too damned perceptive. "I...I'm okay now. Please, can we just go back to what we were...?"

"Not likely." Joel settled her farther back into Trey's arms before hopping out of bed and padding across the room to a dresser. "Waited too damn long for this night to waste it on an oral-only event."

When he opened a dresser drawer, fished around, and tossed a tube of lubricant to Trey, she let out a sigh of relief. With the three of them all tangled up in a pile of limbs, she could forget her fear and focus on the pleasure.

"This for you or me?" Trey tossed the lube from hand to hand. "'Cause I'd just as soon get past the conversational part of the evening and move ahead."

"For you." Joel shoved the dresser drawer closed and took a running leap back onto the bed. "Though in the long run, we'll both benefit."

Serena scrambled out of the way as he knocked Trey onto his back on the mattress, nearly plowing her down in the process. Joel wrestled the tube free from Trey's hand and popped the flip cap. When Joel grabbed her hand and squeezed a generous dollop of lube over her fingers, she responded with a puzzled frown.

“Figured you might like to do the honors.” Joel’s grin stretched so wide, she considered wiping the smug look off his face with a sharp cuff to his shoulder. “Not about to leave you out of this.”

Okay, smug or not, he had a point. Trey rolled onto his side, and she took a steadying breath and brought her slippery fingers to the crease of his ass. Sliding them downward until she felt the tight pucker of flesh, she felt a jolt of sexual power as he shuddered and groaned under his breath.

Chapter Six

"Come on, princess, don't be shy." Trey shivered again and eased back against the pressure of her fingers.

Joel slid his hands around her chest and cupped her breasts in his palms as she slid her finger into Trey's ass. By the time she reached the first knuckle, Joel abandoned the gentle preliminaries and began working her nipples back and forth between forefingers and thumbs, applying enough pressure that she wondered whether she or Trey felt more intensity at the moment. Deciding it should be Trey, she eased a second finger in beside the first, and he reached back for her other hand and brought it forward, wrapping her fingers around his cock.

Every time she moved her fingers deep inside him, his cock twitched in her hand, hot and swollen. As Joel stretched her nipples away from her body, tugging until she gritted her teeth against the burn, she thrust a bit harder than she should have, and Trey bucked back against her thighs.

"Right, much more of this and the game's going to be over before we start." Joel released her breasts and reached down to tug her wrist until she slid her fingers free, eliciting a muttered protest from Trey. "Best part's coming, friend of mine. No need to piss and moan."

Hell, Joel might be Mr. Sensitive with her, but he sure didn't cut Trey a lot of slack. As Joel got up to fetch a cloth from the dresser and tossed it to her so she could wipe her fingers, she wondered if they were about to hit an awkward transition.

But Joel found his way back to the bed in seconds flat and guided her around in front of Trey, then settled in the spot she'd just abandoned. Trey grabbed her hips and pulled her up against him, not wasting any time. As he slid the head of his cock between the slick folds of her pussy, using his hand to help him get the angle right—which took a hell of a lot more talent lying face-to-face on their sides—Joel spooned himself against Trey's back.

Serena struggled to keep her balance as Joel grabbed Trey's hips and began a process that produced some very enthusiastic noises on Trey's part and enough motion to nearly tip them all over. "This isn't going to work. If Trey keeps flailing against me, I'm going to roll over onto my back, and we'll come unglued." Sweet goddess, it felt good to laugh.

"Trey's just a little tense. Once he relaxes, you're going to love this. Might be a bit more stability if you were the one in the middle. But no way am I going to miss out on the chance to feel Trey's tight ass around me. More important, I'm not going to try that with you until you trust us completely – and we're a long way from that yet."

Hell, Joel's done this before. The realization sent a wave of heat up her chest to her face. As for the thought of her in the center of a man sandwich, she'd fantasized about it the entire year she'd been enmeshed in that little love triangle with Scott and Dane. But now that the fantasy had a chance of unfolding in real time, it scared the shit out of her. Not just because of the fact she hadn't yet decided where Joel and Trey's alliances lay, or even because being in bed with a witch after all these years made her nervous as hell. The thought of being filled twice over, stretched tighter than nature ever intended – for real – sent scary little shivers down her spine.

"Awful quiet" – Trey sucked air into his chest in a long, shuddering breath and pressed forward so hard, her clit stung – "all of a sudden, princess."

"There, just like that." Joel's voice came out low and soothing, as if he were trying to gentle a skittish animal. "Hold on right here and just breathe a minute. No one move. Nice and quiet and easy."

Though his words were no doubt intended for Trey, they worked their magic on her as well. Serena snuggled her face against Trey's chest as tension flowed out of her body. After a while, she got impatient and gave an exploratory clench around Trey's cock.

"And here I thought I'd be the one who couldn't hold still a second longer without screaming in frustration." Squeezing her ass where his hands still gripped her tight for balance, Trey surged forward. "Holy fuck, I've never imagined anything this good."

When Trey pressed so deep she whimpered at the overfull feeling, Serena pulled back at the same moment Joel initiated a thrust that increased Trey's momentum against her tenfold, and she felt herself tipping onto her back. She yelped, envisioning herself at the bottom of a pileup. Just when she thought they wouldn't be able to avert disaster, Joel reached past Trey to pull her forward, and she regained her sense of equilibrium.

"Bless it if this isn't easier with two witches – all linked, so we know how to set the rhythm of thrust and countersupport." Joel's impatience would have been hard to take if it didn't go along with a soothing caress to her side. "Look, I can't link with Trey, but seeing as you've already brushed my thoughts a couple of times..."

"No!" Fear crowded out rational thought, and she tried to squirm free of Trey's embrace, but he held her tight against him.

"Shh. I'm sorry. Whatever happened to you must have been awful for your fear to rise that fast, just at the thought of connecting with me. Never mind, we'll sort this out another way."

Joel cupped his palm along the curve of her jaw, and she wondered – not for the first time – how someone so gentle could be mixed up in a town where witches flaunted their powers in front of humans, defying the oldest rules known to their people. Only dark lords supported a platform of open coexistence with humans – didn't they?

"Sounds obvious, but I think if we all focus on the basics – rhythm, thrust, and counterthrust – we'll get this right." Joel reached up to brush his fingers across her hair before grabbing onto Trey's hips again. "I'll try to behave and let the two of you call the shots so I don't send you tumbling onto your back again, Rena."

Snuggled close, with Trey's cock inside her and his thumbs digging into her hips, she wanted to hear him – and Joel – say her full name so much it hurt. Pushing the thought aside, she focused on the heat of Trey's chest against her pebbled nipples and tried to take slow, even breaths.

"Okay, here we go." She moved forward, taking every inch of Trey's cock as deep as she could. As Joel pressed forward as well, driving Trey's body harder against hers, she reached past Trey and dug her nails into Joel's shoulder.

"Oh, shit, that's good." Trey's words tore out of him in gasps. "Again."

Easing back, she missed the overfull feeling, and her body fluttered tight around the head of Trey's cock, clinging to him of its own volition. *Please, please, please let him say...*

"More – again!" Trey's chest heaved against her as he gasped for air.

"Yes!" She surged forward, pressing so hard, her clit ground against Trey's pelvic bone. "Oh yes!"

This time, Trey remained silent, but she and Joel moved back at the exact same moment, secure in the pattern now. Trey shuddered and groaned, and she exalted in the power they'd claimed over him. No spell, no wild spring ritual with naked bodies writhing in a Beltane circle, could possibly hold this much raw, erotic power.

Forward again. Trey arched his head back until it rested against Joel's, and his legs thrashed between them. Reveling in the friction and stretched so tight her flesh stung with that delicious, "hell, there's no more room" sensation, Serena pulled back with more than a little reluctance. If she'd stayed pressed close about three more seconds, she'd have pitched over the edge into the abyss, screaming all the way.

Joel made small grunting noises under his breath with the next thrust, and Trey shook so hard, the vibrations kicked her into nirvana. She yelled his name, then Joel's, as she clung to them and let the wet spasms pull her under. When she could breathe again, she drew back, picking up the rhythm of give-and-take as the aftershocks twitched through her belly, and her juices dripped out around Trey's cock onto the sheets.

At some point, she let instinct take over and stopped thinking about her movements, conscious of nothing beyond the wonderful scent of musky male tinged with pine and fallen leaves, and how fucking good it felt as she and Joel made love to Trey. Some part of her sensed when Joel's aura broke free, never mind that her eyes remained tightly shut. She felt the familiar tug of energy around them, and though a little piece of fear lodged in her belly, her body felt too damn good to raise a fuss.

"Oh, shit. Ohmyfuckinngod!" Still clutching her hips, Trey dug his fingers into her flesh so hard, she cried out, and when she felt his cock surge hot and wet inside her, she moaned right along with him.

Joel's aura flared strong, ripping around them like the autumn wind as he let out a long, tortured groan. The passion tearing through her knocked the air from her lungs, and her stomach ached with the intensity of the spasms. Bright red light flashed behind her closed eyelids, and when it turned brilliant violet, she realized she'd opened her eyes and faced the light of Joel's aura.

Along with the edgy fear came a rush of appreciation. *Because there's nothing – just fucking nothing – more beautiful than the flash and glow of a witch's aura when he comes.*

Joel withdrew but stayed close to Trey, stroking his back as they came down off the high. Rena remained quiet, and he hoped he hadn't frightened the crap out of her when his aura broke free. Nothing to be done about it now. Among witches, he rated pretty high on self-control, but nothing short of an act of the gods could have kept his energy suppressed as he came, buried tight in Trey's ass. *Never thought I'd see the day I got to do that.*

Reaching up to tousle Trey's hair, he felt an overwhelming rush of affection for both him and Rena. *Dangerous, that.* Trey had made it perfectly clear that he couldn't carry on a relationship with another man in Little Harbor, and for all he knew, Rena could be neck deep in a mess with the dark lords. If she'd joined them, she'd been coerced. He had no doubt of that now. *But once in, not many manage to get out alive.* He shuddered at the thought.

"You cold?" Trey sat up, stretched so that each ridge of his rock-hard abs was displayed to perfection, and then got up and closed the window, still cracked open from when Joel had raised it this morning to let in some fresh air. "There'll be a frost tonight. We should go out and cover the garden with blankets later, if we don't want to lose the late tomatoes."

Still keeping her own counsel, Rena sat up and folded her legs, pretzel-like, with her feet tucked up on top of each thigh near the hip. She rested her hands palm up on her knees, her thumb and forefinger touching to form a circle. Trey snagged a pile of clothes from the floor, handed Joel his briefs and jeans, and rummaged in the dresser until he found a shirt and pair of sweatpants, which he tossed to Rena.

The pants would be huge on her, even if she turned them over several times at the waist and rolled up the legs. When they'd searched her car after they brought it back

from the old fire road she'd left it on up near the ridge, he'd found a bunch of clothes in a bag in the trunk. They'd have to bring them in soon, but the thought of crawling out of the nice warm bed held little appeal at the moment.

Chilly in the evening air, he got up to tug on his briefs and jeans. After Trey pulled his on as well, he settled close to Rena, though not so close as to disturb her meditation. Feeling restless, Joel paced around the room a few times before he sat back on the bed. The white comforter he'd chosen for the guest room would need a lot of bleach to restore it to its former condition, and he didn't know if he'd be able to salvage the light blue sheets. But when he looked up and caught Trey watching him, he smiled so wide that his face ached.

Trey reached out to touch his thigh, and Joel shivered at the contact. "Felt damn good."

When Rena made a soft noise, they turned their attention to her. Her breasts and neck bore the rosy flush that followed sex, and her wavy brown hair looked so touchable in its just-fucked disarray that he had to sit on his hands to avoid reaching out to stroke it. This moment belonged to her, and bless it if he'd interrupt her serenity. He suspected she was gathering herself, preparing for the questions he'd let slide earlier.

Hell, he couldn't allow affection to cloud his judgment. They had to find out why she had Eric's photo and what in the world she'd been doing, getting off near that rite. And why she'd passed out, for that matter.

"Spell! Bad spell!" Rena rose up on her knees, arms raised, and Trey dived off the bed and grabbed the shotgun he kept underneath. Every damn room in the house had some sort of gun tucked away, since humans insisted they needed to face the dangers of the dark lords armed.

Though he couldn't perceive any threat as yet, the conviction behind Rena's warning had been absolute. Joel paced the room, trying to get a feel for where the danger might lie. The house felt secure. He could hear Mel rattling around in the kitchen, and he reached out to brush her thoughts, echoing Rena's warning. Shouts followed downstairs as she spread the alarm to whatever humans were taking this shift, helping guard the house.

Damned if it didn't make him crazy, being treated like some sort of crown prince with his personal guards, but Mel had a point when she insisted that Jaimis would seek him out as an ally. The attacks were probably leading up to just that event, judging from the note attached to the knife last night.

"Holy mother of..." Trey whirled and pointed his shotgun at the window as a gigantic flaming bird swooped toward the glass out of the darkness.

Joel readied a counterspell, shielding the room with all his might as he called a glowing violet sword to hand. Not like he could fight off the spell with the sword — though if he needed to defend himself, it could cut as surely as steel if it came to hand-to-hand combat. But the length would direct his magic as surely as a wand or staff.

Right now, he needed every advantage to enhance his power, because damned if the fire spell wasn't about to break through the window.

In a flash, the phoenixlike apparition shimmered and then disappeared altogether. Rena sat clutching her knees and moaning softly. Outside, he heard shouts, followed by a volley of gunshots. At the moment, he didn't find it so objectionable that the humans had such a love affair with the instruments of death. As for the more pressing problem... *What in the fuck happened to the spell, and when's the next one coming at us?*

"Something's wrong with Rena." Trey stood by the window with his shotgun pointed outward into the night, but he looked back long enough to draw Joel's attention to the trembling woman.

Pulling her onto his lap, he cast outward with all his might, locking a protective sphere around them, then pushed farther to include Trey. Beads of sweat covered his back, and his head ached from the effort of drawing power so quickly. Despite his efforts to comfort her, Rena kept trembling. Any malevolent spell should have loosened its grasp as soon as he locked down the area with his own magic.

What the hell had happened to that fire spell? He'd never seen magic disappear like that once launched, short of a witch dying midspell. But he'd have felt the death cry, the sudden imbalance of power. Bless it, what was he supposed to make of the fact that Rena's shuddering coincided with the disappearance of the fiery death magic? "Tell me what I can do to help you, Rena. Tell me what's wrong."

His back rigid with tension, he rocked her in his arms as she shivered. Her skin felt clammy and cold, and he tugged the comforter around them, hoping his shared body heat would help. Trey stayed by the window but cast frequent glances back toward Rena, his agitation evident in the restless tapping of his foot against the hardwood floor.

"Seems like whoever made it this far past the guards took off when our little militia started firing at them." Trey abandoned his post by the window and joined them on the bed, though he kept the shotgun at his side. "She going to be all right?"

Hell, if she'd just done what he suspected she'd done, she'd managed the impossible. As for Trey's question, he had no blessed idea. He cast out to find Mel. When he'd established that she'd finished helping chase off the intruders and was on her way back to the house, he issued a plea for her assistance. Within moments, her feet pounded up the stairs.

"What do you mean, she diffused the spell?" Whipping around the corner like a force of nature with her snowy braid swinging against her denim jacket, Mel darted inside the door and rushed over to Rena. "That's impossible. No witch can do that. Especially not one so frightened of magic she can't even face her own aura, even though the surplus magic she absorbed near the rite last night is blessed near eating her alive in its struggle to get out. Of course she didn't..."

Mel's voice drifted off, and through their shared connection, Joel knew she'd reached the same conclusion he had. Sweet goddess, Rena had somehow negated

another witch's magic. Not *even though* she was scared to death of magic. More likely than not, *because* power terrified her.

"An adaptation." Mel scowled, and she shook her head. "Must to be something she stumbled on, because she can't stand to be around witches' power."

Trey reached out to touch Rena's sweaty forehead. "You mean she made the spell just" —he held his hands in front of him and splayed his fingers outward— "go poof? Vanish? You told me things don't work that way. That energy launched has to be countered with an act of defensive magic. Either that, or find its mark and do what it was kindled to do."

The way Rena's head dropped back against Joel's chest, so limp he wondered if she'd drifted into unconsciousness, he feared more for her safety as every minute passed. "No. Things don't work that way. Not *ever*, in the entire history of recorded magic."

Mel leaned forward to cup her hands on each side of Rena's ashy-pale cheeks. "And yet, I'm all but certain that has to be what just happened here. The witch who cast the spell still lives. No one died when we chased off the handful of intruders just now. Joel never had a chance to engage with a counterspell before the threat...evaporated. Goddess help her, if Jaimis finds out she can do this... A witch capable of diffusing others' spells would seal the balance in favor of his side, once and for all."

"We can't tell anyone! Not a single witch or human outside this room can know what Rena did tonight." The thought of Jaimis capturing Rena had Joel clenching his teeth in helpless rage. Even if the rogue witch had tried to coerce her into his band of dark lords already, he couldn't possibly know about her unique gift, or he'd have chained her to the wall and made certain she never got away. "Goddess help her. The witch who launched the spell's going to suspect something...unprecedented happened here."

As Joel held Rena close to his chest, he feared he'd never find enough power to keep her safe if the rogue witch himself came after her. Assuming she survived the aftermath of whatever she'd just done to disperse the death spell. His mouth dry with fear, he rocked her back and forth in his arms, willing her to open her eyes and speak to him.

* * * * *

With morning light streaming in the windows of Mel's cozy little Cape Cod, not to mention a good night's sleep between her and the exhaustion that followed diffusing the death spell, Serena felt almost normal. After retrieving her travel bag from her car, she'd chosen a pair of her favorite jeans and a thick blue sweater to ward off the chill. Amazing what having her own clothes back did to boost morale.

Joel and Trey had left a mess when they'd searched her old Honda yesterday, but at least they hadn't removed anything —other than her purse. Hard to be annoyed when she owed them a big "thanks" for finding her keys in her pocket and having someone

drive her car back to Little Harbor, rather than leaving it for the dark lords to pick over. Didn't hurt that they'd brought her back with them, rather than leaving her for the dark lords to pick over. Of course, that wouldn't make this any easier.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Joel rested a hand on her shoulder and nodded toward the breathtaking panorama visible from the picture windows at the back of Mel's house. He cut a striking image, standing there in the morning light with his tight jeans hugging the curves of his ass, his black tee and faded denim jacket clinging to his upper body like a second skin. "I never get tired of this. Especially on days like today, when the ocean's green blue, and the sky's so clear the gulls show up against the blue backdrop like white points of light."

Most likely, Trey would have looked out over the water and commented that the sailing would be good today and maybe he could do a bit of fishing later. That she knew the two well enough to predict their divergent views of the world after so little time together provided more than a little cause for concern. When Serena spotted a cluster of seals near a sandbar, her throat choked up tight, and she longed to be back home in San Francisco, working in the marine mammal rescue program.

"The texture's different than the Pacific. The color, the pattern of the waves. But yes, there's nothing more beautiful." With a sigh, she left the window and pulled out an old wooden chair at Mel's kitchen table. She toyed with the soft yellow fringes on the tablecloth and took a deep breath for courage. "I'm feeling okay now, so we may as well get this over with."

The door banged open at the front of the house, and a moment later, Mel and Trey entered the kitchen, arms full of grocery bags. They could have passed for mother and son in their frayed jeans and thick, cream-colored sweaters. Her hopes of stalling vanished when Trey tossed milk and eggs randomly into the refrigerator, and Mel told him to leave the dry goods for later. Joel pulled out a chair beside her, and Mel and Trey settled across from them.

"I checked the defenses on the way in. The checkpoints are secure, and the double ring of guards around my property is tight enough that no death spells will get past without a warning, even if a powerful witch casts one from a distance." Mel nodded toward the back of the house. "Being up on a bluff over the water provides a natural defense in back. Anyone comes by boat, we'll see them long before they get here, and then they'd have to climb the narrow trail up to the house."

"Ree says she's ready to answer some questions." Joel picked up the coffee mug he'd left out earlier, tilting it back and forth in his hands. "Let's start with who the hell you really are."

"Rena Hennesy. I use the surname even among witches, because I've lived as a human so long, it feels natural. I've been settled in San Francisco for the past five years, and I'm working on a degree in marine biology – though my grades are crap lately. Can't seem to concentrate. I've got a tiny apartment, and I work in the marine rescue program, as well as at Starbucks, to help make rent." Damn him for holding her in his arms all night, cradled between him and Trey, blurring the lines further. *Friend or*

enemy? How could she decide, now that her emotions were tangled in the mix? “Not much more to tell.”

“And in your spare time, you make badass spells vanish.” As Trey ran a hand through his hair, the morning light illuminated reddish brown highlights in the sandy gold mess. In his fisherman’s sweater and beat-up old jeans, he looked better than a body had a right to, and it had taken everything she had this morning to turn down his invitation for a quickie in the shower. “Not to mention you hang around fucked-up rites and then pass out with your face in the mud.”

Heat flushed up from her chest to her face, and she gnawed her lower lip.

Joel’s lips tugged into a frown, though his severe expression did nothing to lessen the pull she felt toward him as light played across his sculpted cheekbones, and the hunger rattled through her gut, raising her temperature a few notches. He stared down into the empty coffee mug as if it could answer his questions. “The photo of Eric...”

“Lots of people befriended Eric after Jaimis let loose a pen of half-starved rats on the poor kid, and Sorren’s enforcers rescued him. Sorren had half the population of Midwest witches staying at his estate for protection during the height of the blood rites scare. I lived in Wisconsin back then, so I was one of them.” All truth. But revealing anything more than she had to before she understood Little Harbor’s alliances seemed foolhardy at best, fatal at worst.

Mel stood up and paced to the picture window, then whirled and faced Serena. With the ocean shimmering behind her and her hair moving in white eddies as her power rose, she looked both stunning and terrifying. “The firebird last night, I looked it up in some ancient spell books. Best I could figure, the death spell would have burned you all alive if you hadn’t...stopped it somehow.”

“Joel had a protective sphere locked tight around all three of us.” Trey glanced toward Joel, then back at Mel. “Most likely, that would have been enough to hold it off long enough for us to get out alive.”

“Chances are, Jaimis intended the spell as a test.” Mel continued to pace, her aura flaring out enough to make Serena flinch. “He plans to meet with you this afternoon—whether or not you show’s another matter—and my best guess is, he didn’t want to waste his time if you’re not as strong a witch as he’s heard.”

“But it’s Rena who ended up getting tested. The dark lord who cast the spell will report back to Jaimis on that.” Joel rested his hand on Rena’s shoulder. “Seems to me, the stakes just went up, sweetheart, and your best bet for survival is to level with us.”

Chapter Seven

Fuck! Not like I haven't already figured out that I put myself on Jaimis's map of notable witches last night. If his dark lords haven't already connected me with the dissolution of their storm rite and reported back to him on that, in which case, I'm doubly screwed.

"Faulty metaphor, if you ask me." Joel slammed the ceramic mug down onto the table. "Doubly screwed's what Trey was last night. Not such a bad thing. What you'll be if Jaimis gets his hands on you is *doubly dead*. That's if you're lucky, and he doesn't figure out a way to coerce you into performing for him, nullifying any spells the good guys throw his way."

So much for Mr. Sensitive. At the same moment Trey delivered a sound blow to Joel's shoulder, it dawned on her that Joel had picked up her thoughts. *Again.* Before her stomach finished doing its initial flip-flop, Joel kindled a violet glow sphere over his palm. Goose bumps rose along the back of her arms as she felt magic swell around her.

"Hold out your hands." The violet light softened Joel's features, and the part of her that didn't seem intent on quaking with terror wanted to lean over and lick his neck. "You have my word, I won't harm you. Not now, not ever. And also my word that this is necessary – possibly for your survival."

Pulled in by his earnest intensity, she held out her hands, palms up. With a deep breath for courage, she cupped them together as he slid his glow sphere into them. It had been so many years since she'd held a simple orb of energy. Beneath the fear that came hard on the heels of her aversion to magic, she wondered at his ability to transfer the sphere of light so easily. Most witches could toss a glow and catch it again. But few could hold the orb in place anywhere other than a few inches over their own palm or shoulder.

"Most fucking beautiful thing I've ever seen." Trey's eyes looked almost misty, and his smile held a hint of sadness. "I'd give anything for even a piece of magic."

"Believe me, friend, you've got your own kind of magic." Joel's grin gave that statement distinctly sexual overtones, and the beast inside her stretched and yammered to be fed. "Here, hold out your hands, just like Rena has hers cupped together. And then, Rena, if you'll..."

Eager to be rid of the sphere of spinning energy, she eased the violet glow into the space above Trey's hands. The light wavered for a moment but soon stabilized. Watching the sheer awe spread across Trey's face, her fear eased away, and she reached out to touch his arm, giving in to the irresistible need to be close to him.

Mel crossed the room to settle back at the table. Frowning, she shook her head at Joel. "You're using almost as much power to maintain your glow sphere over someone else's hands as you did to cast the protective sphere last night. And you're one of the few blessed witches in the country who can do that without knocking yourself out for a week."

"As a result of my efforts, Rena's a little less afraid of magic. If that's one step closer to her being able to use a defensive spell if all hell breaks loose... Worth the effort, if you ask me." Joel shrugged and reached across the table to pat Trey's shoulder before reclaiming his glow sphere.

Flashing Serena a reassuring smile, he tossed the orb toward the ceiling, where the light fragmented and fluttered down as a dozen violet butterflies before disappearing. When her heart stopped pounding double time—half in fear, half in wonder—she sorted out the other side of Joel's motive for having her hold his glow sphere. He'd trusted her with a piece of his aura, a piece of himself.

And he'd ranked her right up there with Trey, a friend he'd known since infancy, in being willing to share his magic with both of them. Not to mention the fact that he'd just demonstrated a degree of control that few witches ever achieved. *Message received. You're one powerful SOB.* She cringed, hoping he didn't catch that thought like he'd picked up on some of her others.

"Show-off." So why did she want to peel off his black tee and lick his chest, then perform a similar process with his jeans and what lay beneath? As if in answer, dark energy rose hard and fast, tugging at her belly and hardening her nipples, and she cursed the fact that she'd ever ventured near the storm rite.

"Enough wasting time." Mel pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and turned to Joel. "We've got to decide how to deal with the rogue witch's request that you meet with him, and before that, we're blessed well getting to the bottom of what our guest was doing up on the ridge Wednesday night."

The three of them watched as she dialed, and Serena all but held her breath waiting to see who Mel thought might have information regarding her presence near the dark lord's rite.

"Hello yourself, old fool. Drop what you're doing and find a private spot, this is important." Mel drummed her fingertips against the table. "Beyond a doubt now. We traced the power to its source Wednesday night, and we know the dark lords are

responsible for the storms—just not what they intend to accomplish by wreaking havoc along the coast.”

“Fuck.” Joel leaned forward with his elbows propped on the table and rested his head in his hands. “Jaimis just ceased to be my number one problem.”

Confused, Serena glanced to Trey for clarification, but his attention didn’t waver from Mel’s face.

“So if I told you we’d found a young, attractive, brown-haired witch passed out near the rite—yes, about five-seven, green eyes, goes by Rena. No, won’t so much as kindle a glow sphere, but she seems to have diffused a dark lord’s death spell last night, near as we can tell.”

The voice on the other end of the line got so loud at that point that Rena stood up and bolted toward the back door. *Fuck. Just fuck.* Never mind he had a soft spot in his scary old heart for her, she had a healthy respect for Sorren’s temper, and the elder witch would be apoplectic after hearing she’d been found near a dark lord’s rite.

Leaping up and catching her before she got halfway across the room, Trey grabbed her around the waist and dragged her back to the table. In a move that did nothing to quiet her rising need, he sat back down with her butt pressed to his lap. “No problem so big we can’t work it out together, princess.”

Mel glanced at Rena, her magic swirling just beneath the surface, kicking up yellow shimmers of her aura. “A fire spell. Aimed at Joel, more likely than not at Jaimis’s orders. According to Joel, the bird form the witch used as a delivery mechanism simply...vanished.”

After a long pause, Mel nodded. “Problem is, the rogue witch has invited Joel to meet him in Boston this afternoon, and the blessed fool is insisting he should go in case the meeting provides any leads to finding Carmen, our missing healer. Near the aquarium, not that I can see that it makes a difference.”

Over my dead body. Serena glared at Joel and slammed her hand down on the table. “And you say *I’m* in danger, simply because I won’t use my magic? Gods help you if you’re enough of a fool to feed yourself to Jaimis!”

From the look on Trey’s face, or Mel’s, for that matter, they shared her opinion that any sane witch would refuse to meet with Jaimis—never mind the public location, no doubt designed to provide a false sense of security.

“Right then, see you this afternoon.” Mel disconnected and placed the phone on the table with a sharp tap against the wood.

“So you’re afraid I’ll fall into Jaimis’s hands if I keep the meeting today”—Joel glared at Mel and brought his fist down on the table so hard, his abandoned coffee mug rattled—“and then you go and invite the elder witch himself to fly out here and deal with the young upstart who’s spearheaded the Little Harbor human-witch good neighbor initiative?”

Joel’s sarcasm couldn’t hide the apprehension she sensed rippling off him, and Serena battled rising panic. His fear of Sorren sure as hell didn’t cast him in the ranks of

law-abiding witches. Hell, his tone all but implied the elder witch had him figured for a dark lord wannabe.

Trey's arms snaked tighter around her middle. "Sit tight. Joel's agitation doesn't mean a damned thing other than that he and Sorren have had words over our easy coexistence here. That they disagree doesn't mean we're about to throw in our lot with the bad guys. Not now. Not *ever*."

First thing all morning that finally managed to ease her distress. What quality she found so damned trustworthy in Trey, she couldn't say. But she snuggled back into his lap and rested her head on his shoulder, seeking a bit of comfort, never mind that the closeness increased the prickling sensation across her breasts and the gnawing in her belly. When she felt him grow hard beneath her butt, she didn't bother to raise a fuss. Hell, someone had to help her work the edge off pretty soon – might as well be him.

"So, *Serena*, we have some talking to do." Mel's pronouncement fell with the finality and weight of a prison sentence.

"*Serena?* Sweet goddess, that explains a lot. The photo of Eric you had in your purse – if I remember correctly, Sorren asked your sister and her husband to help him raise Eric after Jaimis's people killed the boy's parents." Joel frowned when she reluctantly nodded her agreement. "Gods help me – I've gone and bedded someone who's practically family to the elder witch." He groaned and ran a hand down his face. "When Sorren gets here, I'm a dead man."

* * * * *

"So the guys you mentioned before, the triangle that took so much out of you, I'm guessing one of them had to be Scott. Even out here on the East Coast, we heard about that. Makes me sick to think of it even now, one witch killing another with a suffocation spell." That Joel stroked her cheek as he spoke didn't do much to remove the sting from the words. "Being close to someone who died violently – that changes a person."

The reminder that he'd probably been a close witness to one or both of his parents burning to death when he was a mere infant made her shudder. A psychic event like that left a mark on a witch, no matter how young. Witch children shared a natural link to their parents, and though he wouldn't remember, the shock of experiencing his mother's death, possibly his father's as well... On some level, he just might understand what she'd gone through when Scott died.

As she stretched out on the king-size bed that graced Mel's guest room – lacy canopy, satin sheets, and all – she wondered why she'd let Trey sweet-talk her into bed with both of them. *Besides the fact that I'll wish I was dead before long if the guys don't help me quiet the beast – and Joel might die for real this afternoon when he meets with Jaimis.*

Never mind Sorren was speeding toward Boston in his private jet with a dozen of his enforcers to supervise the ill-fated event. Joel's face-off with the rogue witch carried more risk than she wanted to think about at the moment. At some point that morning, she'd evaluated the battle lines and figured with Joel's side squaring off against

Jaimis—never mind Joel’s dubious ethics—the time had come to throw in her lot with the people of Little Harbor.

“No one’s going to die, sweetheart.” Joel toyed with the silky folds of the borrowed robe she’d slipped on before climbing into bed with them. Unlike the men, lounging around in all their bare-assed glory, she’d been reluctant to get stark naked until they finished the conversational portion of their little naptime meeting. “Not on our side, anyway.”

Trey ran his hand along Joel’s chest, playing with the light sprinkling of hair, and she could have sworn the temperature in the room rose a few notches. *Nothing like a little midmorning sex to ward off fears of impending death.*

“You were linked with Scott when he died?” Pulling her close, Joel snuggled her into the crook of his arm and pinned her head underneath his chin. “You felt everything? Still have nightmares?”

Pain filled her lungs as sure as drowning, and she couldn’t get out more than a nod.

“I have nightmares sometimes—intense heat, flames, a woman’s screams. I think it’s my only memory of my mother.”

Goddess help him, to carry horrors like that from infancy. She didn’t doubt him, because she had similar dreams—suffocating at the mercy of a dark lord’s spell, reliving the moment Scott gave up struggling to draw air into his lungs. A memory like that, ingrained through a shared link, defied age or time. Something that horrifying never loosened its hold.

“You two are cheerful today.” Although Trey injected a note of levity into the statement, he cuddled Joel as if he were afraid his friend would come apart at the seams. “Just so you know, I’m going with you this afternoon, short of you chaining me to the bed.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“I plan on being there, too.” Determined to get a grip on her runaway emotions, Serena looked away from the men and stared at the vase of yellow roses on the dresser. “I felt a witch die through a link once already. So did you, never mind you were so young the memory only comes to you in dreams. So you’ll understand when I say I need to be there to ensure that *nothing* happens to you today.” She swallowed hard. “You’ve seen me channel off energy from a death spell and direct it harmlessly into the earth. Negating spells is second nature to me, given my aversion to magic. I can help.”

An internal battle seemed to rage through Joel, judging by the furrowed lines on his forehead and the way he clenched his fists around handfuls of Mel’s silky comforter. “I’d chain you *both* to the bed if I could, to keep you away from the rogue witch. And yes, I’m sure you can help, Rena...Serena. But that’s not why you need to be there.”

Flipping over onto his stomach, Trey reached up to tug at Joel’s curls. “Enlighten us.”

"Before she took off to hound the witches of Little Harbor into readiness for the meeting this afternoon, Mel pulled me aside." Absently, Joel stroked his hands across the folds of silk that covered Serena's breast, teasing the robe back and forth across her nipples. "On the phone earlier, Sorren shared a piece of foreknowledge with her. Said there's more risk to both of you if you stay behind than if you come. That's why Mel's out hounding witches and humans alike into a battle-ready militia. She figures Jaimis will order his dark lords to attack while I'm in Boston."

"Simple enough strategy. Lure the strongest witch out of town, then annihilate the troops, demoralizing you and sending you into Jaimis's welcoming arms." Trey clenched his fist and pounded it into his other palm. "Damn rogue witch obviously doesn't know shit about you – and hasn't met Mel."

Startled, Serena flinched when Trey slid his hand across her pubic mound and wiggled his fingers between her legs, but she didn't shove him away. Draining off the death spell last night seemed to stir things up again, and her need simmered at a slow boil. Flickers of heat lapped at her belly as something dark and fierce stirred deep inside her.

"The Little Harbor militia will hold its own against anything Jaimis's people throw this way while we're gone." As if sensing her rising discomfort, Joel reached out to stroke her back. "Sorren's assigning some of his people to provide backup here, as well as in Boston. But I'm taking the elder witch's warning seriously. You two are with me this afternoon."

"And? I hear it in your voice." Though he glared at Joel, Trey nudged Serena's robe out of the way and ran his fingers across her bare belly. "There's more."

"Second part of Sorren's little bit of Sight – to save Carmen and another innocent, 'the witch who cloaks himself in impenetrable spheres, the human warrior, and the witch who melts magic like ice into water need to...' Bless it, there's a lot more flowery language, but bottom line, Sorren Sees the three of us heading into battle and lots of bad shit happening if we don't stick together."

"There's more." Even the rhythmic strokes of Trey's hand, gentle enough that he ruffled her triangle of curls without actually brushing her clit, couldn't distract her from the queasy energy roiling through Joel's mind – or her own terror that she could no longer separate herself off from him, best efforts be damned. "What's really upsetting you?"

When Joel shifted position, easing her back against the pillows and snuggling in against her breasts like a frightened child, she couldn't have been more surprised. With the physical proximity, his fear came across as sharp as smoke on the wind. She offered up a silent plea for Scott to forgive her for letting anyone else get close enough to link as sure and strong as she'd connected with him.

"No dishonor to your lost love, just because you can't keep me out of your head. Now that I know the feel of your thoughts... Bless it, you know as well as I do – there comes a point with witches when there's no choice to it. Power seeks power, and minds

link up like puzzle pieces." Snuggling closer still, he rubbed his face against her robe and sighed. "As for what's really upsetting me, I'm fighting my own monsters. Mel sat me down earlier and shared her theory on how I survived the fire as a baby."

Trey scooted down and laid his head on Joel's bare stomach, humming something tuneless as he stroked his friend's arm.

"The prevailing theory was that I'd been situated so close to the door or window that a nearby witch managed to pick me up and toss me clear of the house when the fire started. Didn't much matter whether it was a firebomb or a spell gone wrong that filled the farmhouse with flames. Either way, the thirteen adults inside perished."

Serena shuddered and reached up to stroke his face, his stubble rough and oddly soothing against her palm. Even the hunger seemed calmed by the gravity of the moment.

"Mel said she and Sorren favor a different version of events. They think I was in my mother's arms when a spell went wrong and the room exploded. Who knows, could have been her spell, could have been my father's. But somehow, she had just enough advance warning to save me—wove an impermeable sphere around me so fast and so tight, I only ended up with the burn on my leg. Magic like that, you can't believe the effort involved. She wouldn't have had time to save herself."

Tears welled up under Serena's eyelids, but she blinked them back. "How could Sorren and Mel know all this?"

"Because from the time I was two, I could draw down a sphere so fast and so solid, no one could pass it. I could spin the magic tight enough to keep the rain out. Having been linked with my mother when she wove a protective sphere at the epicenter of hell on earth goes a long way to explain how I picked up a trick few witches can manage—and performed the spell four years before most kids summon magic."

"Why tell you all that now?" Trey kept rubbing Joel's arm, as if he could wipe away the horror. "With everything you're facing..."

"Because Mel thinks my mother learned to weave an impermeable sphere out of great need, to save me at the moment of her death—and that like her, I have the ability to come up with unprecedented magic under pressure. Just like Serena and Serena's sister. The trait runs in families."

"Here's the thing"—Joel sighed, then hesitated so long, she wondered if he planned to complete his thought—"gods save us, the capacity to use novel magic when all hell breaks loose is part of Sorren's foreseeing."

Serena shivered as she mulled over the possibility that her ability to banish spells might be related to her sister Lena's freakish tendency to throw objects around with her magic, a highly unusual skill for a witch. At the prospect that Joel might be able to summon powers unlike anything she'd seen or imagined, fear rose so strong that the hunger sat up and howled in sympathy, ripping through her with the force of a prairie fire.

Trey's breath caught in his throat when Rena—Serena—reached down and grabbed his cock. *Well, damn!* With visions of Joel's mother's death fresh in his head, and the prospect that Joel might kick out unpredictable supernatural displays under pressure—Serena, too, for that matter—he didn't think he stood half a chance of giving her what she needed right now. *Strike that.* As Serena coaxed and teased, easing her fingers over the most sensitive spots and cupping his balls with her other hand, his body responded, worries be damned.

"I hurt—and I don't want to be frightened anymore. Please, help me not to be afraid?"

The tremor in her voice speared him like a fish with a hook through its gills, and he rolled over to face her, easing into a kiss as if the world weren't falling apart around them. When Joel wrestled him for Rena, Trey chuckled and put up a mock struggle. Rena—hell, he'd never get used to thinking of her by her true name—thrashed between them, her skin flushed and her breath coming in quick little pants.

"You get the middle this time, sweetheart. I'm assuming this won't be the first time someone's bothered your pretty little ass?"

Damn, now and then Joel dropped the sensitive shit and said something he could have come out with himself. More likely than not a result of them spending way too much time together. Though if he ever started spouting poetry, he hoped someone would shoot him.

"Consider my ass well christened." Serena kicked out with her legs, and her tussle with Joel ended up with her clinging to his knees, her head down by his feet. "But since you're misbehaving, I think I'll reserve the honor for Trey."

His cock did a little dance of appreciation at the thought. When he felt the mood in the bed shift as surely as the pressure drops before a storm, he wondered—not for the first time—if humans could pick up sensitivity for some of this witch shit over time. "What's wrong?"

Serena's head was about level with Joel's feet at this point, and it didn't take a psychic to figure out what had caught her attention.

"The hand shape at the center of your scar—if Sorren and Mel are right, it must have been your mother's hand on your leg. Goddess bless her memory, she must have loved you something fierce to pull off a spell that intricate in the midst of an inferno."

"What if she's the one who set the spell that killed all thirteen witches in that room? Or it could have been my father's misconceived magic that brought on the fire." Joel touched Serena's hair. "Fact remains, I don't know who my people were—don't even know if they spun magic on the side of light or darkness. Blessed hard thing not to know, going up against what we're about to face."

Not a new thing, to hear Joel musing over whether he came from good or evil. But damned if he'd let Joel get morbid today—Serena either, for that matter. Doubt had a way of eating through people, and they needed a king-size helping of confidence.

"We're the good guys, asshole. Getting back to the present, I've got dibs on Serena's sweet little rosebud, so shove over." Playing the insensitive jerk just about never failed to shake Joel out of one of his moods. Sure enough, Joel grabbed him around the waist, flipped him onto his belly, and held him down. "Hey!"

"Swat him good, Serena. Leave a few nice pink handprints there on his ass while I hold him down."

Struggling for real now—*hell, I've got my pride*—he managed to throw Joel off him, but not before Serena landed three stinging slaps to his ass cheeks. "Damn! No one gets away with that without me returning the insult." Seconds flat, he caught her and had her over his lap while Joel looked on. Her robe rode up her back as she squirmed in his grasp, baring her delightful little bottom.

After a playful swat to her thigh, Trey meant to let her go, but Joel brought his hand down, higher up, and left a cherry red handprint behind. Serena shrieked and kicked, but damned if he didn't decide he liked this game. Sliding one hand under her so his palm cupped her hot little mound, he held her tighter to his lap with the other, and Joel spanked the other side of her ass, leaving a matching handprint. *Hell, that has to smart.*

But a telltale gush of moisture wet his hand. "She's wet as melting snow in springtime. Again, Joel. She likes this."

"Fuck you!" Her squirming fury would have been more convincing without the frantic laughter. "Come on, let me up!"

Hearing her laugh had to be the biggest compliment she could pay them, with all the worry and hurt she carried right now. When Joel took a turn holding her, his hands splayed out to each side of her hips, Trey raised his palm and brought it down with enough force to sting. This time, she moaned, long and low, and wriggled against his other hand.

"Tell me what you were doing up on the ridge the other night, sweetheart." Joel's voice came out low and thick with arousal, as if he'd told her how goddamned sexy she looked with her ass all pink. "Tell me, and we'll give you what you want."

When the silence stretched on, and Trey decided the scent of her sex was all but irresistible, he delivered another sound slap. She greeted the indignity with more moaning and more squirming against his now very wet hand. Easing his fingers forward, he slipped two inside her pussy, and she whimpered some more.

"You used your ability to disperse energy to mess with the storm rite, didn't you? We thought we scared them off in time when Trey fired a few warning shots, but that wasn't it at all." Joel's sultry tones gave way to edgy determination, and he leaned down close to Serena's ear. "That's why you passed out—and before that, shoved your hand down your pants to try to relieve the unbearable arousal from draining off the magic of a dark sex rite."

"Please, the hunger..." Serena panted and squirmed. "Things got stirred up when I dispersed the death spell last night. I'm hot and cold all at once. *Hurts.*"

Chapter Eight

Trey felt his mouth tug down into a frown. He couldn't stand the thought that she'd feel coerced, even a little, to have sex with them. And it didn't sit well that Joel seemed intent on delaying sex until she answered him. Figuring he could offer a little relief while she and Joel finished sparring, he angled his fingers upward, looking for her sweet spot, and brought his hand down hard on her pretty bottom to disguise what he intended to do for her.

"Oh! Oh!" She bucked hard against his hand, and Joel slugged him on the shoulder.

"Not like I don't know what you're doing down there. I *need* her to answer! Too much on the line here for you to withhold information this late in the game, sweetheart." Joel tensed up next to him, working up a good head of steam, but Trey kept sliding his fingers around underneath Serena, determined to ease her suffering before the pain got anywhere near as bad as it did yesterday.

"That's what got you into this mess, wasn't it?" Despite Joel's obvious determination to see this through, his voice softened, and he stroked Rena's cheek. "You thought you'd go off on a one-woman mission to undo the dark lords' storm rite. Channeled more sexual energy than most witches come across in a lifetime in your attempt to nullify the spell. But some of it stuck with you, didn't it?"

Serena twisted around so hard, Trey's fingers slid free of her clenching pussy, and the swat Joel had aimed at her ass landed hard across her hip. Her furious squeal and Joel's frantic apologies had Trey wondering if anyone would ever get laid here today. He, for one, needed to work off some steam so he'd have a clear head in Boston this afternoon.

"What you said—that it stuck with me." Serena paused, panting hard, and damned if he wouldn't have taken on her pain in a second if he could spare her the suffering. "That must be it—the hunger. The beast I feel somewhere deep inside me. I

passed out too soon to finish grounding the energy. Underestimated the power of the rite. The horror of seeing them draw blood. Seeing them torture each other.”

As Serena shuddered and her words ended in a choked sob, Joel pulled her onto his lap. At least she finally admitted what Joel had figured out anyway, offering a damn credible reason for her having been up on that ridge that didn't involve an alliance with the dark side. Though he understood Joel had needed to hear the words from her to use his witch's sense for ferreting out lies, Trey would give a lot to erase the past several minutes. Fuck it, maybe now they could get onto the part where they sunk their cocks deep inside the world's sexiest little witch and gave her some relief from the hunger that rode her so goddamned hard.

“Next time, I'll be prepared.” Serena's words rang with equal parts pain and determination, and Trey groaned out loud when Joel stiffened up at the “next time” bit. “I need to channel the energy faster, let it rip through me directly into the earth, rather than trying to keep the stream slow and steady.” Serena paused, breathing hard, her breasts rising and falling against the backdrop of the blue silk robe that draped ineffectively around her shoulders. “At the end, if I'm lucky, the trapped energy will follow, grounding itself. I'll be free of the hunger.”

“You are *never* going to risk yourself like that again!” Joel's fists clenched up, and his face twisted into a mask of fury.

As Trey looked on, Serena rounded on Joel, her chin jutted outward, and he almost gave up hope of getting laid before the long commute down to Boston. At the moment, Serena seemed more than willing to live with the fury of the hunger if she could just get in a few good punches at Joel. Readjusting his priorities, he set his sights on keeping the two of them from killing each other. The glimmer of violet around Joel didn't faze him. Damned hothead pulled an aura at the merest hint of an insult or inconvenience.

But when a sky blue glow flashed around Serena's face and shoulders, sparkling like the light that forms when sunlight glances off the ocean, he figured Joel wasn't getting out of here without a serious magical thrashing. This witch didn't use her power—*ever*. That Joel managed to unhinge her enough to raise her aura scared the fucking crap out of him.

Serena planted her hands on her hips, a goddess ready to fly into battle. “You have a better idea? Because I'm dying here—my insides wrapped around a set of teeth intent on gnawing their way out. And I don't plan on being a slave to my own needs—forever.”

The icy calm in her voice frightened him more than shouting would have. Anger and dead-center control made for a dangerous combination in a witch. Joel had taught him that. And their “harm none” ethic didn't apply to occasional power struggles—the equivalent of bar brawls, witch-style.

“Yes, since you ask. You bet I have a better idea. There's another town not too far from here, Seal's Haunt. The witches there have been working toward unity with their

human neighbors. Most of the humans already know supernatural talents run in some of the families in town." Joel slapped his hand down on his thigh, and his aura whipped around him strong enough to ruffle the lace on the canopy over the bed. "We've formed a militia here, and Seal's Haunt is ready to do the same. Witches and humans side by side, fighting the dark lords. We can do together what we don't have the strength to do alone."

"You're fucking insane!" Sweat trickled down Serena's chest, coating her breasts in a thin sheen, and despite her fury, she trembled. Trey winced, trying to imagine how bad she must be hurting by now. "What I can accomplish, as one witch... You'd rather risk an entire town of witches and humans – two, counting Little Harbor – up against dark lords determined to raise havoc along the coast for reasons we can't even say..."

When she paused to breathe, Trey swore he could smell scorching in the room, and he glanced around to make sure neither of them had ignited the bed coverings in their fury. Trey scowled. "Right. This ends here. Later today, the focus is Boston – and living to fight about this again tomorrow. Right now, we need to get Serena more comfortable."

Serena's face shone cherry red, and her knuckles were white, clenched around the edges of her robe. Never mind Joel's soft brown skin tones – so much blood had rushed to his face, he shone like Serena's ass after they'd landed a succession of hot slaps. Between them, violet and blue sparks mingled in a sort of neutral zone where neither of them seemed to dare to invade the other's space. *Damn good thing, too.*

"*Stop!* I mean it. All I want right now is to keep the two of you from unraveling any damn further." With a deep breath, Trey grabbed Joel's hand and pressed it against his chest. "You're scaring the shit out of me – both of you. My heart's fucking pounding as if I'd run a marathon. Fuck it, Joel, Serena's *hurting*. Look at her face!"

Beneath the anger, lines of strain furrowed her brow, and her eyes shone way too damn bright. Her hands shook where she gripped her robe, and when he watched closely, he could see her shivering. No one moved for a couple of minutes, and the smell of anger damn near choked him. Sour and hot. Then, miracle of miracles, Joel reached out and touched Serena's chin, and she all but fell into his arms.

"We'll settle this later." Serena groaned against Joel's chest. Trey moved into position behind her, well aware of how things worked by now and not keen on prolonging her suffering. "Tomorrow – once we've made it past the Boston meeting. For now, please...oh, goddess, I need..."

"Gods, I'm sorry." Brushing kisses across her damp cheeks, Joel lay back on the pillows and pulled her on top of him, face-to-face. "So sorry. No more talk now."

Okay by me, and about damn time, too. Trey guided Serena's hips as Joel eased her body lower, lining up his cock with the fringe of hair showing between her spread legs. She threw her legs out even wider, her toes pointed toward the edge of the bed. Trey helped join them up, lifting her a little so Joel could ease in, slow and gentle, both of them careful not to add to her pain.

As he watched Serena squirm, her desperate mewling noises piercing right to his heart, Trey figured they had things all wrong. "You're not so much wanting it gentle right now, are you, princess?"

Without waiting for a reply, he brought his hand down hard on her ass. The blow shoved her harder against Joel, deepening the penetration. At this angle, facing the head of the bed and looking down at her squirming bottom, he had a perfect view of where Joel's cock pierced her flesh, the satiny folds of her skin hugging the thickness as his friend moved in and out of her.

When Trey brought his hand down again, she moaned, long and low, and Joel exhaled sharply. *Good, just so you two hotheaded witches are both enjoying this.* She'd given up any attempt to rise up above Joel and take control of the pace. Instead, she lay sprawled across his chest, letting him control the rhythm of thrusts from beneath.

Placing the next handprint lower on her ass, close to her thigh, Trey reveled in the heat stinging his hand. Damned if he didn't want to be Serena, getting fucked while someone pinkened up his ass. And damned if he didn't want to be Joel, pumping inside her so hard, he lifted her body with each thrust, pushing her ass high in the air to present an irresistible target.

"Never." Serena panted hard. "Thought I'd like...getting my ass smacked. But...I do. Like it even more, if you fill an old...fantasy of mine. Like it...if you...join us."

Oh hell. Trey's cock twitched so hard, his balls started to crawl up tight under his skin, and he reached down to yank them back into a more patient position. "Lube?" Oh, fuck, at Joel's place he'd know where to find it, but here...

"Sample packet. Pants pocket."

Seconds flat, he found Joel's jeans and searched the pockets, almost weeping with impatience by the time he pulled out the fat foil packet. Leaping back up onto the bed, he wasted no time ripping it open and squirting it all directly between the still-flushed cheeks of Serena's ass. Forcing himself to slow down, he used his fingers to spread the lube evenly, then slid a couple in to stretch her.

"Now!" Damn, she sounded desperate. "Hurry up!"

Squatting between their legs, he placed his arms to each side of the two of them, hands flat on the mattress, and eased into position. For an awkward moment, he balanced all his weight on one arm while he used his hand to guide the head of his cock past a resistant circle of muscle.

"Good – good – so fucking good!"

Serena panted hard as he placed his hand back down on the bed to avoid falling on top of them. With his self-control strained to the breaking point, Trey forced himself to move forward in tiny increments. He felt Joel pull back, giving him more room. As he pressed forward, Serena all but sang beneath him. Never in his life had he felt anything so fucking...

“So fucking wonderful.” Joel reached up past Serena to touch his face. “Don’t know how, but Serena picked up your thought and passed it on to me. The three of us – no fucking sense to it when we pile up together. Sweeter than rules or reason.”

“Now – in! All the way, so Joel can start moving again.”

Serena shook so hard, he counted backward from fifty to counter the urge to give it up and fill her with several ounces of cum, never mind trying to make this last.

“Need to feel you both moving in me.”

Still counting, he eased forward until her muscles stopped fighting him. She let out a long, low sigh and shivered as his balls came to rest against her ass. From dozens of past encounters, he knew enough to hold still and let her finish relaxing around him, readying her body for the movement that would follow.

But as things loosened up to the point where he figured it was time to begin a slow backslide, nothing could have prepared him for the silken push of her flesh around him as Joel eased forward, their cocks dancing together deep inside her. “Gonna die.” Trey panted. “So damn good, I’m gonna die.”

“Not before we finish this” – Joel reached up to slap his ass – “you’re not.”

Joel’s chuckle added a surreal quality to the riot of sensation. The handprint of heat on his butt. The pinching sting as his balls tucked up tight against him. The trickle of fire that hinted at the inevitable. Somehow, either through the intervention of one of Joel’s gods – he suspected his own didn’t help out in the case of kinky sex with two witches – or by the power of higher math as he calculated square roots in his head, he managed not to come. *Yet*. Every moment was touch and go.

Something pulled at his awareness, like water sliding over sand. As he reveled in the squeeze of hot flesh around his cock and the nudge of Joel’s dick against his own when he moved forward before Joel started to pull back, something kept distracting him. Like little fingers inside his head, something nudged at him...tickled.

“Something’s pulling at me – inside my head.” *Right. Now they’ll know for sure I’ve gone around the bend.*

Not crazy. It’s me. Shouldn’t be able to do this. Shouldn’t want to do this. Less scary with you than with Joel – scarier with another witch.

Ohmyfuckingsgod! He and Joel had tried since they were kids. They’d reasoned that best friends – blood brothers, by the nicks they made in each other’s fingers with their pocket knives – should be able to take advantage of the intimate communication any witch could manage. Never mind one of them was human. But they’d never succeeded. *Never.*

Trey flailed around with his right hand until he found Joel’s fingers and squeezed for all he was worth. Tears burned the backs of his eyelids.

“Can you bring Joel in? Oh my God, please?” He didn’t know how to reach back and return the touch, and most likely he couldn’t, being human. But somehow she’d

managed to break through his barriers. If she could pull Joel in with them, just like their bodies were tied together...

Here. She's got me. Serena, can he hear me?

"Oh my God, yes!" Love never felt so good. Sex never felt so good. Tickling so deep inside his brain, he had to resist the urge to reach up and rub his head, Joel and Serena became part of him, and he'd never felt anything so amazing.

Come now. Come with us, love—Joel.

Coming!—Serena.

Even in his head, they had their own voices—sort of. He could tell one from the other, anyway. Never mind dignity, tears washed down his cheeks as he gave into the fire surging through him, yelling their names as Serena raised her ass and clenched around him, and Joel groaned something unintelligible at the bottom of the pile. In his head, damned if he didn't *feel* them come. Which made him cry harder, and *oh, fuck*, if Joel gave him any shit about that later, he'd kill him.

"Love you. Love you both."

As his body kept jerking of its own will, frantic and wrecked beyond pleasure now, he hoped neither of them threw those words back at him later. Because he'd never said them before. Not even in the heat of the moment.

Love you, too. Joel cupped his hand at the back of Trey's neck. *Now shut up and stop fussing. We're here.*

* * * * *

Eager to see his plans unfold, Jaimis allowed a crooked smile to touch his lips as he unlaced the ties at the sides of his leather pants. The scars painted across his face years ago by one of Sorren's men tugged with the small grin, and out of long habit, he schooled his expression into a more neutral position.

Alexa watched as he peeled the tight leather free of his legs, her eyes wide and dark against the backdrop of her smooth olive skin and raven black hair. As always, he left his shirt on as he climbed onto the high, satin-draped bed, unwilling to reveal the entirety of his scarring. As he grabbed a handful of Alexa's hair, yanking hard to see her react, he envisioned another woman's features superimposed over those of his dark lord.

Girlishly wholesome with her California tan and chestnut hair, he tugged harder and imagined tears forming at the corners of Serena's eyes. *She's here*—so close! *Come to me from her sunny home without so much as her sister or a single enforcer to watch over her.* Though he had yet to pinpoint her location, his agents never led him astray. The penalty for failure would be unimaginable—he'd see to that.

"Please, my lord!" The panic in Alexa's voice disturbed his thoughts. He stared at her neck, arched to its limit as he dragged her head toward her back, using her hair to restrain her. "Please!"

Her fear drove blood into his shaft, and he smiled again, never mind the brief discomfort. "My apologies, dearest. You've done well and deserve to be rewarded."

Her breasts heaved as he released her, her nipples dark and swollen, hardened by the pain, and she dropped down to take his cock into her mouth. No, he'd have no trouble from this one. Loyal to the last. Any hurt he inflicted here would be for sport alone, not for punishment. Her mouth worked its magic, and he stroked her face as the muscles in his thighs tensed in anticipation.

"You're a loyal servant, Alexa. And your loyalty will be rewarded. There's someone I need to punish. A woman whose death will crush the elder witch and several of my enemies, all in one blow."

As Alexa purred around his cock, he sighed his pleasure. Her delicate hands caressed his thighs, her ruby red nails raking just hard enough to excite him. "Sorren's witches have scarred me, humiliated me, and defied me." Rage rose thick in his throat. Too many times, they'd thwarted his plans to inflict sorrow among their forces.

Alexa eased back and released his cock with a soft, wet sound as her lips pulled free. "And yet you've celebrated many victories, my lord."

"True enough, my sweet." A warm glow surrounded him, and he let his aura flash free, basking in memories of young Eric's screams as the rats shredded the boy's skin. What a coup, to permanently scar the grandson of Sorren's dear, departed lover. Dearer even than when he'd killed Gillian, Sorren's beloved, as the elder witch looked on helplessly. Of course, he'd been robbed of the boy's death. But the torture had been delicious. The rush of power from the young witch's spilled blood had enhanced his power for months.

"This time, there'll be no rescue. No escape." He reached down and traced the outline of Alexa's lips. "I might even let you help me. I'd like to see you dominate the useless little witch, violating her orifices with toys fashioned of unforgiving steel. She has no power like yours. No ability to send death spells skyward on fiery wings. And what little magic she owns, rumor has it, she refuses to use." *What a waste of gods-given talent! Coming from a family with such an impressive magical legacy, too. But as my pawn, she'll serve me well.*

Alexa cleared her throat, her eyes tilted respectfully downward. "I seek to serve you in any way I may, my lord. The spell I wove last night rose so fluidly that I'll be able to weave it whenever you see the need."

Pleased, Jaimis patted her cheek. "If only I'd been there to savor the rush of energy as you released death on the winds."

Of course, the spell had never been intended to hit its mark, and Joel's performance during the test had far exceeded his expectations. Never in his fondest hopes had he imagined the powerful young witch could dissolve others' magic! *Between that and his ability to call a protective sphere, he'll be the crowning jewel among my dark lords. The meeting this afternoon is well worth the risk.*

"I grow bored, my dear." He gestured toward the chest of drawers beside the bed. "You've earned my gratitude. I couldn't have tested Joel without your efforts. Perhaps you'd like to choose a few playthings?"

His cock twitched as she rose from the bed and opened drawer after drawer, fondling the items within. Her eyes grew dusky as she traced her fingertips across the curves of a glass dildo, but she placed it back into its felt case and moved on to handle other objects.

A leather collar found its way onto the bed. Indeed, his darling witch fancied a bit of domination. Still, when it suited him, she assumed the role of top readily enough. Occasional discipline honed his edge and stirred his power. Over the years, he'd learned that a few drops of his own blood mingled with sweat and cum fed his magic almost as well as blood spilled from another – without the psychic backlash dragging him down into a muddle of confused chaos. *Though, of course, nothing equaled the storm rites for their sheer power rush.*

"Excellent choices, darling." Running his tongue across his lips, he eyed the tweezer-style nipple clamps, the rubber tips removed so that the snake's-tongue tips of metal would draw blood. "A few more now, don't be shy."

Yes, this encounter would provide a nice little energy boost before his afternoon negotiation with Joel. Perhaps he'd have her draw a knife along his wrist near the end, nicking the vein just enough to spill a few drops before he bid her heal the hurt. The delicious irony of training a born healer to fashion death spells excited him further, and his cock twitched against his belly.

In the early days, she'd have made a delicious sacrifice. He allowed himself a moment of wistfulness. The storm rites could never compete with the thrill of augmenting power through a blood rite. But then, the storm circles didn't take a toll on his mental acuity, either. *Better to be not quite satisfied than driven mad.*

"Ready, pet?" A ball gag, a black leather flogger, and a huge steel anal dildo graced with a series of beadlike curves that flared gracefully at the base lay alongside the nipple clamps and leather collar. "Excellent choices."

Of course, if he'd done the choosing, he'd have added a thin whip. But his lovers knew better than to choose such a device, never mind their thirst for masochism. In his hands, the flogger could redden their flesh, make them scream, raise ugly welts, and even cut deep enough to abrade their flesh if he put his arm into the activity. Alexa enjoyed that. But hand him a whip, and he'd leave wounds that scarred, despite a healer's attention.

As Alexa buckled the wide collar around her slender neck, securing the straps tight enough to restrict – though not cut off – airflow, the heady aroma of fear mingled with the scent of the snow-white lilies overflowing the large vases on the dresser. Much as he knew Alexa enjoyed pain, he'd shown her upon more than one occasion that playing his games carried a genuine element of...risk. And sweet gods, her fear made this dance all the sweeter. He snapped his fingers, and the candelabra on the bedside

table flared to life, each wick giving birth to a different color flame – indigo, burgundy, amethyst, and emerald.

The bell sleeves of his white cotton shirt billowed as he moved toward Alexa, and he fancied he cut an imposing profile with his aquiline nose, high cheekbones, dark hair, and of course, the rakish scars shadowing one side of his face.

“Bend forward, dearest.” As she rested her forehead to his shoulder, he slipped the gag into her mouth and secured the strap tight enough that she trembled, though she knew better than to fight it with her hands. As for her spells – any of his lovers who risked calling magic against him knew they faced certain death. No danger of rebellion here, even if she panicked. “Very nice. Seeing the straps bite into your cheeks provides a pleasant little rush. You’re gorgeous, dearest.”

Without needing to be asked, she turned and positioned herself with her back to him, her upper body supported on a mound of pillows, and her head turned to the side. No doubt she meant only to leave her nose clear of the soft down, but he appreciated the fact that he’d be able to watch her tears. Her slender waist flared out at the hips, and her luscious ass rose toward him, presented high and willing for either the bite of the flogger or the intrusion of the cruel toy – whichever torment suited his whim.

Leaving the flogger for now and ignoring the clamps – they’d come later, when he flipped her onto her back and prepared to enter her – he lifted the cool length of steel. Polished to perfection, the custom-made toy represented a meeting of art, craftsmanship, and perfect function. Eager to raise a little fear, he brushed the bulbous knob at the tip against the crack of her ass.

When she trembled, he smiled. “Regretting your choice, my pet? All bravado at the start, but when it comes down to facing the pain you’ve chosen, that’s another matter, isn’t it?”

Curious, he’d had Alexa try the toy out on him once, generously slicked with lube. Despite the fact that he’d had his share of male lovers, the girth of the huge, beadlike knobs had proved too much for him. Sadly, he’d only been able to endure the first few ice-cold, tearing inches before he’d bidden her stop. *A worthy toy for when I have Serena tied and bleeding at my mercy. This time, there’ll be no one to aid the escape of a witch so close to Sorren’s heart, she might as well be his daughter.*

Though he put the curved dildo in his mouth to wet the first couple of knobs, he didn’t bother with lube. Alexa enjoyed pain. Otherwise, she never would have chosen the sloping steel dildo. Though she couldn’t use her healing magic on herself, he kept enough witch healers around to call on their powers if he damaged her.

Spreading her cheeks with his fingers, he stared at the dusky pucker of flesh before touching the cold object to her skin. “Beautiful. You have no idea how fetching you are, my darling.”

As he applied a stab of relentless pressure, her flesh parted to accept the first and largest knob. Though she knew better than to kick out or thrash against him, her body shook as if he’d caught her midtorso with a spell designed to freeze flesh. Rotating the

toy slowly, he ran his other hand along her spine and played his fingers along the sweaty surface of her skin.

Careful not to disturb the dildo, he let go, content that the narrow portion between the two huge knobs would suffice to hold it in place for now. As he continued to massage her back, he lifted the flogger and brought it down across her shoulders. A small, frantic noise made it past the gag. Blood rushed to his cock, and he dragged the rough leather ends of the flogger against his shaft, enjoying the friction.

When Alexa squirmed, he grabbed the metal protrusion and shoved it past the second knob, eliciting a series of mewling sounds from behind the gag. Oh, yes, he'd be in fine form for the meeting with Joel later. And with Sorren on his way in from the Midwest, if his sources proved accurate, maybe he'd catch a glimpse of his old friend – and bitterest enemy.

Heat rose to his face at the thought of the power Sorren had stolen from him. *The fool holds witches in a stranglehold with his overrigid code of ethics.* Hefting the flogger, he brought it down just to the left of where the toy interrupted Alexa's graceful curves. Then he landed another blow on the other side, cutting as close to the anal flesh that clung to the unforgiving steel as he could manage.

Delicious squeaks escaped the gag, and he followed up with six more strokes. Her backside swayed wildly, pain eroding her self-discipline. Draping the flogger across her back, he moved up and grabbed her hands away from where she'd fisted them in the pillows. He placed her palms behind her neck, so her elbows stuck out to each side like butterfly wings. Then he lifted her under her belly and kneed her thighs back until she fell flat against the mattress.

That drew forth more noises, and he imagined the movement caused a good deal of pain with the dildo tearing at her unlubricated flesh. Though he appreciated the submission of her kneeling with her ass in the air, this way she'd be less able to sway and dodge the strokes of the flogger. Testing his prediction, he lifted the toy and brought it down on her right shoulder, then her left, then across the small of her back, raising intriguing red welts. Three more strokes, and the welts oozed blood.

Chapter Nine

"You're doing beautifully, darling. Much better at holding still with your belly and legs pressed flat to the bed. Time to take another inch of the dildo now." Giving her a moment to anticipate the burn, Jaimis reached underneath her and palmed her generous breasts, pinching her nipples to remind her she'd also chosen the tweezer clamps. His sac ached and surges of heat throbbed through the length of his cock, but his control remained absolute. This would last as long as he chose.

As he shoved the next rounded protrusion inside her ass, pausing only when her sphincter contracted around the narrow portion between knobs, he watched as a hint of blood showed around the toy. "You're bleeding, dearest. All the mewling in the world won't stop me from sinking this inside you until the last knob penetrates your bruised flesh and the flange at the base rests tight against your cheeks."

If only they had more time... He glanced over his shoulder at the grandfather clock in the corner. No. With the journey into Boston and his fetish for punctuality, he'd best hurry this along. In quick succession, he sank the final two knobs into her flesh. Though she kept her hands grasped at the back of her neck where he'd placed them, she tossed her head back and forth on the pillow, tears and snot streaking her face. She begged him with her eyes to take it out and ease her torment.

Jaimis suspected the temptation to link with him, to ask him mind to mind to set her free from the unbearable torment, must be overwhelming. But that, too, bore death as a consequence. Impossible to dominate someone if your subjects insisted on projecting the sensations back at you, along with their pathetic pleas. Rotating the dildo, he watched her thrash and kick. The flared base hugged tight to her ass cheeks. The toy would cause just as much misery coming out as it had going in, and he wished he had time to linger and observe the entire process.

For good measure, he applied six more strokes of the flogger, layering welts across her back as he straddled her ass, his balls pressed against the cool flange at the base of

the dildo. Like a terrified rodent, she squeaked at each blow, the ball gag insufficient to mask her terror.

“My turn for a little pleasure now.” Rising onto his knees, he grasped her hips and flipped her over. As soon as he had her on her back, he sat down again, his sac pressed pleasantly against her hot little mound. “The clamps now.”

Her hair matted with sweat and tears, she thrashed her head. *No, no, and again no.* But she’d chosen her reward, and he knew she’d thank him at the end, when her climaxes crested one on the heels of the other, delivering bliss in equal parts to the excruciating pain.

“Pretty.” He fingered her nipple before securing the clamp. The forked ends of the tweezerlike device bit into her flesh just beneath the tip of her nipple. He raised the metal ring at the base higher along the two slender prongs, increasing the pressure. Her grimace became more pronounced as the metal teeth bit harder at exposed nerve endings. “So very, very pretty.”

By the time he had the metal loop shoved halfway up the clamp, pressing the ends so very close together, blood oozed around the pointed tips. When he secured the clamp at its tightest setting, she bucked and arched her head back into the pillows, her face fixed in a grotesque mask of anguish. He didn’t waste any time securing the second clamp, and once he had it in place, the mewling from behind the gag became constant.

Unwilling to contain himself any longer, he grabbed her shoulders, lay atop her, and lunged inside her soaking pussy. The metal knobs of the anal toy nudged his cock with each thrust, and Alexa shook and struggled so hard beneath him, he had to hold tight to stay atop her. Letting his full weight rest on her generous breasts, he pressed the clamps harder into her skin, enjoying the feel of the metal through his shirt.

Just before he came, he grabbed onto her leather collar and tugged hard enough to lift her head off the bed. With the first spurt of fiery release, he felt her clench helplessly around him, her climax quieting her desperate, gag-choked moans. Though he finished long before her wild orgasm ran its course, after he climbed off her, he guided her hand down to her clit so she could see herself through every moment of bliss she’d earned. This was a reward, after all.

“When you’re done, remove the gag, collar, dildo, and clamps yourself—in that order.” Gag first, so her screams could follow him down the hallway as he went about his business. “I suspect removing the dildo and clamps will present an exquisite little torture. Always burns more at the end after you’ve come, doesn’t it, pet? With any luck, you might get another orgasm out of the experience. Enjoy the edge, my loyal witch.”

Without a backward glance, he left the bed, pulled on his pants, laced the leather ties, and walked out the door, satisfied that he’d left ample time for a soak in the tub before he dressed and left for Boston.

* * * * *

Resisting the urge to pace, Joel stood with his hands folded behind his back, surveying the crowds. The plaza in front of the New England Aquarium bustled with a daunting array of activity. Teachers rounded up groups of talkative children. Men and women in expensive suits enjoyed a late lunch on the plaza, and brightly dressed tourists clustered around the outdoor seal exhibit.

About the only person he *didn't* see was Jaimis. Tugging aside the sleeve of the suit he'd borrowed from one of Trey's lawyer cousins, he verified that the meeting should have occurred twenty minutes ago. The back of his neck prickled, and he knew beyond any doubt that Jaimis watched from nearby, letting him sweat.

Over by the seals, Serena and Trey blended with the tourists, inconspicuous in their New England Aquarium T-shirts, clutching the plush penguin and seal Serena intended to ship back to Eric. His throat tightened as he replayed her explanation that, never mind he was almost a teenager, Eric couldn't sleep without a stuffed toy tucked under his arm. Bless it, he never should have given her shit about that photo. But he'd never imagined the boy Jaimis imprisoned and tortured five years ago would turn out to be her adoptive nephew.

Joel scanned the crowd again. If Jaimis had head games in mind, making him wait wouldn't go very far. With every moment, he viewed the situation with increasing clarity. The stakes rose incalculably as soon as Serena entered the picture—someone Sorren valued like kin. Her family and friends included some of the elder witch's strongest enforcers—several of whom had the opportunity to outwit Jaimis in the past, drawing down his rage. *Serena owns fucking ground zero where Jaimis's grudges are concerned. And the rogue witch is all about revenge.*

Risking another glance toward the harbor seal exhibit, he watched as Serena leaned over and planted a kiss on the cheek of one of the Little Harbor humans he'd brought along to help guard her. Not Trey. The witch had blessed good instincts. If Jaimis picked her out of the crowd despite her wig and heavy makeup, the rogue witch would exploit any attachments in his usual, brutal fashion. Still, never mind the kiss was meant as an attempt to blend in; after spending the last hour watching her eyes shine with enthusiasm as they wandered the aquarium together, he couldn't stand to see anyone but Trey get close to her. *And I'll fucking take Jaimis apart piece by piece if he harms her.*

The hair on his arms stood on end as he felt power rise and flow around him. "Get on with it, witch. Stop playing games with me." Though he muttered the words under his breath, he hoped Jaimis watched closely enough to read his lips. An answering wave of power rose from back near the water. Sorren's presence down on the wharf felt more reassuring than threatening at the moment, given that Jaimis presented a more extreme fear factor.

Joel spotted someone with dark hair wearing a suit fit for a high-class politician, but the man faded into the crowd before he could say for sure whether Jaimis had decided to surface. Swallowing hard, he kept a tight rein on his anger. *Important to blend—just another businessman here to meet my friend for a late lunch.*

“Beautiful day for a stroll, wouldn’t you say?”

Joel forced himself to turn around slow and easy. *No fear*. He did, however, dislodge Jaimis’s hand from his shoulder as he turned. Bless it, the rogue witch seemed to appear out of nowhere. *Fuck. I’ve landed so far out of my league, I’ll be lucky to come out of the game intact. But I can bluff with the best of them – when outmatched, meet your opponent with total confidence.*

“You have Carmen. Little Harbor’s witch healer is under my protection, and I expect her returned. Unharmed. I won’t negotiate until she’s back home.”

“Bold words from an upstart witch. Your healer is no more than a pawn.” Jaimis kept his voice low to avoid notice, but each word carried a punch. “You want Carmen back. I seek your cooperation. Thus the little witch becomes interesting to me. She is unharmed – thus far. But should you fail to accept my business deal...”

Jaimis let the threat hang in the air between them. But Joel refused to jump in and bargain as the dark witch intended.

Jaimis raised one corner of his mouth into a half grin, though the scarred side of his face didn’t complete his smile. “Sorren is ruffling his feathers down by the water, so let’s be brief. From what I knew of your parents – and what I know of you – I believe an alliance will prove beneficial. Years ago, my sister died at the hands of humans, simply for using her gifts. Your success in Little Harbor has been...stunning. Together, we can continue to integrate witches and humans. Create a safer world for both.”

Forget the rest, one phrase echoed in his thoughts. *From what I knew of your parents.* Maybe a ruse to engage cooperation, but if Jaimis had information about his background... His skin crawled at the thought that his family may have worked with the rogue witch, but with a mental shake, he forced himself to focus.

“Again, I won’t negotiate until Carmen...”

“You have no *power* to challenge me.”

A haze of energy wove itself around them, and Joel fought to keep his own power in check. Jaimis could crush him. But not here, in front of dozens of witnesses. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Serena whirl to face them, and Jaimis’s spell...evaporated. *Poof. Gone.*

Jaimis whirled in her direction, his lips pursed in a narrow line. “An intriguing development. And so little surprises me these days. I’d meant to test *you* with my associate’s fire spell last night. A weak witch is of no use to me, and I’d see you dead before I form an alliance with someone who can’t hold his own in my ranks.”

A hairbreadth from panic, Joel reached out for Serena’s thoughts. But she’d put up a wall so thick, he couldn’t convey a warning.

“Young Serena, if I’m not mistaken. I track my pawns carefully, you see. However, sometimes knights masquerade as pawns. Clever, clever girl. Not such a disappointment to her family legacy after all. Unprecedented – her ability to drain off power. So much potential in a gift like that.”

Sorren! Joel thrust outward, seeking the unfamiliar imprint of the elder witch's thoughts. *No time – get Serena out of here!*

Jaimis reached out and grabbed Joel's arm as he tried to leave. "Together, with our resources, we can rule them all."

Tugging his arm away, Joel fought his inclination to focus on Serena's hurried progress away from the aquarium. "What you cloak as grief for your sister boils down to a power grab. What I'm doing in Little Harbor has everything to do with cooperation and respect, and *nothing* to do with increasing my power."

"You think too small, friend." Jaimis's crooked smile and steel-cold eyes reflected more ambition than Joel had ever seen up close. "Sorren's tenure as elder witch is about to come to an end. And if you *ever*" – Jaimis's aura flared, riddled with strange, colorless gaps, and Joel hoped the humans would mistake it for a camera flash – "dare to disparage the memory of my sister again, no amount of skill will make it worthwhile to keep you alive." Jaimis let his aura flare further, and Joel took a step back to avoid being caught up in the oddly fluctuating field of power. "Run along home, witch. Storm's coming. Perhaps you'll make it back in time to aid the survivors."

Joel – Little Harbor – danger! Serena's garbled warning seared through his mind, and as her shields crumbled, he caught flashes of her running full out in the direction of the garage where they'd left Sorren's rented van.

"Return Carmen and call off the dark lords before they summon a storm over Little Harbor." Joel swallowed hard. "Do those two things, and I'll hear your case. I can't offer more than that."

Something told him he'd just agreed to bargain with the devil. Jaimis threw back his head and laughed, then brushed his suit jacket to straighten the cloth.

"Anyone we catch messing with our rite today – you won't recognize what's left by the time my people get through with them." Jaimis pulled a pair of sunglasses out of his pocket, put them on, and strode toward the street.

Joel – we have to get back! Mel's in danger!

With that, Joel's determination to present a facade of studied calm vanished. He turned and ran, fists clenched, not caring what anyone thought, least of all the rogue witch.

* * * * *

As they traveled Route 1 north toward Little Harbor, Serena leaned forward against her seat belt, impatience and worry fizzing through her veins. They'd made it out of Boston in advance of rush hour, but the trip north seemed to take forever. Never mind Sorren's driver ignored speed limits and Joel neglected ethics – not to mention common sense, seeing as Sorren regarded him with a piercing gaze – in using magical persuasion to encourage drivers to move out of their way.

"Sit back, princess." Trey leaned close, so his thigh pressed against hers, and rested his hand on her knee. "Best we can do is arrive with clear heads, ready to pitch in and help."

His cool reason spurred her to fury. "What *in fucking hell* made you start calling me 'princess,' anyway?"

"Certainly not your sweet little mouth." Trey's chuckle, joined in by a couple of townspeople who'd accompanied them to the aquarium, raised her temper another notch. "From the start, something about the way you carried yourself told me you were...important. So sue me, I get hunches. Turns out I was right. As powerful witches go, your family's damn near royalty."

As the van lurched down the off-ramp from Route 1 onto a less-traveled road, Serena watched the storm clouds gather overhead, and goose bumps sprang up on the backs of her arms. Trey's proximity raised the uneasy energy building inside her to the point just before discomfort. If the hunger rose here... She gave herself a mental shake, refusing to consider the possibility.

At the moment, she had bigger problems. She felt the dark lords' power growing, and despite her terror, she struggled with the compulsion to channel their magic harmlessly into the earth. Her internal compass pinpointed the rite just south of Little Harbor, on the coast.

"So you say you get hunches." Harassing Trey presented an attractive option to keep her fear in check and gather some information in the process. Bottom line, her own intuition told her the population of Little Harbor was up to something more radical, and more frightening, than the witches' open coexistence. "You also see the colors of our auras. Humans shouldn't be able to perceive anything more than white flashes of static."

Joel lurched around in his seat to glare at her. Beside him, Sorren sat up straighter, and eerie blasts of air tugged long strands free from his snow-white braid. *Oops*. Not exactly what she'd intended. The interior of the van bristled with energy, magic acting in sympathy with the lightning that flashed overhead, hot and dangerous.

"How in hell would you know what I see when one of you shows an aura?" Trey gripped her wrist hard enough to hurt, and his words carried an unmistakable warning to back down on her claims. "As for the hunches, any tracker worth his boots knows to follow his gut. I've hunted in these woods since I could carry a shotgun. Nothing odd about being able to read the signs around me."

Like hell. Though none of what he said registered as a lie, she knew he'd deflected her accusation with obliquely related truths. She'd had a gut-wrenching forewarning of violent harm to Mel earlier—and the experience had her more curious than ever to figure out what made Trey tick. Foresight had never been one of her gifts. But when Trey talked about his "hunches," she sensed enough weight in the word to know that, never mind he couldn't claim any magic, he had a hell of a lot more experience than she did with premonitions.

As for your bit of foresight, Mel told us to expect unanticipated manifestations of power — Joel shifted in his seat but didn't turn back to look at her this time — that the tendency may run in both our families. As for discussing what Trey can and can't do — not now! Not in front of Sorren.

Startled, she wrenched Trey's hand off her arm and focused on the back of Joel's head. He'd tied his hair back, neatly groomed in keeping with the image of a Boston professional, and his shoulders presented solid lines of tension where they strained against the close-fitting suit jacket. By reaching out to touch his thoughts in bed that morning, and again to warn him at the aquarium, she worried she'd broken down the walls to the point where she wouldn't be able to keep him out of her head.

When the rain came down, it hit with full fury, fat drops of rain pounding against the van. The driver switched on the headlights as light bled out of the September sky. Her fear rose as the wind howled, and the van shuddered under the gale. Around them, maples and pines bucked and swayed in the storm. Autumn leaves scuttled across their path, and branches swept low overhead as they turned onto the poorly lit rural road. Couldn't be much past five, but the sky looked like midnight.

"You're in great danger here, Serena." Sorren's warning didn't do much to lower her personal terror rating. "You're very dear to me, and I'd offer my protection under any circumstance. As it is, I've also given my word to Lena that I'll keep you safe. Your sister's out of harm's way in Canada with Matt and Eric. She left as soon as we got wind of Jaimis's power war — despite her initial plans to rush down here to look after you. Eric's already lost one mother, and bless it if I'll let him lose another. In order to convince Lena to stay away, I guaranteed your safety. You understand me?"

Right, the elder witch's honor is on the line if I get hurt, so I'll step aside and let the others do their best to save Little Harbor. Serena gritted her teeth and bit back a sharp retort. At least he'd managed to get Lena to stay out of this. Still, somewhere deep inside, a bitterly damaged piece of her soul wanted to rage, "So you'll keep me safe...just like you protected Scott from a dark lord's death spell?"

"Storm's picking up quite a kick." Trey rubbed her arm as he spoke, but she shoved his hand away again, unwilling to be soothed. "Just ten minutes from town now. Seems like we're here before the worst of it."

Which means there's still time to diffuse the rite. She didn't know what had stalled Jaimis's plans, but hopefully Mel and the others who lived on the coast would have gained enough time to find shelter away from the ocean's wrath. From the urgency of the threat she'd sensed in Boston, she'd expected to see massive destruction by now.

"My guess is this is a second attempt to carry out a storm rite." This time, Joel twisted in his seat to face her. His forehead showed worry lines she hadn't seen before, and his mouth turned down in a tight frown. "Jaimis sounded confident the gale would start immediately. Best case scenario, the witches from Seal's Haunt made it over here in response to my plea for help, and along with our people, they managed to locate and chase off Jaimis's witches."

“Until now.” Stating the obvious, Trey winced as a branch crashed down, missing the van by a margin of inches. “Seems Jaimis must have had a backup plan in place.”

They completed the last leg of their journey in tense silence as wind buffeted the van, hurling branches and other debris across their path. When they pulled into Joel’s driveway, traveling up onto the lawn to get as close as possible to the side door, Sorren escorted her inside and handed her off to Mel with an admonishment to make certain she didn’t leave the house.

Serena waited, trembling with fear and fury as the elder witch hurried back to join the others. Dripping wet from her dash indoors, she watched a puddle form at her feet and counted backward from one hundred as the van sped off into the thick of the storm.

“They know where to find the rite?”

Mel nodded. “Our people just called in. Second rite’s located north of here—a different circle of witches, as near as we can tell. Group we chased off earlier wouldn’t have had time to relocate and set things up that fast.”

“I know where the dark lords are, Mel—as if a compass inside me is pointing right at them. And I can *stop the rite!* Draw out their power and sink it deep into the earth. It’s...what I do. Magic frightens me, so I’ve learned to...” She shrugged, at a loss to describe her odd talent. “I make it go away. Part of the darkness got lodged inside me last time when I couldn’t finish. If I can see things through this time, I think I’ll be whole again—free of the hunger.”

Mel regarded her with a cool stare, as if assessing her claims. “Goddess help me if I’m wrong, child. I understand Sorren’s need to keep you safe. But some decisions a witch needs to make for herself. And you have the right on this one.” Mel threw open the door to the hall closet, grabbed a sturdy fisherman’s raincoat, and tossed it to Serena, then grabbed a second one for herself. “Plan is for our people to circle around and come down from farther north, since the dark lords will be expecting an attack from the south. Gives us time to get there first and maybe save some lives. Jaimis’s people will be watching for a group—not two lone witches.”

As a mix of relief and dread raced through her, Serena hurried after Mel, doubling over to fight the wind once she got out the door. The cuts she’d picked up when she’d run off through the woods barefoot stung after a day on her feet, but she suspected she’d have bigger hurts before the night ended.

“This might be what puts you in danger.” She reached out to touch Mel’s arm. “What I foresaw in Boston...”

Like Serena, Mel shouted to be heard above the shrieking wind. “More likely the danger lay in being blown off the bluff with my house earlier if Joel hadn’t contacted us with a heads-up to get away from the water.”

Diving into Mel’s mud-spattered truck, she panted to catch her breath in the relative security of the steel frame and closed windows. Of course, the bit of shelter wouldn’t do them any good if a falling tree crushed them on their way to the rite.

“Why go against Sorren’s orders and help me?”

Mel started the truck and pulled out of the driveway like a madwoman, and Serena checked the latch on her seat belt to make sure it held tight. “For one thing, no one gives me orders – past lovers least of all. For another, with your unusual talents, I think you’re best qualified to deal with this. If we hurry, we may be able to save some lives. And finally, whatever’s been eating you up inside and driving your needs – you have a gods-given right to do your best to be free of it, never mind the risk.”

* * * * *

Serena sensed they were close when the storm lessened, as if they’d entered the eye of a hurricane. Raw panic made it hard to follow one breath with another, and she wondered if Mel would forgive her if she puked in the truck. The first time, she hadn’t known what to expect. This time...

“Close as I dare go by road.” Pulling the truck over onto the tree-lined shoulder, Mel shut off the engine and pocketed her keys, and they dived out into the wild, black night.

As her terror grew, tears pricked at the backs of her eyelids. Even if she let them spill down her cheeks, Mel would never notice in the pounding rain. Following the unmistakable imprint of power, she led Mel through the woods, keeping low to avoid detection. Using her personal barometer to detect power surges, Serena skirted around the guards, and soon they spotted an eerie purple glow through the trees.

How close?

Serena startled at the unexpected contact and managed to suppress a yelp. Too many years since she’d allowed even normal mind chatter, and there was nothing normal about having a witch she hardly knew touch her thoughts. But somehow Mel managed to forge the tenuous connection to avoid alerting the dark lords to their presence.

Close enough. Serena cringed as she touched Mel’s thoughts, but received only steady comfort in return.

The more she thought about it, part of the problem last time had been proximity. Never having done anything like this before, she’d erred on the side of situating herself as close as possible to the rite. But that could be why she’d absorbed an overabundance of the dark lords’ power, giving rise to the violent hungers that had shaken her over the past few days.

Serena touched Mel’s arm. *I may pass out again at the end.*

I’ll get you back, regardless. Now let’s get started before the militia comes crashing through the woods and starts a war. Witches will know us for the good guys we are – and most likely the Little Harbor humans will pause long enough to sort out friend from foe before they shoot. But the humans from Seal’s Haunt...

Her senses ringing under the complex onslaught of thoughts, Serena stared at the flickering violet glow through the trees. *Holy fuck. If the humans from Seal's Haunt are going to be out here tonight, that means another whole town just found out about the existence of witches – and no doubt, Joel's right at the center of that disaster.*

No time for that now! Do what you need to do, and let's get back home!

Peeling away her shields one by one, Serena let the first ripples of power slide through her and sent them reeling down toward the mud around her feet as her heart pounded and her teeth chattered. The torrent ripped through her like water exploding through a crack in a levee as she channeled it earthward. *Pain. Confusion. Horror.* Through it all, she struggled to maintain control.

Heat pooled in her belly, and though she felt the cold rain soaking through her jeans, she felt as if she'd burst into flame. Holding on with the full extent of her power, she guided the dark energy deep into the bedrock. Visions of violent sex acts flooded her head, and like last time, she felt herself pulled over the center of the rite until she stared down at the purple light of the pentacle they'd etched across the wet soil in garish trails of energy. As before, the three witches at center held whips and brought the strips of leather down again and again on the backs of the five coupling pairs spread out around them.

Serena panicked when she felt arms around her. But the feel of the icy rain as Mel tugged open her rain slicker, cooling her fevered skin, drew her back to herself. Sitting on the ground as mud oozed up around them, they huddled together. The older witch rocked her back and forth as she continued to disperse the onslaught of energy. Pain seared through her skull, and she whimpered at the assault. Odd sensations stung her. The cut of a whip on her thigh. The burning stretch of her pussy. Piercing pain across her right breast.

With sickening clarity, the force of the rite dragged her back yet again to its center, and a horror show of images flashed before her. A woman screamed, her skin whipped to ribbons, as a man suckled her breasts. A man lay tied with his hands stretched above his head, secured to a fallen log, as another man forced an impossibly large dildo into his ass.

Make it stop!

She'd called out to Mel, but the response came from Joel. *Stay put. I'm on my way!*

His steady presence didn't crowd out the sickening sight of a woman carving a half-moon on her partner's thigh with an evil-looking knife. Try as he might, he couldn't shield her from observing a thin witch with blood trickling down her breasts, her face a mask of anguish as her lover licked droplets of blood from her nipples. But as Serena struggled to ground impossible quantities of energy, Joel's mind-touch kept her sane.

Below her, she watched two witches roll in the mud, battling for the top, joined cock to ass, face-to-face, shrieking as they clawed and tore at each other's faces and chests. In that moment, she called out to the goddess in earnest for the first time since

Scott died. Amid the chaos, she smelled fallen leaves, evergreens, and wet earth. Somehow, the scent crowded out the visions. Through Joel, she felt the wind as his power called upon air as sure as hers called upon water. Opening her mouth, she tasted rain on her lips, fresh with the salt of the ocean.

The agony continued, burning away her nerve endings until she wondered how she could survive. The power kept up its cruel march through her, down into the earth. But this time, she remained in Mel's arms, coated with mud and shaking uncontrollably, rather than floating disembodied over the rite.

A red haze spread through her head, followed by the cold, still absence of light or sound, and she lost hold of the torrent of energy. *Jolts of movement. Pain. Voices. Desire. Darkness.*

Chapter Ten

When Serena surfaced like a swimmer coming up one last time before drowning, she expected to be safe back in Joel's bed in Little Harbor. But rain slashed at her, and someone held her draped across his shoulder. Beyond hope, she slipped back into a gray world where time stopped.

"...keep her quiet?"

"...can't help it...hurts."

So wet. So cold. She shivered until she thought her bones would snap. Though most of her seemed frozen solid, the fire in her belly and breasts raged out of control. She squirmed against the man who held her, seeking relief in the friction, never mind she lay draped across his shoulder, dangling upside down, with rivers of rain turning her hair into an unbearable weight. *So heavy. Pulling me down.*

"Please, sweetheart, it's not safe. Gotta stay quiet."

Who? Squirming more, she tried to place the voice, but the fire licking at her pussy tore her attention away from irrelevant details.

Serena! Please. Dark lords nearby. Hush.

Joel. How did Joel get in my head? Didn't ask him in. Not nice to push past barriers.
"Ooohhh!"

Connecting the low moan with herself, she shivered and bit her lip. *Dark lords? The rite came rushing back to her in gory flashes. Blood. Whips. Violence. A thousand perversions. Unbearable.*

Despite the horror show, the fire burned on, and she squirmed harder. Another man spoke. She should know his name. Other people nearby. The dark lords?

"...get her inside soon...feverish."

A woman. Who? She should know her, too. Joel stumbled, and as her head lurched to the side, nausea gripped her, and she choked out a series of gagging noises.

"She's going to be sick. Set her down." Trey. The other man's voice belonged to Trey.

The fire crept up her belly across her chest to her throat, and she wondered if the burning would lessen after she cleared the contents of her stomach. When Joel knelt and helped her onto her hands and knees, the cool mud oozing up between her fingers cleared her head. Connecting the woman's voice in the background with Mel, and adding in two or three strangers' hushed whispers besides, she decided she needed to be sick in private.

Scooting into the bushes, she felt her way with her hands. Someone grabbed at her ankle, but she pressed under a fallen branch and then wiggled through another low tangle of shrubs. The need to puke morphed into a need to crawl away to die alone, because nothing could ease this much pain. Nothing could make the fire stop burning through her belly and across her breasts. Calling on the last reserves of her strength, she scrambled under dense bushes on her belly, farther and farther from the path.

"Whoa!" Who? The voice seemed familiar, but horribly out of place.

A green glow sphere swelled with light, and she blinked as the branches and leaf-covered forest floor came into focus. Squinting past the wavering green glow, she brought pieces of the world into focus. A shallow cave. Someone crouching at its mouth. Dark, spiky hair glistening with rain. Black shirt and pants, coated with mud.

Turning to the side, she gave up any attempt to classify the witch as friend or foe and heaved up a day's worth of food onto the mud. The man moved closer and lifted her soaking hair out of the way, stroking her face as she shook with dry heaves.

"Where the hell are...?" Joel pushed through the narrow tunnel of bushes and crawled up beside her.

Ignoring Joel, she stared at the pale, dark-haired man as recognition crashed in on her. "Sweet goddess...what are you doing here?" She reached out for Dane and held on to his wrist as Joel tried to pull her away.

Power rose around her, and she tried to scramble out of the way before the men launched spells at each other. She made it about two feet before she crumbled onto the ground and lay on her side, her ribs heaving as she tried to suck in air.

Dane's power flared stronger. "I move with the silence of raven's wings." His voice dragged her back more than five years, to rainy afternoons spent nestled under the down comforter in Sorren's guest cottage. He didn't belong here.

"On raven's wings we'll quiet the dark." Joel grabbed her around the middle and started dragging her back toward the opening in the tangle of branches.

"Please..." Even half-blind with pain, she picked up the note of desperation in Dane's voice. "She doesn't belong in the middle of this."

You know him? Joel's thoughts pressed past her defenses again.

Her world turned upside down as she attempted a nod. *Yes.*

"I'm bringing her to safety." Since Joel's assurance went unchallenged, and he continued to drag her through the underbrush, she figured the two men had resolved their little pissing match.

Swallowing her whole, the gray place sucked her in again.

"...all uphill...circle around to the cars from the west..."

"...Jaimis himself...tracking..."

The fear that name evoked pulled her upward. But as she emerged dripping and shivering from the mist, hunger overran reason and with a hopeless whimper she struggled against the arms that held her, desperate to achieve even a moment of relief.

Quiet, Serena. Life depends on it. Joel's warning hardly penetrated the red haze.

Burning up – need – dying – hunger...

As he continued on at a brisk pace, jostling her until she felt as if the back of her head would rip off, someone pulled close alongside them. Joel shifted her down off his shoulder until she lay cradled in his arms, and someone unsnapped her jeans.

Stay quiet, and we'll try to give you some relief.

Joel's words didn't make sense until fingers pressed against her belly, then slid under her jeans and panties. She threw her head back and arched her hips against the pressure. As his fingers caressed her clit, someone put a hand over her mouth, and she tasted salty skin – smelled musky male.

Trey. Trey and Joel will save me.

She moaned against Trey's fingers as Joel rubbed her clit and brought her off within seconds. Not nearly enough. The hunger needed to feed. The blinding pressure needed an outlet.

Help me, Joel – Trey! She slid into their thoughts easily, and for some reason, that made her afraid. *Oh, yes, not supposed to be able to do that with a human.*

Never mind, her plea drew an instant response, and as fingers filled her pussy, the pain pulled back further, until she could take a few deep breaths in a row. In fact, the rough contact of their work-callused fingers moving against sensitive tissue soothed her enough that her night vision cleared, and the shadowy shapes of others came into focus.

Oh fuck! Beyond pride or any real hope, she shut her eyes and tried to pretend they were alone.

* * * * *

Secure, warm, and dry in the safe house, Joel stroked his hand along Trey's silky-smooth cock, playing his fingers over the raised vein in the center. Trey had his arms tangled tight around Serena, gently stroking her clit as she slept, and Joel spooned up against Trey's back. When Serena woke, he didn't know what to expect. *More likely than not, it won't be pleasant.*

Physically, they'd done what they could. They'd bathed her, warmed her, and taken the edge off the hunger. Snuggled in with her on an air mattress under a heap of comforters, they'd be with her if she woke screaming, battling an overdose of the dark lords' magic. But would she remember that he knew the bad guys' passwords? For that matter, what should he make of the fact that she'd known the dark lord hiding in the woods?

Witches and humans stirred around them, clustered on cots and sleeping bags. The safe house under the abandoned barn in West Seal's Haunt would provide the haven they needed until Jaimis's people gave up combing the woods for the witches and humans who'd interfered with the first rite last night—and more importantly, for Serena, who'd shut down the second. They had food and drinks, ample blankets, even spare clothes. *But privacy? Forget it.*

"It'll work out." Trey shifted onto his back and turned his head to whisper in Joel's ear. "Hell, after seeing Mel sweet-talk Sorren out of his killing rage after he found out she'd brought Serena out to the rite, I'm willing to believe anything's possible."

Joel moved his hand upward to stroke Trey's stomach, wishing with all his might that he could have enjoyed this moment months ago, before the world turned upside down. Still, the clean, forestlike scent of Trey's skin and the heat of his body, naked and freshly bathed, went a long way to quiet his fears.

"I understand Mel's reasoning—dead wrong, but I understand why she chose to let Serena head out there to diffuse the rite. Serena can be...convincing. As for Sorren, I thought he'd eat Mel alive for not keeping Serena under lock and key. I'm starting to believe the rumors that they were lovers once."

Trey reached down to wrap a tight fist around his cock, and Joel shuddered as he pressed into the friction, his desire heightened by the slick little sounds produced when Trey stroked Serena with his other hand.

"The man who died tonight..." Trey rubbed his thumb through the drop of moisture at the tip of his cock. "You understand there's nothing you could have done?"

"Won't be any comfort to his family." Joel's gut clenched up, and he nudged Trey's hand away. He hadn't seen the man go down, hadn't been nearby when one of Jaimis's human followers had taken him out with a shot to the head, but the death weighed heavy on his mind. "I led people out there tonight, took it on myself to include the witches from Seal's Haunt because there were too many dark lords to take on without help. I'm the one who encouraged them to tell their human friends and lovers so we'd have more guns on our side."

A few people snored softly. Couples made love in quiet nooks near the corners, layering the musky aroma of sex through the stronger scents of dusty sleeping bags and freshly scrubbed skin. Auras rippled free as witches dreamed, still restless after the terrifying dash through the woods with Jaimis's people in pursuit. Close by, a woman sat up and smoothed down her tousled hair, the motion pulling the room into focus for him.

"We all chose to be out there earlier. No point in blaming yourself." After a moment, Joel placed her. Kiara, a witch from Seal's Haunt who'd lost her human husband in a lobster boat accident a couple of years ago. If he had his facts right, Trey had dated her a while back. "Our human friends understand the price of losing homes to the winds those assholes whipped up tonight. The storms endanger their lives, as well."

When Kiara stood and walked over to join them on their air mattress, settling on the other side of Serena, Joel blinked in surprise. She wore nothing more than an oversize T-shirt, most likely having consigned her muddied clothes to the wash pile like the rest of them, and she didn't hesitate to crawl under the comforters against Serena's naked back. The rainbow of auras from a roomful of sleeping witches cast ripples of light across Kiara's short black hair and high cheekbones, and colors cascaded across her arms and face as she curled her petite form around Serena's back.

"Kiara and I..." Trey shifted beside him, his mess of sandy blond hair glistening in the half-light. "Ah, last summer, we..."

"Your tongue-tied friend is an awesome lover, an adequate dancer, and if he hadn't shared tales with a few of his drinking buddies, I would have given him a chance at more than a few nights with me." Kiara settled in closer to Serena, her small breasts pressed to the sleeping witch's back, only the thin cotton of her T-shirt separating them. "But that's not what this is about. Mel spoke with me before she and Sorren took off for Boston. Explained what Serena did out there tonight, and what it cost her. I think I might be able to help."

"Kiara's an earth witch—has a gift for gentling people and skittish creatures." Trey reached across Serena to touch Kiara's cheek. "Grounding any angst or fear they carry."

Bless it, an empathic witch might just be the thing to ease Serena through the aftershocks of whatever dark magic got trapped inside her during the rite. But at the moment, he had trouble getting past the fact that Trey, who'd never so much as discussed a date with him, had pissed off this feisty witch by telling public tales.

Can't talk sex with someone you want to jump so bad your balls ache. Trey turned toward him and winked. *It's just not done.*

The shock of the contact plowed through his senses and left him flat on his back, panting in surprise. Sure, Serena had pushed open a pathway between them in bed yesterday morning, but having Trey slip into his mind so easily after years of failing to forge a connection... Joel shook his head. Blessed great timing, too. If Sorren didn't nail him for encouraging witches to discuss their gifts with the humans of Little Harbor and Seal's Haunt, or for consorting with some of the dark lords struggling to break away from Jaimis, no doubt he'd beat the magical crap out of him for encouraging humans to nurture their latent psychic traits.

Never mind the threat Jaimis presents – most likely, Sorren will finish me off long before the rogue witch gets his hands on me.

Beside him, Trey sighed and kissed his neck. Kiara waited expectantly, her hand on Serena's shoulder. Before he could wonder where in fuck to go from here, Serena surged upright and let out a scream, rousing every single witch and human in the underground chamber. Power flared as witches scrambled to their feet.

"Stand down! It's just Serena. She had a bad time of it trying to stop the dark lords from raising the storm earlier. Her magic got a bit scrambled, and she's going to need some help working through the aftermath." About as specific as he could be without risking the information that Serena could negate spells. Bad enough Jaimis knew that, without spreading the fact around any further. "Just go back to sleep and try to ignore us."

Likely. As he helped Trey grapple with Serena's flailing arms and legs, taking more than a few kicks and scratches in the process, he resigned himself to the fact that whatever went on here tonight would have one hell of an audience.

Kiara scrambled behind Serena and wrapped her arms around the frantic witch's waist. "I can help, Serena. I'm a friend. Let me help you!"

Whether Serena processed the meaning of the words or simply didn't know how to respond to a stranger locking her in a bear hug, she quieted for a moment, giving Trey a chance to pin her legs and Joel a chance to get between them.

"Same as before, Serena? You want this? Need to shed some of the dark energy?" Joel ached with the psychic backlash of her suffering, but no way would he make a move toward her until she managed to express what she needed. With her eyes wild and her hair flying around her as power escaped in short, potent bursts, he couldn't even tell if she recognized him. "It's me, baby. Joel. Trey's here, too. And this is Kiara, a friend of Trey's who wants to help. Please, let us help you."

Bless it if it didn't kill him to see her like this—wild, in pain, and out of control. Kiara leaned forward with her head on Serena's shoulder, tendrils of short black and long brown hair mingling in the backlash of Serena's restless power. As he watched, Kiara whispered something in a language he couldn't place, and Serena's aura spilled out as free and beautiful as morning mist over the sea. Blue green like the ocean, the color swirled free in arcs and whirlpool eddies, the movement almost violent as her magic surged forth after being suppressed for so many years.

"There you go, princess." Trey choked back what sounded like a sob and moved up closer behind Joel, still pinning Serena's legs with his hands. "Just let it all out."

As Joel reached out to Trey without thinking twice, Trey's link with Serena doubled back on him, and he clenched his teeth against the hurt. Gods help her, no one should have to suffer like this. Sweat dampened the back of Joel's neck as he struggled to separate himself from her anguish.

Please! Serena's thought imprint ripped through his head with the power of an explosion. *I need you!*

All I need to hear, sweetheart. Sobbing audibly now, never mind his pride, Joel nudged his cock against Serena's damp mound of curls.

Kiara settled Serena's head in her lap, still crooning to her in the strange tongue. Trey released Serena's legs and moved off to the side, close to her head, beside Kiara. Like a blanket of love and worry, Joel spread himself on top of Serena, bombarded by heat as she wrapped her thoughts so tight with his, he couldn't breathe. When Trey forced himself into the link, a steady, calming presence, Joel managed to gulp air as he lowered his head to take Serena's nipple into his mouth.

Sucking hungrily, he felt the tug as if on his own body. No casual connection, this time. *Gods help us – we've formed a full-fledged link.* Every sensation, every emotion, that belonged to Trey or Serena echoed through him, potent and confusing. On the periphery, he sensed Kiara's presence as she gentled Serena, calming the panicked witch. But the landscape tonight belonged to the three of them, joined so tight, he couldn't tell where one began and the other ended.

When he felt hands on his hips, he flinched in surprise, but the stranger carried out a garbled conversation with Kiara as he guided Joel's body toward Serena's, helping them join up when Joel seemed to lack the sense to drive his cock home.

"Ah!" Heat tore at him as he entered her, reflected back at him by Trey and Serena. *Liquid silver. Molten. Swirling.* The energy pooled in his balls and radiated up through him until he felt as if the top of his head would blow off, and Serena and Trey echoed his cries.

Joel felt hands on his hips again, callused and rough, urging him to move. Trey's and Serena's voices in his head overwhelmed him, drawing him under. But he moved all the same. Following the suggested path seemed to take less energy than fighting it. Through it all, Kiara's voice droned on, lilting and gentle, anchoring him to the present.

In an explosive spike of passion, Serena's pussy clenched and released so fast, he couldn't sort out what he felt with his own body, and what he experienced through her, dragged under by her gut-wrenching climax. Her breasts tingled, and he lived the sensation as if he called that portion of her body his own. Something deep inside her belly drew up tight and fluttered in pure relief, and he moaned at the ferocity of the spasms. Wrapped in her consciousness, he felt liquid gush deep inside her, caressing her silken flesh, at the same time he registered the familiar tensing, throbbing burn when he came.

Voices chattered around him, though he couldn't sort out the meaning. But it made perfect sense when someone guided Trey behind him and positioned Trey's hands at his sides. Joel mumbled his approval as Trey's steel-hard cock pressed against skin begging for penetration, never mind the fact he'd just come so hard, his teeth ached.

"Linked...caught up in Serena's fever...need to spend the energy." Kiara's voice, calm and matter-of-fact.

"Never seen anything so hot." A stranger. The male witch intent on helping him and Trey hook up together. "Just a blessed shame they're suffering so much."

Moving on his own now, Trey rubbed his shaft through the mess of fluids spilling out of Serena's pussy around Joel's still-hard cock. The stranger grabbed Joel's hips and tilted them back toward Trey. A moment later, Trey pushed in so hard and fast there didn't seem to be enough air in the room or enough heartbeats to get him through the next moment. Trey yelped right along with Joel, and he wondered if they'd ever get the hang of being wrapped up so tight inside each other's heads that they couldn't separate out the hurts – or the pleasures.

As Trey angled deeper, pushing him hard against Serena, Joel's aura ripped free with a burst of power so sweet, he crooned his welcome. The soft violet mingled with Serena's blue-green energy, arching back to encompass not only Trey, but the man who'd guided them together, and Kiara where she sat behind Serena. *Holy blessed fuck!*

Energy rippled and rebounded, and the backlash called out both Kiara's and the stranger's powers, adding flashes of scarlet and gold to the mix. Serena came again, clenching and writhing – and subjected him to a whole range of female sensations that his body insisted just didn't belong. By the time she'd stopped bucking beneath him, and her – gods, for all the world it felt like his – pussy stopped throbbing enough that they could both breathe again, a certain degree of calm settled.

"Better. Can think again. Breathe again." Trey angled deeper, stretching him so sweet and low, he'd have come again if he weren't just too fucking spent. "Sorry – no lube – know it stings."

Stings just right. Oh gods, the heady punch of pleasure-pain, mingled with the realization that Trey felt it, too, through him, kicked him into the sixth dimension of bliss. As he strained to untangle his muddled thoughts, he reasoned that if he felt this fucking good, Serena couldn't be hurting much anymore. The three of them continued to exist, breathe, and feel through each other. So fucking linked, he never wanted to let them go.

"Kiara's helping. Pain's not so bad now." Serena's voice, shaky but free of panic, had never sounded so sweet. "What are all these people doing here?"

A laugh bubbled up deep inside him, though he choked it back when Trey dragged a bit to the left, and the flesh around the rim of his anus set up a crazed protest at the sudden burn.

Sorry. Trey corrected, centering his body over Joel's, and Serena sighed in relief right along with him.

"Safe house under an old barn. Seal's Haunt." As Serena's flesh twitched around him during an especially deep thrust, clenching in what he recognized as preorgasmic flutters, he gave up trying to explain.

"You're safe. But Jaimis's people nearly had us. Not safe for you to head back to Little Harbor tonight." Kiara reached forward to touch his shoulder, and the sensation repeated itself as she touched Serena, then Trey. "About fifteen witches and half a dozen humans are holed up here. Never mind, though. By now most of them have joined in, swept up by the mix of energy and lust."

No doubt they'd provided a blessed good show before their audience got into the spirit of things. Heat spread across Joel's chest and face, and he felt a little queasy. At least two people – Kiara and the witch still stroking his thighs – had front-row seats and had yet to distract themselves.

"Sexy." Serena gasped out a sound that could have passed for either a chuckle or a sob, but through the link, Joel tasted her mirth as if the noise had spilled from his own tongue. "Being watched – now that I don't hurt so much – so fucking sexy."

Never mind his own discomfort with the lack of privacy, Serena's desire tugged him under like the riptide, and his balls tucked up tight as the helpful stranger patted the side of his straining thigh. Any deeper and Trey would stick so tight, they'd never come apart. Joel half feared his arms would give way, leaving Serena crushed beneath a couple of squirming men.

"Sweet, brave witch. You're going to be okay now." Kiara kissed Serena's cheek, and Joel felt the brush of her lips as if she'd touched his skin as well. "I'm going to stop fighting the inevitable and join up with Mr. Handsome down there behind Trey and Joel. I'll be right here if you need me."

"Damned if we haven't" – Trey panted as he delivered a few quick thrusts, driving Joel forward against Serena's sharp little pelvic bones – "gotten a whole fucking safe house full of people laid tonight."

"My fault." Serena reached up and tangled her hands in Joel's curls, which had long since come unstrung from the neat tie he'd fixed at the back of his neck before they drove into Boston. To his amazement, Serena chuckled, and her breasts shook against his chest. "Bad witch. Naughty to spread so much lust around."

Punch-drunk on the overabundance of mingled energy and sex, she wiggled beneath him, and her aura tangled tighter with his, their power mingling together in a wild dance as their bodies shared space, wet and hot and hungry.

"Felt like I was wrapped in chains, bound so tight I couldn't breathe." Serena panted as he swirled his hips against her, driven by Trey's guiding movements. "And then Kiara called my aura, and the steel melted away."

Tangled in the arms of her lover, Kiara reached out to touch Serena's side. "There's more to set free. Do it tomorrow, and maybe you'll be able to bleed off the rest of the dark energy."

Kiara wrapped her arm around the burly witch again. In the light of rioting auras, her creamy hips shone gold, and the man's rich coffee skin shimmered under the scarlet light of his magic. Captivated, Joel stared as Kiara tugged free and scooted around onto her hands and knees, and her partner entered her doggy fashion. They pressed close enough that Joel could reach out and feel the spot where their bodies joined if he had the inclination. Breathing so hard his throat stung, he wondered if he'd ever be able to enjoy normal sex again. But then Trey let out a yell and picked up the pace of his half-crazed thrusts, shaking and trembling against Joel's back as he fought to hold off the inevitable.

“Now!” Serena’s voice rang through him, hot and desperate. “Right now!”

“Fuck! Ohmyfuckinggod!” Trey dug his fingers into Joel’s sides, clinging tight enough to leave bruises, and Joel came with them, overwhelmed by the fire spurting through Trey’s cock, the too-sensitive twitching of Serena’s overstimulated clit, and his own exhausted plunge into shuddering, aching thrusts as liquid fire spilled through his cock.

Witches climaxed around the room, dragged into the vortex as his magic danced with Serena’s power, broadcasting their release to any witch within a hundred yards of them. Beside them, Kiara threw back her head and shrieked. Her golden aura merged with her partner’s bold scarlet until the two colors bled into one metallic glare. Having two more witches reach their crisis so damn close felt like a kick in the balls in his exhausted state, but Serena laughed and came again, her pussy milking his stinging cock.

Trey clung to him, groaning, as ecstatic cries multiplied around the room, witches and humans calling out their pleasure. Near the end of Serena’s final climax, bless it if he and Trey didn’t manage to crawl over the edge one last time and join her, cocks throbbing, balls burning, yelling each other’s names, and hers, too, because it just felt too fucking good – and hurt too fucking much – to keep quiet.

* * * * *

Sorting through the clothes Joel had someone bring over from Little Harbor, Serena ditched the borrowed sweats and T-shirt and pulled on black pants and a stretchy black shirt. After tugging on running shoes and a sweatshirt, she sneaked out of the bustling safe house – a barn-sized area hosting an array of cots, food supplies, and groggy, disoriented people – and ran up the stairs toward the abandoned barn overhead.

With any luck, Joel would be busy organizing the ranks of Seal’s Haunt humans, many of them still anxious or angry as they struggled to come to terms with a world of witches and magic, and he wouldn’t notice she’d slipped away. The scent of stale hay met her as she scurried through the cobweb-laden barn and out into the sunshine. Fear drove her forward with no more than a quick glance at the autumn colors covering the hills surrounding the tiny town. Even the scent of wood smoke, fallen leaves, and fresh air couldn’t drag her out of her mood.

Serena took off at a brisk jog, keeping watch for signs of trouble, never mind that the scouts had pronounced the area clear of Jaimis’s followers. Zigzagging toward the hills, she sought the cover of the trees. *If only I knew what the fuck to do next.*

Pissed off at her own indecision, her fear, and – irrationally, she admitted – at Joel and Trey over the public threesome last night, she selected a clearing near a stream for her next move. If she’d been certain of her plans to leave, she’d have kept moving, but hightailing it back to California seemed like a plan that deserved some clearheaded thought. And her thinking wouldn’t be clear until she got past this next step.

Already, she felt the hunger growing, and since she couldn't take on another storm rite without risking her mental health—and her life—that left one option. Well, technically speaking, two, but her long-term plans didn't include adopting the lifestyle of a nymphomaniac. Which left Kiara's insistence that the only way to purge the dark sexual magic she'd retained after the storm rite was to start using her power.

Serena kicked off her shoes and moved through a couple of sets of sun salutations, hoping to draw a bit of serenity from the familiar yoga poses. *No such luck.* The thick carpet of leaves slid around under her feet, and she had a hard time keeping her balance.

Off balance – that about sums up everything right now. Yet no amount of fear could make her forget how fucking good it had felt when her aura ripped free last night. *So what are you so fucking scared of, witch?*

The hunger hitched up a notch, and seizing the most powerful act of magic she could pull together without supplies, she sat down on a flat rock beside the stream and watched the water until her vision blurred. Her aura broke free, swirling around her in a blue-green haze, and she focused harder. A patch of the bubbling stream blurred and reformed itself, and she shivered with the effort to summon a scrying image.

Not future or past, but a simple view of her family. A little comfort to lessen the hard-edged fear of using her magic for the first time since Scott died. Though she'd sought her sister, her nephew Eric came into focus first. Standing in a field, he tossed a ball to Matt, and her brother-in-law caught it in a worn baseball glove and threw it back. They wore thick fall jackets, and their breath billowed in white clouds. On the next toss, the ball never made it to its destination, because a blonde whirlwind swooped down from the side, froze it in midair with a spell, grabbed the ball, and ran off, with Matt and Eric in hot pursuit.

Lena. Her heart ached as she watched her sister dart across the field, laughing. She'd give just about anything to be there right now. The vision fragmented, and she stared at the swirling water, wondering when she'd be able to visit without drawing the attention of the dark lords to her family. Made no sense to call magic a gift. In her experience, all it brought was pain and trouble.

"You shouldn't be out here alone."

Whirling, she clung to the thread of power she'd summoned, ready to swing it outward if she had to. "Dane!"

Chapter Eleven

Still clasping the twisting cord of energy, Serena took a few steps back toward the path and swallowed hard. Fear and the unfamiliar sensation of holding power again mingled with a profound sense of betrayal, and she wanted to lie down, cover herself with leaves, and weep.

“Last night...” Oh, goddess, she wished she didn’t remember this part. But only one explanation presented itself for why he would have been in the woods last night. “When I stumbled across you in the woods, and my friend followed—the bit about ravens—that was some sort of code, wasn’t it?”

Moving so fast she didn’t have a chance to summon a defensive spell, he lunged forward, clasped her wrist, and drew her into an embrace. Dane towered over her by a good six inches, and though he remained as thin and gangly as ever, he held her easily despite her struggles.

Serena’s rage flared so hot, she forgot to be frightened. “How. Could. You?” Before their battle for her affections, Scott and Dane had been friends. To take that memory and throw it away—to join the very people who had killed Scott...

“Last night, the bit about the raven was meant to identify us to each other. You’re at least partly right in your assumptions. *Partly.*”

Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them back. After all these years, his warm, salty scent held the same power to drag her under. Never mind her fury, the hunger rose all the same.

“Please...” Guiding her with his arm tight around her waist, he pulled her down beside him on the leafy ground. “A year after you left for California, Sorren offered me a chance to penetrate the dark lord’s inner circles and send information back to the elder witch’s enforcers.”

Dane picked up a handful of dried leaves and crumpled them into the stream. “Problem was, I got in too deep. I couldn’t leave. The circle I’d entered moved away from Minnesota to the East Coast, and I got in so far over my head, I couldn’t find the surface. Jaimis figured out who I was early on—had me watched, cut me off from sending information back to Sorren.”

Everything he said rang true, but her instincts still cried foul. Wrenching away from him, she stood up and walked over to where she’d left her shoes, tugged them on, and secured the laces. All the better to make a break for it when she had a chance.

“To complicate matters further, I had to fucking go and fall in love—a witch by the name of Diana, and she’s...well, she’s in trouble.”

Had to fucking go and fall in love. That stung. Whirling to face him, she took in his ratty jeans, rumpled shirt, work boots, and spiky black hair. When she got to his hawklike nose, high cheekbones, and amber brown eyes, she swallowed hard, and a few tears plowed down her cheeks. They say the first one never lets you go, and she’d loved Dane every godsdamned bit as much as Scott. *Hurts to remember how it felt—sharing a link just as strong, a bond just as important. But gods be damned, not strong enough to survive the storm of grief following Scott’s death.*

“Diana’s in deeper than I ever was—more power, more valuable to the rogue witch. And yes, she’s been forced to do some bad shit. Not like I have clean hands, either, at this point. Jaimis has people trailing her parents day and night, and with the threats he’s made about what he’ll do to them, he all but owns her.”

Serena kicked at a hummock of dried ferns and wondered why in hell she didn’t bolt for the safety of the Seal’s Haunt safe house. A little voice whispered its insidious answer. *Because Joel knew the code when we ran into Dane last night—and more likely than not, that makes him a dark lord, too.*

No one to trust. Nowhere to go. Black flickers of light closed in at the edges of her vision, and she bit her lip to stay alert. Passing out right now wouldn’t get her anything but screwed. Taking note of that unfortunate metaphor, the hunger clawed at her gut and twisted her pussy into an eager knot. So much for Kiara’s advice that using her power would cleanse her of the dark energy.

I am so fucked. Fisting her hands in her tangled hair, she tucked it under the back of her shirt, limiting the ways Dane could grab onto her if this came down to a struggle.

“I know you’re angry—can feel it ripping through me like a pair of claws—and I know you’re scared. Please, I’m not going to hurt you. And neither is the guy you were with last night.”

Backing away a few more steps in the direction of the deer path she’d followed up here, she waited for him to explain, all the time watching for a distraction that would allow her enough of a head start to outrun him.

“The bit about the raven—Jaimis’s people don’t use passwords. You’re either one of them, or they capture or kill you. Simple as that.” Dane picked up a rock and skipped it across the surface of the water, but turned back to her too quickly to present an

opportunity to bolt. “There’s a middle ground, folks who were either forced to join because of their formidable talents or who bought into Jaimis’s fever dreams about a country where witches will have full rights under the law. These witches are ready to rise against Jaimis, given the chance. But they won’t follow Sorren, with his uncompromising code of ethics.”

Stall. Keep him talking. Gwen’s lessons came back as if she’d heard them a million lifetimes ago, muted by time but deathly important. “So the man I was with last night...” Damned if she’d feed him Joel’s name. “That’s the group he identifies with? Not quite a dark lord, but not one of Sorren’s people, either?”

“You’ll have to ask him.” Dane took a few steps toward her, and he frowned when she moved away until her back pressed up against a huge tree trunk. “Look, I wanted to see you again. Never really got to say good-bye, with you so messed up after Scott...”

When his voice faltered, she seized the opportunity to dart sideways, clearing the barrier of the tree, but he followed and caught her by the arms. Her heart pounded, and her need rose hot and fierce as his spicy scent surrounded her. When he bent down to kiss her, she raised her head and let him, as desperate as he was for that last good-bye. His mouth tasted like licorice, hot and sweet, and stabs of desire sliced across her belly down to her pubic mound.

At that moment, she knew on some level—never mind her desperation and pain—she’d *chosen* to make love with Joel and Trey each time she’d fallen into their arms. Because even with the hunger burning her inside and out, she’d die before she let Dane help her feed the dark urges.

“Scott never would have done what you did. *Never.*” Scott’s ethics had been rock solid. He never would have agreed to work the dark side for information—let alone get sucked in over his head and become, in any sense of the word, a dark lord.

“I’ve paid for my choices. I’ll be lucky if I make it out of this alive.” Dane reached out to touch her hair. “All I have to give you now is the truth. Not some nobler version of myself. Needing to see you again, that was selfish. I wanted to capture a bit of the past. I’ll leave soon, but I have something to ask you first.”

Oh fuck, this should be good. Anger swarmed up past the lust, stronger than fear.

“Please...about Diana. You’ll know her by her red hair. Only redhead Jaimis keeps close at heel. Rumor has it the lot of you will be going in after Little Harbor’s kidnapped healer soon. Please, when you rescue Carmen, get Diana out of there, too. She knows the layout—can help all of you make it out alive. And if Sorren protects her parents from Jaimis’s people, she’ll pledge loyalty to him. I guarantee it.”

Even if she’d had anything to say to his request to rescue his dark lord lover, her need had risen to a point where speech didn’t seem like a reasonable option.

I’m so sorry. I’ll always love you.

That their link held after all these years, allowing him to reach into her thoughts, brought her to her knees and reduced her to sobs. Dane bent over to kiss her cheek and then faded into the trees, drawing on his power to mask his retreat.

* * * * *

Furious at himself for not noticing Serena had slipped away sooner, Trey bent down and scooped her into his arms. Her breathing came in uneven gasps, and sweat coated her face, despite the fact that it couldn't be much over fifty degrees out here. Worse yet, her skin felt so hot against his hands that he feared the fever would do her real harm if he couldn't get the hunger under control. He rummaged in the hiking pack he'd dumped at the base of an oak and freed the old army-surplus sleeping bag, struggling for balance as he cradled Serena in the crook of his right arm, her upper body half draped across his shoulder.

No way around it, he set her down on the cold ground while he shook out the sleeping bag and positioned his shotgun in easy reach. With the mess in Seal's Haunt, he'd be damned if he got caught with his pants down—literally—by a couple of fear-crazed vigilantes. Right now, pants down was exactly what Serena needed, so he'd rely on the shotgun as a nice little life insurance policy. A lot of the Little Harbor folks favored fancier weapons these days, with so many badass witches haunting the woods. But he'd hunted with this weapon since he was a kid, and he never missed.

"Easy does it, princess." His throat tightened as he slid her into the sleeping bag, fully dressed all the way down to her running shoes. Good choice of footwear, seeing as once he got her up and functioning again, they'd have a lot of walking to do.

Trey stroked her hair away from her eyes as he eased in beside her, the long strands limp and sticky with sweat. No one deserved to suffer like she had, just for trying to do the right thing. Alongside Joel and Mel, she had to be the bravest damn witch he'd ever met. Never mind she kept insisting she was scared to death—push came to shove, she faced down her fears and got the job done.

Her aura flickered around her, a weak, dusky blue. Trey suspected she'd come out here to take Kiara's advice and set her power free. *Judging from the state she's in, doesn't seem to have worked. Damn and double damn.*

"Hang in there, baby." Seconds flat, he had his jeans unsnapped and the zipper down. Without bothering to undress further, he shoved his pants and briefs past his waist and tugged her stretchy pants and panties down out of the way. "Serena? Come on, princess, you've got to wake up so I can help you."

Damned if he'd make love to a barely conscious woman, though at the moment, he didn't have any backup plans. When she whimpered but didn't open her eyes, he begged her forgiveness in advance and smacked her thigh. Filling her lungs with air, she got the beginnings of a shriek out before he pressed his hand to her mouth.

"Shh. Not safe to raise a fuss out here. We've got new problems since you last heard the update." Serena squirmed against him and chomped down hard on his

fingers. "Hey! It's just me. Sorry, but I needed you fully aware of what's going on so I can help ease the burn."

When she stopped struggling, crawled on top of him, and wrapped her legs around his, pulling him closer in the confines of the musty sleeping bag, he heaved a sigh of relief and moved his hand to stroke the back of her head. Her hands found his cock—rock hard and ready for her.

"You've got that effect on me, sweetheart, always wanting, always ready. You and Joel both." He kept his voice low, due to the disgruntled humans who'd bolted into the woods with a vow to pick off witches and make Seal's Haunt safe for humanity again. Just a few idiots, and the town would deal with them soon enough—but wouldn't Sorren have a field day with this one in the meantime? "There you go, baby, you'll feel better real soon."

Letting her guide him with her hands, he allowed himself a grunt of pleasure at the silky grip of her flesh around his dick as she wriggled on top of him until she engulfed him completely. *Only good thing about this week – meeting you.*

Didn't make any sense to care so much so soon, but Joel said it worked that way with witches. Never mind he wasn't one, he'd gotten pulled into the whole deal, caught up in their power like a bug circling a porch light—with the end result that he'd fallen just as hard and fast for Serena as Joel had.

Hell, as she reached out and found their link, he got snared in each thought that bubbled through her—her first kiss, losing her virginity, kinky stunts she'd tried with Scott or Dane. He knew her better after a few days than people he'd dated for months. Serena arched to give him better access, and he hummed under his breath as his cock all but melted inside her.

Hold me.

Damn, yes. Trey wrapped his arms around her back, and they snuggled close, pressed together so tight, he felt the outline of his zipper bite into his thigh where his pants tangled around him. Just once, he wanted to make love to her when she had more choice in the matter.

Am choosing. Have chosen. Hunger just sets the time. Could have fucked Dane just now. Didn't.

As he rocked against her, smelling her honey-sweet skin and brushing kisses across the top of her head, he sorted through that information. "The guy you and Joel ran into last night when you scooted off on your own to throw up? Shit, he's Dane?"

Oh hell, if she'd just found out one of her former lovers had gone over to the dark side, on top of everything else she'd dealt with in the past few days...

Said he's part of a splinter group of dark lords. She squirmed as he moved his hand to cup her breast. *Looking to bring down Jaimis, but not willing to follow Sorren.*

"Mmm." *Not a good time for this conversation right now.* Hoping to distract her, he played her nipple between his thumb and forefinger and swirled his hips upward to brush against her clit.

“Who are they following, Trey? Are they following Joel?”

Oh hell. Silver lining here, at least she was lucid enough to reason that out. She’d be okay, once they chased the hunger off. When he’d found her crumpled on the ground, clutching her knees to her chest, he’d thought...

Who. Are. They. Following? If not Jaimis any longer, and not Sorren, then who?

The question rang through his head like a series of punches. The closer she pulled him into her thoughts, the more he experienced sensations through her – felt her pussy clench, felt the pressure of his fingers around her nipple, and smelled his own forest-clean scent right along with her natural, honey-warm perfume.

“Never gonna get used to feeling through you.” *Oh fuck.* Surrounding him with a rush of energy, she had him arching off the ground to push harder against her, reveling in the feel of her blanketing his body as he came unglued. She dragged him into a blue space, full of air and sound and motion, swirling with power, and as he filled her with everything his body had to offer, he wondered if he’d managed a glimpse of the core of her power. “So beautiful. So fucking beautiful.”

When the last spasms of her climax passed, she eased off him and lay panting on her side. Trey scooted lower, so they were face-to-face under the dark folds of the sleeping bag, and kissed her like he’d wanted to since he first laid eyes on her. A fever-hot, fourth date kind of kiss, with lots of tongue, a few nips, and the illusion that he had all the time in the world to win her love.

Hands planted on his chest, Serena shoved him back. “Is. Joel. Leading. A faction. Of dark lords?”

Didn’t that just kill the mood? Oh well, didn’t make a damn bit of sense lying around out here where a handful of crazed vigilantes could take shots at them, anyway. He tugged his clothes back into some semblance of order, cringing at the feel of dry cotton against the sticky mess covering his cock. Beside him, Serena put herself back together as well.

“We’ve got more trouble than before you took off this morning. I’m guessing that using your magic didn’t work to chase off the remnants of magic from the rite?”

She shook her head and scrambled out of the bag with him, frowning as he rolled it up and secured it to his pack.

“Most folks in Seal’s Haunt took the news about witches pretty well. They’re determined to help Little Harbor form an all-out militia against the assholes bringing storms to the area, fucking with our homes and livelihoods. Fishermen don’t take kindly to having their lobster boats sunk or their clam flats mucked up by freak tides.”

“Trey – tell me about Joel!”

No getting around this. As he hefted the pack onto his shoulders, he nodded in defeat. “Just keep your voice down. Plan is we hike around the hills, and someone from Little Harbor will pick us up on the other side. Joel’s back dealing with the fallout in Seal’s Haunt. But don’t worry, takes more than a few nuts to put him out of commission.”

“Tell me!”

“Getting to that part.” Trey motioned off to the west and started off at a brisk pace, alert for any sign of motion or sound in the woods. “Long story here, so bear with me. I’ve got to go back a ways first, or it won’t make sense. Since Mel shared her take on things, Joel believes his birth parents died in the fire due to a spell gone wrong. But when we were younger, he figured humans got wind of what was going on up there, got scared, and heaved a firebomb in a window. That version goes along with the police report, by the way.”

Serena breathed hard as she walked, but her cheeks were back to their usual golden tan rather than ashy white, and she kept pace with him well enough. Made him crazy that they hadn’t been able to come up with a way to help her shake the hunger. But for now, damn good thing a little sex could ease the burn and get her back on her feet.

“Joel doesn’t know a damn thing about his family. And after yesterday, he’s less certain than ever that they walked on the side of light. Told me this morning the dark witch fucked with his mind at the aquarium. Jaimis told Joel he knew his parents. Logical conclusion seems to be his birth parents weren’t real nice people. That’s fucking with his confidence at a time he needs to be on top of his game.”

Serena bit her lower lip and scowled. *Fuck Jaimis.*

Yeah, my sentiments exactly. “The only thing Joel’s ever known for certain about his heritage is that he’s a witch. He’s valued that power as his only connection to his roots. Add his fierce pride in his magic, together with the fact that he spent a lot of years thinking his parents died due to an act of fear and ignorance on the part of humans... Long story short, he decided the witches of Little Harbor would be safer if they explained their gifts to their neighbors before suspicion took hold and led to a mess of misinformation.”

Serena reached up to push her hair away from her face. The ground had gotten rougher, and her breath came fast and shallow as they worked their way uphill. “Got it. Understand the reasoning. In Little Harbor, it even seems to have worked. Jury’s still out in Seal’s Haunt. Now the bit about the dark lords...”

“Joel doesn’t want to change the world. Never meant to do more than explain magic to one little town in a nonthreatening way.” Trey risked a sideways glance. Serena didn’t look happy. “But some of the dark lords who’d signed on with Jaimis because of their belief in open coexistence with humans got wind of what was going on in Little Harbor. They sought him out.”

Hell, chances were, he’d finish this hike with one very pissed-off witch. “Some of the people who came forward—looking for hope and maybe a bit of leadership—had been hurt real bad. Fucked over by Jaimis.” Literally, in some cases, but he’d be damned if he’d scare her with the details. “With Sorren ruffled as hell at the situation in Little Harbor, Joel—well—he presented a third option. Not Sorren’s outdated ethics, nor Jaimis’s psychotic violence. A middle ground of peaceful coexistence.”

When they came up over the crest of the hill, he touched her arm and paused to look back, satisfied that no one seemed to be following.

"All that's a roundabout way of saying Joel thinks witches are safer if their neighbors know about them than if they stumble upon a ritual unawares—and he doesn't hold with Sorren's rules—and yes, he's fucking working with some of the dark lords."

Avoiding Serena's gaze, he plunged ahead. "A good number of them have been involved in some bad shit. I won't lie to you. But they've been hurt, or at least disillusioned, and they're determined to bring down Jaimis. Even if they die in the process. Joel would be a fool to turn down that kind of help. The storm rites aren't happening out in Minnesota, near Sorren's cushy estate." Trey kicked a rock so hard, it bounced off a tree about ten feet away. "They're happening *here*. The battlefield has relocated. It's not Sorren's problem anymore. *It's ours.*"

Serena stepped into his path, face-to-face, and he pulled up short to avoid bumping into her. She clenched her jaw, and her scowl left worry lines all across her pretty forehead. But damned if she didn't reach out and take his hand and give it a little squeeze for good measure.

"You'd follow him into hell if he needed you to, wouldn't you?"

"Damn straight. So will a lot of Jaimis's former followers—like your ex, Dane. Don't worry." He gave her an earnest look. "We'll find our way out of this yet, princess."

* * * * *

Joel swung out of the passenger seat of Kiara's truck and hit the ground running. With three people injured and the vigilantes still at large in Seal's Haunt, his adrenaline level couldn't be any higher. The sight of Mel's wrecked house kicked him in the gut and left him looking for a way to channel off some excess power.

The scent of sawdust and soggy plaster mingled with the salty ocean spray. Joel swallowed hard, thinking about how Mel's kitchen used to smell like fresh coffee. When Sorren approached and tossed a hunk of plaster into a large trash container someone had dropped off by the ruins, Joel groaned. Not the man he wanted to see, given his urge to pick a fight.

Despite the chilly wind blowing off the ocean, Sorren had stripped down to his black jeans, and he'd worked up a sweat doing cleanup detail. His long white braid swished like an angry serpent as he walked. The tattoo on his right shoulder—a giant hawk kicking the shit out of a dragon—should have been reminder enough for Joel to stand down. But fuck it, today just plain sucked. *Last thing I've got right now is patience for an old man with outdated views of the world.*

Kiara trotted up beside him and grabbed his arm, her fingernails digging through his shirt. The fear radiating off her served as a reality check. Though he never took his

eyes off Sorren, he followed her around the corner of the pile of cracked wood, shingles, and smashed household items.

"Death wish, much?" Her hair whipping in the wind, Kiara hissed at him in a furious whisper. "Shit, Trey and Serena have more use for you up and walking than if you get yourself slaughtered in a pissing match with the elder witch."

Before he could aggravate Kiara with an acid reply, Serena stepped out from behind a section of drywall propped up against what had been the chimney. And she gave him a look that made his blood thin and flow backward in his veins. *Oh fuck.* Like Sorren, she wore leather work gloves, and her black pants and shirt carried a good deal of dried mud. While he struggled to come up with the right words to charm away the fury fueling her glare, she strode off and started hauling wood toward the trash pile with Sorren.

When Mel rounded the corner, a rush of concern pushed aside his king-size helping of angst. Kiara got to Mel first, draping her petite form around the older witch in a hug so frantic, it almost toppled them both to the ground. Joel hurried over to Mel, and ignoring Kiara's body pressed between them, he hugged the old woman for all he was worth. Serena's foresight at the aquarium came back full force, her warning that Mel was in danger echoing in his head like fear itself. Gods help him, if Mel had been here when the storm hit...

"I'm so sorry." Scared the fucking shit out of him to think of what could have happened. He held Mel until Kiara wiggled out from between them, and Mel gave him a little shove to gain some space. "Thank the gods you weren't here when the tornados went through. Your home—I'm so sorry..."

"Lots of memories here, but it's just wood and plaster. I'll salvage what I can, then rebuild." Mel's flannel shirt was speckled with dust and wood splinters, and like the others, she wore thick leather gloves. "Important things to look ahead, stay sharp so the rogue witch doesn't catch us while we're licking our wounds."

"What's he get out of this—Jaimis, I mean?" Kiara shook her head, and her green eyes reflected so much anger, Joel took a step back just before her aura lashed free. "Other than pissing off a lot of witches, bringing Sorren out east to investigate, and taking some lives, what the fuck could be in this for him?"

"The dark witch is feeding off the storms' power." Serena's words carried across the yard, sharp as the edge of a whip.

Joel's head swung up as she approached, her eyes narrowed, her chin held high. *One pissed-off witch.* As for the purpose behind the storm rites, he'd reached the same conclusion she had. Every hair on his body rippled, as if he'd just received a mild shock, but he refused to turn around as he sensed Sorren walk up behind him. With the ocean crashing in the background like a wild thing, he didn't have to work hard to imagine power arching through the air as spells collided in an all-out duel.

Joel frowned. "I'd come to the same conclusion as Serena about the storm rites." Unflinchingly, he met Sorren's glare. "Yesterday, when I met him at the aquarium,

Jaimis tried to intimidate me by pulling an aura." Joel's mouth felt dry, but that probably had more to do with the elder witch's proximity than remembered fear. "The disturbances in his aura were...unique. Long streaks where it looked as if the energy had worn thin, and odd shadows working their way through the light. Never seen anything like it."

"From that you concluded he's designed the storm rites to enhance his power?" Sorren bent to pick up a splintered stake and tapped it against his thigh, and Joel wondered if the bit of wood could serve as a staff in a witch's duel. "Seems like a lot of effort for an energy fix."

"You've come to the same conclusions we have, haven't you?" After ditching her gloves and rubbing her hands from her forehead down along her cheeks in a gesture that broadcast pure fatigue, Serena walked over and draped her arm through Sorren's. "We've got enough facing us right now. How about if you drop the cat-and-mouse game with Joel, and we all share what we know?"

Ignoring Sorren's strangled snort, Serena leaned against his side and continued on. "The rogue witch appeared sane when we saw him yesterday. No signs of the manic behavior everyone described during the years he slaughtered witches to absorb their power."

Sorren shifted to cup his hand under Serena's elbow. "Agreed. Here, you've been pushing too hard." His face soft with concern, he guided her to a nearby piece of patio furniture that had survived the gale and helped her sit down.

Bless it, now *there* was a side of the elder witch he'd never seen before. Trey had it more right than not when he'd dubbed Serena "princess." She couldn't possibly move in more powerful circles. *And Sorren's fatherly affection makes her even more valuable to Jaimis.* The thought sent a wave of acid through his gut, and he let out a weary sigh. Only place he could see things going from here was straight to hell.

"I think it's likely Jaimis is using the storms to enhance his power." Mel moved over and touched Sorren's wrist, the gesture intimate enough that Joel had to work to keep his mouth from dropping open. "Added twist in his dark little plot, Jaimis dragged you out here from Minnesota. The storms certainly served as attention getters. If he's seeking a confrontation, he's well on his way to achieving that goal."

"Given his master plan to make witches known to humans, the storms will blessed well accomplish that if he keeps at it." Kiara frowned and chewed at her lower lip. "Not exactly a positive first encounter for someone who insists he wants equal protection under the law for our people. Seems to me, he's aiming at instilling fear, not tolerance."

Joel's stomach let loose another acid stream. "Jaimis doesn't want open coexistence *with equality*—with enough power, he seeks to dominate. Draw Sorren in, challenge him, use the energy he's harvested from the storms to defeat the elder witch. I'm guessing he plans to establish a reign of terror over both witches and humans."

A gust of wind knocked over a chunk of drywall, and they all jumped as it crashed to the ground. *Holy fuck, could this day get any worse?*

“Which is where Joel and I come into play.” Serena turned her head toward Kiara, and from the expressions flitting across their faces, Joel figured they’d linked up to keep the rest of the discussion private.

This day kicked out any more surprises, he didn’t know if he’d be able to cope. Bless it, took him long enough to get the little witch to trust *him* in her thoughts, and now... Joel flinched as Kiara murmured the beginnings of a spell, raised her fist to key the pattern, and sent a glowing dagger hurling toward the ruined house. Serena closed her eyes a moment, and Kiara’s spell vanished. *No dagger. No power imprint. Nothing.* Just the sound of the waves pounding at the base of the bluffs and the wind rustling through the trees.

Chapter Twelve

“Jaimis figured out I can negate spells. With me under his thumb, he’d be all but invincible against challenges by other witches.” Serena glanced toward Joel, and though he tried to reach into her thoughts, her mind remained locked down like a fortress. “Joel – well, he’s in thick enough with the dissatisfied faction of dark lords that he holds a good deal of authority. Add in the fact that he’s successfully integrated witches and humans in Little Harbor – not to mention he’s helping humans utilize their latent psychic abilities to ease their acceptance of the supernatural – and Jaimis must be frothing at the mouth to get Joel on his side.”

Never mind how in hell she knew all that, because it wouldn’t matter anyway once Sorren used his sorry carcass to wipe up the debris scattered around Mel’s house. When Sorren pulled a thread of power, Joel let his own energy rise, the push of light and air billowing through his shirt sleeves and lifting his hair away from his shoulders.

“No!” Mel put her hands on Sorren’s chest and rested her head under his chin. “This is what Jaimis has to be hoping for. If you push Joel away now, you’re all but handing victory to the rogue witch. Divided, we can’t possibly subdue his forces.”

When Sorren’s power continued to swell, Serena got up and rushed over to Joel. Her body rigid with tension, she leaned back against his chest. “I didn’t tell you all that to start a war here! We can only outwit Jaimis if we’re honest with each other about our strengths – and our weaknesses.”

Kiara stepped behind him and pressed herself to his back, her breasts warm and firm. Joel’s aura swept outward to encompass the two women in a swirl of violet light. Kiara’s loyalty surprised him, seeing as he hardly knew Trey’s former lover. But Serena’s shocked him, after what she’d learned about his alliance with the disillusioned factions of dark lords.

Just because I’m pissed off doesn’t mean I want to see you dead. Serena touched his wrist, then turned her head toward Sorren, the air around her brimming with barely

contained magic. "You should have told me about Dane. You had *no right* to keep that information from me."

Sorren winced as if stung, the lines on his face deepening as he released the energy he'd channeled. "I wanted to spare you more pain. He's here?"

"Yes. I ran into him in the woods last night and again this morning." Serena never softened her determined stance, but he felt sadness seeping out around her so strong, it nearly broke his heart. "Dane...had an interesting story to tell. A faction of former dark lords ready to turn on Jaimis, and Joel poised to lead. Trey filled in the rest this morning."

"I made a mistake when I chose Dane to spy for me." Sorren's shoulders slumped. "I thought he had the strength of spirit required. I was wrong."

Though the danger seemed to have passed, Serena and Kiara remained plastered to him, standing between him and any spell Sorren might cast. Mel maintained physical contact with the elder witch—a hand on his back, her head against his shoulder—and Joel read something more than an attempt to calm into the tender gestures.

"Damn, I take off for a while to check on a few families who lost their homes last night, and when I come back, you've replaced me with Kiara." Trey scrambled up the cliff path, approaching from the ocean side of Mel's property. "Not that her kisses aren't sweet—but a man likes a little warning about these things."

Despite himself, Joel grinned at Trey's attempt to diffuse tension. No one could sum up a situation quicker than he could. Never mind his jovial tone, Trey clutched the shotgun at his side and tossed the pack he carried onto the ground, ready to fight if necessary. In his denim jacket, faded jeans, and mud-crusting shit kickers, with his hair whipped into a ragged mess by the wind, he looked mad enough to use the gun—and good enough to eat.

"No need, Trey. We're all a little high-strung today, but we were just about to find a spot to hash out some plans against the rogue witch." Mel gestured for Trey to set the gun down, and after hesitating a moment or two, he placed it beside his pack. "Sorren's got a lot of catching up to do with events in these parts. But last night, we met with two Boston covens. As a result, we're more qualified to face Jaimis today than we were yesterday."

Finally, something that makes sense. Serena and Trey nodded, and a rush of concern and relief flowed through the link they shared. Disaster with Sorren averted—for now.

Trey bent down and pulled a small leather purse out of his pack and tossed it to Serena. "Some of your stuff got left behind in Seal's Haunt. Figured you'd want this with you. Stopped by Joel's place, too, to check for damage and found this."

When Trey pulled a plain black box from his pack, Joel's defenses shifted into high alert. Sorren must have picked up the same vibes, because the elder witch swept forward and snatched the box from Trey's hands.

"Shit." Trey stood, shifting in place. "No bombs or spells. Had it checked for both. Haven't opened it, though. Figured I'd let that be your call."

Joel stepped forward, dislodging Serena and Kiara from their protective embrace, and snapped the envelope free from the top of the box. "Believe that has my name on it."

His heart thudded hard as he ripped the envelope open and tugged out the note. No one had to tell him Jaimis had sent this. The imprint of evil clung to the package like a foul smell. In the background, the surf pounded, and the wind sent a cascade of yellow leaves skittering down to the ground. But for him, the world stood still as he read the note aloud.

"Time's growing short, my friend. Together, you and I can do much good." Joel choked on the words, and his mouth twisted into a sneer. "Think of it—entire cities, where witches and humans work together, just as they do in your little town. Your power is meant for larger endeavors. Your parents' blood runs true in you. I trust you won't betray their memory. I've enclosed a token to remind you what's at stake."

As one, everyone turned to eye the box resting on Sorren's upturned hands.

"That shit about your parents—he's a mindfucker. Jaimis isn't here for you to gauge the truth of his words—you can't sense truth *or lies* from a note." Trey slapped his hand against his thigh and glanced down at his shotgun, as if it had the power to fend off the damage Jaimis had done. "Forget about it."

Serena didn't say anything, but she moved up beside him and reached out to touch his face. Her fear echoed his own, and Trey's apprehension hit him like a hurricane as Sorren lifted the lid off the box.

Please, don't let it be a finger or an ear or any other part of Carmen. Gods and goddesses hear me – protect that sweet healer, and I'll fight until my last breath to put a stop to Jaimis's reign of terror.

As Sorren withdrew a bloody handkerchief, Joel put his hand to his mouth, and Kiara turned away. Serena grabbed his arm, her fingers digging into his skin. Sorren unfolded the bloody cloth to reveal a clipping of wavy black hair, and the silver goddess earrings Carmen had been wearing the day she disappeared.

Serena squeaked when her cell phone rang in her purse. "Only ones who have this number are family – and Gwen. Sorry, I have to take this."

Still pale, she fished for her phone and flipped it open. Before she had a chance to do much more than say hello, her face lost the last of its color, and her mouth opened in a silent O.

Everyone stood frozen for a few heartbeats. By the time Joel turned to throw his arms around her, Serena broke free of her trance and hurled the phone at a nearby oak, shattering it into several pieces.

"Convince me my sister and her family are safe!" Serena whirled to face Sorren as Kiara moved close to stroke her hair, and Trey rested a protective hand on the back of her neck.

"*No one* knows where they are. Not even you, Serena. You can name the country, yes, but nothing more than that." Sorren pressed his fingers together and rested them

under his chin. "Their closest friends, my most trusted enforcers, are guarding them. No one else. When Jaimis surfaced after spending years in seclusion, I anticipated Eric's value as a hostage and planned in advance for your family's safety."

"What just happened?" Trey's voice held steady, but he eyed his shotgun and shifted his weight from foot to foot. "Who called you just now?"

Better question would be, how did Jaimis get his hands on a cell phone number Serena had only shared with those closest to her? No wonder she'd reached the conclusion that the rogue witch must have found her sister's family.

"The rogue witch said if I don't meet him tonight near Seal's Haunt, he'll punish someone I hold dear. First he'll rape her, and then he'll deprive her of oxygen, wrapping a smothering spell around her. Same way Scott died. Just for kicks, as she dies, he'll conjure a flaming dagger to brand his initials on her breasts."

"I promise you, your sister's safe." Cold fury rippled across Sorren's face, and as he clenched his fists, something crashed to the ground within the pile of rubble. "I'll make a call to warn those guarding her – but that's not where the threat lies."

Blessed good to have Sorren's anger directed at Jaimis, rather than him. But Joel had a sickening feeling that none of them would be able to prevent something truly horrible from happening. "Kiara, I want you to stick close from now on. Wherever we go, you go. Jaimis has spies all over Seal's Haunt. No doubt he knows you helped Serena through a hellish time last night – and spent the rest of the night in bed with us, more or less."

Serena stood glassy-eyed, her arms hugged close to her chest. When he took a few steps toward her, planning to offer reassurance, she bolted for the stairs at the back of Mel's property.

"No! You don't want to go down that way!" Trey took off after her and grabbed her arm, but she stood looking out over the ocean with her hand clasped to her mouth.

Joel joined them, not eager to see whatever drained the color from Serena's face. "Oh fuck." Down below, the bloody remains of three seals lay draped across the rocks, battered almost beyond recognition by the storms.

"I'll kill him." Trembling hard, Serena accepted his hand, her fingers as cold as ice against his skin. "For this and every other hurt he's caused, I swear, I'll see the dark witch dead."

* * * * *

Gritting her teeth against the hunger, Serena tugged her jacket tight around her as she slipped through Joel's back door into the chilly night air. Since it hadn't worked when Kiara tried to soothe the agitated energy, she figured she'd find a quiet spot and try using her magic again, before she gave up and sought release with Joel or Trey – or both. A line of heat sizzled along her spine at the thought. Damn, she hated feeling dependent on them to quiet the edgy passion.

“Don’t even think of sneaking off tonight.” Joel stepped out of the kitchen and intercepted Serena near the back door. “Never mind the threat posed by lurking dark lords – and I don’t mean the disillusioned ones like Dane, who are as determined as we are to bring Jaimis toppling down – we’ve had reports of a few humans from Seal’s Haunt taking shots at witches in the woods.”

Though tension rang through his words, his eyes were hooded with dark lashes, and his mouth looked soft and sensual – and way too inviting. Hours of planning and negotiation with Sorren all afternoon had put him in a foul mood, but now, his work-hardened body put out vibes that had nothing to do with irritation. As he inserted himself between her and the door, his hair brushed his shoulders, dark against his white T-shirt in the glow of the porch light. His jeans clung tight enough to his body that, never mind their shared link, his arousal was tough to ignore.

“Long fucking day today.” Joel touched her chin with his thumb, and she jerked back, shivering at the arc of heat the small contact sent swirling across her breasts. “If you want to see if raising a bit of power will help ease the burn, my attic’s designed to accommodate full circles. Pretty up there in the moonlight. Big white room – well warded, too – with a few skylights to let the moon shine down on you.”

Swallowing hard, Serena seized the last of her self-control, whirled around, and took off at a run for the stairs. By the time she reached the second floor, her clit rubbed slick against her panties. And by the time she found the door to the attic and ascended the stairs, she knew no amount of magic could ease her need. But if she didn’t even try, she may as well just chain herself to Joel’s bed and resign herself to living enslaved to lust.

The old home had been designed by a lover of mazes. The attic stairs stopped at two different landings, then switched directions and rose higher, finally coming to a stop before a partition that shielded the attic from a direct view. The last seemed to have been added later, and she guessed Joel liked a good deal of privacy for his circles. Before she cleared the obstruction, power swelled around her, and her heart skittered into overdrive.

She pressed her back to the drywall partition, shivering as the magic rose and circled the vast space of the attic. Not malevolent, but other people’s spells would never make her favorite things list. Holding her breath, she peeked around the corner – and stopped breathing entirely.

A rainbow of colors danced in a half dome at the center of the vast space under the oversize skylights. She’d never seen a circle so beautiful, but the bit that turned her inside out and left her trembling had nothing to do with the spectacular light show. On a blanket at the center of the circle, Sorren and Mel sat naked, their bodies firm and pale in the moonlight. Never mind their flowing white hair, either of them could have posed for a centerfold spread. She knew witches aged well, but those two took her breath away.

Though they sat close enough to touch, their chins tilted upward as they stared intently at a space just below the skylights, when a shimmering, rainbow-hued hawk

and a brilliantly colored eagle burst forth out of nothingness, Serena all but lost control of her bladder. *Shit, shit, shit.*

As the apparitions twined around each other midair, she knew beyond a doubt she'd burst in on an erotic encounter. But damned if her feet would obey her and march her back down the stairs before someone noticed her presence and all hell broke loose. She'd never seen anything so beautiful. Never mind that the torrent of energy left her mouth dry and her heart hammering with muted terror, the hunger sat up and panted like a bitch in heat.

"I'd do anything for the power to conjure your home back whole and sound, sweet Melinda." Sorren's voice hummed low and gentle, but overhead, his hawk swooped to grab the eagle with its talons. "Never should have believed the evidence that Jaimis had shifted his forces to Europe. When I think that he learned the storm rites from me... If I hadn't used pentacle rites first, as a means of ending the drought..."

Mel raised her hand, and the eagle moved so fast, it left a trail of light behind, darting out of the hawk's grasp and swinging back to tease the rainbow-hued raptor with a nip at its tail feathers. "Won't say I'm not sad, but a house can be rebuilt. I'm whole and well. The rest—you're an old fool, but I have no doubt you'll come to see things my way before the end of this."

Serena pressed her back against the partition, breathing slow and clinging to the shadows near the stairs. When the eagle burst into a rain of shimmering sparks and Mel darted forward to clasp Sorren around the waist, the need deep in her belly flared outward, heating her skin and turning her knees to jelly. She could no more turn away now than she could cut off her own hand. When Sorren brought his ephemeral hawk down to brush its feathers against Mel's ivory-pale back, Serena blinked back tears.

No casual union, this. The erotic tableau held the energy signature of a linked pair, and goddess help her, she ached to see them joined. Mel reached out, wrapped her arms around the fluttering hawk, and pulled the magic to her breast. Her hair drifted out around her as the power crested, and her mouth tilted up in a delighted smile.

With a snap of his fingers, Sorren called the power home. The hawk vanished, leaving the glowing sphere of their circle to light the room. He eased his hand behind Mel's neck and lifted near the small of her back, spreading her out on the blanket beneath him. The tattoo of the fighting hawk and dragon flexed and contorted on his shoulder as he lowered himself over her. Serena swallowed hard as she watched the muscles along his ass tense and release as he drove himself into the eager witch. Need rode her so hard, she wondered if she'd climax here, without so much as her own hand against her skin.

Mel swung her legs up over Sorren's back, digging her heels into his spine, and as the dome of light swelled in an iridescent celebration of their union, Serena watched Sorren's shaft withdraw from Mel's swollen lips, plunge back until his balls pressed against her ass, and then pull free again until just the head remained buried inside her pussy.

Sweat coated Serena's back and breasts, and she clenched her teeth so hard, her jaw ached. *Wrong, to stand here watching. Impossible to leave.* When someone pressed a hand across her mouth she nearly screamed, but before the next heartbeat, Joel thrust past her defenses and touched her thoughts.

There's a word for witches who sneak around watching the elder witch get it on with his love interest. Joel's anger crackled through her head, dangerous and potent. *Never would have sent you up here if I knew Sorren and Mel claimed the space first.*

Sorry. I know – I'm nothing better than a common voyeur. Serena trembled as he lifted her into his arms and padded down the stairs, his bare feet hardly making a sound.

Word I was going for was "dead." I know you're practically family to Sorren, but shit, the witch's temper is legendary.

Serena didn't bother to respond. She'd felt Sorren's fury swell near the ruins of Mel's home earlier – felt the anger come to focus full-on at Joel.

As Joel entered the second-floor hall and strode down to his bedroom, she squirmed to get free of his arms, but he only held her tighter. *Hell, Joel's just as godsdamned stubborn as Sorren.* Power swelled around her, and in a riot of nerves her stomach inverted itself and then assumed its original position, somewhat the worse for the abrupt maneuver. *Not only as stubborn as Sorren – damn well near as powerful.* After channeling hell itself through her quaking body and into the earth – *twice* – magic would never frighten her the way it once had. But she didn't have to fucking like it.

Kiara and Trey broke apart with a startled gasp as Joel exploded into the room and dumped Serena between them on the bed. Serena kicked out as Joel grabbed her left ankle and slipped off her running shoe, then repeated the process on the right side.

His shirt half-unbuttoned and his hair mussed across his forehead like a thatch of straw, Trey helped her right herself, tugging her back against the mound of pillows. "Shoes on the bed don't cut it with Mr. Neat Freak."

Kiara shoved Trey aside and curled up between them, pressed close to Serena. Her cheeks shone pink with exertion, and though she still wore her jeans, she'd lost her shirt and looked damn fine in her silky black bra. Though she understood the need to keep Kiara close at hand, given Jaimis's threat, somehow she hadn't expected Joel's plans to involve keeping the feisty witch with elfin features and cherry red lips quite *this* close. But then, that seemed to have more to do with Trey's plans at the moment than Joel's.

"Sorry, guest rooms were all taken. Sorren and Mel in one, the rest filled with guards." Trey freed another button on his shirt, and Serena's nipples tightened as the cloth gaped wider, revealing a light sprinkling of golden hair and a glimpse of his rock-hard abs.

"Seems Sorren and Mel have moved up to the attic, which leaves at least one room empty." Joel tugged his T-shirt over his head, folded it, and set it on a chair beside the bed.

Except for a dramatic seascape dominating the wall over the bed, Joel's room looked just about as Spartan as the guest room she'd been in yesterday. A glow sphere

flickered in the bowl of oil set out on the bedside table for that purpose. Gold – Kiara’s spell. The comforter, sheets, and walls were white, and the golden light gave the room a fairy-tale quality, like being under water as sunlight rippled across the ocean at low tide.

Joel stretched and rubbed the tight muscles along his shoulders. “You and Kiara could always shift over there if you wanted a bit of privacy.”

“That so.” Trey stretched, feigned a yawn, and unbuttoned the top button on his jeans.

At which point, Serena about melted into the coverlet, her body burning so hot, she swore the backs of her eyelids sizzled when she blinked. Oddly enough, the pain had seeped away and the need felt almost – pleasant. Confused, she glanced sideways at Kiara, who grinned and batted her eyelashes, shaping her full lips into the approximation of a pout.

“Wouldn’t be worth much as an empathic witch if I couldn’t take the edge off when someone’s uncomfortable.” Kiara swung her creamy thigh across Trey’s legs, her pale skin soft against the frayed denim, and for the first time, it dawned on Serena that this could be fun. “Sounds like tomorrow’s going to be spent in the war room, hashing out strategy and figuring out how to extract Carmen with Jaimis none the wiser. But tonight...”

The phrase dangled in the room, a blatant invitation. Trey groaned and readjusted himself when his cock swelled against the seam of his jeans. Joel paced around to the other side of the room and took off his jeans, slow and easy, as if he were undressing for a simple night of slumber. The cocky witch even folded them, laying them flat on his dresser, before sliding out of his black briefs. His tightly muscled ass rippled with each movement, as did the cords of muscle along his back. Though the hunger simmered at a low burn, held in check by Kiara’s power, damned if Serena didn’t want to sink her teeth into Joel’s satiny brown skin until he screamed her name.

Serena’s breath hissed through her teeth as Joel turned to face them, locking gazes with first Trey, then Kiara, and finally... Her insides sizzled as he watched her, his pupils so wide, the black almost swallowed up the brown. She might have stared all night, captivated in a spell of her own making. But Trey hopped off the bed and dragged her around until she lay diagonally on the mattress. Her legs dangled off each side of the corners, her hands were splayed out over her head, and damned if she had any inclination to resist whatever came next.

Trey moved over beside Joel, who stood watching her with every bit as much hunger. She wasn’t sure what Kiara had in mind when she started undressing her, first her pants, then her simple cotton panties, and finally her shirt and bra. Serena let herself be lifted and prodded, willing to lie back and go with the flow for once.

Too much time spent fighting lately. Fighting her fear. Fighting her own power. Fighting the dark lord’s storm rites. And fuck it, fighting the hunger.

No fighting tonight, sweet. Apparently satisfied with her work, Kiara shucked off her own bra and pants—no panties to deal with—and lay on her back opposite Serena, until they formed a single line diagonally along the king-size bed.

The men watched with undisguised interest as Kiara reached back over her head and clasped hands with Serena, their heads close together and their arms stretched out to form a diamond shape on the crumpled comforter. For an entire year of her life it had been her fondest—and most frustrating—fantasy to get Scott and Dane into bed with her at the same time. But she'd never in her wildest imaginings put herself together with *three* naked bodies in a shadowy, golden room. Trey moved first, and she swallowed hard, waiting to see if he'd move toward her or Kiara.

The need hitched up a notch, but it remained at tolerable levels so long as she held tight to Kiara's hands. Though she entertained a moment of disappointment when Trey straddled Kiara's hips—his broad chest visible if she tilted her head back and glanced at him upside down—any fragment of jealousy dissipated when Joel called up his aura, the violet mingling with the soft gold of Kiara's glow sphere. Vague hints of fear skittered through her chest with each breath, and she shook her head at him.

"I figure you're getting more comfortable around showy lights, seeing as you couldn't tear yourself away from Sorren and Mel's circle in the attic." Joel advanced another step. "So maybe it's not my light show making you nervous right now." Another step. "Maybe it's me."

Oh fuck. She swallowed hard and tried to come up with something that would sink his ego in one fell swoop. But all she managed was a faint gasp as he lowered himself onto her, his magic pushing out to encompass them in a cocoon of purple light. She felt him pressing against her shields, and she clamped down harder, shoring up her defenses to keep him out of her thoughts.

Joel's hair brushed her chest as he bent down to take her nipple into his mouth. Kiara grasped her hands so hard it hurt, uttering a string of reassuring endearments in a husky, low tone that did a lot to sum up the witch's state of arousal. Although Serena's defenses held against Joel—someone whose mental imprint she knew so well, it felt like a shadow of her own—her shields caved when Kiara reached out to touch her thoughts, the contact fierce with the pressure and stretch of Trey's first thrusts.

Breathless, she squeezed back at Kiara's hands, the two of them locked together in a grip so tight, Serena swore the bones in her fingers shifted. Lifting his head away from her nipple—*damn!*—Joel looked past her toward Kiara and Trey.

"Easier for you, if you take up with Kiara again." *Uh-oh.* The uneasy edge in Joel's voice hinted at trouble to come. "Less likely your dad will get wind of what's going on between you and me that way."

The bed lurched, Kiara squeaked, and Trey sprang forward and caught Joel around the chest, shoving him off Serena and flipping him onto his back beside the two women. *Oh goody, because I was so worried this would be one of those simple, boring foursomes. What with the bar set so high after all the drama lately, I'd been wondering if this*

might be anticlimactic. She laced the thought with every ounce of sarcasm she could muster and broadcast it to Joel and Trey alike.

When Kiara let loose a hysterical giggle and tugged Serena over to the other side of the bed – giving the men room to commit whatever acts of dominance they planned to attempt – she figured the curvy, dark-haired witch had picked up her opinions right along with the guys. Trey launched a couple of light jabs at Joel’s shoulders. Of the two – though they both measured about six-one standing and boasted bodies honed with hard work – Joel had the advantage in sheer, wiry muscle. *And, oh yeah – a wealth of magic to call on in a pinch.*

But he lay there, letting Trey knock him around a bit, working off the angst of his interrupted lovemaking with Kiara. When Trey settled down and slumped against Joel’s chest, Joel reached up and touched his hair. Trey exhaled sharply and dragged himself off Joel. With a sigh, Serena wondered if maybe they could move on to the part where someone eased the flickers of need lapping across her body.

“I told my father about you and me when I went to check on the family home earlier.” Never glancing back at Joel, Trey continued to move toward Kiara. “Took the news about like I thought he would. But Mom says he’ll come around with time. Storm took off their front porch, and the gutters will need to be replaced...”

“Why?” His eyes dark and serious, Joel sat up and wrapped his arms around his knees, the scar on his calf slightly lighter than the surrounding skin. “Knowing how your dad would react, why take that on when everything’s going to shit around us?”

“Figured with you going up against Jaimis soon – and Sorren as likely to chew you apart as the rogue witch – you don’t need any distractions or worries at home. That, and you deserve better than to be treated like my dirty little secret.” Trey uttered a satisfied sound as Kiara pulled him down and kissed the side of his neck. “My dad turned red-faced and suggested I might not want to darken his doorstep for a while. Mom took things in stride – got the impression she had an idea what I’ve been up to in Boston. My oldest sister wanted to know if sex is better with a witch.”

“That would be a resounding ‘yes’ to that last bit.” Kiara let her aura flash free, shimmering gold around her heart-shaped face. “Get over here, Joel. You’ve got a lot to live up to tonight.”

Serena swallowed hard. This crowd didn’t flinch away from the tough bits. She twisted onto her side and stroked Trey’s thigh as Joel knelt between his knees. The two stared at each other a moment, and then Joel reached out to cup Trey’s chin in his hand.

“Thanks. And I’m sorry about your dad.”

Trey moved his shoulders up and down in one of those macho “no big deal” shrugs, and she felt the two stretch their thoughts toward her, seeking a conduit to connect with each other. No telling why Trey could link more easily with her, but tonight, she didn’t mind that they sought her out as a touchstone, drawing her in with them as they shared a heap of nonverbal affection. Not wanting to leave the fourth witch out in the cold, Serena reached out toward Kiara and pulled her in, too. *Cozy.*

Until Joel bent lower and took Trey's cock into his mouth. *Yeah, cozy like an inferno. Cozy like a thundering avalanche. Cozy like a tidal wave bearing down on the coast.*

Chapter Thirteen

Serena's heart thumped, and her nipples swelled, and her clit thrummed out a desperate little tattoo as she watched the thick, veined length of Trey's shaft pull in and out of Joel's lips.

"Just an appetizer. They want us...bad."

Serena flinched at the cool touch of Kiara's palm against her side, startled by both the words and the touch. Didn't look to her like the men planned to surface anytime soon, with Trey breathing hard and Joel intent on swallowing him whole. So when Kiara shoved her down on her back and kissed her inner thigh, she figured an appetizer of her own would be a nice way to ease the burn.

How'd a nice witch like you get messed up with Trey, anyway? Biting her lower lip at the first strokes of Kiara's tongue, Serena arched into the damp warmth. *Damn – good.*

Before my husband died, Trey used to help out on Rob's lobster boat – friends since high school. Though she didn't slow the delicate whorls and lines she painted across Serena's clit with her mouth, a swell of sadness crossed their shared link.

I'm so sorry – about your husband. That kind of grief she knew too fucking well. For a moment, they shared the anguish of loss, no thoughts necessary to back up the emotions.

Accident on the boat a couple years ago. Never knew what hit him. Rob was human – though as different from Trey as you can imagine. Serious, moody, and he had a romantic side that he never let the other guys see.

Different is good. She couldn't imagine anyone more different from Scott – all goodness and light and easy smiles – than Joel. Or Trey, for that matter.

For the next few breaths, she didn't think. Her body hummed under Kiara's hands and tongue, and when the dark-haired witch nipped her clit, drawing it outward and

moving her head back and forth like a puppy with a toy, something molten and silvery surged up inside her, and her limbs got all heavy and boneless.

What...what do you do? Other than get messed up with a bunch of witches who've landed right at the top of Jaimis's hit list, and sweep your empathic powers across my storm-tossed body so I can breathe without spontaneously combusting?

Kiara released her clit and slid an exploratory finger deep inside her, swirling it around until she found a few sweet spots Serena hadn't even known she had. *Third-grade teacher.*

In a rush of mirth, Serena curled up and let laughter rip through her until her sides ached. *I'm sorry – but with your macho Ford Ranger and take-no-prisoners attitude, not to mention the fact that you're so sexy, candles melt when you walk into a room...* Serena gave up trying to organize her thoughts and choked out a final, indelicate snort of laughter as Kiara inserted another finger, thrust upward toward her pelvic bone—hard—and brought her off in the space of a few seconds.

When her body stopped bucking and clenching in on itself, and the flickers of light reformed into images, she sorted out Kiara's and Joel's faces staring down at her. She felt a little silly for the outburst of maniacal laughter. But hell, picturing Kiara up in front of a chalkboard looking all prim and proper all but undid her.

"She need spanking?" Joel nuzzled Kiara's shoulder, and when Trey sat up beside them, his face flushed and his skin musky with the scent of sweat, Serena reasoned out that hers were the only come cries that had rocked the room thus far. Everyone else must be mighty hungry by this point.

"Hungry doesn't begin to describe..." Hauling her up across his thighs, Joel planted three slaps on her butt in quick succession. "For tempting me, sweet witch."

Though the thought of being spanked in front of two other people set her back a bit, when Trey added a sound pat to her thigh, and Kiara landed a slap across the crack of her ass—hard enough to bring tears to her eyes—she abandoned any plans to put up a fight. Instead, she paid attention to the rhythm of fire drumming across her bottom and the feel of their hands—rough, callused, and in Kiara's case, satin smooth but with a bite like fire and ice.

She felt moisture trickle between her thighs and knew Joel had to feel that on his hand. Her breasts ached as the rain of slaps continued, and the dark kernel of hunger hidden inside her melted under the onslaught of blows. *Just four bodies playing together in a big ole bed. No death threats. No power plays. No militia surging into action. No storm rites. No vigilantes lurking outside the windows. Just sex. Just skin. Just pleasure.*

Just one little witch who thinks too much. Joel flipped her onto her back before she had a chance to catch her breath, and her ass stung where it made contact with the rumpled comforter. "Only us tonight. The rest waits for tomorrow."

Although it wouldn't wait. Because as Joel dragged her between his legs and lowered himself onto her, and Kiara called out as she sat atop Trey and guided his cock

deep inside her, she felt each of them inside her head like a kiss and a scream all combined into one emotion, and she knew she'd die if she lost them.

"No one's going to die this time, princess. You and Kiara have shed enough tears. No more death. No more loss." Trey reached out and tugged at her hair until she forced a smile. "First we kick Jaimis's evil ass the hell out of our territory, and then we get on with loving each other."

Oh hell – Trey expected her to stay. Settle down here and – and what? A new kind of fear choked off her air as Joel kissed the top of her head and moved so slow inside her, the tug of skin on skin felt like an echo of the kiss.

"Time enough for those decisions, sweetheart." Joel curved his head down to kiss her mouth, hot as cinnamon and sweeter than honey, and for all she tried to stop them, tears pearly out from under her closed eyelids.

"None of that, princess. Tomorrow's going to bring fighting, fear, and stranger shit than I've seen in my entire life." Trey's voice shook with the weight of presentiment, and Kiara climbed off him to snuggle into the crook of his arm. "To beat it, tonight we need to hunker down and build strength. Tonight we need a heap of loving and a rock-solid link. No tears. Absolutely no tears."

Oh fuck. Fighting full panic now, Serena shoved Joel off her, wincing when his cock tugged free. She'd had the one flash of foreknowledge – predicting the threat to Mel and the need to get back to Little Harbor ahead of the storms as they'd stood on the plaza in front of the aquarium. So why couldn't she draw forth a spark of prescience now, when they really needed it? Trey'd hardly given them anything to go on. *Bad shit coming.* But what did they need to beat it? What did they need to come out whole?

"Okay, stand down, sweetheart." Joel's words penetrated her rising panic, and she blinked at the rush of blue-green light lashing out from her hands.

Calling the power home, she collapsed in a miserable heap on the damp sheets. The room smelled like sex, warm and thick with salty, musky fluids. The hunger tugged at her stomach, raising spikes of pain deep inside her.

"Easy way to do this isn't working out so well." Joel hopped out of bed and strode across the room to his dresser. "So we'll try things my way – the hard way. Just to forestall any fussing, here's why. Long before Trey had any formal training, his hunches could predict storms better than the meteorologists, find the best fishing grounds, and name the date when the clam flats would stop producing. With years of training behind him now – if Trey says we need a heap of loving and a rock-solid link, then that's what we're aiming for tonight. *No tears. No fear.*"

At first, she couldn't make sense of what he'd pulled from the bottom drawer. Curled around itself like four belts, the dark leather looked harmless enough – until he unfurled the strips and tossed one length after another toward the bed. Kiara and Trey caught the restraints. Four buckled cuffs attached to four long strips of leather. *Oh shit.*

Bless it, he almost wished Kiara's calming influence didn't make it easier for Serena to rein in the hunger and mull over events to come. Trey's insistence that a "heap of loving" had to be on the menu tonight didn't take much effort to figure out. Whatever they faced tomorrow, Serena would need the remnants of dark magic well in check to command full concentration. The need for a strong four-way link, however, mystified him. But if Trey predicted its necessity, he'd go with that.

"Lie on your back, sweetheart. Hands spread up near the headboard, feet out near the corners at the end of the bed." Fixing his gaze on Serena, he wished he could order everyone else out and spend hours tasting every inch of her suntanned skin. Especially her hard little nipples. "Of course, if you have trouble managing the position on your own, we could always help you."

"Make. Me."

The evil little gleam in Serena's eyes shot straight to his groin. Didn't help that Trey reached out to trace his fingers around Kiara's pert, rosy nipples. *Hot*. So blessed hot, his breath stuttered in his throat and refused to sink all the way down into his lungs.

"Good enough, then." Joel grabbed Serena around the ribs and pressed her down on her back in the center of the bed. Trey and Kiara got into the spirit of things by grabbing one arm each and stretching her wrists out and away from her body, toward the corners of the brass headboard. "Kick me, and I promise, you'll get another spanking."

Although she snorted her disagreement, Serena held her feet still after that. Joel moved fast, grabbing the restraints and buckling the first one around her right wrist, then lashing the tie to the headboard in a matter of seconds. "Very pretty. You should see your breasts heaving in rhythm with your breathing. Seems to me, it might not be a bad idea to keep you like this awhile."

As he moved over and secured her other wrist, shoeing Kiara down by Serena's ankles, Joel brushed against Serena's mind and shared the image of her arms straining against the bonds, her breasts rising and falling with each breath. *Bad move*. She fought harder after that, and he caught a good kick to his side when he shifted down near her left ankle.

"Got her." Trey sat on Serena's leg so Joel could finish buckling the restraint cuff and securing the tie to the brass post at the corner of the bed. "Not sure if I want to wrestle Kiara into position and tie her up next—or if I want to volunteer to let you do whatever the hell you want with *me*."

Right. Joel swallowed hard at the image of Trey secured spread-eagle to the bed, his cock straining upward toward his belly button and the veins on his arms standing out as he fought the restraints. *Oh yeah!* But not tonight. "Just hold that thought, friend, because the night it happens, we're getting out the toy box and pulling out all the stops."

Joel swatted the side of Serena's thigh, all worked up and desperate to let off a bit of excess energy. About half of him wanted to plunge inside Serena and then move on to Trey—but the other half couldn't let go of what lay ahead. The image of the bloody cloth wrapped around Carmen's earrings and the lock of hair kept intruding on present events—a gruesome image, and not conducive to sexual abandon.

"Now who's thinking too much?" Serena lifted her head, but he'd tied her tight enough that she couldn't move her shoulders more than a couple of inches off the bed. "Seems to me like I should convince Trey and Kiara to untie me, and we should put you in my spot."

As if. Might not know what lay in wait tomorrow—or how in the blessed world he'd manage to free Little Harbor's healer and stop Jaimis's storm rites—but some people were made to be tied up, and some were made to do the tying. He fell into the second class. *No negotiations.*

And you've got me pegged as someone who likes to be tied? The edge to Serena's thought had him on guard in an instant. Even as he cursed himself for not shielding that last thought, a flash of blue light filled the room. Laughing, Serena sat up—the severed ends of the restraint straps dangling from the cuffs still buckled around her wrists and ankles.

Kiara smothered a chuckle, and Trey whistled under his breath. *Well, let's see if I can shift alliances a bit.* Grinning at Serena's smug satisfaction, Joel reached out to Kiara and Trey. *You'll help me? If I promise to blow both of your minds with the sex that follows?*

Joel kept Serena closed out of that bit of contact, seeking out Kiara's mind and linking easily with Trey now that Serena had shown him the imprint of his friend's thoughts. Blessed frustrating that he'd tried to get inside Trey's head since they were kids, and then Serena waltzed into his life and managed it without any effort at all. *One powerful little witch, that one.* He couldn't even imagine what it must have cost her to deny her gifts for so many years.

"Sorry, Serena, but Joel just made us an offer we can't refuse." Kiara put a world of seduction into her words, moving forward to kiss the side of Serena's neck as she spoke.

Without any further delay, Joel grabbed Serena and tugged her into the center of the bed, lifting her upright so her knees bore her weight, and her shins pressed down against the mattress with her feet pointed out behind her. When she started to sink back so that her bottom rested on the backs of her calves, he swatted the side of her ass and tugged her upright.

"I'm sitting here drooling, thinking about what my role in this little power play might be." Trey winced when Kiara cuffed his shoulder, but his smile crept back when Joel put his hands on Kiara's hips and guided her into position, kneeling back-to-back with Serena. "Oh hell—I've gotta say, I like the way you think."

Easing Kiara into place until her shoulder blades pressed against Serena's back, he stroked both women's bellies, caught up in the scent of their shampoo, fresh and

flowery, and the softness of their skin. When he had Kiara kneeling upright so that the women's lower legs stuck out past each other in an alternating pattern, he summoned the first thread of power.

Trey jumped in without being asked and held Kiara and Serena pressed together. Joel wove a violet braid of energy, sighing as the magic hummed through his veins. Though Kiara waited expectantly, her tongue darting along her lower lip as she turned her head to watch the spell solidify into lengths of glowing rope, Serena waited, rigid and nervous, worry lines furrowing her forehead. Trey's reaction stole the prize. His face rapt with awe, his sexy blue eyes shone just a bit too bright in the fluctuating light of the spell.

"Nothing—nothing in the world—can equal seeing something like this." Trey lifted one hand away from the women's wrists and brushed his finger along the length of glistening violet rope. "You were right, Serena—though saying so in front of Sorren would have landed Joel in a heap of trouble. I see the colors. Took me years of working with Mel and Joel to learn to see auras and threads of power. Now it's ten times brighter, ever since you crashed through and connected with my thoughts for the first time the other day."

Joel figured Serena needed another moment or two to get used to the idea of being bound with his magic, so he touched her thigh and got her to meet his gaze. "Little Harbor has a history of psychic tendencies in families dating back to colonial times. Same deal with Seal's Haunt. That's what's in it for humans, putting up with a bunch of witches in their midst. We work with them to heighten and perfect their natural psychic tendencies."

"My mom felt like a freak growing up." Trey narrowed his eyes until the deep blue looked more icy than enticing. "Dreaming about house fires before they happened, anticipating her grandma's death, and a million other 'hunches' that proved true with time. Pretty much the same deal with me. Felt like a fucking freak. Until Joel and the others risked it all—shared their big secret and taught us to use any psychic tendencies we carried."

Although Serena's anxiety rippled off her as strong as the scent of fresh grass in a rainstorm, Joel figured he'd press his luck. "Wouldn't work everywhere. And it'll be a while before we make it work in Seal's Haunt like it does here. But what's to be gained for the humans—you watch Trey tonight. Watch his face when I weave the next length of rope. Then ask yourself if you could deny him this."

"Hard to forget that in Seal's Haunt, you've got a handful of frightened, angry humans running around shooting at witches." Serena tried to get free of Trey's grasp, but he held her firmly up against Kiara. "The risk—"

"We'll straighten things out in Seal's Haunt, just like the Little Harbor folks did back when they went public." Kiara leaned her head back to nuzzle Serena's shoulder, calming the agitated witch. "Buy the property of those who want to leave at double its value, soothe over fears and emphasize benefits. Just takes a bit of time."

“One last thing before I tie you up tight and we get on to that ‘heap of loving’ Trey mentioned.” Joel swallowed hard as the vision of a farmhouse at ground zero of a raging inferno clouded his mind. “If humans bombed the house where my mom and dad died, I say we’re safer having them know about us from the start. Ignorance breeds hatred and violence. If Sorren and Mel are right and the farmhouse burned because of a misbegotten spell—fact is, having humans know about us, participating openly in their judicial and legal system and becoming full members of our communities, provides a hell of a check on what we do.”

Trey sighed and brushed a kiss across Serena’s shoulder, then Kiara’s. “If this conversation runs its course, I’m going to be as limp and useless as overcooked pasta by the time we get around to tying you two together. So let’s end things here, for now. Just know that Joel’s right—Little Harbor could never produce someone like Jaimis. Humans would never in a million years stand for that kind of abuse of power.”

“So, history lesson over.” Kiara batted her eyelashes and made a gesture with her tongue that had blood flowing back into his sagging dick in seconds. “Now you tie us up and have your evil way with us, right?”

“Oh please. Do.” Never mind that Serena’s tone held a wealth of sarcasm, her diamond-hard nipples and flushed chest indicated enough interest to have his cock twitching in anticipation. “Kneeling upright on display like this makes me feel like a stripper popping out of a cake or something. You think we could make this more of a team effort and less of a spectator sport?”

The rush of humor penetrated the shields he’d been holding in place during that tense little discussion, and he cracked a grin in response. Felt blessed good to see Serena’s playful side surface, with Kiara’s empathic abilities keeping any discomfort in check.

Careful not to startle Serena, given her uneasiness about magic, Joel moved slowly as he looped the cord of energy so the rope rested just above their knees and secured Serena’s left leg to Kiara’s right. Goose bumps popped up along Serena’s arms as he tightened the cord, sealing it in place with a quick hand gesture. But her heart beat steady against his hand when he rested his palm between her breasts. When he brushed against her thoughts like a cat winding around someone’s ankles, he sensed more nervousness than real fear.

“Not going to hurt you, sweetheart. But you’ve already shown me you can break out of leather ties as easy as breathing, and since I want to see you tied up tonight more than just about anything”—Joel took a few shallow breaths as his balls tugged up against his skin, and his cock jerked of its own volition—“nothing for it but to use a bit of magic.”

Kiara’s lips opened a fraction of an inch, and her tongue darted out to wet them. When Trey reached between her legs, his hand came away glistening with moisture. Joel swallowed hard to keep himself in check. *Next matter of business...*

While Trey held the two steady, Joel wove another rope of light and looped it just over Serena's right knee and Kiara's left. That bond tightened, he moved on to more entertaining endeavors and draped a violet length of energy across Kiara's creamy breasts, then looped it back to secure it in front, stretched tight across Serena's golden skin. Since Serena had a good four inches of height on Kiara, he couldn't secure both sets of heaving breasts at once. Weaving another length of braided rope, he draped the strand across Serena's nipples.

"Oh!" Serena arched her neck so hard, she knocked the back of her skull into the top of Kiara's head, but neither of them seemed to mind as they shivered and panted. "Like running water – but warm – almost alive – driving me crazy!"

Just getting started, sweetheart. Just getting started. When he pulled the cord tight, stretching the ends until they joined high up on Kiara's chest just below her shoulders, the women struggled against each other's backs, breathing hard. Trey did his best to hang on to them, and Joel secured a wide band of energy around their bellies, pulling it taut enough to make them gasp as he pressed their spines and bottoms closer together. Sitting back on his heels to evaluate his work, he grinned.

Some days, it's blessed good to be a witch.

Trey cracked a broad smile. Given that neither of the women raised a fuss, Joel figured he'd managed to keep that statement between himself and Trey. His power rose swift and eager at his fingertips, urged on by his desire. By the time he tied Serena's and Kiara's arms together, right to left on each side, fixing the restraints just above their elbows, he didn't know how much longer he could wait.

Seeing them bound by his magic, creamy and golden skin laced over with streaks of violet light, he swallowed a few times and reached out for Trey's hand. Trey squeezed back, as transfixed as he was by the sight. Every time Serena or Kiara drew a breath, the bands across their breasts and tummies bit deeper into their flesh. Kiara squirmed, thrusting her hips outward to the extent the ties would allow.

Serena's eyes were closed, and he felt her with him like a piece of his own soul – a bit frightened, but fascinated, and more than a little eager for what came next. Never mind her proximity to the empathic witch – being tied so tight, to another highly aroused witch, no less, set the hunger billowing around her like hurricane winds.

"So fucking beautiful." Trey reached down and took his cock in his hand, stroking himself in a lazy, unhurried manner designed to heighten desire rather than grant relief. "Never in a thousand years could I forget this moment."

Mixed in with Serena's anticipation and apprehension, he felt Trey's fierce attraction to each and every person in the room, and Kiara's determination not to ask for the stimulation she craved.

"Not so easy to slip out of these bonds now, is it, little witch?" Joel moved in front of Serena and traced his finger along the broad band of light crossing her breasts.

When she tried to lean into his touch, Kiara squeaked her protest at the sudden tug. Joel laughed and reached down to trail his fingers across Serena's clit. When Kiara

whimpered, he reached back farther, tracing the dewy line of her swollen sex as well. The bombardment of their thoughts left him off balance and struggling to hold onto his position of control.

Sexy images, champagne and candlelight, forest floors and midnight beaches, scenes with toys and wild positions, the taste of blood—*bless it, who did that come from?*—the scent of sweat, the heady rush of penetrating and being penetrated, pounding hearts, sighs and screams, couples and trios and foursomes and orgies—*wow, that last one bore the distinct note of Kiara's thought imprint*—aching balls and straining pussies, pebbled nipples and...

Whoa! Dragging himself free of the rush of erotic images, Joel swallowed hard and eased into position in front of Serena. When she tried to nip his chest, he pulled back and scooted around to the other side, his cock pressed to Kiara's silky mound. "Maybe ought to start with someone who doesn't bite."

Without missing a beat, Trey moved in front of Serena and took her face in his palms, stroking her cheekbones as she worked up to an audible level of fussing. "Me and you, princess?"

In his head, he felt Serena's protest, nonverbal, but compelling in its distress. Not surprising that she expected the one who tied her back-to-back with Kiara, straining against the satin-smooth ropes of pure light and desperate for release, to drag her up to the peak and hold her afterward. But something Trey said stuck in his mind. *A rock-solid link*. If that's what they'd need to navigate the mess that lay ahead, than bless it if he could think of a better way to accomplish that than switching things around a little.

"Nothing new for you to take Trey deep inside you, sweetheart." He kept his voice level, calm and soothing. "And you and Kiara already stole a little moment of your own tonight."

"Dive inside me, Serena. Everything Joel does to me, you'll feel." Kiara wiggled so her bottom rubbed against Serena. "Everything Trey does to you, I'll feel. Dive inside and curl up in my thoughts so snug, you'll breathe with me—feel with me—make love with me."

Oh holy gods. When Trey took Serena's hips in his hands, eased his knees apart, and spread his legs a little to achieve the right height where he pressed against her bound body, then nudged the folds of her pussy with the head of his cock, Joel's head all but came apart. For one instant, he felt an edge of the jealousy Serena had experienced when he moved around to pair up with Kiara—and he understood. In the end, they might spend a lot of time in each other's beds, and inside each other's pants, but bless it, Serena belonged to him. *And she owns my soul*.

Trey grunted as he eased inside Serena's tight little pussy, straining to keep his balance as he joined with the kneeling woman. Kiara cried out, her head back, eyes closed, before Joel even touched her. Easing deeper into the link, he felt through Serena—sensed Trey and Kiara right there with him—all getting fucked right along with the sassy, brown-haired witch.

“Oh goddess, please, Joel!” Kiara’s plea held an edge of desperation. “Now!”

When he grabbed her hips his fingers brushed Serena’s ass, and he struggled to stay sane as he lined his shaft up with Kiara’s slick folds, eased upward, and joined the game. Never mind that he’d set this scene himself, he’d never in a million years imagined what it would be like to make love to one witch with another tied to her back—while Trey worked hard to make Serena cry out with every stroke. *Oh gods! Sweet.* So sweet. He gnawed his lower lip and tasted the metallic tang of his own blood.

Serena clung so tight inside his head, he couldn’t make a move without sharing the sensations, projecting what he felt as Kiara clenched around him, whimpered with her breath hot against his chest, and struggled to arch her hips closer to his, never mind the restraints cutting into her skin.

Trey’s thoughts pounded him like heat and wildness itself, reveling in the grip of Serena around his shaft, the scent of sex and sweat, the feel of Joel’s magic against his own body as he pressed into Serena’s heaving chest. When Kiara cried out and started the desperate clench and release of her climax, gripping him so tight he almost gave in and came along with her, Joel stroked her short, silky hair, cupping the top of her head under the palm of his hand. But he refused to let go.

Trey hovered on a precipice, fire creeping through him as Kiara continued to call out each of their names. Without so much as a single spoken word, Trey pulled away from Serena just as Joel eased free of Kiara, and they managed a rapid switch.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes!” Serena strained so hard against her restraints when he entered her, Joel feared she’d hurt herself. Quickly, he murmured a few words to loosen the strap across her breasts. “So good. So fucking tight. Never would have been afraid of magic if I knew it could feel *so fucking good.*”

As her breasts heaved against his chest, the top and bottom swelling over the strap that ran along the midline, Joel strained to drive deeper without upsetting the whole deal and toppling Serena and Kiara both onto their sides. Making love to one kneeling woman as he knelt in front of her would have been tricky enough, but with the swaying dance of Kiara’s and Trey’s movements, he didn’t know if he could...

When Trey’s hands snaked around behind his ass, he thought his friend intended to steady him, adding a bit of support. *Shit!* Last thing he expected was for Trey to slip a finger deep inside.

Payback’s a bitch, buddy.

Breathing hard, he circled his arms around Serena and Kiara and strained forward to include Trey in his embrace. Eager to serve up a little of what Trey had just added to the menu, Joel sought out the familiar ring of puckered flesh. Trey groaned when Joel slid one finger deep into his ass, and the fiery rush rebounding through their four-way link increased to inferno frenzy. He could barely fucking move with his arms locked around three people and Trey straining to maintain the same position, but little glides went a long way, present circumstances considered.

Love – love this. Serena put so much force behind that thought, his head stung with the intensity of their connection. *Love you.*

Joel reined in the rush of victory at hearing that. Give too much credit to whatever she called out in the grip of passion, and he'd get burned for sure. *Oh gods. Oh gods!* Felt like someone tugged a beaded string of fire through his balls and threaded it up his cock. His ass clenched so tight, he wondered if Trey's fingers – *gods, how many has he got in there?* – would leave him bloody and bruised, never mind logic that insisted he could take a hell of a lot more back there.

Now! Kiara dragged them with her when she screamed and treated them to front-row seats as her body convulsed around Trey's cock.

The alien spasms rippled up through his gut, and he cried out as Kiara mashed her clit hard against Trey's pelvic bone. Somehow, he managed to motion with his free hand and call his magic home, releasing the ties around the women all at once rather than one by one. He yelled so loud as the power crashed back into him that he wondered if the guards would come running. As he and Trey slid their fingers free of each other, eliminating one bit of painful overstimulation, he and Serena toppled sideways onto the mattress, somehow managing to stay attached through the crest of their shared orgasm.

Her hands free at last, she clawed his back and then found a grip on his hair, pulling so hard, his neck arched back and his eyes teared up. With his body reeling with input from four minds, four sets of genitals, and eight hands touching everyone everywhere all at once, it took him a few moments to sort out Serena's words as she panted near his ear.

"Best. Never better. You" – her breath heaved against his skin as her body shuddered through another round of bliss – "taught me...not to be afraid."

Not much he could say to that. As Kiara gasped out a frantic, sobbing noise, he wrapped his arms around Serena and curled her up tight against him before she could be tugged down into the scary, overwhelming place Kiara owned at the moment. A spot where, gods help him, he could see himself drowning if the relentless grip of their link didn't let up soon.

He tugged a corner of the comforter up over Serena's hip and cupped his hand at the back of her neck, easing free of her slowly so as not to tug at still-quivering, oversensitive flesh. Trey curled up so close, his back pressed against Joel's. The sound of Trey's voice, crooning nonsense words to Kiara as she eased back from the heights of ecstasy into the confines of her own body, left him feeling drowsy and content.

Serena's breathing evened out into the regular patterns of sleep, and their link held so strong, he traveled with her into the realm of her dreams – slick skin and satin sheets, whispered endearments, and waves heaving under a fat yellow moon.

Chapter Fourteen

When she woke, Serena's fingers remained tangled in Joel's hair, and as she pulled them free, she tried to sort out what had disturbed her sleep. Trey lay with his legs sprawled across her ankles, pinning her to the bed. Kiara snuggled between Trey and Joel with the comforter tugged up over her hips, her upper body gleaming ivory pale in the moonlight that streamed through the windows.

Serena!

The voice in her head startled her fully awake, a cry tinged with desperation. She shoved Trey's legs off her ankles, scrambled out of bed, and dug through the mess of clothes on the floor until she found her own. Never mind her witch's night vision, she managed to stumble into the chair by the bed in her sleep-drugged efforts to dress, and Kiara stirred in her sleep. By the time Joel sat up, rubbing sleep from his eyes, she'd already dressed and tugged on her running shoes.

Fear made her clumsy, and she caught her shin on the corner of the dresser on the way toward the door. "Downstairs—Dane—not sure what's happening."

By the time she hit the stairs, Sorren and Mel joined her, their glow spheres bobbing over their shoulders. Joel pounded after them, cursing as he struggled into his shirt, and Trey and Kiara caught up with them by the time they reached the back door. Sorren stepped forward to open the door just seconds after frantic pounding ensued. Blinking in the sudden light that flooded out of the house, Dane stood there, wild-eyed and frantic, blood seeping through his shirt near his shoulder. Serena didn't know if the elder witch intended to invite him in or launch a spell at him were he stood.

"Don't—he has news." She grabbed Sorren's arm as his fingers moved to cue a spell. Her heart pounded so hard, she couldn't catch her breath, and damned if some part of her didn't want to see Sorren nail Dane to the ground where he stood. "Please!"

“Could be a trap.” Joel channeled so much power, a purple haze hummed around him, and Kiara followed suit, glowing golden and fierce as energy rushed through her. “How did you get past the guards?”

Dane leaned forward to rest his hands on his knees, his breath rasping in an audible wheeze. “Told them...told them what I’m here to tell you. Guards...right behind...”

“Let him speak.” As if on cue, the guard, point man in a group of six witches and several humans, raced around the corner of the house. “You’ve gotta hear this.”

Mel ushered them all into the kitchen and clicked on the overhead lamp. As they settled around the oak table, one of the women who’d been guarding the house got Dane a glass of water and a damp towel to hold against his wound. Trey, Sorren, and Joel stood behind the dark lord’s chair, and Kiara sat to his left, surrounding Dane with a formidable show of power.

The back of Serena’s throat went dry as she waited for the world to collapse around her. Her nascent gift of foreseeing spewed out an array of images so appalling, she couldn’t sort out the specifics from the freak show of fear.

“Bad—something bad—” Her glance darting from Dane to Mel, she widened her eyes in an unspoken plea, and Mel moved forward to rest a hand on her shoulder. “Fire, a giant dragon, so much heat...”

Hell, the images didn’t even make sense to *her*. They’d all think she’d cracked under pressure. But Dane’s face turned a few shades paler, and Sorren nodded, his expression grim.

“The dragon’s Jaimis. His sign, sure as mine’s the hawk.” Sorren frowned and reached up to trace the outline of the tattoo on his shoulder. Sitting there in nothing but a pair of black pants, his feet bare and his hair hanging loose, energy hissed around the elder witch like a waterfall caught behind a dam. “Can’t speak to the fire. Not good though—my own Sight is kicking out images of witches’ duels, an armed struggle—but no specifics. Speak to us, Dane, and prove your worth.”

Serena shivered at the implied threat, and Dane hunched lower over his water glass, cringing under the elder witch’s scrutiny. The taint of dark magic around him raised every hair on the backs of her arms, sure as if she’d entered a field of static electricity. But she’d loved him once, and fuck it if she didn’t want to tend to his wound and protect him from Sorren’s wrath.

Wincing as if in pain, Dane looked up at Sorren, his face snow pale under his spiky black hair. “Serena—Joel—they’re in horrible danger.”

“Tell us something we didn’t know.” Trey slammed his palm down flat on the table, the set of his mouth more cruel than sensual at the moment, his eyes icy cold. “Spit it all out. *Now*.”

“Jaimis plans to issue an ultimatum—tomorrow afternoon, or rather, this afternoon, given it’s past midnight—giving Joel and Serena two hours to meet him at a paramilitary compound he’s fashioned into a fucking fortress.” Dane paused to wipe

sweat from his forehead, his eyes narrowed with pain as trails of blood seeped out from under the wadded towel, staining his shirt. "If not, he'll torture and kill Carmen—"

Serena stopped breathing when Dane paused and made eye contact. Jaimis had threatened to take someone she cared for. *Oh sweet goddess, not Lena – not Eric...*

"And Gwen." Dane looked back at Sorren. "He has Serena's girlfriend. Sent a group of human paramilitary types out to California this morning to capture her."

Time stopped as she pictured Gwen in their king-size bed, her sun-kissed legs sprawled out in a wide V as she lay on her stomach, reading the Sunday paper. Pictured Gwen teaching a karate class, all sweaty as she barked out commands to her students. Pictured Gwen's tears as she explained why they had to part.

Goddess help me, if Jaimis so much as nicks Gwen's skin, if he so much as casts one spell to harm her... More than anything, Serena wanted it to be a lie. But she'd heard the truth in Dane's voice, as did every other witch in the room.

"Dane's bought us some time." Joel's posture radiated intense focus, alert and ready to lead. Everything from his forbidding scowl to the violet light flickering around him fairly screamed of power. Every person in the room turned to listen when he spoke—Sorren included. "Not much, but enough to put a plan in place before Jaimis contacts us. We'll need to make our move—storm the compound—before he places that call. Surprise will be about the only element on our side."

Sorren stood, and wind whispered around him, billowing through his loose black pants and lifting his hair in a mass of snakelike tendrils. "This time, we'll end things. Jaimis can't walk away again. The price would be too high if he got away."

"I have a map of the compound." Dane tugged a folded piece of paper from his pocket, spread it out, and handed it to Joel. "Jaimis has taken up with a group of human survivalists—paranoid and looking to fight at Armageddon—and they've stockpiled weapons like you can't imagine. The compound houses more than twenty dark lords, witches with powers to rival Sorren's."

The hum of voices faded into the background as Serena tried to think through the fog of panic. Gwen's voice hummed in her ears. "*Panic gets you dead. Fear can add an edge to your fight. Use that. But never give in to blind panic.*"

As Joel grabbed a paper bag from a pile by the door and started mapping out battle plans in black marker, Serena murmured something about needing air and left the table. This much she knew—if she waited until all of Little Harbor and Seal's Haunt, along with several Boston covens, stormed Jaimis's stronghold, Gwen and Carmen would die. Once the invasion started, Jaimis would have no more need of the hostages he'd taken to try to secure Joel's—and her—cooperation.

Grabbing Trey's jacket from the rack by the door, she shrugged into it and felt around in the pockets until her fingers touched the cool metal of his keys. She stepped out into the night, deceptively peaceful and rich with the scent of wood smoke, and told the guards by the door she needed to head out to the bushes to be sick. Quickly, she moved off into the shadows.

Just as she started toward the driveway, the back door slammed, and Serena cursed under her breath as Kiara trotted after her. Several of the witches and humans guarding the house looked their way as Kiara caught up with her and gave her a quick hug.

"Would you let Joel and Trey know I'm taking Serena for a ride?" A glow sphere bobbing over her left shoulder to light her way, Kiara waved back toward the guards. "She needs some air after the news that the dark witch captured her ex. Tell them not to worry if we're out awhile. We'll probably stop for something to eat."

Fuck! Serena dragged her feet as Kiara led her toward the rural road where she'd parked her black Ford Ranger off to the side on the grass. She refused to accept that Gwen would die at Jaimis's hand, violated, bloodied, and broken. There had to be a way to slip away and...

"Don't even think of making a break for it." Locking her fingers around Serena's wrist, Kiara kept walking. "Your best chance is with me right now."

Damn link. Never mind she'd been shielding, Kiara had slipped into her head so neatly, she'd never detected the presence. Despair clouded her mind as she climbed up into the massive truck and settled into the passenger seat. Kiara let her glow sphere flicker out as she clicked her door shut and started the engine. She offered another cheery wave in the direction of the guards and pulled out nice and slow, as if she didn't have a care in the world.

"I helped out just enough with the battle plans to justify scratching out some key notes from the map Dane brought along." Kiara fished in her pocket and handed Serena a folded piece of paper. "Memorize it. We'll need to know the layout of the place."

Hope flared as Serena spun a small orb of blue-green light over one hand, unfolded the paper with the other, and stared at the scribbled map and notes. The night flew by outside, the winding road slipping into long stretches of blackness between the rare streetlights, and she swallowed hard, terrified to her core at what they were about to attempt.

"Thanks. I can't tell you..."

"No need. Joel believes in his plan. Thinks anything short of sending a full militia in there is too risky and doesn't stand a chance of success. But if it were my ex in there—someone I still cared about—I wouldn't sit around waiting for the main invasion, hoping somehow our people got to her before Jaimis did. This is one of those times a little stealth can go a lot farther than an armed attack."

"Joel and Trey, they'll figure out we're not just out for a drive at some point. Most likely, as soon as they're done planning. Chances are they'll use the link—know where we've gone and set out to find us."

"Counting on it. By then, we'll be too far ahead for them to stop us, even if they break every land-speed record on the way up to Jaimis's hideout." With a sigh, Kiara reached up to rub the back of her neck. "I figure our odds aren't that good tonight. If things get tight, having Trey and Joel up there will increase our chances of getting the

fuck out of there. I also figure this is where Trey's foreseeing comes into play. The four of us are in this together, come what may."

"Shit!" Serena jolted hard against her seat belt as a car pulled out in front of them, speeding onto the road from where it had been parked on the shoulder with its lights off, and Kiara swerved hard to avoid hitting it. Her heart pounded double time as Kiara got the truck under control and brought it to a stop just shy of a brown car with a bad case of body rust.

"Blessed goddess, if that's who I think it is, I'm going to skin him and leave him for roadkill." Reaching past Serena, Kiara flipped open the storage compartment and pulled out an intimidating-looking gun. "Stay here. And don't even start about carrying a gun. With what we're going up against tonight, the Glock ups our chances of walking out whole."

Still shaking after the near miss with the car blocking the road, not to mention the impact of seeing a witch pull out a weapon that looked like it belonged in the hands of a street gang member rather than someone committed to "harm none" ethics, Serena threw her door open and joined Kiara. *Stay here, my ass!*

"Doug Wainwright, what in the name of all that's holy do you think you're doing?" Fury radiating from her with each stride, Kiara pointed her gun at the portly man who'd climbed out of the car, and he aimed a shotgun toward the ground between Serena and Kiara. The headlights on the two vehicles illuminated the scene, and Kiara's usually pale face shone red with rage. "You were waiting for my truck, weren't you, you worthless piece of shit? Mine, or Joel's, or any other car, truck, or van associated with witches."

Another man climbed out of the car, and the gun he held at his side glinted in the glare of the headlights. He was tall and thin and dressed head to toe in black, except for a heavy brown utility belt that held, among other things, an evil-looking hunting knife. Serena suspected the numerous pouches on the belt contained enough bullets to shoot a lot more than two witches.

When the skinny man aimed and fired a shot at the ground near her feet, she shrieked and channeled a potent thread of magic. Fear fed the dark little seed of power she'd absorbed during the storm rites, never mind the calming effect of Kiara's proximity. Having more or less subdued her aversion to magic, she had only minor qualms about casting an unpleasant spell or two in self-defense. Not that she'd hurt them, but scaring them half to death held strong appeal at the moment.

"Drop the fucking guns!" The level of compulsion in Kiara's command rang so strong that Serena opened her empty fingers as if to let an object drop to the ground. The two men tossed their weapons several feet away and stood blinking in confusion. "Now, Doug, move the car back off the road! Kenny, into the back of my truck! If Mary knew you were out here shooting at people, she'd skin you alive. I swear, your third grader has more sense in his little toe than you've got in what passes for a brain."

The one called Kenny stood staring at his feet, and Serena imagined that Kiara didn't get a lot of crap from her students.

"Ken Junior has quite a gift for predicting weather patterns." Kiara shook her head, and her short hair ruffled in the wind. "We might be able to help him with that—make it easier for him to fit in with his peers—if you chill out long enough to stop taking shots at us."

"Yes, ma'am." The thinner of the two men shuffled toward the back of the truck and climbed into the open bed, tugging his stretchy black hat down over his ears.

After moving the car off the road, the man Kiara called Doug joined him, and Serena enjoyed a moment of satisfaction thinking of them freezing their asses off in the uncovered truck bed. *Any luck, maybe they'll fall out.* Wincing, she immediately felt guilty for that thought. But damn, the zealots scared the crap out of her. And with her fear for Gwen so strong it hurt to breathe, she had no patience for delays.

"Now listen up." Still pointing her gun at them, Kiara kindled the faintest hint of a glow sphere and tossed it up to hover over her shoulder. The men pulled back against the cab of the truck, putting as much space between them and the angry witch as possible. "If you'd have stuck around at the town-hall meeting long enough to find out, you'd know we're willing to buy your property at twice the assessed value if you aren't inclined to live in a town full of witches. As it is, here are the facts. We're the *good guys*. Glinda the Good Witch and all that."

The men nodded, and Serena figured since no one planned on taking any more shots, the truck would be more comfortable than a chilly, poorly lit road. Careful to remain facing the men, she inched back toward the passenger door.

The fact that Kiara seemed able—and willing—to use her empathic gifts to gain compliance didn't sit well. Sorren would have a field day with that particular ethical violation. But damn, desperate times and all that... To her surprise, Kiara retrieved the men's weapons from the ground and returned them to their owners.

"So to review, we're Glinda. You don't have to like us, but if you ever take another shot at us or our friends, I know a spell for impotence that will leave you wishing you hadn't." Kiara moved around toward the driver's-side door. "Now we're on our way up to see the Wicked Witch of the East. Biggest bastard ever to crawl out of a swamp. Scary fucking character likes to torture innocent women—sometimes even little kids—and he comes equipped with a host of SOBs intent on helping him carry out his plans."

The men grumbled from the back of the truck and lifted the shotgun and handgun, but Kiara didn't look concerned.

"Now him—the *bad witch*—you can shoot. You with me?"

"Damn straight!"

"Fuckin' A."

Serena buckled her seat belt, trying not to think about the two armed vigilantes riding in the back. Would they remain cooperative when Kiara focused on driving, rather than spinning layers of compulsion through her words?

“These aren’t the guys who injured a few Seal’s Haunt witches – they aren’t the ones who killed a man in the woods after the rite, either.” After swinging up into the driver’s seat, Kiara returned her gun to the storage compartment, then sped off down the road. “The assholes responsible for that have been...dealt with.”

With a shiver, Serena chose to let that one rest. The lines between light and dark blurred more every day, and some things she just didn’t want to know.

“Kenny and Doug are all bluster and no action. I’ve got Kenny’s son in my class this year. Great kid – nearly as psychic as Trey. Anyway, don’t worry. Doug and Kenny – and others like them – will settle down once they get past being scared shitless at finding themselves sharing a world with witches. Took a while in Little Harbor, too, before folks figured out the resident witches weren’t going to hurt them.”

Serena frowned. Damn, it took her a while to get used to living with witches again, too. She glanced sideways at Kiara – who looked harmless enough in her navy blue squall jacket and jeans – and wondered just how many rules she’d break tonight with her empathic ability to broadcast imperatives. Could be a point in their favor with crowd control, but if Sorren ever found out...

“So don’t tell him, Glinda. As for the fools in back, I figure they just may save our asses when we wander into a compound thick with paramilitary types. Bringing along a little muscle won’t hurt our chances of rescuing Carmen and Gwen – and getting out alive.”

* * * * *

Frustrated to the point of tears, Serena stared at the solid rock face in front of them. Her first instinct insisted it had to be a trap. Dane must have betrayed them, feeding them false directions and leading them up to a remote area where Jaimis could capture them. But as Kiara pulled the truck onto the dirt circle where the road ended, she spotted a small...fluctuation in the rock face. Not quite a flicker, more a moment of inconsistency in the rock pattern. But as she stared harder, the surface looked like regular old rock.

“An illusion?” *Please, please, please let it be an illusion.* Serena stretched and yawned, stiff from the ride and weary with lack of sleep.

She’d heard the truth in Dane’s voice when he said Jaimis had Gwen. But the map – anything written didn’t require verbal explanation. The map could be a lie. And if they couldn’t get to Gwen in time...

“Not going to drive into solid rock for the sake of finding out if it’s real.” After shrugging back into the jacket she’d discarded behind the seats, Kiara switched off the headlights. Muttering under her breath, she formed a glow sphere, threw open the door, and walked toward the towering rock face that appeared to be the start of several rocky hills. She pushed her hands against the stone and shoved. “Feels solid enough.”

Shit! Serena swallowed hard and chewed her lower lip. The men in the back of the truck tossed aside the pile of blankets Kiara had given them when they'd stopped for coffee and climbed out, looking stiff but otherwise not much the worse for wear. Still wary of a trap, Serena scanned the surrounding area, straining to catch any sounds that might not belong to the night.

"Doesn't feel right. Looks like rock, but something's off." Kenny, the one with the psychic son, pulled a flashlight from his utility belt, switched it on, and walked over to join Kiara. "Everything has a feel to it. Tree feels like a tree. Water feels like water. And stone feels like stone. I'll eat my hat if that's stone."

Where. Are. You? Tension rippled through Joel's query as he shoved past her shields again.

For the past forty-five minutes, he'd been badgering her, and she could feel him drawing closer all the time. No doubt he had a good sense of her location, too, given the unbelievable strength of their link, never mind the distance between them. So she felt justified in wrapping her shields tighter and ignoring the aggravated inquiry.

Her sense of urgency grew with every moment. Bad enough that this might be a trap. But on top of that, if Joel and Trey caught up with them before they found a way into the compound, she suspected she'd end up tossed over Trey's shoulder again, cursing as he dragged her back to his truck. *Stopping us is not an option. Risking Gwen during the full-scale invasion tomorrow is not an option.* There, let Joel and Trey stew over that for a while.

At the sound of a stick cracking behind the truck, all four of them spun around — Kiara, Doug, and Kenny with weapons drawn and aimed at the source of the disturbance. Serena stifled a snort when she recognized the black mask of a raccoon peeking out of the bushes, its eyes reflecting green in the beams of the men's flashlights and the witch's glow sphere.

"Not getting anywhere just standing around." Her tone thick with aggravation, Serena walked along the rock face, dragging her fingers against what felt like rough, cool stone. But she trusted Kenny's ability to sense something *off*. She'd learned too much about Trey's psychic inclinations not to. "So, assuming this is the mother of all illusions, backed up with power siphoned off from a half dozen storm rites, how do I bypass the magic?"

None of her usual gifts applied. Hell, what good was a water witch against solid rock? But she'd already stirred up more than one freak talent. Now would be a good time for more innovation. Concentrating so hard the backs of her eyes ached, she threw everything she had at the stone, willing it not to exist. *Nothing.*

"Damn it, Gwen's in there. I *know* she is. I'm not going to let her die at Jaimis's hands!" Adopting a new tactic, she stopped resisting the rock and accepted its presence. Mist formed around her, potent with her magic, as she moved forward and stepped straight into hell. "Oh!"

Fire raged across a long, one-story building to her left, the heat so strong, her lungs burned. Several larger structures in the distance glowed eerie orange, and smoke billowed around her, thick and bitter. Screams echoed through the night, and Serena issued a plea to any goddess or god who might be listening to guide Gwen safely out of the inferno. Off to her right, several buildings remained untouched by fire, and she hoped beyond hope one of them housed Jaimis's prisoners.

Backtracking, she eased past the barrier and rejoined the others. "Grab onto me and stay close. Something's happening on the other side. Fire – everywhere."

Joel! The cliff face at the end of the road – it's fake. Don't resist it, and you'll walk right through. Jaimis's compound – fire, everywhere. Maybe an attack from within? Content that she'd warned him to the best of her ability, she slammed her shields back in place. No time to be distracted chatting back and forth. A shell of mist formed around her, and she guided Kiara and the two men through Jaimis's protective screen and reentered a landscape more horrible than her worst nightmare.

Kenny exchanged his flashlight for his gun. The flames offered more than enough light to see by, even for those without witches' enhanced night vision. "Keep low and try to stay in the shadows. Any idea how to find your friends – or the badass witch we're after?"

Serena didn't bother to correct him about Jaimis as they crept along a row of overgrown bushes. If he wanted to think they planned to hunt down the bad guy, let him. Fact was, once they found Gwen and Carmen, they'd hightail it out of there and leave the rest for Sorren and the Boston covens to clean up.

"Hang on a second, let us get our bearings." Serena took in the burning buildings and choked back a frightened sob. *Kiara? I can't contact Gwen. She's human, and not the psychic variety that seems so common in these parts. Do you know Carmen well enough to touch her thoughts?*

Three men carrying rifles ran past them, coming within ten feet of them without even noticing their presence. One of them had his pants and shirt scorched half off. All of them ran as if their lives depended on escape.

Low building back beyond those trees. Kiara pointed toward the area where the structures had yet to be touched by flame. *Carmen's hurt, but alive. Couldn't get much out of her other than that she's in a one-story structure, and it's not burning. Has to be that one.*

Moving faster now, they abandoned the shelter of the scrubby bushes and made a beeline for the only single-story building not yet burning. *Please, let Gwen be with Carmen. Let them be safe.*

A shot rang out, louder than the crackling flames and the sounds of human misery. Dirt sprayed up a few feet in front of Doug, and he raised his gun and returned fire. Giving up on the attempt to stay low, they ran full out as two more shots hit a fence off to their left. Serena was so far beyond fear at that point, she didn't even have a word for her state of numb, half-crazed desperation.

“Ditch—get in!” Kenny shoved her, and she half fell, half rolled into a deep trench with sloping sides. “Fucking place is set up for warfare. Trenches, sandbags, rifle turrets on the walls around the compound—the works.”

Chapter Fifteen

Serena's ankle protested when she straightened up from the heap she'd landed in. Damn, her feet still hurt from the cuts, and she didn't need a bad ankle in the bargain. Kiara crouched beside Doug, her arm resting across his shoulders, and Kenny hunched down beside them, his gun aimed up toward ground level.

"Whatthefuck!" Doug's yell raised her adrenaline level about six notches.

Looking around for the source of his fear, she gasped as a flaming phoenix swooped over them. Instinctively, she reached out to nullify the magic, but Kiara shoved her so hard, she lost her focus.

No! If you cancel someone's spell, Jaimis will know we're here for sure! Save that trick to counter a direct attack – only if our lives are in danger.

Trembling, Serena nodded. *Got it. No channeling off power unless it's life-or-death – meaning ours.*

Within seconds, the spell crashed through the window of the closest two-story building. All the windows blew out, and as the structure mushroomed into flame, debris settled around them. For a few minutes, they couldn't do much more than stomp out burning fragments that landed too close for comfort and pat at sparks that landed on their clothes.

To her relief, they didn't hear any additional screams. By now, hopefully everyone in the compound had evacuated the buildings. "The witch who tried to burn down Joel's house. Has to be her."

Kiara nodded, worry transparent on her delicate features. "If she's decided to turn sides, let's just hope she spares the prisoners."

"Or it could be a power play – a dark lord's bid to take on Jaimis's role as head asshole." Right then, Serena hated magic more than she had in years. But seeing as the

two wide-eyed humans hunkered down beside her hadn't wet themselves, she'd best not either. "What now?"

"Not getting anywhere hiding out in a trench." Doug gestured off to the east. "I say we risk it and make our way toward the building Kiara says holds your friends. Free them and any other sorry souls the Wicked Witch has locked up in this fucking hellhole. Then find the Wicked Witch himself and put a few holes in *him*."

Cheered by Doug's bravado in the face of death magic shocking enough to frighten dark lords themselves, Serena scrambled up out of the trench and hoped the shooters had gotten down to the important business of clearing the fuck out of there before the entire place blew sky-high. If one of the buildings not yet burning contained the stockpile of weapons Dean had mentioned...

Better not to think about that. Kiara reached out and squeezed her hand. "Look!"

Giving up the search for armed paramilitary types long enough to glance over to where Kiara was pointing, Serena felt the first signs of hope since they stepped into this war zone. A group of half-naked men and women staggered from the building Kiara had believed held the prisoners and started moving toward them. Two of the men carried what looked like unconscious—*please, not dead!*—women, their hair and arms hanging limply toward the ground.

Try to reach Carmen again. With the billowing smoke and the garish orange light, she couldn't for the life of her tell if any of them might be Gwen. She felt Kiara's fear rise even before the reply formed.

Can't. Can't reach her.

"I say half-naked and injured means friends—or potential friends, if we offer to help get them the hell out of here." Kenny inclined his head toward the small group heading their way, and Kiara nodded.

"Only one way to find out." Kiara picked up her pace, rushing toward the pitiful collection of witches and humans.

Most of them showed flickering auras—witches, no doubt channeling power in case they had to defend themselves. The two unconscious forms could go either way, witch or human. At least two of those walking seemed human. Since luck could only hold so long, a couple of shots sounded nearby. Serena figured she must be getting shell-shocked, because at this point, bullets hardly seemed to present a threat. Now the burning phoenix they'd seen... She shivered, hoping the dark lord who'd whipped up that piece of death magic didn't make an appearance anytime soon.

Or Jaimis. Don't forget about the real bogeyman here. Kiara's reminder left her cold. Jaimis would use her to nullify any opposing witch's spells. And then he'd use her to gain control of the East Coast. And then he'd use her to challenge Sorren's authority as elder witch.

"Down!" Gunfire followed Kenny's warning, and they all dived to the ground, pressed flat against earth still damp from the rain that swept the region during the

storm rites. He and Doug returned fire, but Kiara never took her eyes off the group of people walking toward them.

As Serena lay in the dirt coughing, smoke searing her lungs, there didn't seem to be any means to a happy ending here. Fire on all sides, the sound of gunfire, screams, and long, low moans, a crazed dark lord wielding death spells – and oh yeah, the rogue witch who wanted to make her into his personal witch slave.

It's Carmen. Don't give up hope! Kiara's thought imprint held a note of barely contained exultation, but as she scrambled to her feet, Serena didn't dare open herself to optimism. *Close enough to see better now. To the right, being carried by the big guy wearing nothing but shorts.*

Holy gods, witch, where are you? Serena couldn't ever remember hearing Joel this rattled before. *Even the dirt seems to be on fire! Got through the rock wall only to find myself in a firestorm.*

Here! Linking tighter, she found Trey as well, and the two of them seemed to glow like dots of light on an internal map. If she could pinpoint their location that easily when fully linked, hopefully they'd be able to...

Got it. If it's safe, stay put till we get to you. Sorren's here. Mel, too. Twelve Little Harbor witches and seven from Seal's Haunt, plus at least as many humans from each town. All we could get on such short notice. Boston covens are on their way.

Because life just couldn't grant her a moment of relief, another phoenix soared overhead, its six-foot wingspan scattering flames, and plunged into an as-yet-untouched building. More explosions. More fire. As she crept forward, Serena resisted the urge to reach down and feel whether she'd wet herself. Just didn't matter.

You okay? Fear leaped across the connection she shared with Joel, and she wondered what it must be like for him to enter a scene not unlike the hell in which his parents died.

So far. We're making our way over to Carmen, but some asshole's shooting at us now and then, just to keep us on our toes. I think the dark lord launching the death spells is on our side. She's left the building that housed the prisoners untouched and hasn't bothered the group of injured people making their way toward us out in the open.

Her head ached from pushing all that out at once, but she felt the acknowledgment from Joel, Trey, and Kiara, so she'd managed to get the information out across the four-way link. Coughing hard, she forced herself to keep stumbling ahead, one foot in front of the other. They bypassed another long trench, heavily sandbagged on each side, and when the wind shifted, clearing the smoke between them and the walking wounded, she suppressed the urge to let out a joyful whoop. She'd know that gorgeous body and contrasting military-stiff posture anywhere – even half-naked in the middle of hell. *Gwen!*

Of course, she couldn't link with her ex to let Gwen know she was here, but Joel, Trey, and Kiara sent back a wave of warm reassurance. Now if they could just get to them without being shot, and then find their way out of this fiery maze... Her eyes

teared as acrid smoke billowed their way, and she put her arm up to her face to breathe through her sleeve. Even hunched low, closer to the ground, the air felt thick and hot. Breathing got harder every moment.

With the next round of gunfire, Doug let out a grunt, and in the light of the flames and witches' glow spheres, Serena watched in horror as his sleeve turned darkly wet below the shoulder. Kenny stopped to fashion a makeshift bandage to cover the spot where the bullet had grazed Doug's arm, and then motioned the rest of them to keep moving. Fuck, if she made it out of here, she never wanted to see another gun.

"Kenny, get Doug back to the second trench we passed." Kiara pointed back over her shoulder. "We'll join you as soon as we can."

Somehow, they covered the distance between them and the group of stragglers without anyone else getting shot. *Praise the goddess.* But Gwen and a man in the group hefted weapons as they approached. *Fuck, leave it to Gwen to get her hands on a gun during their escape attempt.*

"Gwen, it's me! Serena! I'm here to help." She held out her hands, palms up. "Kiara's Carmen's friend."

Let's hope Gwen and Carmen had had a chance to introduce themselves, because at the moment, Gwen had her weapon aimed right at Kiara. *Might help if you set your gun down for a minute, Kiara!* She didn't even try to hide the anger behind that thought. *Witches shouldn't carry guns. No one should carry guns.*

"Sorry about the weapon, Gwen. But with our backup out of action for the moment, I'm all that's standing between me and Serena and those snipers out there. Not gonna put down my Glock. But I promise, we're here to help you."

After what felt like years, Gwen nodded and motioned for the ragged group to join them. All but weeping with relief, Serena hurried forward and touched her ex's arm. No time for warm reunions, though. Something exploded off to their left, scattering burning debris, and they scurried out of the way. Movement progressed at a snail's pace with two of Jaimis's former prisoners carrying wounded women—*not dead, please, not dead*—but somehow, they kept creeping forward.

"Son of a bitch!" As a man catapulted out of the smoke, blindly firing a military-style weapon, Kiara raised her gun and shot him in the chest. "Move! Keep moving forward!"

Jolted out of her shock by Kiara's order, Serena forced herself to look away from the khaki-clad form sprawled in the dirt—*not a man, I can't think of the broken creature as a man, not if I'm going to stay sane for the immediate future*—and forced herself to keep walking. One of the men in Gwen's group had been hit in the thigh when the gunman approached, and he sobbed like a small child as they approached the trench.

"Kenny, Doug—friends!" Kiara shouted the greeting as they climbed over the sandbags, helping the injured as best they could and dragging the two unconscious women over with the help of the men who'd been carrying them. Without being told, she knew the lifeless-looking woman with flowing dark hair was Carmen, and her heart

ached for Kiara's connection to the healer. *Please, goddess, let Carmen live.* For now, all she could do was let the man who'd been carrying Little Harbor's healer tend to her and hope for the best.

Joel, still out there? As she panted on the bottom of the ditch, drawing huge gulps of air into her lungs now that they'd descended beneath the cloud of smoke, she opened her mind to the internal map of Joel and Trey. Kiara showed up first, a strong flare of light right beside her. Then Trey, just about fifty yards from the trench. *Joel?* Desperation rising, she searched again—and found him, too close to the burning buildings for comfort, but the mental dot of light marking his location shone strong and bright. Without their link, they'd never be able to find each other when it came time to get the hell out of here.

Joel and Sorren are trying to sneak up on Jaimis. Trey's mental touch conveyed a heap of worry and fierce determination. *Joel's too busy for chitchat. I'm keeping a bunch of armed assholes away from the trench. Join you when I can.*

More guns—shit, she hated this. Around her, people worked to bandage the wounded with ripped strips of clothing, and Kiara and Kenny reloaded. They fired off shots whenever one of the paramilitary types got too close. She tried not to think about what would happen when Kenny's cornucopia of a utility belt came up with empty pouches, and they couldn't reload. She hated the damn guns. But she hated the idea of them all getting shot a lot more.

A brilliant flash of light joined the eerie orange of the flames, and when she looked up, she forgot to breathe. A dragon larger than a house winged overhead, glowing red against the night sky, its breath hissing in streams of flame. Her foreseeing came back to her with the power of a blow. *The dragon and the hawk.* As if on cue, another flash of light cut through the smoke and darkness, and a rainbow-colored hawk, every bit as large—and frightening—as the dragon, flew at the serpentine beast feet first, talons extended.

Shit. Jaimis and Sorren's magic – and we're right underneath the dueling ground. She directed the thought toward Trey and Kiara. Joel would have enough to think about, providing backup for Sorren while the elder witch engaged Jaimis in the duel. The dragon raked at the hawk's tail feathers with its giant fangs, and the hawk rounded to rake its talons across the dragon's back.

"No one else has to die." Jaimis's voice boomed through the night, louder than the sound of gunfire or the roar of the fires. Enhanced by the dark witch's magic, it seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. "If Joel and Serena join me—a one-year employment contract is all I ask, and you'll be well compensated—the rest of you will be free to leave."

"Never!" Joel's voice ripped through the night, as bodiless and huge as that of the rogue witch, and Serena shivered at the show of power.

Not about to give away her hiding place with so many of their group wounded, Serena let Joel's denial stand for her, too. The dragon and hawk rose high above them, grasped each other with talons and claws, and plunged earthward. At the last minute,

the hawk struggled free and rose into the night, but the dragon seemed to be heading directly toward them, wings spread but plunging fast.

"Holy mother of God!" Kenny stood with his face tilted skyward, his eyes glazed, and his face bone pale in the orange light.

The beast swooped past the trench, and she hoped beyond hope Jaimis hadn't discovered their hiding place. "Noooooooooooo!" The scream tore from her throat, and as pain lanced along her shoulders and back, she shrieked again and again. Trey's pain tore across her body, the agony nearly dragging her under.

"Put him down, Jaimis!" Joel's voice tore through the night, fierce with the imprint of his power. "*Let. Trey. Go. It's me you want, not him!*"

Serena watched in horror as the dragon rose higher, its talons piercing Trey's upper body in several places, the red glow of Jaimis's magical beast illuminating the unconscious man as if he had a witch's aura. *Please! Please! Please!*

In her panic, she couldn't think of a single god or goddess to name in her entreaty. Just please. She'd asked once before, begging for Scott's life, and her plea had gone unanswered. The hawk swooped below the dragon, trying to grab Trey with its talons. But Jaimis proved too quick, flying higher before Sorren could manage a rescue.

With everything she had, she reached outward and tried to channel power away from the gruesome beast, but the magic felt like an extension of Jaimis himself, guarded by the wards he'd wrapped around his body. Sobbing, she tried and tried again but couldn't break the dark witch's shields. *I can't help him, Joel! Jaimis's power is too strong for me to channel it away from the dragon.*

"Come to me, Joel. Serena, too." The voice boomed from the west this time, and when Serena swung her head around to locate Jaimis, she spotted him standing on top of a low shed, arms raised skyward to command the dragon. "Join me, and we'll bargain for your friend's life. You come from the dark, Joel. Your parents wrought nothing but death. The spell they wove the day that farmhouse burned rivaled anything I've attempted. You belong with me. Their power flows in you, begging to be used. Leave it dormant, and it will consume you, just as the flames they summoned consumed them!"

It's not true! Kiara's protest rang through her thoughts, never mind the words were meant for Joel. *Don't let him shake your faith. He lies!*

Lies—mixed with the truth. Serena had sensed a bit of each in Jaimis's claims. Joel would have, too. If the dark lord shook his confidence now, in the middle of battle...

"Heads up. We're friends—it's Dane—don't shoot!" Whirling around to face the back of the trench, she watched as Dane and a red-haired witch half dragged a dark-haired woman over the sandbags and into the trench. "Alexa's about done in, but she'll fight with us. To the last."

Serena stared in horror at the dark liquid soaking the woman's inner thighs, dripping all the way down to her ankles. *Holy goddess.* With Trey's pain searing across her nerve endings, and fresh evidence of Jaimis's brutality slouched down before her on

the trampled earth in a bloodstained heap, she'd do anything to see the rogue witch dead. *Anything.*

The red-haired witch with singe marks smudging her clothes gestured in Jaimis's direction. "Tell the others—anyone you can link with—next time Jaimis sends the dragon apparition toward Sorren's hawk, he'll be distracted. That's his one moment of weakness." With the way Dane stood protectively close to her, the witch must be his lover, Diana. She had a gash on her forehead, but didn't seem to be in immediate danger—unlike the witch Dane had called Alexa. "The sick bastard is strong, horribly strong, from the storm rites. But if we all attack at once, while he's focused on manipulating the dragon..."

Kiara gave the thumbs-up sign, and Serena nodded. Not much of a chance to defeat the rogue witch and free Trey, but a chance, nonetheless.

Joel—when Jaimis sends the dragon toward Sorren's hawk, we need to attack together. Throw every bit of magic you have at him. Tell Sorren to let Mel know. Has to be soon, while Trey still has a chance!

Clutching Trey in its talons, the dragon swooped toward the hawk and bit at its back, staying above it to avoid its sharp beak. Alexa raised her arms, whimpering under her breath, and a fiery phoenix swooped toward where Jaimis perched atop the shed. So many things happened at once, Serena had a hard time processing the rain of glowing yellow swords that fell around the rogue witch, the explosion of fire that encompassed a large sphere but didn't touch Jaimis, and the whirling vortex of green light just over Jaimis's head.

None of the magic touched him, though he knelt low on the shed with his hands protecting his face. As she pressed forward with a wall of water, calling it up with all the effort she could muster and sending it crashing toward the dark witch, she felt his protective sphere as her magic crashed around it. *He's untouchable.*

Moaning audibly, Alexa sent another phoenix flaming through the night, but again, the fire stopped short of Jaimis's defensive sphere. Of all the colors rioting around the rogue witch, she didn't see any violet.

Joel! You have to help! Trey will die! She clenched her hands so hard, her nails dug into her palms. Jaimis wants dark? Show him how dark you can play! Sometimes you have to embrace the shadows—I get that now. You're not your parents, but you've got to fight!

If Joel gave up, Trey was as good as dead. With all the witches throwing dueling-caliber spells Jaimis's way, he hadn't even faltered. They needed more force, more...

Deep inside her, the hunger howled and stretched its claws. She stood tall, counting on Kenny and the other armed humans to deal with Jaimis's armed thugs. With a bloodcurdling scream, she spread her fingers wide and let the seed of dark magic flow up through her like black blood, vile and potent.

As another phoenix flared through the night, Serena called forth the form of a giant serpent and sent it upward on silken wings, using the flaming bird as a beacon to help her find Jaimis. When an arch of violet light flared behind Jaimis, she embraced a

thin shred of hope. *Joel!* With everything in her, she sent determination cascading through their link. Together, maybe they had a chance.

Kiara screamed when the dragon swooped low and dropped Trey in a heap on the ground. Despite the pain, Serena kept dark energy streaming through her spell. The serpent she'd conjured had as much form and substance as Jaimis's wall of rock – or the rogue witch's dragon. If she could breach Jaimis's sphere of protection...

As violet light formed a funnel cloud around the bubble that protected Jaimis, she figured out what Joel meant to do. If he could tear down Jaimis's wards, then she'd have a chance to strike. A sunburst of flame joined the pulsing violet sheets of energy as another phoenix exploded into a fireball. But when the flames fizzled out, Jaimis stood unscathed.

Within the circle of protection, she could see transparent streaks in Jaimis's aura – the disturbances she'd noticed at the aquarium. Irregularities she suspected were caused by feeding off the power of the storm rites. If she could just get past the wards and exploit those weaknesses...

Now! Joel's voice rang in her head, simultaneous with Kiara's scream. The dragon swooped down on the hawk and locked the bird's neck in its jaws. *Not Sorren – not Sorren, too!*

Too much death. Too much blood spilled here tonight. Trembling, she found the spot in Jaimis's wards where Joel's magic had pierced through, leaving a hand-sized hole. Driving the serpent forward, she shrunk it down to the size of her fist, propelled it past the opening, and breached Jaimis's defenses.

I'll have a death on my conscience. Death magic – same as killed Scott. No better than a dark lord.

Now, damn it! Joel's command jolted her out of her moment of indecision. *Now, while Trey's still breathing!*

Expanding the serpent to its full size, she sought the weak spots in Jaimis's aura and dug in with the full force of the serpent's fangs. Lifting him as he'd lifted Trey, she shook the rogue witch like a rag doll, calling on the full power of the dark magic that had lodged inside her.

Jaimis screamed, long and horrible, and yet she didn't drop him. Pain raged through her, and a burst of murky light pounded at her defenses as the dark witch fought back, but she felt Joel and Kiara with her, buoying her up past the agony. With the last fragments of her will, she held on until the death spell spent itself.

The moment she registered her unthinkable victory, she let the dark witch's lifeless body fall to the ground and sent the final remnants of storm magic deep into the earth. Agony pounded through her. She bent over with her hands pressed to her knees, hunched up as she struggled to catch her breath.

Beside her, Kiara knelt by the bloody, dark-haired witch lying crumpled on the ground and pressed two fingers to her neck. "Alexa's dead – died fighting Jaimis. What he must have done to make her bleed like that – sweet goddess," she said softly, raw

pain in her voice. "I can't even imagine." Kiara took off her jacket and spread it over the fallen witch like a blanket.

Never mind that the fire witch had cast a death spell toward Joel's room a few nights ago, something deep inside Serena keened at the loss. Like Kiara, as she stared at the blood coating Alexa's inner thighs, she couldn't begin to think what Jaimis must have done to her. Small comfort that Alexa would be the last witch he'd brutalize like that.

"We have to get to Trey." Kiara took her hand, and somehow Serena managed to cross the trench and scramble up over the sandbags, with Kenny following close behind. "I know you're hurting after what you just managed. Put it aside. Just think about Trey."

As the smoke spurred a round of racking coughs, Serena felt hollowed out, like an empty walnut shell. With the hunger banished and the rogue witch dead, she seemed to have lost the last of her strength.

"Shooting's stopped, at least." Kenny's matter-of-fact tone steadied her. "Assholes must have beat it for the woods when their leader died."

"Keep moving!" Kiara gripped her arm tighter, and Kenny grabbed her wrist on the other side, pulling her along through the blinding heat. "I can still see the point of light marking Trey's location if I close my eyes, but it's fading."

No need to ask what that meant. Serena saw it herself. Glowing beacons for Kiara beside her and Joel up ahead—and nothing but a yellow stain marking the spot where Trey lay unconscious. After what seemed like years, they caught up with Joel, and struggling to breathe through the heavy smoke, they covered the last of the distance together.

Serena threw herself on the ground and pressed her ear to Trey's chest. Blood soaked his torn shirt, and if his chest rose and fell at all, she couldn't detect the motion. "Joel, remember Mel's theory about us summoning novel forms of magic in times of great need? You'll have to heal him. Like my serpent, but for life, not death."

"I can't. I've never—"

"Doesn't matter!" Desperation gripped Serena as Kiara sobbed against Trey's shoulder, and Joel pressed his hands to his friend's chest. "What Mel said about our families—that we can come up with new magic when pressed—it's true, or I'd never have been able to create the serpent! Now! Heal him! I can't. Everything I had, I spent fighting Jaimis."

Used my magic for death. None left to kindle life. Tears blurred her vision as she knelt close to Trey, holding his ice-cold palm against her hand. When violet light surged around them, she shivered under the sheer determination of Joel's power. Seconds passed, then minutes, and still she couldn't tell if Trey was breathing.

The wash of power never lessened, though Joel had to be long past exhausted. When a golden haze merged with the streaks of purple, Serena startled and glanced at Kiara.

“What Trey said—when we were all in bed together—‘Tonight we need a heap of loving and a rock-solid link. No tears. Absolutely no tears.’”

A rock-solid link. Reaching out, Serena let herself merge with Joel and Kiara. And then—*live or die together*—into Trey. Somewhere deep inside, she found shreds of magic—weak, but clean and whole—and commingled it with Joel’s and Kiara’s power. *All of my love, Trey. All of our love.*

Clinging to hope, she rubbed his icy fingers between her hands. Just when she thought they couldn’t maintain the flow of magic another second without slipping into unconsciousness, Trey’s chest moved.

Chapter Sixteen

Never mind she'd dumped her clothes into the backseat of her Honda and had the key in her hand, Serena couldn't make herself start the engine. Not because she wanted to stay. Staying would mean knowing Joel, Kiara, and Trey saw a horrible power every time they looked her way – magic dark enough to slaughter the rogue witch. Staying would mean seeing the gruesome headlines reflected in the eyes of the townspeople who knew the true story. 56 BURN WHEN COMPOUND EXPLODES. ARMAGEDDON FOR SURVIVALIST GROUP. CULT GOES UP IN SMOKE. No, she had to leave. She just didn't know where to go.

She tugged Joel's faded denim shirt tighter around herself and tried to plot her next move. San Francisco held nothing for her. She'd visited Gwen this morning over at Carmen's house, and despite her relief that Jaimis hadn't hurt her ex, the awkward conversation confirmed that things were long since over between them.

After a phone call to her sister describing last night's grisly events, she'd called to check her answering machine and received a message from her advisor explaining the terms of academic probation. A quick call, and she'd withdrawn from her courses. *A fresh start – as a witch.* No denying that after last night. In her rearview mirror, she caught a flash of movement. Her joy at seeing Trey up and about warred with her instinct to flee.

Don't even think about it, witch!

As Trey loped up beside the car, leaned through the open window, and grabbed her shoulders before she could dodge his kiss, she cursed the fact that she hadn't left sooner. Distracted, she startled when the passenger-side door clicked open. As Trey pulled back from the kiss, she turned to confront...

"Dane?" Of course – Joel she would have sensed before he got within twenty feet of the car. "I...ah..."

“Look, I didn’t want to get you in trouble with your boyfriend, so I made sure we had a chaperone before approaching you. But I wanted to say good-bye.”

Tears prickled behind Serena’s eyelids. Didn’t take much to make her cry today. Images from last night filled her thoughts like a low-budget horror movie. *Sweet goddess, I killed a man. A bad man. But nonetheless...*

Leaning close, Dane cupped his hand under her chin. He smelled like burned wood and fresh air. “The best witches sometimes have to make impossible decisions. You did what you had to.” Tilting her face closer, he kissed her full on the lips, ignoring Trey’s impatient noises beside the car. “I’m heading back to Minnesota with Diana. Be happy, Serena. And remember to cut yourself some slack.”

Not trusting herself to speak, she nodded and slipped into his thoughts. *Good luck – I’m glad Diana got out safe and whole.*

One final kiss, and he climbed out of the car and walked away. Damned if it didn’t hurt to see him go. Struggling for control, she wiped the back of her hand across her cheeks. Dane’s dark jacket flapped in the breeze, and from behind him she could see spots where his hair had been singed almost to the scalp.

Swallowing hard, she offered silent thanks that more people hadn’t died last night—Trey foremost among them. Kenny would be fine, though he’d be doing physical therapy for months as his arm healed. Carmen responded well to the ministrations of a witch healer from Boston. And after the healer finished with Carmen, she’d tended to all their assorted cuts, sprains, minor burns, and other small hurts. The other prisoners... Well, they’d live. The healers had tended to their physical injuries, but the emotional scars left from Jaimis’s torture...

Like you, they’ll heal. What happened last night – you’ve got scars of your own, on the inside. That won’t always be as hard to face as it is this morning. Joel walked up behind Trey and leaned against the side of the car looking rumpled and sleepy in his faded denim jacket, black T-shirt, and jeans. *You and the dark lord still share a link after all these years, don’t you?*

“Don’t call him that.” Angry, she tried to shove Joel out of her thoughts, but her shields refused to close.

“Sure, Dane gets a fresh start—just like the rest of us.” Trey reached into the car and stroked her hair. “But what Joel meant is that seeing us walk away wouldn’t be any easier—even if you’re the one doing the walking. Link like ours won’t dissolve into nothingness, sweetheart.”

When Kiara’s truck pulled around the curve in a spray of gravel and came to a stop on the grass at the side of the road, Serena covered her eyes with her hands. *This is exactly what I wanted to avoid.* Within seconds, Kiara trotted up and climbed into the passenger seat of the Honda. She looked too peaceful for someone who’d lived through hell last night. Her hair was fluffed out around her face in a dark halo, and she tucked her hands into the pockets of her leather jacket.

“Make yourself at home. Everyone else has.”

Ignoring the sarcasm, Kiara reached up to touch her cheek. "Hurts, huh? I shot a guy last night—dead. Sure, witches get a self-defense clause, and it would have been one of us, if not him. But it went against everything I stand for."

So lovely to have all three of them privy to her darkest thoughts—and aware that she felt like an evil lump of shit. *Fucking link!*

Trey reached through the window to open the door and pulled her out of the car as she grumbled her protest. "I owe you one, witch. Damn fond of my life, and I've got you to thank for it."

As she stood shaking with frustration and a world of hurt, a black sports car pulled into the driveway. When Sorren and Mel climbed out and walked toward them, white hair flowing down the backs of their black jackets, she clenched her teeth and let out a distressed sound.

Ignoring Serena's leave-me-the-fuck-alone scowl, Mel approached and rested a hand on her shoulder. "Not an easy thing, getting past what you've been through. But the hunger's gone now, isn't it?"

The question caught her off guard, and she did a quick evaluation. No throbbing burn, despite her agitated state. No aching gut. No seed of darkness lodged deep within her.

"I was on the right track when I told you you'd have to use your magic to work off the dark energy." Kiara hopped out of the car and walked around to stand beside Serena. "Turns out, you needed to use the *dark* magic you'd gotten stuck with. Last night had that covered."

Well, hell, if nothing else, I can start my new life free of all-consuming lust. As Joel tried to pull her close, she twisted free.

Sorren glanced from Serena to Joel, and she thought she detected a note of fatherly disapproval as she shoved Joel's hand away when he reached for hers. "Melinda tells me you're haunted by the gaps in your past, Joel. I can fill in a few details, though it's not a pretty story." Sorren's voice was soft, unmarred by pity or anger. "Had your father lived, Jaimis never would have been able to rise to power the way he did. He would have had to share."

Joel swallowed hard and nodded, and Kiara and Trey moved closer to him. "What Jaimis told me last night was true, then."

Sorren frowned and reached for Mel's hand. "Your father didn't start out looking for trouble. But by all accounts, he became...intoxicated with his power. A fire witch, he pushed the limits of spellcraft. Two witches died when he miscast a spell a few years before your birth. One of them was his brother. I don't have much more to tell—knew him by reputation alone. I don't even know his given name. He went by Z."

Joel kicked at the gravel drive, sending a spray of stones skittering toward the Honda. "So chances are he cast the spell that misfired and killed every witch in the farmhouse that night. Including my mother."

"I'm sorry, Joel. I knew the story – thought it would be too dark a legacy to carry when you were younger." Mel's face shone alabaster pale in contrast with her black turtleneck. "Your birth mother wouldn't have been an innocent spectator that night. None of the witches they associated with would have been. That coven had been raising trouble for months – combining energy to kick out darker, more dangerous spells."

Serena heard the intent in Mel's tone, though she'd been careful of her wording – "Better the witches died, or we'd have had a dozen like Jaimis on our hands." Shivering, she grabbed for Joel's hand, but he pulled away.

"Your mother saved you, Joel. Whatever path she followed, she pulled off a miracle by shielding you from the flames until she could throw you clear of the house." Mel moved forward to embrace Joel, but he stood rigid, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down as he swallowed several times in quick succession.

"I met her once, at a gathering soon after you were born." Sorren touched Joel's elbow. "Her name was Marisa. She had straight black hair, delicate features, and light caramel skin. And she held you like you were the best thing that ever happened to her. You don't resemble her, so I assume Z must have looked more like you. I'm sorry, that's as much as I know."

"Joel, are you okay?" Kiara rubbed her hand along Joel's spine, glaring at Sorren as if the lack of information might be a conspiracy on his part.

Joel's thoughts pressed in on her like a storm tide, full of bitter disappointment. *Only thing I know for sure is I come from darkness, twice over. Hell of a legacy.*

"We should go inside." Desperate to get him out of here before his volatile mood simmered over in front of the elder witch, Serena grabbed his arm and took a step toward the house, but Sorren gestured for her to wait.

"Evil isn't genetic, Joel. You know that as well as I. Melinda and I plan to spend some time in Minnesota. I have business there that can't wait. I don't agree with the risks you've taken" – Sorren scowled in Trey's direction – "but as Mel's explained, the situation here is...unique. After what I saw last night, I trust you possess sufficient resources to bring the remaining dark lords to heel."

"You've done well – and against crappy odds, too." Mel's eyes glistened in the sunlight as she squeezed Joel's hand in passing. Shaking her head so her hair fell across her face in a shield of sorts, she followed Sorren toward their car. "I'll be at Sorren's estate. Give a call when you and Trey have my house put back together."

The car purred to life, and Sorren guided it onto the road. *Well, shit.* Mel had quite a nerve to drive off in a swish of autumn leaves just after Joel found out his parents weren't much better than murderers.

Trey shook his head. *Mel got Sorren the hell out of here, giving Joel a bit of privacy when he damn well needs it.*

Fact remained, Joel's despair pounded at her like thick fog, dragging her down to a dark place she'd only just begun to crawl out of herself. And she didn't have a clue how to help him.

“Fuck” – Trey put both hands on Joel’s chest and shoved – “you’d have reasoned it all out yourself by now, anyway. Self-pity doesn’t look good on you, friend.”

What the fuck do you think you’re...? Kiara’s outrage echoed Serena’s own.

Ever need to hit someone? Ever have so much pain and anger brewing inside that...

Okay, got it. Serena sighed. No need for Trey to finish his explanation.

As Joel scrambled to his feet and took a swing at Trey, Serena kicked out to trip him and sent him sprawling back on his ass. Trey seized the opportunity to straddle Joel’s hips. Although Joel managed to land a few punches – enough to bloody Trey’s nose – Kiara joined the fray, and between the three of them, they got Joel pinned to the ground. Kiara licked her lips and shook her head so her hair fluffed around her face.

“Thing is, I’ve never known a better solution for grief” – Kiara traced her thumb along the angular line of Joel’s cheekbone – “any kind of grief, than sex. Ever wonder what it’s like to play with Serena when she’s not tormented by the magic from the storm rites?”

Hey, how did this get to be about me? I thought we were helping Joel?

With a tremendous heave, Joel shook them off, scrambled to his feet, and grabbed Serena around her waist. “Am I reading into this, or did Sorren just say I’m in charge here?”

“Wondered when that part would sink in.” Blood dripping from his nose onto his shirt, Trey got up and pulled Kiara to her feet, then joined them as they headed toward the house. “Fucking head enforcer for the elder witch. Thought I’d never see the day.”

* * * * *

As Joel leaned back and hot spray from several showerheads pounded his tight muscles, he’d never been so glad he’d modernized the master bath. Never could have fit four people in the old shower. This one came equipped with side benches, showerheads on each wall, double drains, and enough space to house a horse. Trey’s nose was swelling in the heat of the shower, but shit, no one tackled him and got away with it. Serena and Kiara, on the other hand, looked damn good wet.

“Thanks. You, too.” Kiara reached down to run her pinky finger along his cock, teasing his skin so lightly. He shivered.

But Serena hung back, her face raised to the spray, her eyes closed tight. All his life, he’d wanted to know who his parents were – what happened that night in the old farmhouse. Joel glanced down at the puckered scar on his calf. So now he knew. Seemed like he needed another goal – and he intended this one to work out a blessed lot better than the last.

“Can’t decide who’s sadder right now, you or me.” Without crowding her, he reached out and traced his fingers along Serena’s spine.

“Doesn’t make any fucking sense at all – feeling so wrecked by the death of someone who did so much harm.”

“Come here.” He pulled Serena against his chest, her back warm and wet, and her hair scented like a summer orchard. “Makes all the sense in the world. You wouldn’t be the same person if claiming a life didn’t take a toll on you. But you saved Trey – and saved others from a world of hurt.”

“Some part of me knows that.” All soft and soapy, she turned to face him, the tips of her nipples brushing his chest. “I guess it’s just going to take some time.”

Kiara moaned as Trey lifted her against the wall of the shower and coaxed her legs around his waist. Transfixed, Joel watched as Trey entered her, sliding in, pausing, moving deeper, pausing again, and then driving home on the third stroke. The gasp near his ear indicated this might provide the distraction Serena needed right now – maybe even keep her from following through on her plans to bolt next time their backs were turned.

“You like that? Watching?” Bless it, he knew she liked it. Knew from the heat seeping across their link. Knew from the imprints of her fingernails on his wrist. Knew from her nipples, diamond hard and pressed tight to his chest. “Feel what they’re feeling?”

Tight. Kiara’s so wet. Trey’s hitting her sweet spot – so hard – she’s going to come soon. It’s almost like the hunger – being driven by their passion rather than my own. But...nice. Not scary.

Some days it was so blessed good to be a witch. Drawing in a few steady breaths, Joel pushed his sorrows to the back of his mind and gave each and every one of those sensations due consideration. Not as good as driving his cock deep inside Serena and making her scream with pleasure. But if he waited it out, he’d come right along with Trey and Kiara without so much as wrapping his fist around his dick.

Joel leaned down to nip the tip of Serena’s ear. “I want to make love to you, witch. But here’s the thing. I don’t want to spend my nights wondering if you’ll sneak out and hit the road in that old Honda before morning light. I don’t want to wonder how long love’s going to last – how much it’ll hurt if you leave.”

When she groaned under her breath, he couldn’t sort out whether the distressed sound had more to do with what he’d said or the fact that Trey and Kiara were racing headlong toward blinding orgasms and dragging him and Serena along with them.

“I know you’ve been away from witches a long time. But some things you should remember. Like how fast a lifelong link can form. How unbreakable that bond is.” He kissed the top of her head, her hair warm and wet under his lips. “How much it hurts to walk away once a pair-bond forms. I can’t lose you. Please, don’t go.”

No sense lying to himself. He’d known from the start what they had together. Only question remained – would she stay or run scared? When Kiara cried out and Trey let loose a hearty yell, Joel leaned forward with his hands on his knees and fought the pleasure, willing himself to retain control. Serena clutched her breasts and whimpered, her face flushed red as she came. But Joel refused to let loose.

“Not until I’m deep inside you, witch. Not until you promise me you’ll stay.”

After setting Kiara down, Trey leaned back against the side of the shower and struggled to catch his breath. "Day we were at the aquarium, I picked up a card about the marine rescue program. Figured you might want to call them."

Kiara laughed, sexy and low. "You're not leaving, are you? You're letting Joel pour his heart out to you, and you've already decided to stay."

"Back at the car, I couldn't drive away. Thing is, I don't know how to stay, either. Don't know how to have anything like a normal...relationship."

Joel choked up when Serena started crying, heaving sobs that sliced through him with a razor's edge as he pulled her close and tried to soothe her, running his palms across her back in slow strokes.

"Bless it, witch, you call this normal?" Kiara's face shone pink from her climax, and her breasts bobbed enticingly as she moved. She spread her arms in a gesture that encompassed all four of them. "Even for witches, you've got to admit this isn't exactly what you'd call a 'normal relationship.'"

Serena groaned, but the sound ended in something that sounded suspiciously like a chuckle. "Fuck. How am I going to explain the three of you to my sister and her husband – let alone my nephew?"

"I'm thinking if we abstain from group sex in the shower when they come to visit, things will go smoothly enough." Trey's remark sparked a round of nervous laughter.

At some point, Joel crossed that fine line in hysteria between laughter and tears. They'd been through too much hell. Seen too many secrets revealed. And then, to top it off, fate – the fickle bitch – went and handed him more than he'd dared hope for. Trey, always so inaccessible – with sassy Kiara thrown in for good measure. And, gods help him – *Serena*.

Honey sweet and seething under his skin, molten and fizzing just shy of the point of pain, his bond with her tugged at him like south to migrating birds in autumn. Too much to hope for. More than he'd ever imagined.

Serena cupped her dripping-wet palm underneath his balls, and he bit down on his lower lip so hard, he tasted a faint, coppery trace of blood. *I'm staying. When I climbed into the car earlier, I figured out I've got nowhere else to go. Now, where do we go from here?*

Joel traced the outline of her chin with his thumb, trying to sort out the mess of emotions cascading across the link. Kiara moved closer and rested her head against Serena's shoulder, and Trey dragged his fingers along the curve of her ass.

Afraid to spook her, Joel leaned down and brushed the faintest hint of a kiss across her lips, trying to make sense of the haunted look in her sea green eyes. "We all know you're unhappy, but what's coming through is so complex, I can't sort it all out. If you feel pressured about moving in with me, we could take it slower. I could help you find an apartment in town, give you some space to figure out what you want to do next."

"No!" Serena's face crumpled, and she sobbed like a lost child. "I want to be with you. All of you." She pressed close and hugged him so tight, his ribs ached. "You especially. I just... It's just that..."

When she cried harder, they stroked and soothed her, touching her hair, her face, her back, petting her and crooning to her like they'd soothe a hurt animal. The pain rushing through him put all his defenses on alert, never mind the fact he knew the adrenaline rush came from an overload of Serena's emotions crashing through his head.

"Please, sweetheart, tell me. I feel the hurt but can't put a name to its source."

"Every time you look at me, I'm afraid you'll see a killer. See me lifting Jaimis's body with the serpent, channeling dark magic that wasn't even my own. Weaving death magic so strong, it fucking scares me to death to think of it. And you'll think less of me. I know you'll try not to, but on some level..." Sobs racked her so hard, she gave up trying to speak.

"What I see when I look at you" — Joel choked out his words as if he wore a steel band around his throat — "I see the woman I'm bonded with so tight, I can't stand to be away from you for more than a few minutes. I see someone who crashed into my life with the force of a meteorite and forged a link as hot and volatile as lava, a bond more beautiful than the ocean at sunrise."

As he spoke he touched her everywhere he could, covering her body with caresses. Trey and Kiara followed suit, massaging Serena's arms, stroking her neck, kissing her breasts, pressing their hands flat against her belly, her back, her ass. They traced the outline of her mouth and her eyelashes as water cascaded across her face, washing the tears away.

As he worked to reassure Serena, his troubles faded into a dull ache. Still distasteful, still painful, but something he could bear.

"Gods, Serena, you're so fucking strong. You helped bring Trey back from the threshold of the next world last night." Kiara's voice faltered, and she tilted her head up to kiss Serena, then Trey, and then...

Joel sighed as Kiara darted her tongue along his teeth before she withdrew and tucked herself into Trey's embrace. Serena quieted as they continued stroking her, broadcasting their warmth and acceptance.

"What I see..." Trey lifted Serena's hair out of the way and nipped the side of her neck hard enough to leave a mark. "I see someone who's not afraid anymore. I see a witch with a sexy, ocean-colored aura who needs a lot of kissing and some other things as well. And I can't fucking wait to get to know you even better."

As Serena relaxed in their arms, Joel tipped her head back for a final rinse. His dick swelled with the heat of the water, the pounding spray against his ass and balls, and his proximity to Serena's sweet-smelling skin.

When she turned to face him and pressed her body close, he shook his head. "Not here." Beyond desperate, he turned off the spray and helped her out of the shower.

Serena shivered, and he grabbed one towel to wrap around her hair and another to drape across her shoulders. He, Trey, and Kiara grabbed towels to wrap around themselves and then turned their attention to drying Serena. Together, they buffed every inch of her body, lingering over her breasts, her belly, her ass. When fizzy bursts of need began cascading through his head—hers, not just his—Joel smiled. *Love you, witch.*

A man can only wait so long, so when she sent the barest thought whisper—*Love you back*—he dragged her to the bed, pinned her down, and eased inside her, inch by blessed inch. The warmth of her seeped up his cock and flooded his body until he simmered at a slow boil.

“Feel you—feel through you.” With her eyes wide, taking in every expression that crossed his face as hungrily as he watched hers, she clenched so tight around his dick, he almost came right then.

Us, too. So fucking good. Kiara echoed her appreciation of the intricacies of sensation that sucked them in deeper and deeper, wild and breathless.

As he sank deep inside her, pressed so tight, their pelvic bones scraped together, Serena’s eyes drooped shut, and she arched her head back until her damp hair spread out around her, dark against the white pillowcase. When he eased back, so very slow, her eyes opened again, and he saw himself through her. Unruly curls dripped beads of water onto his shoulders. Thick lashes framed moody brown eyes. The slant of his cheekbones. The tilt of his smile. The way his eyes rolled back a little with the giddy pleasure of loving her.

The way you see me—it’s sexier than anything I see looking in a mirror. Seeing myself through your eyes, it’s... When she clenched her devilish little pussy around his cock again in a series of flutters designed to drive him out of his fucking head, his balls pulled up tight, and his heart hammered against his ribs. Joel gave up any effort to explain.

Same way you see me—more exotic, sexier.

“Mmm.” All he could manage in response, because as they rode the crest, he felt a sharp jolt every time he hit her sweet spot—so fucking wild to feel through her like that—and bless it if he wasn’t about to lose his mind.

Kiara moaned low and eager, and she and Trey touched them all over as they drove each other mad. He loved having Serena’s arms tight around his ribs, her fingernails pricking close to his spine, along with the sexy touch of Trey’s callused fingers on the sensitive skin of his ass and thighs. And then, through Serena, Kiara’s sweet touch along the ticklish skin on her side. Hands everywhere. Before long, he lost track of who had their hands on him at any given moment. What he felt himself, and which sensations came from Serena.

Serena’s skin burned so hot, he moaned his appreciation every time she arched to meet his thrusts, pressing her breasts tighter against his chest. Her aura rippled free, pulling at his magic like her body milked his cock. Beside him, Kiara moaned, and

golden energy flashed around her like a sunburst. When Trey let out an “ahhhh” of appreciation at the light show, Joel swallowed hard, so fucking grateful to be here instead of mourning, graveside, like they might have been.

Trey – never thought I’d have you. For a moment, he saw a flash of red as the dragon hovered over the scorched earth with Trey gripped in its claws, and he strained to push the image away. *Last night – didn’t think I’d get to keep you.*

Too tough to kill. Stop fretting and bring Serena over the top. Trey trailed a finger along the crease of his ass. *I want to go a round with you sometime later today, and...*

“Oh!” Serena threw her head back, arching so hard, her neck formed a long, golden curve above the pillow, and he bent down to nip the tender skin. “Now!”

Kiara screamed beside them, her aura wild with motion, and Serena let loose a series of primal sounds that rocked through Joel with as much intensity as her sweet pussy spasming around his dick. When his power rushed out to join with hers – violet melding with blue-green to form the colors of the sky before dusk – he’d never seen anything so beautiful. Driving hard and fast, again and again, he called her name as his body bucked and shook on top of her.

Fire and ice and melting snow. Spurt after spurt of heat flowed through him. Trey came beside him, and warm fluid coated Joel’s thigh. In a crazy rush, he felt every twitch of Kiara’s clit, every surge of cum through Trey’s cock, and the achy, wild surprise as Serena climaxed again, her body rising to his in a series of white-hot peaks – pleasure so intense, it hurt.

They collapsed into a sated heap, and Joel managed to roll off Serena, curling up between her and Trey, with Kiara tucked up against Serena’s other side. Every time one of them experienced aftershocks of pleasure, they all moaned, sucking in big gulps of air. From among the mass of tangled limbs, Serena made a little cooing sound – pure contentment – and for the first time in his life, Joel’s world felt complete.

 THE END 

Eden Rivers

Eden lives in the Midwest with her husband and daughters, but has roots in the Northeast. Growing up in New England, she developed a fascination for things that go bump in the night, and her stories often have paranormal elements. Everyone needs a little magic in life. In addition to reading and writing, Eden enjoys gardening, yoga, listening to music outdoors, and watching the moon rise over water.

Check out Eden's latest news at <http://www.edenrivers.com>.