



# STRANGE SABBATS

EDEN RIVERS

Loose Id

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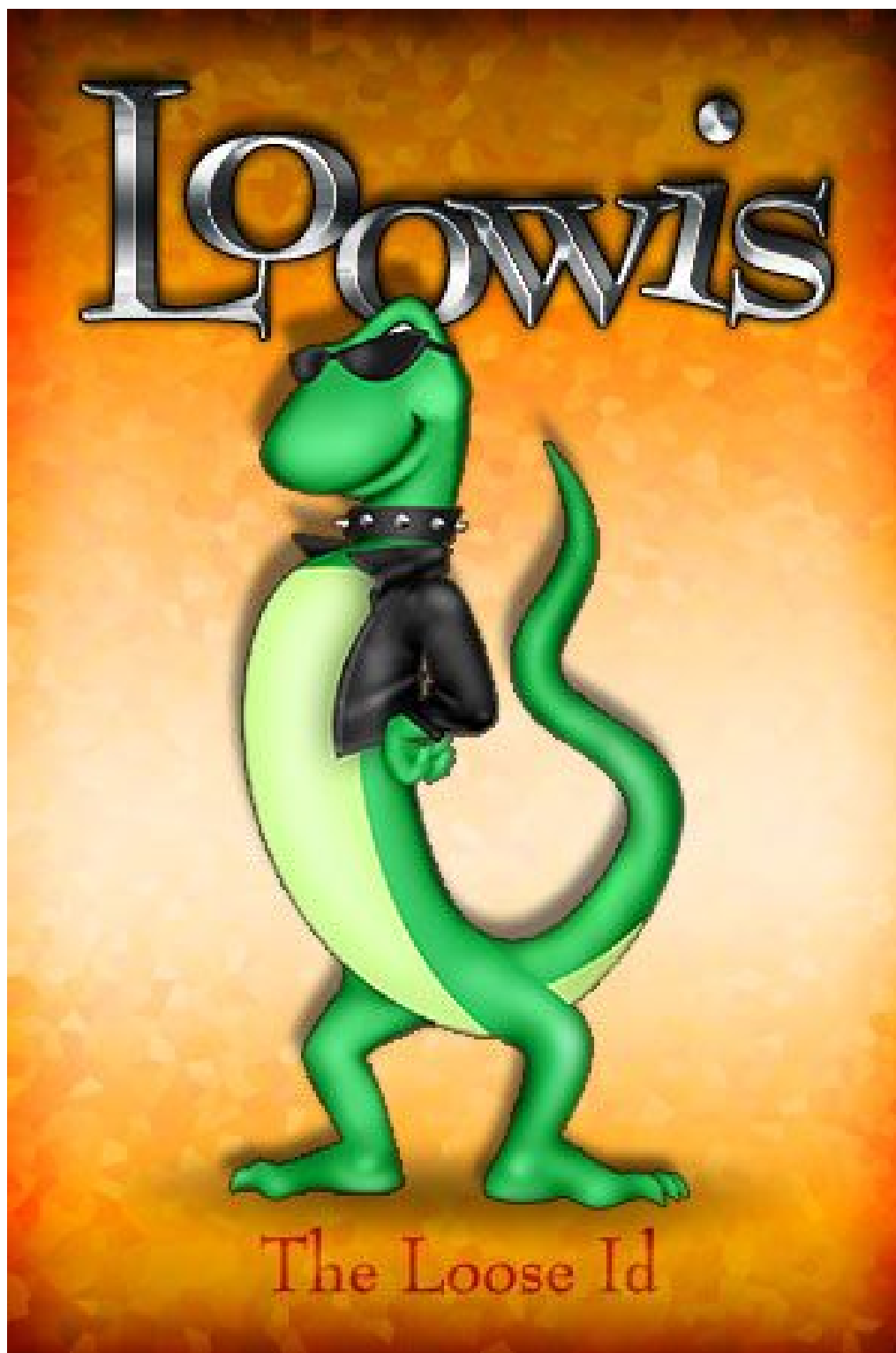
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## Chapter One

Aileen knelt over the unlit candle, cradling her palm over the wick. Nothing. Trembling with effort, she tried again. Rather than beckoning her power, the trappings of ritual mocked her efforts. Bereft, she stared at the winter altar, decorated for the solstice. She'd scattered nuts and pinecones across the red altar cloth, and evergreen boughs surrounded the wooden pentacle at the center of the altar.

Fighting the pull of a migraine, she pictured the wick flaring to life. But when the headache spread tendrils of pain behind her eyes, she gave up and dropped to her side. Naked, empty, and hurting, she curled up beside the altar and twined her arms around her knees.

As she blinked back tears, the flames from the menorah on the mantel blurred and stretched, the wash of color and light increasing the ache at the base of her skull. She'd hoped acknowledging Tim's tradition one last time would set her free. One last year, when his cherished menorah would bear silent witness to her solstice Yule ritual. But it still wasn't enough to unlock the power frozen within her.

Puck's plaintive meow echoed in the stillness. Using the edge of the altar to steady herself, Aileen pushed to her feet. The room whirled off-kilter. As the calico tom threaded his way around her ankles, she staggered toward the hearth.

Overcome with a rush of anger, she grasped the base of the menorah and blew out the candles. Maybe she should just admit she was a sorry excuse for a witch and stop blaming her problems on Tim. When the doorbell rang, she startled and stepped back, right onto Puck's tail.

By the time she struggled into her terry cloth robe and scooped up the cat against her chest to soothe him, whoever was at the door decided to lean on the bell. Wincing at the noise, she cradled the cat in the crook of her arm and stalked to the entryway. Frowning, she yanked open the door.

"Take your thumb off my doorbell." She glared at the offending thumb, still pressing the button for the chime. As pain flashed across her temples, she took a breath of frigid air and looked up to study the source of her irritation.

"Jon?"

Jon belonged to her past. Filed away along with pleasant memories of summers in San Diego -- days spent snorkeling with leopard sharks and garibaldi fish, sundrenched and happy. What the hell was he doing standing on her doorstep in the middle of a Massachusetts nor'easter?

"Invite me in?" Lifting the cat out of her arms, Jon leaned forward and brushed an icy kiss across her cheek. She shivered -- as much from surprise as from the chill. "Your hair's longer. Look's great -- black as midnight and soft as silk."

"Thanks." Having no choice, she stepped back as Jon barged inside. "If you don't mind, I need my cat back. Puck's not good with strangers." As she reached out to reclaim the tom, Puck butted his head against Jon's chin and purred. *Traitor.*

With a glance at the pool of firelight behind her, Jon brushed snow off his coat with one hand and cradled Puck with the other. Grabbing her cat back and snuggling him against her shoulder, Aileen struggled for something intelligent to say. But Jon's unexpected arrival -- in addition to the searing headache -- knocked her so off balance, she couldn't come up with anything approximating a reasonable welcome.

"I haven't missed your Yule ritual, have I?" Shaking snow across the floor of the foyer, he shed his coat and hat, kicked off his boots, and dumped the entire lot in a pile by the door. "Were you just starting?"

Confused, Aileen shoved past him and closed the door, sealing off the entryway from the gusting wind. Why would Jon be expressing an interest in her pitiful attempt at a solstice circle? "Just starting? I guess so."

Jon strode across her living room like he owned the place, but somehow she couldn't bring herself to resent his presence. She followed him to her altar, stepping carefully over the ring of evergreen branches she'd used to mark out a circle about eight feet across. Kneeling beside the altar at the center of the circle, he lifted his face upward and closed his eyes.

In her personal worldview, she divided people into three categories -- witch, not witch, and Tim. Tim had earned his own special category because he'd tolerated more spells than the average nonwitch husband could be expected to put up with. Up until that last year before his death, anyway. Her final year with him made the role of grieving widow a hell of a lot more complicated. How do you mourn someone you both loved and -- in the end -- hated?

As for Jon, he was a nonwitch. And though he'd grown up with her, earning him a heap of *Wonder Years* variety nostalgia, she couldn't explain either his presence in her living room or his interest in her pitiful attempt at a Yule celebration.

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions, but it's almost midnight. Let's do this first, okay? Questions later. You were just starting, right?" With a grin, he unbuttoned his shirt.

“No. I mean...” Realizing she was squeezing Puck, Aileen set the squirming cat on the floor. “I haven’t...I don’t...”

Oh, holy goddess. Before her eyes, Jon transformed himself from nonwitch to naked nonwitch. The firelight rippled across the golden brown hair on his chest, and she swallowed hard, trying not to look lower. Panic seized her. “What are you doing?”

*Right. Jon. Naked. Not a problem. Seen one skyclad witch, seen ’em all. Except Jon isn’t a witch, which makes this...just plain weird. But bless it, with all the times we went skinny-dipping as teens, it’s not as if I’m seeing anything new.*

Well, not strictly speaking, although he’d filled out nicely since then. Now was *not* the time to be ogling his pecs. Angry for reasons she couldn’t quite explain, she strode toward the altar. “This isn’t a game!”

Her solstice circle might be devoid of power, but that didn’t mean he could march in here and... Sucking in some air to help calm herself, she dropped to her knees as he cradled his palm over the candlewick and kindled a warm yellow flame.

A wave of heat spread from her chest to her face, and the needles of pain under her scalp intensified. A year and a half. She hadn’t been able to kindle flame since the night of the accident. Envy bubbled up like thick syrup, sticky and cloying. Somewhere in there under all the resentment, she thought to wonder how in the blessed world he’d pulled off that bit of magic, seeing as she’d known him since they were kids and surely would have figured it out by now if he were a witch. Shaken by the strength of her jealousy and the raging frustration that her own magic remained lost to her, she knelt beside Jon.

“Sorry. I know you didn’t expect that. Like I said, I’ll explain later. Please, let’s do this?” His green eyes clear and focused, he stared at her as rivulets of water dripped from the snow-encrusted tips of his light brown hair onto his cheek.

Aileen nodded. In the interest of a thousand childhood memories -- and a pool of warmth in her belly that was all too adult -- she knelt beside him.

“You hurt.” With a note of regret, as if he couldn’t believe he hadn’t noticed sooner, he cupped his palm against the nape of her neck.

“Migraine. I get them when...”

“Shh. I can help.” Rhythmically, he stroked his fingers along the taut lines of her neck, massaging the base of her skull.

The sane part of her recorded the fact that her brother’s best friend, her childhood buddy, was merciful enough to help her ease the mother of all headaches. But her baser side seemed more interested in the fact that a large, golden, gorgeous naked guy was playing his fingers over her skin like he’d stroke a longtime lover.

Lowering her defenses another notch, Aileen relaxed under the steady pressure of his massage. For the first time in weeks, the pain all but vanished. “So, you flew out from California because you wanted to crash my solstice circle?”

Ignoring the question, he loosened the sash of her robe and eased the terry cloth down so he could rub a path along her spine, leaving her upper body bare and sensitized to the touch of his hands along her back and the soft movements of air in the room. Her nipples hardened in the chill, but thankfully, Jon seemed intent on massaging her back and shoulders and didn’t notice.

“How long have your headaches been this bad?”

*Since Tim died.* No, that wasn’t true. It took a few months for the torrent of power to back up into the knot of magical constipation that prevented her from accessing even the most basic magic.

“About fifteen months. It’s not a big deal. I get migraines when I’m stressed.” *When a raging river of power tears through my body, and I need to release it more than I need breath or food or sex, but there’s a wall, and it hurts so much I feel like I might burst into flame or evaporate in a puff of mist.*

Leaning back against him, she wondered how sex made it onto her list of personal needs after breath and food. Goddess, some things a person could live without. Unfortunately, the release of power didn't seem to be one of them.

"Close your eyes and listen. What do you hear?"

*Your heartbeat.* Letting herself drift, she listened to the pat of Puck's paws as he leaped onto the back of the sofa, the logs shifting in the fireplace, and the whisper-soft sound of Jon's fingertips stroking circles through her hair at the base of her head.

"Look around again. See things the way I do, being here for the first time."

Opening her eyes, Aileen watched the flames in the fireplace blur across her vision and resisted the urge to focus on details. But then a reflection of shimmering firelight drew her attention to the cold metal of Tim's menorah on the mantel. She cringed. Jon would think she planned to cling, one of those pathetic, eternal widows grieving for the memory of a man who'd been far from perfect.

"It's okay." Drawing his fingers along the rigid lines of tension in her shoulders, Jon pulled her closer against his bare chest.

She tried to ignore the brush of chest hair against her spine, the beating of his heart through her skin. "What am I supposed to see?"

"Just look around. The colors, the texture of the season. What do you like best?"

"The evergreen. But not because of the color. Because of the smell." The scent wrapped around her, drawing tension out of her body as surely as a soak in a whirlpool tub.

"And now you're ready, aren't you?"

Though she didn't like the note of smugness in his pronouncement, he was right. Even though the dam still held, blocking a torrent of energy so strong it shook her to the core, she felt ready to move through the ritual. Calm enough to say the sacred names.

"Right. So let's play witch."

Aileen frowned, still uncertain of Jon's motives for joining her Yule ritual. For her, this should be more than playing. The thought of her lost gifts galled her beyond distraction. Seeing as he'd already half undressed her, she shifted the folds of her robe off her lap and stood up beside him. There. He wanted to play? Well, let him look.

Which was exactly what he was doing -- but without the embarrassment she'd expected. *Please, don't let me blush now.* He was no more uncomfortable with her nudity than his own, though a hell of a lot more interested -- fascinated with her to the point where she could feel his gaze sweeping her skin like a caress.

By the time she gathered her wits, he'd walked the circle, marking north, east, south, and west with a pinecone, a feather, a sprig of holly, and a bowl of water. Raising his arms over his head, he sent a wave of energy cascading around them, as palpable as a shower of warm rain. Aileen struggled to process the swell of power from someone she'd been certain was human, not witch. The bit with him kindling the candle she might have been able to pass off as a fluke, but this... Bless it, how could she have been so wrong about someone she'd known as long as Jon? With a reassuring smile, Jon took her hand, and they knelt beside the altar.

*Oh goddess, I've missed this.* Brushing a bead of sweat from her forehead, she lifted her face and welcomed the crackle of energy across her skin. Not her own energy, but real power, nonetheless. Before she could dwell on his abilities, Jon chose sprigs of rosemary, pine, and bayberry from the bowls she'd set out and tossed them into the large chalice she'd placed near the center of the altar. With a wave of his hand, the herbs flared into blue gold flames and filled the circle with pungent smoke. As the flames sputtered out, she inhaled the rich, smoky scent.

The cadence of the ritual washed over her as they uttered the sacred names, joining their voices in chant and song. As the energy twisted inside her, the pain became almost unendurable. Jon released the circle and pulled her into his arms.

"It hurts," she whimpered. *Right, like he'd understand that.* But he surprised her.

"I know." Soothing his hands along her sides, he gentled her against him, cradling her like a distressed child. Gently, he repeated the massage he'd offered earlier, taking his time to ease the last bit of tension from her aching muscles.

"What do you mean, you know?" As the pain receded, a thousand questions bubbled to the surface.

"You'll get it back. I feel your power just beneath the surface."

Bryan. Blessed goddess, her brother was the only one she'd told about her loss, and he'd gone and blabbed it to his childhood buddy.

"Bryan told you." Her words held the same fervor with which she might have announced, "My brother is going to die a violent death."

"He's worried. When he was out here for the equinox, he said you couldn't --"

"So you're here to help the pitiful witch who's lost her power?"

"No, that's not why I'm here." Turning away from her, he knelt to put another log on the fire, then picked up the quilt draped over the arm of the sofa and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Shrugging away from his touch, Aileen got up and paced the length of the room, her bare feet padding across the hardwood floor. "So you thought you'd come and show off? Thought maybe since I've lost my power, it might be a good time to rub my face in yours?"

There it was again, cold, hard, and distasteful. However this former nonwitch had ended up with a king-size helping of power, she envied the hell out of him.

"Okay, for one thing, I can think of better things to rub your face in tonight. For another..."

"How dare you!" When she raised her hand, it wasn't so much in retaliation for the sexual innuendo as it was a response to the desperation that she'd been found out.

Jon knew her deepest secret -- something she'd only shared with her brother. Furious, she hurled a tightly woven sphere of light at his chest, but he laughed and caught it in his

palm, snuffing it out as easily as he'd blow out a candle. Hope flared that she'd been able to summon even the most rudimentary of magical abilities, but more likely than not she'd just been "piggybacking" on Jon's powers, borrowing a little of his energy as her own.

Grinning, Jon caught her in his arms. "Still haven't lost that temper, I see."

"I should... You should..." Sweet goddess, she should ask him to leave, but she didn't want to. Tim had been gone a year and a half, and they hadn't had sex more than a handful of times that last, awful year...

"You want to know why I'm here." He leaned down and kissed her, startling her so much she couldn't think of anything to do but kiss him back.

Mumbling something unintelligible against the heat of his mouth, Aileen tried to nod.

Jon withdrew from the kiss but continued to hold her close. "Because you're not sixteen anymore, and I'm not eighteen, and Bryan has cordially lifted his timeworn threat to subject me to every dark spell he knows if I so much as steal a kiss. You've had time to grieve for Tim, and you have a lot of life ahead.

"And because through three serious relationships and one near-disastrous failed engagement, I've never stopped thinking of you."

"Oh." Not just a plan to save the poor, disempowered witch, then. No, he also planned to rescue the grieving widow. She almost snorted. The guy was a regular hero.

Backing away, Aileen cursed her brother for talking to Jon. Well, not an actual curse. She didn't want to hurt Bryan. But she thought some pretty bad things about him.

"Mad enough to do it again?" With an insolent grin, Jon took a step toward her.

"I'm not sure what Bryan had in mind when he sent you out here. But"-- raising her hand, she hurled a marble-sized ball of amber light at Jon's shoulder -- "you're leaving."

As she'd predicted, he dodged to the left to avoid her attack and caught the sting of the tiny light sphere on his chest as it curved at the last moment.

“Damn!” Rubbing the red mark on his skin, he exhaled sharply. “That’s as far as I go to make a point. Take a minute and think about what you just did.”

Tendrils of color corded themselves around her ankle, and as the fur on Puck's back rose and he spat in alarm, the conjured rope tripped her. Aileen fell flat on her ass.

“You are so going to...” *Pay for that.*

The final words never cleared her lips. Jon joined her on the hardwood floor and made a good show of kissing her senseless. As he eased her onto her back, his erection pressed against her thigh.

It had been such a blessed long time since she’d had sex. She’d had enough of guilt, grief, and frustration to last a lifetime. Aileen groaned under his masterful lips. This might be the perfect opportunity to see if her teenage fantasies about her brother’s friend had been worth the effort.

Sensing a cessation in hostilities, Puck abandoned his feral cat impression and started cleaning his paws. Aileen squirmed into a more comfortable position so her spine wouldn’t press into the floor. But polished oak boards weren’t made for intimate moments.

“Not here.” Scooping her up in his arms, a move which would have triggered a fresh round of protest if she weren’t so damn wet and ready, he plopped her on the couch and covered her with his body.

The worn leather caressed her back as she arched under him. Light flared as the logs collapsed in the fireplace, then faded to glowing embers. Above her, Jon’s face looked serious in the half-light. Somehow, that frightened her. His taunting or scolding she could deal with, but this intent focus made her nervous.

Her heart skittered and almost stopped when he slid his hands under her ass and grabbed a handful of flesh. “*Now.*” Having made up her mind, she felt like she’d spontaneously combust if he didn’t bury himself inside her in the next five seconds.

“Only brining this up because I want to keep things honest and open from the start, but Bryan hinted that Tim wasn’t...well matched for you. That you were never right for each other.”

Okay, so maybe her brother did deserve a few choice curses. The kind with clout. And warts. And lasting impotence.

“And he’d know that how?”

“Because you’re a witch, complete with fire and passion and fury. And Bryan said Tim had about as much passion as an IRS accountant.” Stroking his thumb along the puckered flesh of her anus, he waited for her response.

Whether he expected her to comment on what his thumb was about to do, or what he’d just said, she didn’t know. She chose to ignore the proximity of his thumb to forbidden territory. “So we’re not taking the ‘let’s respect the dead’ approach tonight?” She felt like she should summon a bit more outrage on Tim’s behalf, but her brother and Jon were right on target with their observations.

“I can’t compete with a dead guy, so I figure I may as well put my best arguments on the table.” As he lowered his head to kiss her, his thumb breached the tight ring of muscle that guarded parts better left unexplored.

“Hey!” Did she mean hey as in “stop exploring my ass,” or hey as in “stop talking about my late husband?” Shifting her head to allow his tongue access to the roof of her mouth, she decided it didn’t matter.

“Anyway, I decided, right from the start, there shouldn’t be any lies between us. Lies like, Tim was the one for you, and if he hadn’t died, you would have lived happily ever after.” Nipping her lip, he maneuvered his thumb deeper, and she uttered a soft squeal. “Lies like, you don’t like it like this. Fierce, and a little bit edgy.”

Before she could catch her breath, he traced his free hand along the curve of her breast and trapped her nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

"I'm really... Ah!" *Sensitive*. She hadn't liked Tim to touch her breasts, had flinched on the few occasions he'd brought his mouth to her nipple. Had she been disappointed when he hadn't persisted? Wished he would have pushed a little?

Shoving Jon's hand away from her breast with her elbow, she let out an exasperated sigh. "Okay, no lies." She gasped as he brought his mouth to her breast, capturing the areola between hungry lips. "There wouldn't have been any happily ever after." *Probably would have been a divorce*. "And I'm not a grieving widow in need of rescue or charity sex."

A snort of laughter exploded around the flesh of her breast, and then, before she had a chance to recover, he took her nipple between his teeth and treated her to a sharp little nip.

"Hey!" That hurt. Right, so why didn't she want him to stop?

"This" -- tracing his tongue over the hardening flesh, he nipped her again -- "is hardly charity."

As she considered that, he suckled for a few moments, all the while stroking his thumb along the tight channel where no thumb belonged. "Truth?" he asked, releasing her breast and gazing down at her. "I need you worse than you need me. You're why I'm here. Simple as that. No charity involved."

"Oh." Bless it, she should really do something other than lie under him like an inert object. Aileen took a deep breath, cupped one hand over the tight slope of his ass, and eased the other between his legs to find his cock.

Jon's head jerked back against the arm of the sofa, and he slipped his thumb free. To her surprise, she whimpered at the sudden emptiness.

"Sorry. I'm about two steps shy of losing control." He brushed his cheek against her breast then planted a gentle kiss behind her ear. "Just out of curiosity, did you convert?"

"What?" No contest, this was the weirdest solstice of her life. Wrapping her fingers more tightly around the base of his erection, she arched again, imploring, if not all-out begging, for penetration.

“The menorah. I just wondered if I’ll be taking on a new set of religious celebrations. I’m still getting the hang of the witch ones, and I’ve been working at that since I was sixteen.”

“Why when you were sixteen?” She thought it best to ignore the presumption that he’d be around long enough for them to share holidays.

“Because that’s when you got all curvy. In the interest of keeping me away from his fourteen-year-old sister, Bryan relented and admitted that I might have latent power, and if I promised to keep my filthy hands off you, he’d try and teach me how to use my gifts.”

“Oh.” She seemed to be saying that a lot tonight. Sometimes, there wasn’t a lot else that could be said. “To answer your question about the menorah, no, I didn’t convert, it’s just...”

“I understand.”

Aileen doubted that. With a weary sigh, she tried to think of how to verbalize just how far from understanding he was.

“Hey, it’s okay. I know it’s tough to let go.”

“No! That’s not it. Look, Tim’s death was my fault, okay? The last year we were together sucked. We were heading for divorce. He’d decided that, after all our years together, I shouldn’t practice spells and rituals in our home...” Bless it! This had to be the weirdest ass conversation she’d ever had in bed -- or on the couch, or anywhere, for that matter.

Jon seemed to have that effect on her. He got her talking, and she didn’t know when to shut up. PaPPusing to breathe, she shoved a tangle of sweaty hair away from her face and reached up to touch Jon’s forehead.

“Look, it was my fault. And I thought if I could remember the better times, honor the good things about his memory, the years we had together, then maybe I could free myself. Unblock what got blocked the day he died.”

Although by then, her power was all but lost, smothered by the blanket of his contempt.

“You killed him? Wanted him dead? Cursed him?”

“No! None of that. I’d never...” Okay, he’d made his point. Slumping back against the arm of the couch, she let her head drop to the side and closed her eyes.

“So stop blaming yourself. Lose the guilt and move on.”

“Are we going to have sex tonight, or did you travel across the country to nibble my breasts until dawn?”

With a low, throaty chuckle, Jon cupped her chin in his hand, turned her head to face him, and leaned down to tickle her forehead with his mop of sandy brown hair. “Yes. Barring any protest on your part, we’re most definitely going to have sex.” He slipped his arm under the curve of her back to pull her closer.

“I’m assuming Bryan covered the important parts of *Witch Genetics 101*?”

“If by that you mean no disease risk, and you control your fertility cycle, yeah, he spent a lot of time detailing the benefits of those points.”

With a throaty chuckle, she arched her hips, impatient and hungry. Jon buried his cock inside her, and she closed her eyes to enjoy the wash of color accompanying the sensations. “Better.” Oh sweet goddess, “better” didn’t begin to sum up the delicious, stretchy, achy fullness.

“So how -- in your opinion -- was Tim’s death your fault?” Maneuvering deeper, he let out a little groan of contentment.

*Oh, bless it, can’t we do this without the conversation?* With a frustrated sigh, she decided to humor him. If he wanted to talk, she was more than capable of doing two things at once.

“We were fighting. He’d walked in on a spell after I’d promised I wouldn’t do them at home anymore. That’s a long story. One that would have ended the marriage sooner or later.”

As Jon bumped her cervix, she groaned and gasped for air. “We were arguing, and he stormed out. Screeched out of the driveway. And died twenty yards from the front door when a pickup careened into his BMW.”

“So you blame yourself because you’d been arguing?” Swirling his hips in a slow spiral, he came to rest so tight against her that his pubic bone bit into hers.

“No. Because I’d let him bully me into weakening my gifts. I would have known, otherwise. Would have sensed the danger. But I was so out of practice, I didn’t have the slightest intimation of impending disaster.”

“Which was tragic. And ironically, his fault, for trying to make you someone you weren’t meant to be.” Rising until only the tip of his cock pressed against her, he hesitated a moment before completing the downward plunge. “But most definitely not...”

“Not my fault.” With a sigh, she arched to welcome the slick heat of his cock, arched higher yet to take him deeper inside.

“Why’d he make you stop? The magic, I mean?”

Aileen shrugged. “One of those power plays that start once love becomes tepid?” Truth was, he’d had regrets -- had been ashamed of her talents.

She pressed her face into Jon’s chest and uttered a silent plea that he was done talking, that he’d continue moving just like -- *Oh yeah, right there*. When he cupped his hands under her ass, she squirmed sideways to avoid another attempt to breach regions best left untouched, but he was too quick for her and buried his finger in the spot previously explored by his thumb.

“You have a thing about my ass?” The shadows from the shifting embers gave his face an impish appearance, and she decided maybe hot, sweaty witch sex was what she needed to take her mind off her troubles.

“Mmm. Nice and soft, round, curvy, and when I wiggle my finger right about here...”

With a grunt of surprise, she arched against him.

“You make all sorts of neat noises and get all wet. What you need is wild, scorching witch sex. Edgy, and a bit over-the-top.”

“Fierce?”

“Mmm.” He shivered as she raked her nails along his spine. “Fierce is good. Leave some skin though.”

Blessed goddess, he was starting to get under hers. Like a drug, he was seeping into her system, and she didn’t have the heart to tell him this could never work.

## Chapter Two

“Oh! Yes, right there.” If he stopped now, she’d explode. “More.” *More, harder, deeper.* She couldn’t get enough of him. Or maybe of this -- tangling -- with another witch. Something she’d never done before.

“Greedy little witch.” When she reached up to cuff his shoulder, he caught her wrist and pinned one arm over her head.

If the relentless rhythm wasn’t enough, and the gentle stroking of his finger inside her ass didn’t heighten the sensations a hundredfold, being restrained proved more than enough to plunge her into some dark abyss she hadn’t explored before. Giving an exploratory wriggle, she tried to loosen her arm, but his fingers locked tighter around her wrist, and he stretched her arm higher over her head.

He was doing pretty well on the more, harder, deeper front, too. Darts of heat crept along her spine, and her breath came in shaky little rasps. Half afraid to find out what he’d do to push her that last little bit over the edge, she tensed beneath him.

“No, soft and gentle now. Don’t fight this. Trust me.” And then he did the last thing she’d expected. He kissed her so tenderly she was only dimly aware of the brush of his lips on hers, then he whispered in her ear. “Come for me.”

With a cry of raw passion, she shuddered and pressed her face against his chest. As spasms shook her body and left her breathless, she pressed her palms to each side of his chin, rubbing against the razor stubble.

Before she had a chance to recover, he plunged deeper. *More, harder, faster. Be careful what you ask for.* She couldn't remember when, but he'd slipped his finger out of her ass and now he held her hips so tight that her flesh stung under the imprint of his fingers. She wasn't inclined to ask him to let go.

*Hold on.* That's what she wanted to ask for. *Hold on, and don't ever let me go.* If this was witch sex, she wanted more. Wanted to curl herself around him until no one could tell where she stopped and he began.

And then it happened. As he drove her higher, taking her with him as he soared closer to his own climax, a barrier broke between them, and she couldn't tell which thoughts or sensations were hers, and which were his. He pulled back, startled, then muttered a soft curse and plunged back inside her.

Fire wasn't enough, nor rain, wind, or rushing water. Nothing explained this. Nothing came close. His cock, her clit, bodies pressed together so tight it hurt -- his hands, her face, their heartbeats, breath -- all wrapped up into one wild, fierce set of sensations. Her fear and frustration, his power, his love, her...

*His love?*

Holy goddess, she was in over her head. And then she was drowning. Or maybe flying. Her body shattered and broke loose from its moorings, and she felt not only the familiar release, but a searing, tightening, rushing explosion of sensation she knew had to be his.

"Hey." Stroking his fingers along her damp hairline, he struggled to catch his breath. "You okay?"

Generally, she hated it when guys asked that right after sex. Tonight, though, the question bore asking. She did a quick inventory. She seemed to have regained feeling in her

toes, and her fingers wriggled upon command. Lifting her head was beyond her powers, but seeing as he couldn't manage that yet, either, she figured that was okay.

"I think so. You?"

"Very happily annihilated, thanks."

This wasn't going to be good -- the part where she had to tell him things couldn't work between them. Not good at all.

"We just..." She tried to remember if her parents had included anything about this in their lectures on the finer points of being a witch. *Sexual Annihilation 101*. Nope, they must have skipped that part.

"Linked. Or that's what my aunt calls it, anyway."

"That'd be your Aunt Sylvie? Prada and boardroom Sylvie? Second-in-line-to-CEO Sylvie?" His only aunt, as far as she knew. But why would Sylvie be giving him pointers on witch sex? This night kept getting weirder and weirder.

"Mmm. After Bryan agreed to teach me what he knew, and I demonstrated some genuine talent, I started wondering where it came from. The idea of Mom or Dad having a spark of power seemed ridiculous, so I turned to Sylvie for answers."

Jon snuggled his face against her breasts. "My hunch proved true. What Bryan couldn't teach me, Sylvie did. She says Mom has a latent gift but chooses not to use it." He shifted sideways, and when he took her nipple into his mouth, she didn't attempt to dislodge him.

As wrung out as she was, the heightened, almost painful tingling that spread across her breast as he suckled was one of the milder sensations she'd experienced tonight.

"Look, tonight's been amazing. Indescribable, mind-blowing variety amazing. But in the spirit of avoiding lies and half-truths, this isn't going to work." With a pop, he detached his mouth from her nipple, and she forged ahead before he could talk her out of what she knew needed to be done. "I'm not going to kick you out into the snow, but tomorrow, you should probably find a hotel. I can't..."

“Hang on, how’d we get here? Back up a minute. We were together, so together it defies description, and then we curled up here all nice and warm and limp, talking about how I figured out I’m as much of a witch as you are, and then...”

“That’s the problem. I gave it away, threw my gift away for a marriage that wouldn’t have lasted six more months, even if Tim had lived. And now I can’t get it back.”

Grinning, Jon struggled into a sitting position and pulled her against his chest. “Think a minute. If you’re still blocked, what about this red mark on my chest where that little missile of a light sphere -- the second one you launched tonight -- hit me full-on?”

“Piggybacking.”

“Oh.”

At least now he was the one reduced to monosyllabic replies. But part of her hoped he wouldn’t give up that easily, that maybe he could convince her that her power had returned for real. That she didn’t just borrow his.

“What I did tonight happens during every witch child’s first lessons. It’s how Bryan started teaching you, right? Letting you ride the coattails of his power, borrowing a little until you figured out how to find your own?”

Drawing her closer, he stroked his hand over the curve of her shoulder and down her arm. His silence provided all the answer she needed.

“I was angry, and I wanted to strike out, so I borrowed a bit of your power,” she continued. “Sure, I couldn’t do that if I weren’t a witch, but it doesn’t mean I can fly solo. If you stay, the jealousy’s going to eat me alive. Eat *us* alive. I want what you have more than life itself. And it’s gone.”

To emphasize her point, she leaned over the coffee table, cupped her palm over the candle in the evergreen centerpiece, and focused every last ounce of will on kindling a flame. Nothing. Same as what they had together.

Nothing.

Here came the hard part. The part where she'd crush him. "Look, when we were...together...linked. I'm sorry, but I picked up how you feel. About me. If this was just about sex, you could hang around a while, but as it is, I'm only going to hurt you worse if you stay. You're welcome until morning, but then it's best for both of us if you leave."

"Okay. Got it." He stood, stalked over to where he'd abandoned his clothes on the floor, and tugged on his boxers.

By the time she found her voice, he'd zipped his jeans and buttoned his shirt. As much as she wanted to blurt out that she'd been wrong, and he could stick around without her turning into an envious monster, the fact was that he had what she wanted most. And she wasn't strong enough not to hate him for it. Over time, her jealousy would surely poison what they had together.

"Look, it's been great, but I'd just as soon hit the road tonight." He shrugged into his coat and tugged his hat over his ears.

"But the storm..."

"I'll get where I'm going just fine." He opened the door, letting in a gust of wind-driven snow, and clicked it shut behind him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shivering as a gust of wind bypassed the open flue and sent the flames in the fireplace dancing in a shower of sparks, Aileen sank down on the quilt she'd spread near the hearth and pulled her legs into the lotus position. She'd set a straw bed and a corn dolly at the corner of the hearthstones, and she wore her favorite Brigid pendant, the one with Celtic knots etched around the goddess's braids. Yule was six weeks past, and she should be joyously celebrating Imbolc, but her mood leaned more toward morose than festive.

One more solitary circle held no appeal for her. Her parents tried to convince her to fly home for Imbolc, but with two teachers on maternity leave and a shortage of decent subs,

she couldn't justify using a few personal days. Besides, she had a pile of term papers to contend with, and bottom line, she hadn't dared risk running into Jon.

In her opinion, California wasn't big enough for both of them. Not that she blamed him. She'd been selfish, childish, greedy, stupid -- running out of adjectives, she sighed. She'd been an idiot.

And it took her no more than five minutes after the door closed behind him for her to figure that out. But she'd been too proud to run after him, or maybe too scared he'd jump at the opportunity for turnabout and reject her like she'd just rejected him. So, armed with the knowledge that she wanted something worse than her power, she threw herself back into the rhythm of everyday life. Teaching, lunch with friends, even a few dates.

As the pain of missing Jon increased, commanding her full attention, the discomfort of her blocked power bothered her less and less. Until one day she dropped a dish while loading the dishwasher and snapped her fingers to halt its plummet toward the floor -- and managed to stop its plunge midair.

Had he known that night, when she sent him away? Known she hadn't been piggybacking on his power? Known she'd found her own again? As Puck curled up on her lap and treated her wrist to a rough tongue bath, she gave herself a mental kick for wallowing.

If she had an ounce of sense, she'd get up off her ass, create a circle, and honor Brigid's day. So what if the storm raging outside was more suited to Yule than Imbolc? With the beginning of February, and the gradual return of the light, she knew the crocuses waited to rear their heads beneath the blanket of snow. Yesterday, the chipmunks gathered seeds from beneath the bird feeder. And before long, the robins would be back.

With a sigh, she picked up the oversized mug of hot chocolate, complete with marshmallows, and scooted closer to the hearth. When the phone rang, she raised an eyebrow at Puck.

“Are you going to get that, or am I?” Pleased to be the center of attention, Puck ratcheted his purr up a few decibels. “What say we let the machine pick up?”

“Hey, if you’re there, answer the damn phone. It’s taken me about six weeks of wounded pride and a few ass kickings from your brother to get up the courage to make this call. Come on, I’m going to feel stupid if you screen this. Since it’s Imbolc, and you’re not home with your parents, I know you’re there.”

“Fuck!” Not very creative language, but as she dumped the cat out of her lap and spilled hot chocolate over her left knee, it was the best she could do. Scowling, she stomped across the room and dove for the phone.

“Emotional blackmail. I thought you were above that.”

“Oh, good, I really didn’t want to have to try this again later.”

With that, several seconds of awkward silence ensued.

“Uh, did I pull you out of a circle?”

“Wouldn’t have answered if you had. Strike that. I’ve been feeling pretty lousy about what I said before you left, so for you, I’d have picked up anyway.”

“I’m flattered.”

Settling into the glider rocker by the window, she gazed out at the snow and wondered where they could go from here. “Look, I’m sorry about what I said, how I acted. More sorry than you can know. I was wrong, and...”

“So what are you wearing?”

“What?” If nothing else, he still had the ability to stun her into one-word responses.

“I’m sorry, too. I knew you weren’t piggybacking, and I was a huge SOB not to tell you. I couldn’t stand knowing you wanted something worse than you wanted me. Now, I repeat, what are you wearing?”

“As soon as you left, I knew I wanted -- needed -- you worse. Losing you hurt worse.” More pain than losing Tim -- even more than losing her power. “I’d always had what I

thought was this colossal crush on you. When we linked, and I figured out you felt the same way, it scared the blessed crap out of me, and..."

"Back to basics here. Simple question, and you haven't answered it yet. I was hoping to pull you out of a circle, in which case the answer would be, 'I'm not wearing anything.' Not so lucky, I guess."

Suppressing a grin, she glanced down at her chocolate-stained jeans. "Sexy negligee. Sort of a corset and thong kind of getup. I was expecting company."

"Jeans and a wool sweater."

"Uh-huh. And I dumped hot chocolate all over my jeans when the phone rang." Another awkward silence.

"Look, I wanted to call and warn you, but I'm coming over."

"From California?"

"From a hotel. You have about fifteen minutes to get into something more appealing than damp jeans." With a decisive click, he disconnected.

For about three heartbeats, she sat holding the phone. Then, in a rush of activity, she pulled down the blackout shades -- guaranteed to hide any pretty lights she and Jon might create in the heat of the moment -- and wiped up the dark stain of chocolate near the hearth. Next, she gathered herbs, water, salt, her cauldron and pentacle, and the vase of white roses on the dining room table, and set up an altar. Finally, she stripped and shoved her clothes under the couch.

Running her fingers through her hair, she tried to arrange it into something silky and enticing. Heck, she'd settle for neatly groomed without knots and tangles. But as she attempted to subdue her hair, she remembered she hadn't unlocked the door.

Which was her undoing. As she threw back the latch, Jon shoved the door open without ringing the bell and was greeted by a naked, screaming banshee. *So much for presenting an erotic tableau.*

“Crap, close it quick. It’s freezing, not to mention the neighbors don’t need to see me naked.”

“Need, not so likely. But I bet some of them would enjoy it.” Grinning, he closed the door and kicked off his boots.

Unlikely there’d ever been a more awkward hug in the history of erotic moments than the one he attempted in the entryway. *Bigfoot of the snowy north attempts to hug shivering, naked witch.* Shrieking as snow from his coat pressed against her bare breasts, she darted out of range. A potent silence followed while he took off his coat, then his clothes.

“Circle, right?” He tilted his head toward the Imbolc altar she’d thrown together at the last minute.

Seizing the chance to do something remotely normal, she nodded and followed him across the room like a confused puppy. *Off to a good start, Aileen.*

When he knelt, she knelt beside him, settling back on her heels. Goose bumps prickled across her arms, and she shivered as the furnace clicked on in the basement.

“Come here. It’s your turn this time. Let’s see what you can do.” His grin hinted at thoughts Aileen wouldn’t categorize as the least bit sacred, but when he tugged her against his chest, the awkwardness seemed to melt away.

As she spoke and sang and, at one point, danced, he stayed close beside her. He rested his hand over hers as she kindled dried angelica, basil, bay leaves, and chamomile in her cauldron. When the flames darted up, red gold and beautiful, she added a few rose petals, the last white of winter combined with the sweet promise of spring.

When she finished her words of praise to Brigid, snuffed the candles, and released the circle, Jon wrapped his arms around her chest so tight she could hardly draw a breath.

“We’re not making it to the couch this time. And I should warn you, no matter what you say afterward, I’m not leaving.”

“Good. I mean the ‘not leaving’ part. The part about ‘not making it to the couch’ is okay, too.”

He lay back, rolling her on top of him, and she stared at the startling green of his eyes, the light fringe of lashes covering them, and the strands of sandy brown hair that, as usual, needed a trim.

Jon growled deep in his throat, his voice vibrating through his chest, sending shivers along her spine. “Remember what I taught you about witch sex?”

“Fierce?”

“That’d be it.”

“Mmm.”

Shuddering as he dug his fingers into her shoulders, she shifted so his cock pressed against her belly. When he lifted his head to kiss her, she nipped his lip hard enough to elicit a rumble of protest.

“Are you going to do this, or should I?” His grin hinted at a challenge.

“Me. Definitely me.” Sitting up and wriggling back a few inches, she reached down to guide his cock home. Hot, his skin felt so blessed hot against her. Pressing downward, she took the entire length, until she felt the head bump her cervix.

“It’s good.”

“Damn right.”

“To have you back.”

“Mmm.”

As she lifted her weight off his hips, he arched to follow. Nearly as impatient as Jon, she sank back down, taking him deep inside her, then leaned forward until her body covered his like a warm, damp blanket.

"I would have come sooner. Knew I messed up. Never should" -- he gasped as she bit his shoulder -- "have left." Trapping her hips between his hands, he overrode her attempt to set the rhythm, guiding her movements in a torturously slow dance. "But Bryan said" -- he curled his neck forward enough to nip the slope of her breast -- "you needed time. To figure things out. Get your head together."

Bryan again. That did it. The next time she saw her brother, he was getting the worst case of poison ivy he'd ever had. In the most intimate location possible. It didn't help that he'd been right.

"After you left that night, I cried a lot," she admitted, "but I put Tim's menorah away. You were right, you know. The part about not being able to let go. Not being able to say good-bye. However awful things were at the end."

"Hey, this is a talk that needs to be had, but how about later? Tonight, the only person I want to think about is here on top of me, warm and wet and..."

"Fierce?"

"Jury's still out on that. You'll have to convince me."

As he reached up to capture her nipple, pinching until she squirmed at the heat, Aileen dug her nails into his ribs. If she held him tight enough, loved him hard enough, maybe this time he wouldn't let her chase him away.

"Ready?"

"Not nearly, I..." When he curved his hips off the floor to drive deep inside her, she whimpered in surprise, and then, like crashing through a wall, the barrier between them shattered and their link bound them so completely she felt through him -- *was* him.

Closing her eyes at the onslaught of sensations, she tried to make sense of the hardwood floor bruising her -- *his* -- spine. The tight channel of heat that encompassed his cock. His surprise at the little jolts of sensation that radiated out from her clit every time his pubic bone ground against her.

“Too much. Can’t catch my breath.”

“I think” -- panting, he cradled her chin in his hands -- “that’s part of the definition...” His words trailed off in a groan as she reached down to stroke the base of his cock where their bodies joined.

“Of fierce.” She finished the thought for him.

And then the world exploded into fragments of sound and color. Light crackled and arched overhead in an unbridled display of power.

“Show-off.” Coaxing her own magic to the surface, she wrapped a braid of power around his wrists and drew his arms over his head, securing them as surely as if she’d bound them with rope. “Now who’s the strongest witch?”

The answer got lost in a rush of wet heat as he came, exploding inside her a second before her second climax wracked her body. She couldn’t separate out which sensations were hers and which were his, but she knew if this lasted another second, her spine was going to shatter and she was going to burst into a thousand pieces. And yet she never wanted it to stop. Finally, the fury passed, and she realized the faint whimpering noise came from her.

“Shh.” Jon stroked her hair away from her face, his fingers warm against her forehead. “Hey, you can open your eyes now.”

Okay, he sounded too smug by half. And when did she free his hands, anyway? Reluctant to return to reality, she nuzzled closer, sucking his fingers when he brushed them across her lips.

“Here’s the part where you say something awful and try to make me leave, remember?”

*Ouch, low blow.* “Stay.” *As long as you want.* Although she didn’t know if he was ready to hear that yet, or if she was ready to say it. “Hey, did you fly all the way out here just to see me?”

“Nope. I’ve got an interview tomorrow at a Boston law firm.”

“Just what Boston needs, another lawyer.”

“Tone down the sarcasm a notch, will you? Maybe Boston needs another witch.” Patting her butt, he let a grin play at the corners of his mouth. “The interview? I set it up because of you. Hell, nothing less would drag me away from sunny San Diego.”

“Oh.” Staring with what she hoped wasn’t a dumbfounded expression, she tried to sort out the implications of what he’d just told her.

His grin broadening, Jon touched the tip of her nose with his fingertip. “I assume you have a bed? Because it’s sort of drafty down here.”

“Yeah.” She managed to lift her head high enough to reach his mouth and deliver a sharp nip to his lower lip before settling in for a lingering kiss. “I have a bed. And you’re welcome to it. If I’m feeling generous in the morning, I may even let you use my toothbrush.”

“Mmm. That’s big of you.” Before she knew what he was up to, he got to his feet and grabbed her around the waist.

She kicked wildly as he lifted her and managed to land one on his knee, but he only laughed. “Blessed goddess, if you drop me...”

“Hold still then. The stairs might be a bit tricky.”

Which was enough to settle her down. For thirteen steps, she nestled in his arms. Nudging open her bedroom door, he carried her across the room and dumped her on the bed.

Then, sprawling beside her, he tugged the down comforter over their legs and pressed his face close to hers. “I love you, you crazy witch. Just the way you are. Curvy butt, sassy attitude, emotional insecurities, temper and all.”

“I find myself awed by the depth of your emotion.” She squirmed as he shifted on top of her.

Grinning, he kissed the tip of her nose. “You know, you’ve failed miserably in driving me from your home this time around.”

“Not such a bad kind of failure.” Wriggling out of reach, she lifted her hand and directed a small globe of tightly spun light at his naked ass.

With a surprised yelp, he lunged forward and pinned her to the bed. “You’re going to be a handful, aren’t you?” Easing her thighs apart with his knees, he maneuvered closer and slid his cock between damp, swollen folds of skin.

Heat flared through her, followed by a rush of tenderness so strong her aura rippled free in a curtain of shimmering light. “Count on it.”

### Chapter Three

Bryan slammed the ball at the basket, caught it as it rebounded off the backboard, and threw it at Dallas's chest so hard his friend grunted as he caught it.

"What's wrong with you tonight?" Anger hardened the frown lines around Dallas's mouth, but his body rippled like golden brown honey as he moved. Sweat trailed through the silky hair on his chest and formed a slick line, pointing right down to his white shorts.

Wiping his forehead, Bryan watched as Dallas pounded the ball against the pavement a few times then tossed it onto the scorched lawn. April 30, yet heat seared across him like the Santa Ana winds in October. Just like fire season and he was the damn kindling.

"Sorry. Let's head in." Without looking back, Bryan scuffed up the path and into the tiny home that had him mortgaged up his ass for the next fifty years.

*Fucking San Diego real estate market. Maybe Aileen -- and Jon -- have the right idea settling out East after all. Nope, not gonna go there.*

Moping about his sister getting the guy wasn't going to do him a damn bit of good -- especially since he'd all but handed Jon over to her on a silver platter. After losing that rat bastard of a husband, Tim, Aileen deserved every bit of happiness that came her way. End of subject.

The air inside didn't feel much cooler than the ninety-plus heat in the yard, despite the persistent hum of the air conditioner. Even stripped down to his shorts, Bryan felt like he wore way too much clothing. Exhaling sharply, he pushed a damp thatch of brown hair away from his eyes and settled cross-legged on the hardwood floor, near the ring of power left behind by past rituals.

Dallas shouldn't be here. Not tonight. Ignoring Beltane -- the May eve rite to welcome spring that was guaranteed to get any healthy witch's blood boiling -- wouldn't make it go away. Bryan's itch to cast a circle competed with the buzz of energy along his cock.

"Tell me." Kneeling behind him, Dallas radiated so much warmth that Bryan shivered in response.

If he leaned back an inch, his back would brush Dallas's chest. So what if his friend drove a slick Corvette, voted with the conservative crowd, and worked in a defense job so fucked up, even his boss didn't have security clearance to supervise his project? Dallas wanted him. All he had to do was lean back, just a little, and...

"Fucking tell me. Tell me what you need." With a resounding thwack, Dallas pounded the flat of his hand against the hardwood floor.

*Jon.* Simple as that. Bryan wanted the one man he could never have.

"Come on, I see it in your face. Say it."

"I miss him, damn you. So you want me to torture you -- remind you you're not him?"

Dallas rested a hand on Bryan's side, and his skin flinched at the contact. "So you want your sister's fiancé. And I want..."

"Me. You want me. We've been dancing around this for months, and nothing we say is going to change --" Bryan sighed. *What a blessed mess.*

"You gave him away." Dallas rose to grab a towel draped over the back of a chair and started smoothing away sweat from Bryan's chest in even strokes. "Hell, the boy next door. And here's the best part -- you even say Jon's bi. You had your chance."

"I let him go because he loves my sister. And I'd do it again." *Fuck me very much. Sorry excuse of an unselfish bastard.*

"So what can I do for you?" Dallas's voice, usually free of any accent, melted into the soft cadence of his grandmother's Mexican homeland.

The words spun across his senses, leaving Bryan off-kilter and feeling more than a little ill. Or maybe he should blame his sense of unease on the energy crackling along the outline of the circle, waiting for him to beckon the magic to him like a lover.

"Any damn thing you want -- so long as you make me forget him. Bind me -- hurt me -- make sweet love to me. Use my body as a canvas for one of your fucked-up games. Spin me until the only thing I see is your face. But make me forget him."

On some level, Bryan registered the familiar outlines of the green sofa and reclining chair, the shelves of books, the cluttered desk with the half-finished manuscript, the half-graded papers strewn across the dining table in the L-shaped room, and the smooth pressure of polished oak under him. But the part of him that had honored the Beltane rites since he was old enough to breathe across a candlewick and kindle flame refused to be denied.

"Any damn thing I want?" The accent was there again, thick and throaty now.

"But first, I need to show you what I am."

"So show me." Dallas's hand slid down Bryan's side and came to rest on his thigh. He moved closer, until his chest pressed into Bryan's spine, and his swollen cock found a warm spot to nestle against Bryan's sweaty shorts.

Good enough, then. He'd been avoiding tonight because of the cold, hard reality that he'd never spend Beltane with Jon. Not the way he wanted to, anyway. But unless he was going to let this sour his love for Aileen -- not so unselfish after all, was he? -- and his sister's brand-new fiancé, then he'd best get on with life.

“Sit. There.” When Bryan dropped the air of tortured uncertainty and started issuing commands, Dallas raised a quizzical eyebrow, but he backed off and settled a few feet away on the bare floor.

No need for niceties tonight. He didn’t need an altar or pentacle to call his power. Raising his arms, Bryan drew a sphere of energy around them like a shimmering blanket and suppressed a grin when Dallas leaned forward, uttering a startled sound.

“Just the beginning. Want out?” Sweet goddess, was he really about to let Dallas in on his true identity? Fear nibbled at Bryan’s thoughts, and he half hoped his friend would run now, before things got out of hand.

“Wouldn’t back out of that offer you made for anything.” Dallas’s eager grin packed an unmistakable erotic punch. “You’re my canvas tonight. Don’t forget it.”

“And you’ll make me forget about Jon.”

“Count on it.”

Was it his imagination, or did a shudder of apprehension ripple across Dallas’s shoulders as Bryan started murmuring the invocation to the god and goddess? Letting his eyes droop shut, he felt energy ripple across his bare chest. Aggravated by the constraint of his gym shorts and briefs, he tore them off and tossed them on the floor.

Dallas’s low whistle jarred him from his reverie, but he sought the thread of power and focused harder. Opening his hand, he kindled a ball of light, blue green like the ocean at noon. Tossing the glow sphere into the circle’s center, Bryan pictured the god and goddess, keepers of the Beltane rites. A rush of energy tore through him. *Renewal, rebirth, and the crazy energy of San Diego spring. Sex, release -- the holy and the sublime, mixing with the age-old rhythm of skin on skin.*

Light filled the room, and he blinked, expecting to see the lithe, feathered beauty of the goddess. He let out an “oh” of surprise as a man covered with vines, his hair tangled with oak leaves and his lips curving into a grin, burst into the center of the circle, splintering light.

“Green Man.” Bryan whispered his welcome, his eyes wide at the startling clarity of the vision.

“Holy fuck.” Dallas crept back a few inches, his butt almost brushing the flickering light that marked the holy space. “Who the hell -- what the hell --”

Coming back to himself, Bryan shook his head and reached for his friend’s hand. “He’s not real. I mean, he is -- but not here -- not in the flesh. I see him this way -- a vision. I must have linked with you -- part of what I wanted you to know -- what I am...”

*Good job, Bryan. Keep this up and you won’t have to worry about Dallas’s persistent attempts to capture your affection -- or whatever scene he plans to paint on your shivering, naked body.*

The Green Man danced, his cock swollen and jutting straight out, straining forward, looking for a target. Bryan wanted to ride the giddy rush of magic, letting everything else go but the intoxicating energy. But he was torn. Dallas was going to panic if he didn’t come up with a better explanation.

“What I am, when I told you I’m a witch, you thought religion -- that I’m a witch like you’re Catholic -- but it’s more than that.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to get that.” Dallas gestured toward the center, where the altar would usually stand, the hardwood floor of the circle no less holy for its lack of adornment.

With a sharp intake of breath, Bryan watched a dark shape coalesce behind the Green Man. At least six feet eight and horned like the biggest stag he’d ever seen, the Horned God stood before them looking so blessed real the vision even cast a shadow. Maybe he shouldn’t have created his circle sans altar or magical tools. No Beltane he could remember came close to this.

As the Horned God took a step toward the Green Man, his skin gleaming like burnished ebony, Dallas muttered in panicked Spanish. “*Dios te salve, María, llena eres de gracia...*”

Bryan recognized the simple prayer. The Green Man smiled and nodded -- all holiness welcome here tonight. Looking away, Bryan tried to focus. If he didn't pull it together fast, Dallas would either bolt or break.

It came as a surprise that he was almost as afraid of the first option as the second. "Please, don't leave. So, I'm a witch. It's a genetic thing. Mom's a witch. Dad's a witch. Aileen's a witch. Jon's a witch -- didn't figure it out until he was sixteen or so, since it's latent in his mom, but his aunt..."

The Horned God moved toward the Green Man, and when he touched the trembling leaves that circled the smaller man's forehead, Dallas let out a low moan.

"Stop babbling and tell it to me straight. What is this?"

"Beltane. I started a ritual, but I'm off balance, so it's -- different. The power, the divinity -- I've always been very literal, so I *see* them. Being a witch, part of it's a bunch of psychic powers, individual to each person. I can link to people I'm close to, forge a connection. That's why you can see all this."

"If we make it to bed tonight, I'm going to whip some sense into you until you can get a full sentence out." Dallas frowned. "So you're imagining two...gods...coming on to each other in your living room. And because you're *psychic*, I can see it, too?"

"Sort of. Not imagining, more like a vision. I can't control it." For now, that would have to do.

Dallas murmured another prayer under his breath and slid beside Bryan. "You didn't slip some shit into my sports drink when we were playing ball, did you?"

"Sorry, no."

Then, with a shudder of wind strong enough to ripple Dallas's silky black hair across his forehead, the Horned God made a dive for the Green Man and caught him around the middle.

\* \* \* \* \*

Wrapped up in the unfolding drama, Bryan's heart pounded against his ribs. The Green Man twisted away from the larger man's grasp and whirled across the circle in a blur of scattering leaves. The Horned God threw back his head and let loose a silent peal of laughter, then joined the chase.

"This isn't happening."

Too riveted by the drama unfolding before them to reply, Bryan traced a soothing pattern over the back of Dallas's hand. The Green Man darted just out of the Horned God's reach, and the shadows rippling across his golden skin twined with the vines draped across his shoulders. Bryan almost hoped he'd evade capture -- was half afraid of what would happen if the antlered giant caught the fine-boned wood sprite.

But when Dallas slipped his hand out from under Bryan's palm, struggled out of his shorts, and started stroking his own cock, Bryan knew there was no turning back. Dallas trembled and grasped his shaft harder when the Horned God captured the Green Man's hips between his huge, calloused hands. The scent of pine filled the room as the Green Man knelt, then bent forward, his forehead resting on his arms.

"Please." The word tore from Bryan's throat like a curse. *Please what? Let it be over? Don't stop? Let that be me and Dallas?*

Dallas's breathing rasped across Bryan's senses. Rapid, frightened, and more than a little desperate. Dallas trembled as his fist glided up and down his cock -- not so much jerking off as teasing himself higher without working toward release.

Not real -- that's what he'd reassured Dallas. But no other vision had twisted his insides and heated his blood like this. The smell of pine and sweat, the ripple of muscle, the eager smile twisting the Green Man's face into a mask of erotic anticipation, the fierce scowl as the Horned God worked to press his way past resisting flesh...

"Mother Mary, they're really going to do this." Dallas shook his head, as if to clear his vision.

With his arms tight around the Green Man's waist, the antlered giant drove his cock home. If there'd been sound, the smaller man's yell would have echoed off the walls. Head back, he grimaced at the intrusion, struggled to free himself, and then finally relaxed with a shiver of ecstasy.

Bryan's cock twitched in sympathy, and the muscles across his shoulders corded into lines of solid tension. Bless it; he'd never in his wildest dreams imagined a Beltane like this one. Dallas moaned under his breath, and the sound ripped through Bryan's senses like an aphrodisiac.

"Later." Breathing hard, Dallas grabbed his balls and tugged them away from where they were attempting to crawl up under his skin. "That's you, the one on the bottom."

*Message received.* When this was over, Bryan suspected he'd get the fucking of a lifetime. For now... Sweet goddess, the two gods generated enough heat to singe his eyeballs. No sooner had the Green Man relaxed than the Horned God began to move in a relentless dance, withdrawing almost completely and then burying himself to the hilt with each stroke.

"Hurts."

Bryan wasn't sure if Dallas meant that as an empathetic comment -- given the exultant grimace pasted across the Green Man's features -- or if he meant his own, unrelieved hard-on. Dew gathered at the tip of Bryan's cock, and if someone poured boiling water across his exposed flesh, he didn't think it could possibly up the heat from what he was experiencing at the moment.

"Yeah. Hurts." As would whatever Dallas had in mind for later. He had no doubt of that.

When the smaller man shuddered and pressed back to meet his conqueror's thrusts, Dallas made a sympathetic noise. But the look on the Green Man's face -- eyes closed and shadowed by his crown of oak leaves, cheeks and forehead unlined by stress or pain -- reflected a deepening peace.

“Damned if I could get fucked like that and look so serene.”

Bryan almost choked trying to hold back a bark of irreverent laughter, and the Horned God chose that moment to look right at them -- and smile. Then he turned his attention back to the task at hand, burying himself in the Green Man with terrifying fervor. Strangling in a mix of awe and fear, Bryan felt more like a helpless bystander than the witch who had created this sacred space.

The Green Man came first, burying his face in his arms as his body shook and bucked under his lover. When the Horned God followed a moment later, he shook his head so that his antlers swung in a dangerous arc, droplets of sweat flying from his face. His grimace carved deep lines in his forehead, and his mouth opened in a wordless bellow.

Bryan expected the image to fade, but the two remained joined, so real, he suspected if he reached forward, he'd feel heat radiating from their skin. With unexpected tenderness, the Horned God reached forward to stroke the Green Man's temple, toying with his drenched curls. When he withdrew, the movement held all the tenderness absent from their coupling -- slow, easy, careful not to cause pain.

The smaller man rose and came into his lover's arms, nuzzling his head against the Horned God's shoulder. When the giant bent to kiss his lover, his face shone with reverence and affection.

And then they were gone. No shimmer of light, no thunderclap, no fade to black. Just as if they'd never been. Bryan swallowed back a knot of emotion and released the circle, drawing the blue-green shimmer of energy back into himself.

“That was some fucked-up shit.” Dallas staggered to his feet, found his balance, and grasped Bryan's shoulder. “And some day you're going to explain it to me. But tonight --”

“My body's yours.” Bryan shivered as Dallas helped him to his feet then nipped his shoulder hard enough to make him wince. “Anything, just so long as you make me forget.”

“Be careful what you wish for.” Dallas’s simple statement raised goose bumps along Bryan’s arms, and he wondered if he’d jumped in over his head here.

Bryan wasn’t prepared for the blow, and he cried out when Dallas’s hand connected with his bare ass. On some level, he knew he must have scared his friend half out of his mind with that little scene in the circle. “If I’m about to pay for what just happened here, more likely than not, I’ll only be getting what I deserve.”

“Deserve. Want. Crave. Fear. Doesn’t make any difference to me. You’re mine tonight, one way or the other.” With another sharp slap to his ass, Dallas pointed toward the bedroom.

\* \* \* \* \*

As they tore back the covers and bared the white cotton sheets, Bryan tried to sever the link he’d inadvertently formed between them when he’d cast the circle. But it was as if Dallas held power over the bond. Either that or Bryan didn’t have the heart to break it. Dallas’s intense desire battered his senses, and he knew he sent answering waves of fear across the connection.

*Right. If we’re going to do this, why not do this right? So what if Dallas knows what I’m feeling as he layers sensations across my skin?* He forced back a laugh. Bless it, if he knew his friend, he wouldn’t have a shred of dignity left by the time he crawled out of this bed tomorrow morning. Not like sharing a few thoughts should bother him.

“Sex is never a dignified deal, witch boy.” Dallas shoved him back against the pillows. “Damn, you weren’t kidding about that psychic thing, were you?”

Bryan risked an evil grin. “The connection works both ways, so watch it. I’ll pick up some of your thoughts, too. And FYI, the toy box is under the bed.”

“Enjoy it, that’s the last smug moment you’ll have for a while.” Dallas grabbed his wrist hard enough to elicit a grunt of protest and brought Bryan’s hand up to the brass bars of the headboard.

Rather than stage a token resistance, Bryan wrapped his fingers around the cool metal. Eager to move things along, he stretched out his other arm and grabbed the opposite corner of the headboard. The sting of Dallas's palm against his thigh was quick and unexpected, and Bryan sucked air through his teeth.

"Tonight, you do what I say, when I say it. Got it?"

"Sure. What you're saying is you're the guy with the antlers here."

That bit of sass bought him another slap -- this time across the sensitive flesh of his inner thigh. Right. Best not to remind Dallas he'd just been dragged into an enchanted world of visions and magic he'd had no idea even existed.

"Which brings us to rule one. I don't know what other kinds of weird shit you're capable of, but tonight --"

"No magic. Got it." He was impressed with how well Dallas was taking what he'd seen so far -- not like he'd risk springing more on him so soon.

If he stopped to analyze that thought, he'd have to wonder why he was afraid of chasing Dallas away, when all he'd done for the past few months was fend off his advances. Good thing he didn't plan on doing a lot of thinking for the next few hours.

When Dallas leaned down to retrieve the simple wooden box that contained a formidable collection of sex toys, restraints, and an assortment of whips, floggers, and slappers, Bryan's heart kicked into high gear. He never took his eyes off his friend as he sorted through the box, touching each item with a contemplative expression. His dark lashes shadowed his deep brown eyes, but Bryan didn't need to see his eyes to know Dallas was startled by the sophistication of his collection.

"So if you're into this kind of thing, why does the box have a layer of dust on the lid?"

Crap, not a topic he wanted to explore at the moment. "So I haven't played in a while. Big deal."

"Haven't played -- or haven't gotten laid at all?"

When Bryan turned his head away, Dallas stroked his cheek.

“What gives? You’ve turned me down a few times -- Jon’s out of the game, since he’s marrying your sister -- and yet, no one else has been keeping your bed warm?”

“Look, if you want to talk all night, that’s fine, but I thought we were here to --”

Bryan didn’t get any further before Dallas touched a finger to his lips, pulled a pair of fur-lined leather restraints out of the box, and secured his wrists to the brass bars of the headboard. “Play. We’re here to play. But just so you know, your loneliness is coming across like a scream in the night. Later, we’re going to talk, and you’re going to explain what you’re so goddamned afraid of.”

*Fat chance.* He might not have the heart to tear down the connection he’d forged between them, but at least Dallas didn’t seem to be picking up on much more than strong feelings.

Bryan shivered as his friend reached into the box to select the next item, and he couldn’t decide if he was relieved or disappointed when Dallas pulled out a simple leather slapper. He generally saved that one for when he brought home someone who was skittish about his toy box. The rectangular layers of leather attached to the stiff leather handle weren’t much longer than his hand, and he knew from experience that it made a big noise, and produced some heat, but lacked any real bite.

Nonetheless, he squealed when Dallas raised his arm and brought the leather down against his chest. Heat rushing to his face, he tried to figure out what in blessed creation had him so on edge.

“You sure you’re up for this tonight?” Dallas bent to brush a kiss across the pink mark where the leather had connected with his skin.

“Surprised me, that’s all. Bring it on.”

He flinched when Dallas nipped the tender center of the slap mark, then kissed him again and ran his tongue along the sensitized skin. Before he could catch his breath, Dallas layered another area of heat next to the first, covering his left nipple this time.

His cock jumped at the next nip, not to mention the following kiss and slow, sensual tongue stroke. He twisted against the restraints and arched his hips, all but begging for Dallas's touch.

But all that followed was another resounding "thwack" of stiff leather slapping against his chest, another kiss, more tongue work. By the time Dallas worked down to his belly, methodically covering his body in rows of heat and sensation, he was ready to twist out of his skin.

"I -- oh, shit -- I can't --"

"Sure you can. You just need a little help."

## Chapter Four

Bryan tensed when Dallas reached down to where he'd abandoned the toy box at the end of the bed, but the only items forthcoming were a leather cock ring and a tube of lubricant. He exhaled sharply when Dallas grabbed his cock, but rather than the relief he craved, his desperation earned him the constraint of the cock ring around his swollen shaft and aching balls. At least now he wouldn't embarrass himself by spilling before Dallas ever touched his ass. But the band of leather felt like it was cutting off his circulation.

"I didn't do it up that tight, you big baby." Dallas chuckled as Bryan grunted his disagreement. "You'd better remember that crazy psychic thing, or you're going to give away more tonight than the fact that you're not very good at tolerating a cock ring."

Afraid Dallas was more right than he knew, Bryan tried to break the connection he'd forged between them when he cast the circle. But either he was too tired to manage it, or he just didn't have the heart to end the dizzy, intoxicating closeness he hadn't felt since he'd taught Jon the basics of using his power.

Then Dallas lifted a thin, mean-looking quirt from the box, and all other thoughts vanished.

“I, oh, shit --” He held his breath as the first lash lay a path of fire alongside his hip. “Oh...” His groan echoed through the spartanly furnished bedroom as three lashes followed in quick succession, spreading a fan of pain across his thigh.

Through it all, Dallas remained silent, but he paused to touch Bryan’s face from time to time, stroking his sweat-dampened forehead, or smoothing locks of brown hair away from his eyes. Easing into the haze of pain, Bryan turned his head sideways against the damp pillow.

His wrists chafed, so he knew he must be struggling against the restraints, but the steady rain of lashes eclipsed all other sensations. He knew Dallas wasn’t putting his arm into it. He’d used the whip more unkindly himself on several occasions. But nonetheless, the tide of pain pulled him under, eased him into a dark velvet ocean of doubt.

Did he want this to stop, or should he ask for more? Anything harder and he might be able to slip away into the moment -- leave behind all the crap that chased him through every waking hour and then haunted his dreams.

“Tell me. What’s hurting so much inside that you want me to hurt you more?” Dallas placed the quirt on the twisted sheets and waited.

“No -- don’t stop!” He writhed against the bite of the cock ring, thrashed against the bonds securing his wrists, and trembled with the need to meet the sting of the whip.

With a sigh, Dallas bent down to kiss his forehead. “What you’re asking me to do wasn’t part of the game. The deal was that I could play this any way I wanted -- so long as I made you forget Jon. What you’re asking -- that I hurt you enough to quiet whatever beast is howling inside you -- I can’t do that, Bryan. I won’t do that.”

When Dallas reached up to undo the leather cuffs around his wrists, Bryan let out a low, tortured moan. Without something holding him down, he’d come unglued. Without something to struggle against, he was afraid the thin shred of what passed for control would

evaporate like rain on the steaming San Diego sidewalks. As Dallas freed him and pulled him into his lap, cradling him as he rocked back and forth, Bryan fought a wave of panic.

“What frightens you so much more than the whip, friend of mine?”

“I -- I can't --”

“What I saw tonight, the...vision, you weren't supposed to show me that, were you? Is that what you're afraid of, that you'll be punished?”

Covered with sweat, trembling, and all too aware of the sting of the fading lash marks on his thighs, Bryan struggled to form coherent thoughts. “No, not like that. Although safety requires that we're extremely cautious, and I should have waited until...”

*Until what?* Until he was sure of Dallas's love? Until he was in so deep, it would have torn him apart to see his lover run? He sighed, needing to give Dallas something. “Witches often pair up with people who don't share our powers. There aren't enough of us to go around. But I should have waited longer before I showed you what I am.”

“Who. Not what, *who*.”

The anger in Dallas's voice brought on a fresh wave of trembling, and as Bryan struggled for control, his lover held him tighter and rocked him like a frightened child.

“You said that earlier, too. Before the thing with the vision. That you needed to show me ‘what you are.’ But it's ‘who’ -- and I'll tell you. Who you are is a sexier-than-hell, Prius-driving liberal. You fill college students' heads with a lot of liberal ideology -- and probably the best introduction to Shakespeare anyone could provide.”

Pausing for breath, Dallas brushed a kiss across his shoulder. “You shoot a decent basket, kick my ass on the racquetball court, and have the most enchanting blue green eyes I've ever seen in my life. Your tan extends where there should be a pale area from your swim trunks, so I've filled my nights fantasizing about you swimming nude since the first time I saw you in the showers at the gym. You frown every time you talk about your half-finished

manuscript, and I've got a hunch I might be good for your writer's block. You love your baby sister enough to give away the guy you've had a monumental crush on for years, and --"

He paused at Bryan's half-choked sob. "I haven't made you forget him tonight, have I? Because if I've failed, well, then I guess we both lose."

The pain in Dallas's voice was nothing next to the rush of frustrated desire and anxious hope Bryan sensed as Dallas rested his chin on his shoulder. Goddess help him, if he owed Dallas anything for dragging him into his crazy world, it was a little bit of honesty.

As he hesitated, Dallas reached down and removed the cock ring, stroking Bryan's sagging cock between his thumb and forefinger. "I've thought about touching you like this for months -- didn't think when it finally happened we'd both be sad."

As blood flooded back into the shaft, he arched forward, pressing himself against Dallas's hand as he tried to sort out where to start. Because caution be damned, this was worth the risk.

"Just tell me all of it -- the fear, why you haven't taken anyone to bed lately, why you can't let go of an empty crush --"

Bryan squirmed around to face Dallas, draping his legs over his friend's thighs. "I told you witches don't usually marry other witches -- that there aren't enough of us to go around. But it's a risk, telling someone. They might react violently, out of fear, or simply refuse to accept us for what -- *who* -- we are."

"But what's this have to do with..." The puzzlement in Dallas's voice was tinged with impatience, and the strokes of his hand along Bryan's cock took on a note of urgency.

"Aileen fell hard for Tim, and like a good witch, she waited until she was sure of him to explain her quirkier traits. He put on a good show, told her he could accept who she was, but he never managed it. In the end, Aileen's love counted more than her identity. She let her gifts shrivel up to almost nothing. By the time her rat-bastard husband died, it was almost too late."

With a sigh, Dallas nodded, his silky hair brushing against Bryan's cheek. "So you latched on to Jon as a safe bet -- someone you'd never have to risk exposing yourself to. Because you'd die before you gave up your power. I saw that tonight when you cradled the green light on your palm, then sent it dancing in a sphere around us. Scared the shit out of me, but I could feel your joy -- that the crazy, crackling energy was part of you."

"So anyway, I had this monumental crush on Jon." Bryan continued, wanting to get everything out in the open, now that he'd finally started talking. "Even before Tim died, I never had the guts to act on it. But Jon held the promise of not spending my life alone, you know? Not having to expose myself to someone who might turn around and destroy me."

"And then Tim died, and you realized how much Jon still loved your sister. So you did the right thing and sent him to her." Shifting his hand, Dallas stroked the soft covering of hair on Bryan's sac. "And you haven't been bringing lovers home because...?"

"Empty." Bryan sucked in a gasp as Dallas fondled his sac, and he let the tidal wave of emotion that one word depicted, everything that churned inside him, fill the air between them. Bryan moaned when Dallas slid his fingers back farther to finger his asshole, tracing circles over the puckered flesh.

"So if you're looking for someone of your own, why turn me down over and over? You knew I was after more than a quick roll on the sheets." When Bryan shivered, Dallas stroked long, easy paths up and down his back with his free hand and increased the pressure of his fingertips against his ass. "What's really scaring you? Sure, you're cautious after what happened with Aileen and Tim, but that's not enough to set you shivering in my arms like a hurt puppy."

"Stop, okay? Enough." He tried to break free, but Dallas grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him close. Fear clouded his vision, and Bryan slipped backward in time. "I knew I wasn't supposed to, but Mom and Dad were spending Beltane out of town, and it was easy enough to sneak off without the babysitter noticing."

Fear crawled across Bryan's skin, and Dallas crooned something comforting.

"I wanted to be under the stars, to cast a circle out in the open rather than in the stuffy air of my bedroom. I wasn't allowed to use magic outdoors without one of my parents with me, but I was eight -- more brave than smart."

As he listened, Dallas never let go of the back of his neck -- never stopped stroking his ass. The rhythm of his touch was soothing and disturbing, all wrapped into one.

"I brought a few things with me -- a statue of the goddess and a few other sacred objects. When I thought I was far enough into the trees not to be noticed, I set them on a rock and took off my clothes."

"Ah, the delightful absence of tan lines gets a young start."

Despite himself, Bryan laughed, and the laughter loosened a knot of fear deep inside him. His voice grew solemn. "I hadn't cast a circle yet when they burst out of the trees, beer cans in hand. It was dusk, and enough light filtered into the clearing that they couldn't help but notice me." Bryan shivered, remembering the fear, the threats, the hateful jeers.

"Shh. It's okay. You're safe."

Bryan didn't know if he'd made a troubled sound, or if Dallas was responding to his fevered thoughts.

"There were two of them, tourists I guess, since I'd never seen them before and never did again. About seventeen or eighteen, and more drunk than smart."

"Oh, Jesus, they didn't...?"

"No, not like that. They went right for the stone where I'd placed the carved goddess, the pentacle, a couple candles. One of them crushed it all, slamming his boot into the wood and wax and glass, while the other guy held me by the neck. Said he'd teach the goddamned, bare-assed heathen not to play with Satan's toys. Then they kicked the shit out of me. I ended up with a couple of cracked ribs and more bruises than I could count."

They sat together without speaking, and when Bryan couldn't bear Dallas's sympathetic silence any longer, he touched his fingers together and clicked off both the overhead light and his desk lamp, plunging the room into darkness.

"You don't have to hide from me." Easing him down toward the pillows, Dallas settled beside him, face-to-face, their bodies stretched close. "So you know firsthand how dangerous it is putting yourself out there." Bryan must have flinched, because Dallas pounced on it. "That's it, isn't it? Why you clung so hard to the fantasy of ending up with Jon? Another witch. Someone safe."

"Yes," Bryan whispered, then cleared his throat, searching for his voice.

"So my job's easier than I thought, because I don't have to make you forget Jon. I just have to be what you hoped he could be. Someone who will never hurt you. Someone who accepts who you are."

When tears streaked his face, Bryan swiped them away with the back of his hand.

"No, it's okay." Capturing his wrists, Dallas leaned forward to kiss his damp cheeks. "No hiding from me. Not anymore. I'm a far cry from those guys in the woods. Hell, I'm not even a rat-bastard like your sister's late husband. I swear -- I'm not going hurt you."

In way over his head and desperate to end this sensitive guy crap if it was the last thing he did, Bryan rolled onto his side and reached for the quirt Dallas had abandoned earlier.

"Not a chance, buddy. Given the shit you've just shared, tonight's flavor is plain vanilla." Dallas pried the whip out of Bryan's hand and tossed it on the floor. "But just so you know, I happen to do plain vanilla exceptionally well."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bryan had been more right than he knew when he'd teased that Dallas was the guy with the antlers tonight. He'd been soundly whipped, bared his soul, cried -- *damn it* -- and couldn't for the life of him seem to regain control of this scene. Shivering, he realized he'd

reached out for Dallas's mind instinctively, communicating his unease along with that last thought. *Fuck.*

"Not a scene anymore. This is more important than that." With a warm palm on his shoulder, Dallas pressed him onto his back, then covered him like a blanket. "One more question, though. The bit with the two guys earlier, leaf boy and antler man...what did it mean?"

Bryan's chuckle warmed his throat and loosened knotted muscles. "Gods. Not leaf boy and antler man, the Green Man and the Horned God. The vision -- like I said, what happened tonight was new to me, too. Weird-ass Beltane. But I guess if it meant something, it was about trust. Taking a risk and having it work out all right."

"Fair enough. So if you'll tell me where you keep the condoms, I'll make like antler man and show you how good this can be for us."

No doubt, Dallas's sense of humor was one of his best traits. Bryan considered directing his friend to the stash of condoms in his bedside table drawer, but if this was going to work -- and he didn't quite dare hope there was a chance -- he figured he'd better come clean about just how different he was.

"Okay, that part about what -- who -- I am. Besides the psychic shit and the pretty lights, I can heal small injuries, light a candle without matches, find lost objects, and do some serious magic. The genetics of it -- I'll give you the long form later, but we're resistant to disease. I'll get a condom if it'll make you feel better, but there's zero risk."

"Anyone else tried that line on me, I'd be out the door. But with you, compared to what I saw earlier, that's probably the least strange thing you've shared tonight."

"I'm telling you the truth, because if there's any chance we..."

"I know you are, and stop talking about chances. Once you relax and let me in, you're going to have a hell of a time getting rid of me." Dallas wiggled his hips so his cock nudged

against Bryan's stomach, harder than iron, warm, and as smooth as velvet. "So if you'll help me find the lube I tossed down on the bed earlier..."

With a snap of his fingers, Bryan summoned a small globe of bluish green light over his outstretched palm, located the lost item in a tangle of sheets, and handed the tube to Dallas. Using even that little piece of magic sent his heart rate ratcheting up a few notches. Adrenaline coursed through his veins, and he tensed for rejection as he snuffed out the glow sphere.

"Neat trick." Humming softly under his breath, Dallas popped the flip-cap on the tube of gel lubricant. "But you're going to have to get over the part where you go into a panic every time you show off for me, because I'm cool with who you are. All of you -- and honestly, your politics are harder to take than the witch thing -- and I want to see where we can go together."

"Are we done talking?" Blessed goddess, his heart felt like someone tugged it out and stomped on it, then kissed it all better and slapped on a Band-Aid. But he was still a man, and it had been a long time since he'd seen any action. If Dallas didn't get on with things, he was going to self-destruct.

"Yeah. Done talking." With hands cupping his face, holding him still, Dallas kissed him until he stole his breath, his will, and his sanity.

Dallas's tongue tasted sweet and salty, soft and probing, as he explored Bryan's mouth. The weight of his body drove Bryan wild, hard and firm from hours on the basketball and racquetball courts, and burning up with enough fire to consume them both in an instant. Bryan's hands traveled along Dallas's back, memorizing the ridge of his spine, the dip before the slight rise of his tightly muscled ass, the fine covering of hair on his thighs.

The press of Dallas's cock between his legs was more than Bryan could bear. He wanted to feel the rigid length buried in his ass right this minute -- almost as badly as he wanted to draw the encounter out and savor it all night long.

“We’ll have lots of nights. Lots of time. Take it easy, or you’re going to come before I do much more than kiss you.”

If anyone else insulted his control like that, he’d put up a hell of an argument. But Dallas knew exactly how far gone he was, so there was no point arguing. Instead, he spread his legs and canted his hips -- more pleading than suggesting at this point in the game.

“Not yet.” Ignoring his moan of protest, Dallas slid down along his body until his mouth brushed his chest, then his belly, and finally, his cock.

It took every ounce of control to hold it together, as Dallas dragged his tongue along the shaft, nibbled the head, and then all but swallowed Bryan’s cock. Flickers of blue green light lit the room as his aura crackled to life, encircling them in a cocoon of energy. For the first time since the show with the Green Man and the Horned God, Bryan intentionally delved into Dallas’s thoughts, checking to see if he’d gone too far and frightened his friend.

But what coursed across the bond was white-hot lust and pure wonder at the show of shimmering lights surrounding them. As he pressed deeper into Dallas’s mind, conveying his affection and arousal, Bryan drew back in surprise when he felt an answering wave of emotion so true and deep, he refused to name it.

All the while, Dallas’s mouth kept at him like liquid fire, pushing him past the limits of sanity and into the realm of pure desperation. No matter how hard he arched upward to meet the heat of Dallas’s mouth, Dallas was too damned skilled to let him find release one second ahead of the game plan.

“So, you planning to torture me all night?”

There must have been a note of misery in his lighthearted jest, because Dallas finally released his wet, throbbing cock and slid back up his body to claim his mouth.

*I could kiss you forever.*

“Mmm.” Pulling up for air, Dallas smiled through the wavering blue light. “Me too.” He touched Bryan’s hair and smoothed out the tangles, then glanced around the bed. “Ah, lost the lube again.”

Grinning, Bryan fumbled around until his hand landed in a puddle of goop. He handed the wet container to Dallas. “Got as far as opening the cap before you got distracted and put it down. We’re going to wreck my bed tonight.”

“Sorry.” Squirting a generous amount of gel onto his fingers, Dallas coated his cock, then spread the cool substance along the crease concealing Bryan’s anus. Probing deeper, he eased a finger inside, stroking gently to spread the lube.

“I wasn’t complaining,” he said, his voice husky and his breathing fast and uneven. “Bed hasn’t been wrecked” -- he shivered as Dallas eased a second finger into his ass and nipped the side of his neck -- “in way too long.”

Bryan felt Dallas ease his legs open wider, and the world shrank down to a throbbing point of anticipation. Every nerve in his body awakened and glowed in sympathy with the silky, dark heat when Dallas slid a third finger into his ass and stretched him in preparation to take his cock.

“You said it’s been a while -- just want to make sure you’re ready.”

“I was ready an hour ago.”

But Dallas refused to be hurried as he continued stroking, stretching, and probing, and Bryan panted at the tantalizing pressure. At this point, it was nothing short of miraculous that he hadn’t come by now. But when Dallas took charge, his control seemed to serve where Bryan’s failed.

When Bryan had just about decided begging wouldn’t compromise his pride, Dallas eased his fingers free and guided his cock home with his hand. The dizzy ecstasy of having three fingers inside him was nothing next to taking Dallas’s cock.

“Okay?”

“More.” The first few strokes sent a wildfire searing along his spine, and the puppy noises he made didn’t do what was left of his pride a lot of good.

“Careful what you ask for.” Slowly, Dallas slid his hand between their bodies and captured Bryan’s shaft in his fist.

With each stroke -- deeper and deeper, until Bryan shuddered at the raw, clawing explosions of pleasure -- Dallas moved his hand, stroking Bryan’s cock and filling his ass until his world shattered. Light exploded at the back of his eyelids, and he released a warm flood between their sweat-slick bodies.

He yelled, moaned, and, by the end, bless it if he didn’t also whimper. But although Dallas allowed him a moment to catch his breath, he didn’t pull out. Staying deep, taking his pleasure in short, fierce thrusts, Dallas sought his own release as Bryan dug his nails into Dallas’s shoulders. When the stretching, burning rhythm passed the line between pleasure and pain, Bryan grabbed fistfuls of sheet and held on for all he was worth.

“Hey, if this is too much, I could pull out, and we could finish another way.” Although Dallas’s words wavered with the strain of his approaching orgasm, he started to ease out, willing to make good on his offer.

“No -- I want it like this.” And he did. Releasing his death grip on the sheets, he cupped his palms over Dallas’s ass and pressed to urge him deeper.

Planting his heels on the bed, Bryan tilted his hips more, rubbing his still-hard cock against Dallas’s stomach. When Dallas got back to business, Bryan’s world unraveled and bled into a haze of blue light. At some point, he slipped into Dallas’s head, and what rocked him wasn’t the sexy, wild flood of erotic images but rather, the love.

His body went limp as he tried to process the overwhelming flood of affection, and Dallas took advantage of the absolute lack of resistance to bury himself so deep, Bryan let out a gasp of surprise. Face-to-face, there was no hiding as Dallas kissed his tears away for the second blessed time tonight.

“Shh. Stop worrying what I’ll think.”

For a while, only the sound of their frantic breathing filled the room. Then, with a series of desperate strokes, Dallas groaned and shuddered against him. They lay holding each other as the blue green light Bryan had cast around them faded to darkness.

As if through a haze, Bryan registered damp, sticky heat, strong arms, slowing heartbeats, and more peace than he’d thought he’d have in a lifetime.

When Dallas eased out, tickling Bryan’s balls to distract him from the tug of separation, he felt abandoned.

“Still here, witch of mine.” Rolling him onto his side, Dallas snuggled close. “Not planning on going anywhere.”

“You’ll stay the night?” Bryan hated the quaver in his voice.

“As long as you’ll have me. Tonight, tomorrow, a month, a year. Forever.”

When Dallas tensed up after choking out that last word, Bryan realized he wasn’t the only one blown away by what they’d stumbled into tonight.

“So, did it work?” The cheeky note in Dallas’s voice couldn’t hide how close they’d come to confessing shit so deep it threatened to drown them both.

“Work?”

“Did I make you forget about Jon?”

With a weary sigh, Bryan pressed his face into the warmth of Dallas’s shoulder. “Jon who?”

“Good.” When Dallas brushed his cheek with his fingers, the tentative touch would have been enough to convey his unease even if Bryan hadn’t been able to slip inside his head.

“Look, I know how you feel. And you know how desperate I am for you not to leave me. So, which of us is going to be the first to say it out loud and ease the tension?” Bryan’s breath stuck in his throat as he waited for an answer.

“I think it has to be you. That’s what the vision meant, isn’t it?” Dallas sighed and shook his head. “You have to trust me, or you’ll never be able to take us for granted. You’ll always be afraid of losing me.”

*Shit.* He so fucking did not want to be the one to give a name to feelings that, truth be told, had been building for months.

“Maybe we could say it at the same time?”

Dallas laughed, about the last thing Bryan expected, and then reached back to land a sound slap on his ass.

“You’re a real head case, you know that?”

“Yeah. Give me time?” Bryan swallowed hard, hoping this wouldn’t turn into an argument.

“You’ve got it.”

“Here.” Grabbing Dallas’s hand, Bryan guided it down to his stiffening cock.

“What’s this?”

“Did I mention witches have quick rebound time?” As Bryan rolled Dallas onto his back and slid across his sweat-slick stomach until their hips met, Dallas let out a low, husky laugh.

## Chapter Five

Sylvia eased the phone onto its cradle and tucked her legs beneath her. CEO. She'd worked hard to earn everything those three letters represented. But the joke was on her, because she'd never planned on New York. Never planned on a cross-country move, or having to plunge into a new company and take over as an outsider. A company so plagued with infighting and financial trouble, the current CEO opted for early retirement rather than staying around to clean up the mess.

Her first act would be to dust off the old guillotine, decide who was loyal and who had to go, and shed some corporate blood. Easing out of her jacket, she unbuttoned the first few buttons of her silk blouse and leaned back against the leather sofa. Glancing around at the colorful abstracts splashed across white canvas, her soaring glass shelves displaying objets d'art from her travels, and the crisp, modern furniture, she tried to picture all of this without the view of the gardens as a backdrop.

At least she'd be closer to Jon and his fiancée. Rumor had it there was trouble brewing among some malcontent witches out East. It couldn't hurt to keep an eye on her nephew, whose powers were still fledgling-level, at best. At the sound of the key in the lock, she faced the inevitable. Ty wouldn't be coming with her.

“Hey, you’re still in your work clothes.” Tyler placed a picnic basket on the bench in the entryway, slipped out of his sandals, and strode across the room.

Six feet two of lean muscle -- honed daily by the demands of working at his uncle’s landscaping business -- Ty was a dream in khaki shorts, his cinnamon brown skin accented by his white cotton shirt. A twenty-six-year-old dream. Far too young for her forty-three. Of course, witches aged slowly, and she didn’t look a day over thirty, but still...

“I had a series of unexpected calls at the office and had to finish up at home. I’m sorry -- did we have plans?” She didn’t usually forget things like that, but today had turned her world on its head.

“You’re kidding, right?” Concern lining his forehead, Ty sank down beside her on the couch and released her hair from the knot at the back of her neck. Fluffing the chestnut brown curls across her shoulders, he bent down to kiss her. “Your altar’s not set up. You’re not kidding, are you? You *forgot*?”

“Oh!” In all her life, she’d never forgotten one of the fire festivals. Lughnasadh. And she hadn’t so much as baked a loaf of bread to mark the summer harvest.

“Hey, all the blood just rushed from your face. Buck up, Mrs. Robinson, all’s not lost. I have a feast packed -- thought you might like to eat out in the pagoda.”

Sylvia fought a smile at the familiar jest. “Don’t call me that. Never could stand *The Graduate*, anyway. And yes, to the picnic in the gardens. Thank you.”

“Back in a minute.”

She watched him lope off toward the bedroom, her heart squeezing tight at the thought of telling him. When he returned with an armful of summer clothing, she let him undress her without protest. His fingers brushed the lacy outline of her bra as he struggled with the tiny pearl buttons on her blouse, and she flushed at the contact. When he undid the catch on her skirt, she rose to let the crisp fabric fall to the floor.

Circling his arm around her small waist, he held her a moment, and she could almost feel his eyes sweeping over her body. She'd chosen royal blue lingerie to accent her pale skin, and she suspected the effect of her skimpy bra, garter belt, nearly translucent panties, and silk hose wasn't lost on Ty. Her breath came faster, and she wondered if he'd take her here, on the sofa, as he had hundreds of times before.

Tonight, he could have her any way he wanted. And when they were done, she'd set him free.

"You're quiet tonight." Skillfully removing her bra, silk garter belt, and hose, he slid a pair of indigo shorts up over her panties and tugged a barely-there white top down over her head.

Rather than answer, Sylvia leaned into the heat of his chest and ran her hands over the slope of his neck, tickling along the edge of his close-shaved hair with her fingertips.

"Right, a quickie on the couch before we go out, then." Scooping her up and easing her onto her back, he grabbed her legs and pulled her toward him, shoved her shorts around her ankles, shed his own shorts and silk boxers, and tugged the edge of her panties aside.

She almost issued the familiar admonishment that he couldn't come on the sofa, but tonight, stains on the furniture were the least of her worries. Arching against the warmth of his body, she closed her eyes and let herself drift on the scent of salty, musky male, mixed with earth, mint, and summer roses.

Sylvia felt him trail his fingers along her labia, making sure she was wet, then he sank his swollen length into her without further preliminaries. Two years after she'd seduced him in the garden, it was still a challenge to take him all. A challenge she relished. Moaning like a wanton cat, she arched higher and wrapped her legs around his broad back, digging her heels into his spine every time he claimed more ground.

"All?"

"Yes. Sweet goddess, yes!"

This was one of those moments she wished she'd been graced with her older sister's broad hips, rather than her own wraithlike figure. Stretching became burning as he struggled to fill her, and she willed herself to relax. She grabbed his ass, sinking her nails into his skin as she urged him deeper still. More than anything, she wanted to sear this encounter into her memory, ensuring she'd never forget.

Once she was as full as nature would allow, claimed and sated and shaking, he held still and traced his fingers over the curves of her breasts. Cupping the mounds of flesh in his large hands, he covered her completely, then squeezed until she whimpered against the pressure.

Shifting his strategy, he toyed with her nipple, pulling it forward until her skin flattened between his thumb and fingertip. He rolled and pinched the areola, then finally pinched the nipple itself as blue sparks exploded behind her eyes and licks of wet fire traveled through her belly to her clitoris.

"Mmm. There, you loosened for me. Easier now." He began to move like the ocean waves beating at the San Diego coast, relentless yet graceful.

She sucked her lower lip between her teeth and held her breath as the silk of her panties tugged between her legs each time he surged forward or pulled back, adding to the dizzy feel of being possessed by him, loved by him -- fucked by him.

"No!" The cry ripped from her throat as she rose in a dizzying spiral and crashed onto the rocks. Too soon. The series of spasms caught his shaft midstroke, trapped by the iron grip of her climax.

"Easy, Sylvie, breathe for me. You're okay."

She tossed her head back so hard she banged it on the arm of the couch. He caught the back of her head in his palm, tangling his fingers in her damp brown hair to hold her still. She winced as he withdrew, still harder than iron.

"This is going to kill me, but I'm saving myself for something special later tonight."

As he got up to retrieve a washcloth, she chuckled. He must have plans for sex in the garden later. Despite the privacy of the hedges surrounding the pagoda and rose gardens, she rarely acquiesced to sex outdoors. But Ty had long since learned that the Sabbats were enough to banish any inhibitions on her part regarding sex under the stars.

\* \* \* \* \*

“What are you hiding tonight, my brown-haired witch? You hardly touched the food.” Ty leaned back, naked and glorious in the fading light, and settled on the blanket he’d spread on the polished boards of the garden pagoda.

“The salmon was excellent, and I had more than my share of wine.” She dipped her finger into the chocolate mousse and held it to his lips for him to suck. “You’re spoiling me. A bucket of fried chicken would have been fine.”

“You wouldn’t look half so wanton gnawing on a greasy chicken wing, naked in the garden as the moon rose. The thing with you playing with the chocolate mousse, however...” He reached down to stroke himself, much more roughly than she would have handled him.

The temperature dropped once the sun sank below the horizon, but it was still near ninety. Typical of a San Diego summer. She sighed at the thought of trading paradise for cold and dirty New York winters.

Of course with the early California fire season this year -- fueled by a drought only recently broken by heavy rains -- at present, paradise extended just twenty feet past the iron gates surrounding her estate. Then the land gave way to charred ruin. She’d been able to summon enough rain to protect her property, and rumor had it a coven of witches finally managed to turn the weather and curb the wildfires. But the devastation would take time to heal. Maybe New York wouldn’t be such a bad place to be for a while.

Besides, Ty was so blessed busy these days -- scrambling to keep up with business from all the property owners who wanted to replant after the drought, or rebuild and landscape

after the fires -- he'd hardly have a chance to miss her. Sylvie shook her head. *Get a grip, witch. Self pity's not your style.*

Respecting her moody silence, Ty rose and piled containers of food back into the basket. When he walked the perimeter of the octagonal structure, lighting candles in the hanging lanterns as he went, her breath caught in her throat. What began as a fling with the landscaper who'd crafted these gardens had rooted itself in deep affection. Cutting him out of her life was going to all but break her.

Sylvie smoothed her hand over her bare stomach, wondering if she'd ever find someone who could touch her the way he did. Ty moved across the garden to light a fire in the stone fire pit. Watching him naked in the firelight, she wasn't sure she had the strength to let him go.

But then, what choice did she have? She could abandon her career goals, just like her sister had abandoned her magic for the man she loved. Or he could abandon the family business he planned to take over when his uncle retired.

"You have to tell me sometime." His quiet voice sounded much too serious. "Whatever's on your mind is painting worry lines across your forehead like a road map." Sinking down beside her, he massaged the knots of tension in her shoulders.

Oh, bless it, she didn't get as far as she had in life by flinching from what had to be done. Her father taught her that when faced with the option of pain now, or greater pain later, you might just as well face the misery head-on.

"I received an offer from New York today -- CEO. I didn't go looking for this. They came looking for me."

"Congratulations. Seems your reputation has spread beyond sunny San Diego." His tone guarded, he continued to knead her shoulders.

"I accepted." Curt and to the point. Just like she'd deliver news of someone's termination at the office.

Although this time, her own heart cleaved in half with the blow. And as well as she knew him, she suspected Tyler's did, too. "I'll be leaving as soon as I can wrap things up here. A matter of weeks. I think it's best if we make a clean break after tonight."

"Well, then." He dropped his hands, took a deep breath, and stared across the rose bushes toward the Lughnasadh fire.

When she scooted back, instinctively putting space between them, he grabbed her wrist hard enough to sting. "I'd marry you in a minute, Sylvia."

"So you've told me on several occasions, and I've explained --"

"That you're not the marrying type. What if I followed you to New York?"

"As what -- my boy toy? My kept man?" She aimed the jab to wound. A little blood now could avoid a world of hurt later. "And you'd content yourself with designing window boxes and rooftop gardens?"

"There are suburbs all over New Jersey where a landscaper could find a niche. I'd cross the globe for you, Sylvie. I'm not going to bitch about a little commute." His voice held a world of hurt and anger. She'd hit her mark.

He gripped her wrist harder and brought his other hand up to cradle the back of her neck. "Marry me. You know I'd never ask you to give up the career you love. And I'm not your sister's husband -- I love your magic as much as I love your laugh. I'd sooner cut off my own hand than ask you to throw away your pentacle and spells. Would loving me be such a sacrifice?"

She cried out when he shoved her onto her back and covered her with his body. "So I'm supposed to ask you to give up your family's landscaping business -- your shot at owning it someday? I'm no more capable of that than you are!" Of course, if he'd chosen to use his engineering degree instead of mucking around in the soil, he could find a position in New York, but she knew better than to mention that.

Rage flickered through her like lightning, sparking saffron light around her face. He knew as well as she did what the real problem was. They'd covered this ground so many times, she could recite the argument in her sleep.

"Once again, if we must, you're twenty-six, Tyler. And I'm --"

"Acting like my age is the modern equivalent of leprosy. Not to mention, picking a fight on a night that's sacred to you." Stroking her curls away from her face, he rolled off of her and walked toward the fire pit. "Dance with me. If you're too upset to cast a circle and kneel at your altar tonight, at least dance a circle around the fire."

As easily as that, her anger evaporated, replaced with so much affection -- so much love -- that her throat ached with the impending loss. The path of flat stones felt cool under her bare feet as she hurried to join him, and the scent of roses hung thick on the night air. Wind licked at the flames, turning the fire blue, then orange, then green.

"I'm sorry." She took his hand, and without further conversation, they danced a wild tango across the cobblestone courtyard, circling the fire pit until yellow mist formed in their path, her magic rising of its own volition to form a sacred space.

Rose vines lashed at her legs as they spun too close to the trellises, and Tyler cried out in surprise as his arm tangled with the thorns. As they whirled away, she traced her fingers along his forearm until she found the warm, wet scratch. Without breaking the beat of the dance, she bent to kiss the hurt.

"Call your circle, my wanton witch." Breathing hard, Tyler slowed, then guided them to a stop a few feet from the fire. "Summon your magic. Give thanks for the harvest, and then --"

As his hand slid from her shoulder to her breast, then lower to cup her pubic mound, goose flesh rose across her bare arms. "And then?"

"You'll have to wait and see. But I promise I'll leave you with a memory to cherish long after I'm gone." The words held more hurt than anger, and he sealed the promise with a kiss.

She sucked his tongue as if she could capture the taste of him, something to remember him by. When he finally pulled away, she felt hollow and spent. Shakily, she knelt by the fire and let her power rise, first as an amber ball hovering over her hand, then as a sphere of light arching over and around them.

“I never get tired of that part.” He spoke in a whisper, his voice full of reverence.

Goddess only knew what had prompted her to draw him into her world and trust him with her secrets less than six months after she’d taken him into her bed. Maybe something about the way he cradled seedlings in his bare palm, stroked the leaves of her rose bushes between this thumb and finger, as if he were caressing her breast, or lifted his face to the rain with his eyes wide open and let the droplets coat his thick lashes. In any case, she’d never regretted her decision.

The circle cast, she tried to focus on the solemnity of the occasion. The earth recovering from the wildfires, offering up what harvest it could. But instead, erotic images kept dancing across the flames. Tyler bending her over the foot of the bed and taking her in the ass. Lying beside the tall hedges on a patch of warm grass as he buried his head between her legs, his tongue probing so deep, his teeth brushed her tender flesh.

Twisted together on their sides, her leg draped across his and their upper bodies forming a V as he glided in and out, panting at how tight she was. Up against the wall in the shower, screaming in ecstasy as jets of water pounded her face and shoulders. Her evening gown hiked up around her hips, palms flat on the dining room table, after the New Year’s ball.

And the ones she’d almost, but not quite, rather forget -- things that still made her blush. Her legs draped over the arm of the sofa as he filled her with a thick purple dildo. Arms splayed wide and wrists bound, tied to the pillars of the garden pagoda. Corseted, blindfolded, wrists handcuffed to the mahogany posts of her bed. Splayed on her stomach, naked, her arms and legs tied spread eagle to the bedposts with stiff leather restraints. The

rhythm of a whip against her ass, gentle at first, then hard enough that she tried to wriggle out of its reach, her juices dripping down her thighs.

No sacred images had enough power to break through the parade of erotic vignettes. Surrendering to the heat of the fire and the heady scent of roses, she leaned against Tyler, her breast brushing his arm as she pressed closer.

Her concentration fragmented beyond hope, she gave up her halfhearted attempt to pull together a summer harvest ritual. Aching, as if she'd relived each scene that had danced across the flames, she struggled to her feet, called the swirling energy home, and waited for whatever came next.

Ty hesitated a moment, staring at the flames, before he stood and led her back to the shelter. What memories or regrets had he seen as he watched the fire? Or was he planning one, final decadence to top all the others?

## Chapter Six

Her body felt like warm honey, pooling on the thick blankets spread on the pagoda floor. She wasn't sure how long Ty massaged her back, neck, arms, and legs, but she doubted she could stand. All her anguish at the impending changes flooded away with the smooth strokes of his hands on her skin.

"Now that you're relaxed, I have some things I need to say." He cupped his palm at the back of her neck and stroked her hair. "So far, tonight's discussion has focused on you. This part's about me."

Easing himself down onto the blankets, he lay with his face close to hers. "Once, when I was about eight, I strayed off the path on a family hike. Flattening myself on top of the tall grass, I lay listening to the buzz of insects and smelling the warm earth. Another child, not much older than me, intruded on my solitude."

"What does this have --?"

"Shh, just hear me out." He traced the back of his thumb across her eyebrows in two, gentle arcs. "I almost called out to her, but then she started dancing on the hillside. As I watched, violet light framed her head, then her body, and flared out into a brilliant white violet sphere around her."

“Oh!”

“I’d never seen anything so beautiful. Not the flowers, not the trees, not the sunrise. With everything in me, I wanted that. Wanted to be able to dance in the enchanted circle, to see the shimmering light dance with me. When I told my parents later, they thought it was a child’s fairy tale. But with everything in me, I knew it was real. All my life I searched for that beauty -- thinking I’d be complete if I could see it even one more time.”

“So you were drawn to my power? Somehow, you knew I was a witch?” She frowned as he circled the tip of his forefinger around her areola.

“No, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. I had no idea until you confided in me.” With a sigh, Ty leaned down to kiss her cheek. “By then, it was too late for the breathless beauty of your magic to make me complete. What I thought I’d wanted more than anything -- that moment of pure enchantment -- paled beside the love you’d shared with me. I love you more than magic, my brown-haired witch.”

“Pain” didn’t begin to describe how his words slid beneath her fortress of bravery and left her torn and bleeding, with no way to effect repairs. She hadn’t cried since her father died. Not a single tear. The wet trails down her cheeks must be something else. Sweat perhaps, or the evening dew.

“The next part’s less flattering, but just as important.” He stroked the moisture from her cheeks and dried her eyes with the corner of the blanket. “Tonight, we’ve talked about your career, my career -- but not the path I didn’t follow. When you first asked me why I never used my engineering degree, we’d only been together a short while, and you were almost scornful.”

She made a soft sound of protest, but he placed his fingers against her lips.

“The same summer I saw the witch child, I worked with my uncle in his landscaping business. More a pickup truck and a shed full of shrubs back then, but I knew that’s what I

wanted to do when I grew up. Work under the hot sun, coaxing things to grow, turning ugly brown lots into something beautiful.”

She tossed restlessly, uncomfortable with the direction the talk was taking.

“The engineering degree -- that was for my parents. So they could be proud of their only child.” His voice sounded weary, and he rested his forehead on her shoulder. “I never told you this part, but the car accident that claimed their lives, that happened just a few weeks after my college graduation.”

Never good at coping with emotions -- hers or anyone else’s -- she struggled for something to say. “They got to see you graduate before they died. They must have been very proud.”

“Ah, and there’s my point. I knew you’d see the pride and miss the real message. I followed someone else’s dreams, Sylvie. Not my own. If I gave up landscaping and followed the path my parents set for me, I’d be good enough for you then, wouldn’t I?”

“I never...”

“Sure you did. The times I’ve gone with you to your fancy office parties, you’ve dressed me up in designer suits and mentioned my MIT degree every time.”

“I...” *Can’t say a blessed thing to defend myself.*

“I love you -- faults and all -- but you’re a snob, Mrs. Robinson.”

Fury rippled across her skin, red and hot. Would hurting her make it easier for him to walk away? Was that what he intended?

“This is important, or I’d spare you the pain and anger. Let’s not discuss this anymore tonight. But think about what I’ve said.”

This might be the worst Lughnasadh of her life. Fighting a tension headache, she sat up and gazed across the garden at the dying fire. Ty touched her arm, just a soft brush to say *I’m here, and I’m not angry*, before heading over to the garden spigot to fill a bucket and douse

the fire. By the time he returned to her, her anger and hurt had bled away into the night, leaving behind a dull fatigue.

"I'd hoped to have some time alone together out here under the stars, but it's time to head inside. Before I knew -- well, I set something up for tonight. Now, I think maybe it's even more important."

Stiffening with apprehension, she pulled away when he offered a hand.

"Suit yourself." He collected the picnic basket, blankets, and scattered clothes, and started toward the house without bothering to dress first.

Hurrying to keep up, she crossed her arms across her breasts. She felt exposed as soon as they left the garden, despite the locked gates and tall hedges around her estate.

"I'd planned to surprise you with one of your fantasies, but given that things are sort of strained right now, I'd better tell you first."

Wow, what kind of scene could he have planned that required a lead-up like that? She might be angry, but she wouldn't turn down one last chance to curl around him and feel him move inside her.

"Granted, things are a bit tense between us after that little chat in the pagoda, but I want to be with you, Ty. Whatever you have planned --"

"I have a friend, someone who works with me in my uncle's business. We've known each other since we were teenagers, when she started on with him as a summer job."

Oh, sweet goddess, no. Not *that* fantasy.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sylvia shivered as Ty secured the blindfold over her eyes. She rested comfortably against a pile of pillows, but her wrists were bound with leather cuffs and secured to the bedposts with strong ties, leaving her naked breasts exposed. The silk sheet covered her hips and legs, but she doubted Ty would let that stay in place long.

“You’ll like Ami. She’s the one person I know who’s as strong as you are. She had it rough growing up and came out the other end knowing exactly who she was and what she wanted out of life.”

His words had a surreal quality, as if he were explaining how to care for a rare rose bush, rather than talking about someone who was about to join them in enacting Sylvia’s kinkiest fantasy. As he talked, he buckled cuffs on her ankles and secured the ties to the posts at the foot of the bed. The tall, elaborately carved mahogany posts had always been her favorite touch to her bedroom decor.

By day, she ruled over her little corner of the world. By night, the last thing she wanted was to be in charge. What better way to relinquish control than to let a lover tie her to the bed? But at the moment, she wished she’d gone with a simple waterbed -- no headboard, nothing that begged for a little bondage.

She flinched when Ty bent down to take her nipple into his mouth, sucking and tugging until warmth flooded from her chest up to her face, and she lost the edge of her fear. When he pushed the sheet clear of her legs, then lapped a damp line down her belly and sucked the eager bud of flesh that threatened to send her into a shattering climax, she decided maybe inviting Ami to bed with them wouldn’t be so terrifying after all. Not if Ty kept her in a state of insensible lust the entire time. But when the phone rang and he got up to answer it, her heart pounded, and her palms grew damp.

After a brief exchange with Ami, Ty punched in the code to open the gate and then returned to sit beside her. “This is all about you tonight -- literally, since Ami’s a lesbian. There’s nothing more than friendship between us.”

Feeling very small in the black velvet world behind the blindfold, Sylvia nodded. “Be careful what you wish for” didn’t begin to address the current situation. The night she’d shared the ménage fantasy with Tyler, it had made for sexy pillow talk. But she’d never expected something like this.

“She’ll be here in a minute. Last chance to back out if you want tonight for us alone. I’m sorry -- when I arranged this, I never dreamed tonight would be good-bye...”

He sounded so sad, so lost. If her hands were free, she would have been tempted to grasp his head and cradle it to her breasts, stroking and comforting him. “No, it’s okay.” Was she honestly more frightened of being alone with him, of the sticky, emotional entanglement of choking out those parting words, than she was of bringing a stranger into their bed?

“I’ll go let her in, then.”

As his footsteps retreated, she wiggled a little to test the bonds. Secure -- as always. Ty was a lot of things, but sloppy wasn’t one of them. When he tied a knot, he meant it.

When Ty returned, she could only hear one set of footsteps and wondered if his friend backed out at the last minute.

“Hey, Sylvie, I’m Ami. Didn’t want to startle you -- I’m at the foot of the bed. Okay if I sit down?”

So, shoes off and a light step. Sylvia’s throat clenched with anxiety. And yet, her body experienced a ripple of excitement like sheet lightning arcing across the clouds.

“Sure. Ah, welcome.” *Ouch.* That sounded stilted even to her, but as far as she knew, the advice mavens had never addressed how to greet the third party of a ménage while bound and blindfolded.

The bed moved slightly as Ami settled near her legs, and then Ty plopped down next to her chest, jostling the bed even more. *Oh, wow, this is really happening.* More sheet lightning exploded across her senses, and she suffered a moment of apprehension that her power might break free in a telltale display of saffron light.

“Ah, Ty, how much have you told Ami about me?”

“The basics -- you love your gardens, art, traveling.” His voice sounded closer than she expected, just a few feet from her face. “That you rule your corner of the corporate world

with an iron fist, but in bed you love to relinquish control. Plus some planning between us for tonight. If you want to tell the rest, you can trust her.”

Not information she’d usually share, but Ty’s vote of confidence in Ami was enough for her. Better to warn Ami ahead of time than let her aura burst forth in a riot of yellow light as she climaxed. “This is going to sound strange, but I’m a witch. Not the religious variety, an actual ‘can do magic and make pretty lights’ sort of witch.”

“Yeah, well, my policy’s not to discriminate on the basis of race, religion, national origin, or supernatural powers. So I’m cool with it.”

Sylvia chuckled, and her apprehension started to melt away. She let a small orb of light form over her hand, just to be certain Ami could deal with it if things got a bit out of control.

“Wow.” Sylvia heard the awe in her voice. “You’re for real. Can I touch it? I mean, is the light hot?”

“No, go ahead. You’ll feel a tingling energy, sort of like static electricity.” One of Ty’s favorite bedroom games was to let her caress him with a glow sphere. More than once, he’d come from that alone.

When Ami moved up to the head of the bed and brushed her fingers along Sylvia’s wrist, her stomach did a backward flip-flop, and she suspected she’d dampened the sheets. Then she felt the energy flux and knew that Ami had her hand cupped over the top of the small sphere.

“Amazing.” Shifting slightly, Ami bent down to brush the faintest hint of a kiss across Sylvia’s lips. “Tonight’s going to be one to remember, isn’t it?”

“Tell me what you look like. Blindfolded, I feel -- helpless.” She’d never felt that way when she let Ty call the shots in bed. But tonight, with two of them -- and her spread out before them like a feast -- the loss of her vision troubled her.

Ty brushed his hand across her breasts, then locked fingers with Ami and stroked her chest, ten interwoven fingers fluttering across her skin. “She wouldn’t do herself justice, but

she's gorgeous. Short blonde hair, sun kissed from working outdoors. About five-seven, and toned from all the lifting that comes with working in landscaping. Devilish smile, and an enticing piercing in her belly button that I never had the opportunity to notice at work."

Oh, goddess. If he could see the piercing, they must have undressed already. It wasn't as if she could reach out and touch them to check for herself, and she was too proud to ask, but the thought sent tingles of panic and arousal through her from head to toe.

Sweet goddess, exactly how much had she told Ty about her fantasy? And how far did he intend to go in carrying it out? Did she tell him about the nipple clamps? The dildo? The whip? The original scenario contained just about every kinky possibility she could come up with -- plus another set of hands, another mouth, another body, to drag things over the top.

When Ty's hand brushed her stomach, she flinched.

"We're not going to jump in all at once here -- we'll ease into this. But if anything gets to be too much for you, safe word's 'blue.' Say the word, and we'll stop what we're doing and let you free, soothe you if you need it, and finish off nice and gentle."

"First, we're going to touch you, let you get used to having both of us here. Nothing but hands on your skin." Ami sounded completely at ease, and she underscored her assurance by brushing her fingers under Sylvie's chin.

With Ty on one side and Ami on the other, they massaged her scalp, traced the curve of her cheekbones, and drew their fingers along the outline of the blindfold. Along with Ty's musky male scent and the fragrance of summer gardens and fresh air, she detected the more feminine odor of vanilla bath and body products. *Ami.*

By the time they finished massaging her neck and worked down to her shoulders, she was all but purring. For now, they left her breasts untouched, and she found herself anticipating when the touching would become more sexual.

"God, you've got an eager body. I can't wait to taste you." Ami sounded breathless, as if she'd been running hard, into the wind.

“Mmm.” Sylvie shivered at the thought of Ami’s mouth on her nipple, Ty’s mouth working her other breast.

They intermeshed their fingers to stroke her ribs and stomach, two ten-fingered hands fluttering over the surface of her body like hungry moths. She moaned when they moved lower, each kneading the flesh of one of her thighs. Like Ty, Ami kept her nails clipped short, though her hands were much smaller, and her fingers were long and narrow.

By the time they finished rubbing her calves, Sylvia was ready to crawl out of her skin if they didn’t find a way to take the edge off her desire. Ami took her time massaging around the ankle cuffs, testing the fit to make sure she wasn’t chafing under the leather. She could have wept for joy as they handled her feet, rubbing out every last bit of soreness and tension.

“Oh!” Simulating the motion of sucking her nipples or clitoris, they suckled her toes, moving in perfect, synchronized rhythm.

“Ready for stage two?” From the hint of teasing in Ty’s voice, she expected the next step would be -- interesting.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” So much for her intended show of confidence.

Ty must have moved back up by her head, because she felt him cup her chin in his larger, calloused hand. As he took her lip between his teeth and nibbled, then slid his tongue in to tease her with the flavor of his mouth, she was acutely conscious of Ami’s breathing -- aware she was being watched.

When Ty sat up, Ami cupped her chin and bent forward. The kiss held the promise of ripe strawberries in a summer field, sweet and tart and rippling with warmth. More than anything, she wanted to rip off the blindfold and see the expression on Tyler’s face. Was he aroused? Curious? Did he regret his decision to bring a third party into the bedroom with them?

“Sexiest thing I’ve ever seen, Sylvie. Goddamned sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.” His voice scorched across her and left her panting.

Was she starting to link with him? Or had he guessed at her discomfort? Shoring up her mental shields, she cordoned off her thoughts. Linking was a private act. She'd share her body with Ami, but her heart and soul were for Ty alone -- and not tonight, not with someone else here.

The kisses alternated like a rain of passion, first Ty, then Ami, then Ty again, until her lips felt bruised, and her tongue ached from fencing with theirs. When they each captured a corner of her mouth and darted the tips of their tongues past her lips, she wrenched her wrists against her bonds.

Ty must have shared every minute detail of her fantasy. What rocked her wasn't having them both in her mouth, but rather, that she'd shared far more than this with Ty. She blushed as she recalled describing the part where their tongues darted in and out of her sex. A wave of power danced across her, and she knew her aura had just broken free.

"Oh, wow, that feels, I mean, I've never -- Oh!"

Ty's warm laughter startled her more than Ami's awe. "You should see her, Sylvie, she's got her head thrown back like she's worshipping you, with an expression of near bliss painted across her face."

"I'll feel it, if you stroke my aura. Like little charges of pleasure, diffused over my body." Ty knew what she liked, but this would be new to Ami. She stopped shy of telling her she especially liked to feel the energy ripple in response to someone's touch over her erogenous zones.

"Here, I'll show you." Ty shifted on the bed, and a moment later two sets of hands connected with her field of energy -- right over her clitoris.

"Oh! Oh, oh, noooo!" *Sweet goddess, too soon!* Too much, with both of them sending the power swirling in dizzy eddies just where she'd feel it most.

And then it was gone, their hands withdrawn, her body throbbing within a moment of release, left hanging on the edge.

“Pull the magic back now, so we can touch you without pushing you into nirvana.” An order, not a request -- Ty was taking charge.

*Taking away decisions. Taking away responsibility. Setting me free.*

With a concerted effort, she quieted the energy and pulled it back into her center. Now they could touch her without pushing her into an orgasm before they ever made contact with her skin.

And touch her they did. She didn't have a chance to catch her breath before they zeroed in on her breasts, licking slow, lazy circles, starting at the base and moving upward. She could feel dew beading at the creases of her thighs, dripping over the folds of her sex like juice on an overripe peach.

Having two people here to tend to her needs both frightened and delighted her. As they licked, they circled their hands at the base of her breasts and squeezed, pressing her flesh so the feel of their velvet soft tongues became more pronounced. Her entire body shrank down around that one sensation.

If they planned to use her fantasy as a road map -- and so far, Ty had demonstrated both an admirable memory and a willingness to speak candidly with his friend about very personal details -- she knew what came next. Tensing as they began to suck her nipples, she braced for the pain of their nips, the unrelenting pressure when they'd bear down with their mouths and stretch her nipples away from her body.

When Ami first nibbled a little, it felt more like a love bite, a brush of hard on soft. But Ty got right down to business.

“Ahhhhh.” Arching her hips off the bed, light crackled behind her closed eyelids as he bit down, released, nipped and tugged, released, and finally rolled her sensitive skin back and forth, savoring the feel between his teeth.

When she didn't protest, Ami followed suit. With the almost intolerable mix of warm, soft, wet, sharp, stretching, rolling, tugging bliss on each side, Sylvia abandoned her pride

and cried out, again and again. A guttural groan broke from her lips and rose to a keening wail as both of them nipped her swollen nipples simultaneously.

When she thought she couldn't stand the sensation overload, they shifted from mouths to fingers, playing the compressed flesh back and forth between thumbs and forefingers, increasing pressure gradually. Her entire chest felt as if they'd poured heated honey across her skin.

Just when she didn't think she could tolerate the focused attention on her nipples one more second without coming, they shifted their attention, squeezing and rolling her breasts between their hands. Her breath came faster, and she forced herself to hold still when all she wanted to do was thrash and tear against her restraints.

"Your skin's all pink where we've been squeezing you, almost as if we'd slapped your breasts." Ami's voice sounded breathless.

Something rustled, and then she heard a series of metallic clinks. *Oh, no.* "No."

"No? Or 'blue'? We'll stop if you use the safe word."

This was her fantasy, and Ty knew she hadn't included anything that didn't arouse, or at least fascinate, her. "Just no."

"I won't set these too tight, because they'll be on for a while." Businesslike, Ami secured the first nipple clamp, then brushed her fingers across the tip of her nipple, probably checking to make sure the grip was loose enough for decent circulation.

Sylvia moaned, low and desperate. Every muscle in her body rebelled against the pain.

"It'll feel more intense because we worked your breasts over so well before putting the clamps on."

Now here was something new -- Ami would know exactly how she felt. Would no doubt have traveled this ground herself in the past. The thought was so intriguing that she relaxed into the nest of damp sheets and breathed deeper, the pain turning to pleasure as she imagined Ami's nipples similarly constricted.

And then Ty placed the second clamp, dragging the thin connecting chain lightly across her chest, and Ami's graceful fingers checked the fit. Her body thrashed of its own accord, fighting the slick, scarlet fire that raced across her breasts.

"Breathe, and you'll accept the sensations easier."

Taking Ami's advice, she surfaced, floating on the waves of crimson rather than fighting them. With utmost gentleness, both of them bent to nudge and lick the captured peaks of her nipples. A gush of warm moisture escaped between her legs and puddled beneath her ass.

What came next? She couldn't for the life of her remember. When Ty loosened the ties so her arms could move enough to flex sore muscles, she didn't think that was in the script. Ami did the same with her ankles, and she groaned a little as she took advantage of the new freedom to bend her knees and move her legs slightly.

"Sore?" Ty settled between her legs, his bare ass pressed against her, and started kneading her thighs.

"It'll help having the bonds looser. A bit of wiggle room can go a long way to prevent cramps." Ami started working on her calves, relieving tension Sylvie hadn't even been aware of.

The burning grasp of the nipple clamps receded to a steady hum of distracting sensation, uncomfortable, but arousing as all hell. Every time Ty moved, his ass rubbed the fork of her thighs, pressing against her damp, matted nest of curls. When they finished rubbing her legs, Ami got up and crossed the room.

Strange, how her senses heightened the longer the blindfold was on. She hadn't even noticed Ami's steps when she and Ty first entered the room. But now every movement registered, almost as if she'd been watching. Something thudded against the wood of her dresser, items were handled and rearranged, and Ami returned to the bed.

At the touch of something long and firm against her belly, she tried to process what was happening. When Ami let the item sit on her warm skin for a few moments, she knew what was coming next. Long, but not as wide as Ty, the dildo absorbed her body heat before Ty lifted it off her belly and touched her between the legs.

Her face flushed hot as he let her feel the swollen tip between the lips of her vulva. He'd introduced this particular item into their bedroom play three times before she'd let him use it for its intended purpose. Something about taking a foreign object inside her set her inhibitions at red alert.

And though he'd conditioned her to accept this as another form of pleasure -- just another way to play with him -- with Ami here, her embarrassment returned full force. At least they'd let her become accustomed to the weight and feel of it on her stomach before going further. In her fantasy, Ty had surprised her, driving the cool, lubricated object home without warning.

As he let her take a moment to get used to the pressure, probing gently before penetrating, she knew she'd never find anyone she trusted as much as Ty. Would never find anyone she loved as much as she loved him. As pain at the impending good-byes -- the crushing loss of his companionship -- flooded over her, he eased the sex toy home, stopping only when it bumped the back of her tight channel.

At least with the blindfold, they couldn't see her tears. Would this be all she'd have to fill her in New York? Never again the frightening-dizzy-wonderful stretch of accommodating Ty?

"Hey, you're awfully quiet. You okay?" Ami touched her elbow and then bent to kiss her cheek.

Not trusting herself to speak, she nodded. Ty worked the smooth, unforgiving length of the silicone shaft in and out of her a few times before tying a G-string panty over it to hold it

in place. The ribbon ties tickled as he secured a bow on each side, and she took advantage of her loosened bonds to jerk away.

The answering slap on her thigh came hard and fast, and she cried out in surprise. Yes, that had been in the pillow tale she'd shared with him, and she guessed she'd feel the sting of both their hands on her before the night was through. At least the unexpected impact had the effect of cutting off the emotional flood. Instead, she focused on how the heat of the spanking heightened both the bite of the nipple clamps and the pressure of the toy deep inside her.

"I'm going to go off script for a while here, but I think she needs this if we're going to do everything else we talked about." Covering her like a blanket, Ami lay breast to breast, stomach to stomach, leg to leg.

Locking her hands behind Sylvie's neck, Ami kissed her as if they'd known each other -- and been lovers -- for years. Answering instinctively, Sylvie joined in the kiss, even shifted her legs to better enjoy the warmth of Ami's pelvis pressing into hers. As Ami moved, the nipple clamps and the thin metal chain connecting them pressed harder against Sylvie's body. Knowing Ami felt the outline of the skin-warmed metal on her own breasts drove Sylvie into a near frenzy.

Sylvie broke away from the kiss, coming up for air. "You can feel it, can't you, the metal of the clamps pressing against your breasts?"

Ami's laugh bubbled up, warm and easy. "Sure, though not nearly as much as you can. You need me to readjust the clamps yet? Massage some blood back into your pinched little nipples?"

Ty made a soft choking noise, followed by the rhythmic rubbing that indicated he was stroking his rigid shaft.

"Yes, that'd be good." Anything to feel Ami's hands on her skin while Ty watched.

"This'll hurt."

Inhaling sharply, she shifted under Ami's weight as first one, then the other clamp came off. Indigo fireworks exploded behind her eyelids, and she mumbled incoherently.

"Here, I'll help with this part." Nudging Ami toward her right breast, Ty captured her left nipple in his mouth, then sucked deeper to include as much flesh as he could hold.

Pain sizzled across her breasts as they sucked and kneaded, driving too much blood back into the still compressed flesh. "Oh -- please -- please!"

*Please what? Stop? More? Hurts! No!* She didn't for the life of her know what she meant to say.

"Okay, clamps back on." Saving her from trying to figure out what she wanted, Ty cleared things up by naming the next step for her, then making good on his promise.

This is what she did at the office. People below her in the food chain never had to wonder what came next -- she mapped it all out for them. Leaving them to attend to their duties -- but making all the big decisions herself.

"No! Hurts! Too much!"

"Blue?" Ty left the clamps in place -- the metal connecting chain clinking as she thrashed against the pain -- but pulled back so no one was touching her, giving her space to decide.

As her body twitched and shivered in preclimactic frenzy, she shook her head. The sting had already pushed her past the bad moment and translated itself into hot, greedy pleasure. She stopped short of asking them to tighten the clamps -- turn the little screw that would compress already screaming flesh -- but did leave that option open for later.

*More. More. More.* That had been the theme of this -- her darkest, wildest fantasy. Taking more than she had to give. Over the top. Out of bounds. With Tyler leading the way.

On some level, she knew she wouldn't have to ask. Tyler would know when to push things over the edge and into the abyss. He wouldn't leave her regretting that she hadn't seen this through.

“You know me now? Know the feel of me? Know I won’t hurt you -- more than you’ve asked for, anyway?” Husky and low, Ami’s voice rippled across her like a lover’s touch.

“Yes. I know you.” And she did. The time they’d spent pressed together had been enough. “I trust you.”

Ty would never bring someone here that he didn’t trust with her physical and emotional safety. But it was more than that. Without releasing the firm grip on her shields, somehow she’d read Ami’s basic nature while they lay pressed together.

“Thank you, for the little deviation from the script.”

With the first thwack against her thigh, thin tongues of leather heating a tiny area of her body to the boiling point, she knew they were back on track. No more tender moments for a while. Two people taking charge of her, just as she’d imagined.

The whip was smaller than the forbidding bullwhip cracking and twisting over her body in her fantasy. But far more practical and safer in the hands of her tormentors. They wouldn’t mark her beyond the strips of pink she imagined were forming under the bee sting kisses of the leather, but they’d drive her just as wild as she’d been in her erotic musings.

After ten strokes across her right thigh -- she counted as she bit her lower lip in an effort not to cry out -- there was a pause. When the icy-hot lashes rained down on her left thigh, she knew the whip had changed hands. Ty had a stronger arm, but Ami layered the strokes faster, more expertly, creating a solid path of sparkling, biting sensation on her outer thigh.

She didn’t have time to catch her breath before the stiff length of narrow leather changed hands. Ty set to work again, thrashing her inner thigh hard enough that she flinched and pulled away.

“Bad idea, witch of mine. Don’t want the lashes landing on your tender little mound by mistake.” He fingered her clit before pressing her firmly against the mattress. “Hold. Absolutely. Still.”

As she counted off the seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth strokes, her body knotted into a mass of tension, and sweat coated her stomach and legs, but she didn't try to dodge the pain again. With a sigh of relief, she relaxed as Ty handed the whip off to Ami. At least Ami made it happen faster, even if it hurt more.

Molten, golden, unfettered, out of control. *Slap, slap, slap*. Each rapid-fire impact followed by a low, keening sound she couldn't have held back if her life depended on it.

And then it was over. Panting and trembling, she waited for the blue mist to fade. What came next? It seemed vitally important to know what part of her body would draw their attention. What indignity or heady bliss had she described to Ty following the dark and delicious bite of the whip? She'd never imagined he'd make this happen in real time, outside the safety of her fantasy world.

Sylvia sighed, content. "I'll never forget this, Ty. Never. It's...wonderful. Thank you." She knew he could hear tears in her voice, but so what? She didn't want him to think she was leaving him callously, without regret or remorse.

Oh goddess, leaving him hurt so much more than the whip. But what of it? Two careers. Two states. A span of years and experiences between them. Different worlds. Different goals.

"I think she's had enough time to catch her breath." Ty opted not to acknowledge her teary outpouring of emotion, and she appreciated that. Tonight, she needed him to be in control.

The two of them settled by her legs, close enough to share body heat, and began licking a symmetrical pattern up her thighs. Outer thighs first, and then the throbbing, stinging flesh on the inner side. She was so far gone that it took her a good twenty-five tongue-lashes or so to realize they were tracing the pink marks the whip would have left.

"Oh!" The erotic power of that image rocked her.

By the time they finished, she lay shuddering beneath their hands, hungry to move forward and have them claim even more intimate ground. She whimpered when Ami untied one side of the G-string, and her breath escaped in a whoosh as Ty released the other. Air brushed across slick, swollen flesh.

Ty held her down, the flat of his palm pressed against her pubic mound, pinning her to the bed. Ami moved the thick length of silicone until only the tip remained inside her. Then they switched. Ami's small but determined hands pinned her down, and Ty moved the shaft deep inside her, pressing forward past the point when her body started to resist.

Sylvia cried out. "Too much. The nipple clamps! Please --"

They must have sensed the panic in her voice, because this time they didn't ask her for the safe word. Rather, they moved quickly to remove the dildo and release the clamps. A scream ripped from her throat as a flood of fire rushed back through pinched nerve endings, sending out panic signals.

"Shh, you're okay. Getting better already, isn't it?" Ami cradled her while Ty gently licked her tortured nipples. "Clamps hurt a lot worse coming off than going on, don't they? Remember it's not really hurting you -- only sensation, no damage."

Somehow, that helped calm her, and she relaxed under their caresses. Ty got up and crossed to the dresser, then returned and pressed a glass to her lips. Ami supported her head as she drank. Nothing had ever tasted better than the sweet relief of the ice water sliding down her throat.

"Blue? Or are you game to finish this?"

From the note of anticipation in his voice, she knew it would make Ty crazy if she said the safe word, though he'd abide by whatever she decided.

"I'm okay now." And she was. If she remembered correctly, the part where she surrendered to their will and they pushed her past her limits was over. The rest, well, she couldn't wait!

“Okay, then.” Ami gave her shoulder a reassuring pat, followed by a tender kiss on the lips. “You’re sure fun to play with, beautiful witch. Full of surprises.”

Oh, she hadn’t even thought of that. What had she done when pain washed over her and dragged her under? “Did I -- do anything -- when I panicked...?”

“Some amazing bursts of jewel-toned amber crackled around your head, and little sparks darted across your body, but you didn’t try to scare us off or anything.” Ty knew what that was like, because the first time they’d had anal sex she’d summoned so much light -- combined with an awesome thunderclap -- that he’d withdrawn and scampered off the bed.

Evidently, she’d gained better control since then. “Good -- I mean, that I didn’t try to frighten you.”

“Witches backed into a corner can be feisty creatures, but know that she’d never harm you. Scare the crap out of you, maybe, but nothing that could hurt you.” Ty’s voice held an almost humorous solemnity at that pronouncement.

“Got you good once, did she?” Ami chuckled.

“Scared about five years off my life -- but I was asking for it.”

Ty settled back by her legs, and Ami followed. *Oh, yes. Oh, goddess, please don’t let them turn back now.* As two eager tongues caressed the gaping flesh where the sex toy had prepared her for further exploration, she crooned under her breath.

“Mmm.” Ami’s voice vibrated against her, a steady thrum of pleasure.

As smoothly as if they’d choreographed this intimate dance ahead of time, their tongues darted in and out of her, first one, then the other, and she slid into a dizzy river of slippery, wet passion. Rosy gold sparks flashed behind her eyelids, and she knew her aura had broken loose to dance across her flesh. Pressing outward, she spread the energy to include Ty and Ami, wrapping them in a snug web of warmth and light.

“Oh!” Ami stiffened for a moment, then relaxed and resumed the rhythm.

Sylvie came for the first time in a series of rolling waves, a free fall of lazy, heady pleasure. At that point, they shifted to her clitoris, teasing it between the tips of their tongues like a tasty morsel.

When Ty moved aside to let Ami cover her with her mouth, Sylvie pressed upward into the wet warmth. "Don't stop. Please, just like that."

Ty slid two fingers deep inside her as Ami continued to drive her insane with a suckling, nibbling, licking frenzy of delight. When a third finger joined the first two, she realized it belonged to Ami -- and slammed over the edge as if she were exploding through a brick wall.

"Ohhhhhhhhhh!" The wail crested with the hard, tight spasms of her climax, and she felt her aura whipping around them like a windstorm.

"You get her feet. I'll do the hands." She lay writhing between them as Ty moved to unbuckle the wrist restraints.

By the time Ami freed her legs, she could breathe again, if not think coherently.

"Still want to play it like this?"

Did he mean her, or Ami?

"Wouldn't miss it for anything." Ami rolled her onto her side and settled behind her, spooning her body and soothing away the last of her trembling.

Ty pressed close on the other side, facing her.

"Blue?" Ami asked this time, rather than Ty.

"More like red. I'm melting between you."

Ami held onto Sylvie's waist, her hands warm and steady. In the next heartbeat, Ty lifted Sylvie's leg over his hip and guided the head of his swollen shaft inside her.

"Tight. So tight." He groaned out the word "so" like a blissful caress.

No kidding. She was so inflamed with lust after two rapid-fire climaxes that she wondered if he'd be able to complete the act. At least she was dripping wet, so what she felt was best described as slippery, stretching pressure -- and bless it, she wanted more.

"Take me, Sylvie. Breathe deep, and let yourself relax."

She tried, but her breath came in stuttering gasps as he struggled to gain entry.

"Here, let me help." Releasing her hips, Ami caressed her legs until she reached the point where Ty and Sylvie became one.

When Ami worked her fingers along the stretching lips of her sex and massaged the skin, then tugged outward just a fraction, Sylvie moaned and threw her head back.

"More. Please, help me take all of him."

Again, fingers feathered along the straining flesh, pulled, massaged, and, as Ami worked her over, Ty stole an inch. With less than half of him buried inside her, Sylvia felt as if she'd come apart at the seams.

"Long way to go, sweet thing. You've gotta relax if we're going to do this right." Ami continued to rub her burning flesh, and Ty pressed forward.

Sylvie summoned some shred of control and focused on her breathing. In. Out. In. Out. Picking up the rhythm, on each exhalation Ami pulled gently to widen the channel, and Ty pressed forward. In. Out. *Oh, no!*

"Breathe, Sylvie. You almost had it." Ami's tone indicated she wouldn't put up with any complaints.

Sylvie focused her whole being on the simple task of inhaling and exhaling. She felt a tug as Ami sank her fingers deeper and pulled outward, and then a long, delicious glide as Ty slid home.

"Too much. Please, pull back."

"Blue?" Ty ground out the word between what had to be clenched teeth.

When she remained silent, he continued to press forward, and Ami pulled her fingers free. Finally, Ty slid back, and Sylvie sighed as the heavy, overfull feeling eased.

Rather than filling her again, Ty held his position, and with her fingers still slick from Sylvia's juices, Ami pressed against the puckered doorway of her ass.

"No. Oh goddess!"

"Blue?" Ami waited, barely pressing against her.

"No." The assertion was more stubborn than brave, because this part frightened her for reasons she couldn't quite explain.

"I'll be gentle. And I know Ty's put more than this back here before."

Heat flooded her face as she imagined their conversation as they planned out each element of this ménage -- and Ami no doubt asked about Sylvia's prior experiences.

"Just a little press, and you'll feel my finger slide right in."

Sylvie panted, and her stomach tensed. Why was this more of an invasion than what she'd already allowed? *More intense. Darker.* That one finger sliding deep inside.

Not painful like the whip. Not as intimate as their tongues fencing over her throbbing clitoris. But requiring more trust, more courage.

"Good girl. You're doing great." Ami pressed a kiss against the back of her neck, shifting her hair over her shoulder and exposing her sweat-soaked skin to cool air.

Ty pressed forward in one relentless stroke, and Sylvie gasped. She felt a disturbance around them and reined in her power before she did anything she'd regret.

On the next out stroke, Ami worked another finger into her ass.

"Tight. So tight."

Then, with a melting explosion of light and sound that pushed her past reason, she gasped out, "More! Please, more!"

They established a pattern, with Ty plunging forward as Ami withdrew. At some point, Ami added a third finger, and Sylvie threw her head back so hard it collided with Ami's forehead.

"Sorry. More. Don't stop."

The part of her still capable of rational thought knew she'd regret it all her life if she didn't see this through. So she welcomed their thrusts, canting her hips forward and back to meet each invasion.

Ty grabbed her shoulders hard enough that she cried out, and Ami reached forward to touch her breast. *Rising, rising, rising.* And then something broke inside her, and Ami and Ty rushed in to fill her thoughts.

Their passion rivaled hers. They cherished. Worshipped. In Ty's case, loved.

Feeling through Ty, she experienced the soaked-satin grip of her flesh around his shaft. Through Ami, the giddy delight as she reached down to finger her own clit, joining them in the headlong rush toward disaster or climax, whichever came first.

Sylvia thought she'd be the first to break -- so filled, so possessed. But Ty threw his head back and yelled, loud and long, as he filled her with hot fluid and shook against her. Experiencing it along with him -- the uncontrollable rush that ripped through his balls and burned through his shaft, only to leave him weak and gasping for air -- she joined him.

"Now!" The cry broke from Sylvie's throat like an explosion.

Crashing down a slope and hitting bottom so hard the air left her lungs, Sylvie screamed as the world collapsed and folded inward around her. Ami's cry followed quick on the heels of her own, and the back of Ami's hand pounded against Sylvie's thigh as she strummed her clitoris, seeing the climax through.

And then there was quiet. Ty reached up and removed her blindfold, but she kept her eyes shut tight. Ami whispered something to Ty, kissed Sylvie's shoulder, and got up off the bed.

“Don’t go.” *No, don’t let this be the end.*

“You’ll see me again someday, and we’ll talk. Thanks, Sylvie. I wouldn’t have missed this for anything.” Then there was the sound of clothing being collected and the unforgiving click of the door as she closed it behind her.

Ty wrapped Sylvie in a blanket and rocked her back and forth. Her stomach threatened to crawl up into her throat. She didn’t have it in her to be strong. Not after what they’d shared tonight.

“I’ll stay the night if you’ll let me, sweet witch. We can say good-bye over breakfast.”

“No. A clean break, remember?”

*Please, don’t let him argue.*

When he kissed her, touched her face, and rolled to the edge of the bed, it took everything she had not to reach out and grab him. Hold him close.

“I’ll be a phone call away, Sylvie. Anytime you need me, anytime you want me, just call. I’ll be waiting.”

Then another click of the door, and she lay damp and shaken on the tangled sheets as her heart splintered into a million pieces.

## Chapter Seven

Aileen watched the dancers whirl across the ballroom-sized patch of mown grass between the rows of apple trees. The lanterns strung from the trees cast shadows across the swirling, jewel-toned gowns as the band played a lively fiddle tune.

“I should go check on Mom.” Too handsome for his own good in his wedding tux, Jon tilted his head toward where his mother sat with Aileen’s parents near the bar. The lantern light reflected an overabundance of concern in his clear, green eyes.

Cupping her hand behind the back of his neck, she shook her head. “It’s not your fault. You know that. My parents promised to look after your mom so you could enjoy the reception. But if you’ll feel better after you talk with her, then go ahead.”

“Thanks -- I’m sorry this is intruding on our wedding night.” Raking his hand through his sandy brown hair, Jon kissed her and started off in the direction of his mother.

Aileen sighed as she watched him go. He’d had a rough time, with his father shutting him out after he discovered Jon was using his powers. His mother’s decision to use hers again -- and his father’s rapid request for a divorce -- had left him reeling. Not to mention blaming himself.

Aileen jumped as Bryan and Dallas emerged from the trees.

“Didn’t mean to startle you.” Bryan closed the distance between them and captured her in a bear hug. “You’re the most enchanting witch-bride to ever waltz across an orchard.”

Dallas nodded toward where Jon had joined his mom. “How’d you frighten him off -- threaten to turn him into a toad if he didn’t live up to wedding-night expectations?”

“Toad jokes -- now that’s original.” Rolling her eyes, Aileen shook her head at Dallas. “Actually, would you mind checking on him for me? He’s having a hard time with...”

“Say no more. I’m on it. His selfish bastard of a father should have waited until after the wedding to drop the divorce bomb.” Dallas touched the back of Bryan’s hand. “Back soon. Save the next dance for me.”

They stood in silence a moment, listening to the music and watching Dallas’s retreating back. Despite the mess with Jon’s family, Aileen couldn’t remember an autumn equinox where she’d felt more balanced -- or happier. Even the weather had cooperated, with unseasonably warm temperatures.

“Hell of a party.” Bryan gestured toward the field of dancers. “Dallas and I made due with a picnic of champagne and Chinese food.”

“I wish I could have been there when the two of you said your vows.”

“Wasn’t anything we planned ahead of time. Took me forever to choke out, ‘I love you.’ When I finally did, I’d built up so much momentum, next thing I knew we were buying rings and pledging our love on the beach at sunset. Just felt right -- the two of us, the waves crashing, gulls diving for the evening catch...”

He pointed to where a large moth fluttered around a lantern, and they watched a moment before he continued. “Go figure, with Dallas as my taskmaster muse all decked out in leather, I’ve almost finished my manuscript. He’s good for me -- fixed some old, deep hurts.”

“Look, Bryan, I’m sorry -- about Jon. I never set out to take him away from you. When he showed up shivering on my doorstep last December, things took on a life of their own.”

"This is where I'd usually do the guy thing and disappear, because this talk is more than I'd bargained on. But seeing as it's your wedding night..." He shrugged, the corners of his mouth tugging down into a half frown.

"I had no idea you knew. Jon was never mine -- more of a frantic crush. In the end, I sent him to you. Knew he loved you -- would do right by you where Tim failed." Bryan shrugged. "That said, I'm going to get a drink." Bryan hugged her, then made a beeline toward Dallas and the bar.

"I'd say that went well."

For the second time in a handful of minutes, Aileen jumped as someone emerged from the trees. "Sylvie. You heard all that?"

"Didn't mean to. Just needed a few minutes to myself, so I took a walk. A bit of advice, men don't like to discuss messy emotional situations."

"Should have left well enough alone, shouldn't I?" With a sigh, Aileen pushed her hair away from her face and tilted her head up toward the moon.

"No, you needed to clear things up for yourself. Hard on your brother, though. So, how's my nephew holding up?"

"Pretty well, except for the guilt over his parents' divorce."

Sylvia took a deep breath, smoothed out the skirt of her emerald gown, and stepped forward to touch Aileen's elbow. "I've never been good at girl talk -- bless it, I'm better at barking orders and firing slackers -- but you must understand that my sister's a thousand times better off without James."

Grasping Aileen's hand, she rushed on. "Andrea all but died the day she put on her wedding band. Jon told me what happened between you and Tim -- and at least he made the pretense of accepting your talents. James -- he made it clear what he thought of witches as soon as Andrea told him who she really was."

"You don't have to..."

"I do, because someday, when the wound's less fresh, you have to make Jon understand. By accepting his gifts and refusing to hide them from his father, he set his mother free. Andrea and I cast a circle for the equinox earlier." Sylvie cleared her throat. "She's not one to cry, but as her power twisted free in a rush of light, she wept with joy."

Aileen wondered how much stranger her wedding reception could get. "I understand. And I'll try to explain to Jon, once he gets over the shock of their divorce."

"Andrea will land on her feet. She's tougher than I thought. Not everyone's meant to walk through life with a partner."

The note of longing in Sylvie's voice sent a shiver along Aileen's spine. Maybe she wasn't all that great at this girl talk thing herself. As she wondered if she should ask questions, or leave well enough alone, Jon saved her by trotting up with a glass of champagne.

"For you, compliments of my mother. She looked a bit teary, but she scolded me for leaving you on our wedding night." He handed Aileen the glass and turned to hug Sylvie.

"I'm so glad you could make it. At least your flight was shorter than if you'd come from San Diego. Do you miss it -- sunny California?"

Aileen nudged him with her elbow, hoping he'd take the hint. Sylvie missed something, sure enough, and from the set of her chin, she guessed well didn't want to talk about it.

"When I get homesick, I fire someone, and the ache dissipates."

Despite her wry humor, the note of longing hung heavy on the night air. "You think you'll be able to pull the company out of its slump?"

"Count on it --" Sylvie broke off and brought her hands to her mouth as a gorgeous man in a slate gray suit strode out of the trees, stepped behind her, and rested his hands on her shoulders.

“Surprise.” He leaned down and tucked his head over her shoulder to kiss her cheek. “I’ve missed you, Sylvie.”

Aileen fidgeted with the tiny beads covering the bodice of her gown, trying to decide whether to grab Jon’s hand and make a break for it or stay and see if Sylvie needed help getting past an awkward moment. As she hesitated, Sylvie’s eyes filled with tears, and Jon stepped forward, summoning a faint channel of power.

“No, Jon. Please, stand down.” Sylvie put her hand on his chest and waited until he released the thread of energy. “This is Tyler, a close friend of mine from San Diego. He -- well, he owns one of the best landscaping businesses on the West Coast. Ty, meet Jon and Aileen, the newlyweds.”

“Congratulations, and I’m sorry to crash your wedding.” After shaking their hands, Tyler turned to Sylvie and grinned. “How did you know I took over the business?”

Blotting at her tears with a silk handkerchief, Sylvie blushed -- a reaction as shocking to Aileen as the tears. Jon called his aunt “the original hard-ass in Prada and heels,” and seeing her lose composure was disturbing.

“Ami -- we’ve kept in touch.” Sylvie touched Tyler’s arm. “She told me your uncle retired last month. I know it’s too late, but you were right about landscaping -- about my attitude. I’m sorry. How did you know about the wedding?”

“Ami’s a double agent. She filled me in on the details, and I figured it was my only chance to catch you away from the office.” Fishing in his pocket, he pulled out an envelope. “Three round-trip tickets, New York to San Diego. And I’ve got three, San Diego to New York. Figure that covers the next six months of a long-distance relationship.”

The music picked up into a brisk Cajun tune, and the flood of conversation hummed in the background, but otherwise, no one seemed to breathe.

“Jon, Aileen, please, don’t let me cloud your wedding night with my unfinished business.” Sylvia waved them away, and Aileen dragged Jon toward the trees.

Looking back over her shoulder, she saw Tyler take Sylvia into his arms, her face moonlight pale against his warm cinnamon skin. When Sylvie choked back a sob, he reached up to touch her cheek and murmured something too low to hear.

"They deserve a bit of privacy to try and sort things out." Aileen gave Jon's hand another tug as he hesitated.

"I didn't even know there was a 'they.' Aunt Sylvie never said anything."

When Aileen furrowed her brow and dug in her heels for an argument, Jon shook his head. "No, you're right. Whatever's between them, they need to work it out alone. And the crowds are thinning. I don't think anyone will miss us if we slip away."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Okay, step up now, there's a low stone wall you've got to clear." Jon steadied Aileen's elbow as she cleared the obstacle.

"Not sure if this is silly or sexy." She reached up to trace her finger along the satin blindfold.

"Sexy. If you could see yourself with the swath of blue satin across your eyes, your dark hair shifting in the breeze, and the light of my lantern casting flickering shadows across your gown, you'd know just how sexy this is. Here, kick your shoes off and step onto the blanket."

Playing along and grateful that whatever game he'd arranged was keeping his mind off his parents, Aileen kicked off her shoes and stepped forward. Through her hose, she felt a thick blanket covering the grass. They must have walked twenty minutes before they got to wherever "here" was, and she couldn't imagine what Jon was up to.

"Sit, and I'll take the blindfold off."

She curled up on the blanket and blinked as he removed the stretch of soft cloth. "Oh!"

A ring of lanterns hung from the trees surrounding the clearing, each holding a blue candle. The tiny flames danced like fairy lights, illuminating the ring of dark trees surrounding them and the narrow path on which they'd entered the clearing.

"First things first. There's wine and cheese in the picnic hamper if you're interested, but seeing as it's unseasonably warm, let's shed some clothes." Jon shrugged out of his tux jacket and reached for the buttons on her gown.

"But..." Aileen frowned, and Jon raised his hand, slowly closing his fist to set a spell.

"Just a mild repelling spell. Anyone lost in the woods won't want to follow the path down to the clearing. No one's going to disturb us."

Aileen shrugged. *Why not?* She'd never regretted anything she'd done with Jon, and he'd gone to a lot of trouble to stage a romantic setting for their wedding night. She relaxed and let him undo the row of tiny buttons down her back, then stood to step out of the gown. He folded the silky billows of blue cloth and placed the gown in an empty box beside the picnic basket.

"I brought casual clothes for later, and extra blankets for when it cools off."

Aileen settled back beside him and deftly loosened his bow tie and unbuttoned his shirt, baring his chest. "Thank you. This is perfect."

He helped her out of her silky bra, hose, lacy garter belt, and panties, kissing each inch of flesh he bared. Once she sat naked beside him, he stripped out of his pants and black silk boxers.

Through the power of their link, she felt the wind caress not only her own skin, but his as well. She reveled in the strength of their bond -- that for a few moments, it wasn't just that she shared a connection with him. She felt as if she *were* him.

For the sheer joy of feeling through him, she reached out to stroke the soft hair on his chest, shivering at the sensation. He captured her hand as her fingers trailed lower, scooped her up in his arms, and deposited her on her back. Laughing, she felt his boyish anticipation

bubble across her senses. He knelt to fish around in the picnic basket and withdrew a small container. Curious, she watched him remove the top and dip his forefinger into the contents.

“Chocolate body paint. Here, try some.” He knelt close to her, his knee pressed against her side, and brought his finger to her lips.

She sucked deep, swallowing his finger up to the knuckle, then swirled her tongue around as the dark chocolate eased down her throat. “Mmm. Who gets to go first?”

“My turn, since you’re conveniently flat on your back. Your only job right now is to relax and enjoy the moonlight breaking through the trees.”

As he traced a design on her stomach -- a pentagram, she realized -- the chocolate felt cool and thick and tugged at her skin. But soon her body heat softened the dark trail, and she delighted in the feel of it melting on her tummy.

A light breeze shifted the trees, and the lantern candles danced. Just enough moonlight made it through the branches to cast silvery shadows from above. Jon’s face shone golden in the candlelight, and a hint of a smile tugged at his lips as he worked.

When she closed her eyes and followed the pull of their link, Aileen knew what he was going to paint next before he began. A bird, darting across her shoulder. She hummed at the pressure of his fingers on her skin.

An evergreen, beside the pentacle on her belly, and a turtle on her rib. A chocolate wolf on her thigh, followed by a goddess symbol on her calf. At some point, his hands started to shake, and as he straddled her to paint her breasts, his erection brushed her stomach, hot and heavy.

“Mmm.” He leaned down to suck her nipples, tracing the sticky circles with his tongue.

When he’d cleaned every inch of her breasts with his mouth, he layered on more paint, wild lines and swirls and dabs now, and bent down to suckle her nipples like a starving man. His cock nestled against her, pressing into her thigh as he worked her over with his mouth.

Tiny peaks of heat flickered across her overly sensitized nipples, then sparkled and broke loose into a swirling aura of light.

Jon let his own field of energy ripple free and merge with hers, accentuating the intimacy of their link. She mewed and squirmed as he finished cleaning her breasts, sealing the deal with a gentle nip to each side. Determined to see him shiver under her chocolate-covered fingertips, she struggled to get out from underneath him.

"Nope. Not your turn yet." Pressing one hand against her chest, he pinned her to the blanket. With the other hand he dragged a finger coated with a thick glob of chocolate between her legs, mingling the sweet scent with the heady aroma of her sex.

Wiggling around only granted him better access, and once he'd covered her clit, he set to work. An animal rustled in the underbrush as she thrashed and moaned beneath the relentless strokes of his tongue.

"Too soon. I'll come if you keep doing that."

"So be it. I plan to leave you boneless and melting a dozen times before I'm done tonight."

Her clit twitched harder at the promise. As the wave of heat billowed like a prairie fire, she stopped fighting. She cried out when he darted his tongue back and forth faster, faster, and faster still, then threw her head back and arched her hips against his mouth.

Her own passion heightened as their link tugged her inward, to the center of his being, and she experienced the desperate heaviness of his cock as if it were her own, reveled in the tight feeling as his balls drew up higher in anticipation. Goddess, nothing could equal this -- the profound completion of making love with another witch -- so connected, she lost track of all boundaries. *Breathed with him. Felt with him. Shivered with his desperate need.*

"I feel you -- *feel through you*. So good." Which was as much as she could get out before her body melted like the chocolate paint he'd spread over her skin.

She bit her lip to avoid crying out and welcomed the fierce stabs of pleasure. When she'd wrung the last bits of glory from the moment and the pressure of his mouth threatened to become more of a torment than a release, she shoved his head away and struggled to a sitting position.

"Wow." Jon pulled her close, cradled in his lap, smearing chocolate across his arms and legs in the process. He pushed her long, tangled hair behind her shoulders, away from the sticky trails covering the front of her body. "I'll never, ever get tired of this."

As he gestured toward the swirling light writhing around them like an aroused beast, Aileen nodded. "You felt me come, didn't you?"

"Mmm. Almost did myself, around the time you ground against my mouth, gushed wet around my chin, and bit back a scream."

Okay, a witch could only summon just so much restraint. Touching her fingers together, she twined a rope of light around his ankles and scrambled out of his lap so she could tie his hands. When she had him bound -- still cursing at having been taken by surprise -- she pressed her hand against his heaving chest.

"Lie back and be a good little witch. I promise -- I'll be gentle with you."

"Oh, fuck." Flinching as she reached out to caress his lower stomach, he lay back on the old blue blanket, now liberally smeared with chocolate.

Aileen sat back and watched him for a moment, enjoying the beauty of all that rippling muscle. At her mercy. Dipping a finger into the tub of rich, gooey chocolate, she touched his face. When she'd left two lines on each cheek, she moved down to his chest, too impatient to do more than paint a riot of abstract shapes and swirls. After a token effort to adorn his arms and legs, she paused, her attention fixed on his rock-hard erection.

Jon's eyes were closed, and his breathing came in short gasps. When she let her thoughts drift through his, the erotic impact rocked her back on her heels. Crouching on the

blanket, she let his desire burn through her -- along with full-color snapshots of exactly what he wanted her to do to him.

"Sure that's what you want?" The image of her weaving a ring of light around his straining cock sent shivers of edgy anticipation across her body, like hot rain mingled with ice chips.

"I didn't bring the toy box, and if we don't play it this way, I'm not going to last past the first few strokes of your pretty little mouth on my cock."

Aileen couldn't help chuckling. "Yeah, I guess not everyone remembers to pack a cock ring on their wedding night. Lie still. I don't want to hurt you."

"No argument there." Jon froze as she touched her fingers together until light glowed at the tips, then traced an arch under his balls, paused, and completed the circle over his cock.

With a snap of her fingers, the trail of light firmed, taking on all the properties of a sturdy cord of rope. "Too tight?"

"Hate to admit this, but not tight enough, if it's going to serve its purpose."

"Mmm, let me know when it's secure enough that you couldn't come if your life depended on it -- but not so snug as to strangle you." Very slowly, she thickened the cord, constricting the ring until he exhaled through gritted teeth.

"Enough!" Jon tensed, then relaxed as she sealed the spell and bent down to kiss the thick vein running along his shaft.

"Hurt?"

"A little, but in a very interesting way. So get to work, witch, I'm ready for the good part."

Laughing against his balls, Aileen blew warm breath across his skin as she drizzled chocolate through the silky hair. When she'd coated his sac to perfection, she dipped her fingers in the tub again and fisted a thick coating of chocolate over his straining cock.

"Dying here."

“Poor baby.” Settling down to business, she nibbled the soft skin of his sac, then sucked one side into her mouth, tonguing the firm mass from cheek to cheek as if it were a particularly delectable chocolate truffle.

“Uh, nix the food imagery while that particular bit of anatomy’s brushing up against your molars.”

*Can’t do this if I’m laughing.*

“Just watch the teeth, and I’ll behave.” Jon flinched as she released one side and drew the other into her mouth.

When she’d cleared every last droplet of chocolate, she moved upward, dragging her lips along his erection in a teasing gesture. Exploring with her fingers, she shivered at how firmly the rope of energy dug into his sensitive flesh.

“Sure this isn’t too tight?” Imagining anything that constricting around her breasts sent shivers across her back and raised goose bumps on her arms.

“I’m fine -- but I caught the bit about your breasts. Intriguing image, that.”

Before he could follow that thought any further, she rested her head on his stomach, curled close beside him on the blanket, and began to suck in earnest. She loved the feel of him in her mouth, and the rich sweetness of the chocolate pushed the experience to new levels.

Taking him deep into her throat, Aileen held position as he pressed forward, driving farther inside her mouth. When she drew back toward the head, Jon groaned. Before he could complain, she swallowed his shaft again, dragging her tongue back and forth to drive him higher. Despite the fact that the night was growing cooler, sweat covered Jon’s stomach and thighs.

Sinking into a rhythm so familiar that thought surrendered to pure movement and sensation, they danced the familiar dance until Jon moaned at each downstroke of her

mouth. When he used his own magic to break free of the restraints on his wrists and ankles, she knew he couldn't take much more.

He caught the back of her head with his hand, tangling his fingers in her hair as he pressed deep into her mouth. Whimpering her approval, she reveled in her power over him.

"Enough!" The word vibrated with impatience, and Jon gently pushed her head away.

Shivering in anticipation, she released the energy that bound his cock, shifted onto her side, and pulled him to her. She'd no sooner lifted her leg over his hip than he pressed forward and buried himself inside her.

Lying on their sides, face-to-face, they watched each other as they made love in the lantern light. Jon's hair fell across his forehead, and she reached up to brush it out of his eyes. When he rolled her nipple between his fingertips, she moaned and swallowed big breaths of air.

"Let me try it, Aileen -- what you thought as you fashioned the cock ring."

She shivered at the image of rings of light encircling the base of each breast, growing thicker and tighter as she tossed her head back and cried out. Her judgment was clouded, all wrapped up in Jon's desires. What would she decide if they weren't already joined so closely, mind and body? Her breasts were sensitive, even under ordinary circumstances, and the thought of being constrained frightened her.

"Just a loose rope to start. I'll ask each time I draw it tighter." He quickened the pattern of thrusts. "I promise, I'll stop if you don't like it."

Reaching out to steady his hips, she held him close to her, buried to the hilt. "Yes."

He held very still, throbbing inside her, and his breath quickened further as he summoned a small light at the tip of his fingers and traced a rainbow of color around the base of her right breast.

Laughter bubbled up, and she pulled back involuntarily. "Tickles."

"Mmm, not a bad first reaction. So you'd say so far you don't hate it?"

“No -- it’s okay. Warm and tingling, and all my blood seems to be rushing to my nipple. Oh!” She held her breath as the loop of energy tightened, becoming thicker, more like a soft, braided cord against her skin.

“Okay?” Jon touched her face, pushing her sweaty hair back from her neck to let the night breeze cool her.

Maybe not. But his excitement at seeing her breast bound with a cord he’d woven out of energy and air bubbled through her like a hot spring. He seemed to gain an extra inch inside her, and her pussy clenched around him, begging for more. When he reached down to brush lazy circles around her clit with his fingers, sparkles of silver darted across her vision.

“Okay.” When he tightened the braided loop enough to squeeze her flesh, then enough to sting a little, she opened her mouth and took several frantic breaths.

She could hardly separate the fire dancing around her breast from the scorching heat racing along his cock and the painful tightening of his sac. He murmured something soothing as he traced a ring of light around her other breast, and this time he tightened the cord quickly, pressing his fingers to her lips when she cried out.

Only for him would she stretch her boundaries this far -- trust this much. *Only for you.*

“I know. Seeing you like this -- I can’t imagine a better wedding present.”

She lay still and let him look, worshipping her with his eyes. Every time she inhaled, her breasts tightened and stung, and her nipples hardened into desperate little peaks.

“Begging for attention, aren’t they?” Without withdrawing, he eased her onto her back and rolled on top of her, half sat, and bent down to lick her breasts, then suckled as much of her as his mouth could hold.

As he tongued her into a frenzy, his fingers explored the ring where the cord bit into her flesh. “So goddamned sexy.” He lifted his head and stared down at her, sighed, and bent to take the other nipple between his lips.

Overwhelmed by the unfamiliar experience, she trembled under his touch. Her pussy clenched so tight, he had a hard time moving inside her. He hummed under his breath each time he pressed forward, and his neck strained as he refused to release her nipple so he could stretch into a more comfortable position.

She traced her fingers along his shoulders, tight with the effort of curling his back to reach her breasts. Only fair that they'd both endure a bit of discomfort as the price of his fantasy. Her breasts felt as if all of her blood had pumped into them, swollen and full and hot. The cord tugged and pinched with every movement, but oddly enough, she knew she'd protest if he offered to remove the glowing crowns of light.

Jon released her nipple with a soft, sucking noise and lay down to cover her with his chest. "Pushes you higher -- even though you weren't sure you wanted to go there -- I can feel your body reveling in the added intensity."

She squirmed as his weight flattened her breasts against the bonds, leaving her breathless and desperate for release. The sting of prickling warmth sent desperate little messages down to her clit, and she curled her hips up hard against him.

"You're going to come like you never have before, sexy witch. Push past your limits, and your body rewards you with sensations you never imagined."

Jon couldn't hold on much longer. She felt blood thrumming through him like a raging flood, pounding through his veins and drenching him in a blanket of sweat. Desperate, she tried to will her body to let go, but the burning across her breasts, the painful tightness of her nipples as Jon's chest slid across them, held her back.

*Just accept it -- the heat, the pain, the pleasure. Ride it like the tide. I'll be with you when you crash against the rocks.*

His voice in her head echoed through her like a battle cry, exultant and wild. She draped her legs around him and dug her heels into the small of his back, grabbed his

shoulders, and held on for dear life. *Fierce, unfettered, free.* That's what he'd given her when he exploded into her life uninvited.

Surrendering, she let herself unravel, flowing like the crash of foam and water, and screamed when they slammed through the barrier into another world.

*Pure power. Blue and gold light. Shrieking, glorious release.*

By the time she thought to rein in the energy dancing around them like the northern lights, she'd come off one peak and climbed to another climax. She bit his shoulder to hold back her scream this time, and every spasm of her pussy around his spurting cock sent echoing waves of sensation through her breasts.

Her nipples burned like glowing peaks of light, pulsing with each brush of his pelvis across her clit. And still he didn't stop, plunging deep and hard, locking his hands behind her back as he wrung another orgasm out of her. She was sobbing now, spent and shaken, and he raised his hand to release the bonds.

"Oh!" Panting at the unexpected pain when the ropes evaporated and blood rushed back into constricted flesh, she dug her fingernails into his back and whimpered.

"Over soon. Shh. Feel the strokes of my fingers."

As he massaged her neck and face, she quieted and let herself drift into the stillness of the night. The temperature had dropped, and when she shivered, he got up to retrieve another blanket. Aileen murmured her thanks as he wrapped her close to him, tucking the thick folds around her until warmth seeped across her body.

"Did I push too far?"

"You know you didn't. I sensed you with me every step of the way. You felt it, didn't you? Every lick of fire across my breasts, the way the bonds set my clit throbbing and turned me inside out?"

"Mmm. And you felt what you did to me, too. I swear, Aileen, I had a gentle, romantic evening planned. The chocolate, the candlelight, the midnight picnic..."

“Surely no regrets?” The smug note rippling through her words won her a sound slap across her ass. “That December night, when you showed up half frozen at the door, you told me witch sex should be --”

“Fierce.”

“Yes, fierce. I wouldn’t have had this any other way, Jon.”

Content, she listened to the rustling leaves and the sound of his breathing as he drifted off to sleep in her arms. She wondered how Sylvie’s night had turned out and thought of Bryan safe in Dallas’s arms. She hoped Sylvie had been wrong when she insisted not everyone was meant to walk through life with a partner.

She’d thought that, after Tim died. And it had taken a witch who wouldn’t take no for an answer to show her just how wrong she’d been. Blinking up at the branches and dancing rings of lantern light, she murmured a wish that Sylvie and her friend from San Diego would find equal amounts of tenderness and fierce, red-hot sex. Casting the energy on the wind, she smiled and snuggled closer into the warmth of Jon’s body.

 THE END 

## **Eden Rivers**

Eden Rivers lives in the Midwest with her husband and daughters. Like many writers, she followed a number of career paths over the years before returning to writing. In her spare time she enjoys reading, yoga, gardening, and listening to music outdoors under the full moon. Eden loves to hear from her readers, and can be contacted through her website at [www.edenrivers.com](http://www.edenrivers.com) or her author blog at <http://edenrivers.blogspot.com>.