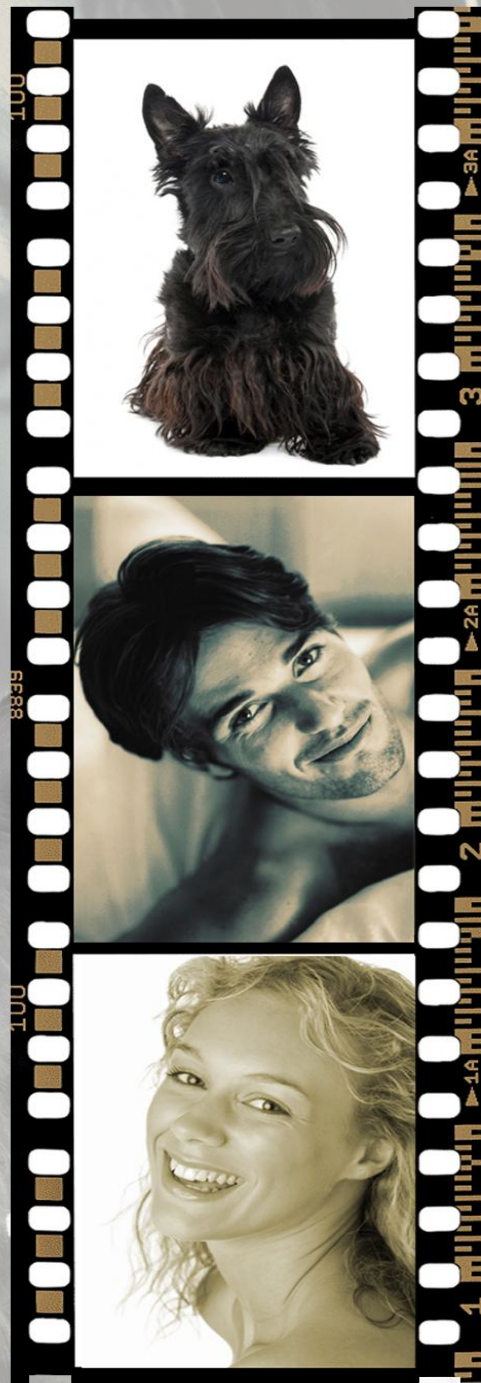


*Red Rose Publishing*

# DOGSPELL



# LIZZIE T. LEAF

*Dogspell*

*By*

*Lizzie J. Leaf*

*A big thank you to Sloane, the world's best  
critique partner! Her suggestions and smacks keep  
going.*

*Vi Bowen, my editor at Red Rose Publishing, you  
taught me so much with your edits and suggestions.*

*Thank you Wendi at Red Rose Publishing for  
having faith in me!*

*And to Bill, my husband who makes this all  
possible through his support and encouragement.*



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## Chapter One

Dread. That was the best word to describe the feeling of what lay ahead of him the next few days. And that dread now churned as acid in his stomach, eating a hole in the lining.

Randall McAllister pulled his car into the driveway. He studied the house in front of him and marveled at how the place never changed. The Victorian gingerbread façade was one of his first memories. Of course, if the women in your family were witches, they probably managed the maintenance through magic.

He leaned back against the headrest, letting sounds of Barry Manilow's "Mandy" wash over him. He'd been a Manilow fan as long as he could remember. Maybe he owed this little quirk to his mother, since she'd played the man's songs endlessly when Rand was a youngster. For some reason, "Mandy" was his favorite. Who knew, maybe someday he'd find his own Mandy.

But right now, Goddess only knew what he would find waiting for him on the other side of the red double doors. He winced at the thought of the havoc his twin sisters could create in a few short hours on their own, but a whole day left to their own devices—not a good thing. Imagining the possible trouble the two fifteen year olds had gotten into generated another acid surge that burned all the

way up to his throat.

Usually, Granna Lila stayed with the Demon Duo when their mother traveled. This time, their mother, the High Priestess of the Witches' Council, had made a frantic call to Rand asking for his help. It wasn't often Jorgia begged for his help, but beg she had.

"Rand, I know it's short notice, but I'm putting a new proposal up for vote before the general membership to add a Member at Large to the council. I know several of the older members will object since they will consider another voice on the council will dilute their power."

He'd wondered briefly what that had to do with him. His mother usually didn't keep him up to date on the happenings in the magical realm.

"I really need you to stay with the twins." Before he could ask why Granna wasn't staying with them, his mother had rushed on with an explanation. "I need mother's support in this. She may be retired, but she still carries a lot of influence and can lobby for the proposal. I'm sure she can sway the more liberal members who are sitting on the fence at the moment."

The "yes" word had come out of his mouth in a moment of insanity. He loved his mother and didn't want to add to her stress, but now his stress was about to begin.

Rand squared his shoulders and flipped the lock release. *Dread or not, may as*

*well go see what hell has brought forth.* He slammed the front car door, then paused, opened the rear one, and lifted the pizza box from the back seat. His stomach rumbled when the aroma of pepperoni tickled his nose. He'd missed lunch because of a conference call and had survived the afternoon on a pack of stale crackers he'd found in a desk drawer and coffee strong enough to eat the plating off a spoon. *No wonder your stomach is acting up, fool.*

Silence greeted him when he entered the house.

"I'm home." His announcement received no response and he cast his eyes around in nervous anticipation. The hairs on the back of his neck tickled, a sure indication that Charmela and Charisma were up to something.

Muted voices drew him toward the back of house to the kitchen. "Mel? Riz?"

Still no answer, just the sounds of an argument in progress, which was the twins' normal way of communication. For identical twins, the two were as different as night and day, in every aspect except their physical appearance. From the way their mother's stomach bounced during their days in the womb, the two had probably started fighting before making an entrance into the world.

"Mom should have named them Imp and Spawn," he mumbled as he neared the entrance to the kitchen. Sadly, even Simma, the giant black cat and family familiar, had more common sense than his younger sisters. At least the animal



didn't get into constant trouble the way the girls did.

Standing in the door, he ran the fingers of his free hand through his short black hair as he watched the dual mops of carrot curls bent over a book spread out on the counter. By the powers! They had dragged their mother's *Book of Enhancements* out of the cabinet above the refrigerator. The trouble the two could create from that book would be anything but enchanting. *And where is that damned cat? He was supposed to keep an eye on the pair until I got home.*

Damnation. How could the three of them have come from the same mother? He shook his head in wonder. Granted, they had different fathers, both human. From the stories, his father was an Italian stallion, whom he could thank for his dark eyes and hair. His mother had mourned his loss for years, until she'd met the smooth-tongued Irishman who'd fathered the twins. Their red hair and freckles left no doubt to their heritage, either.

Maybe it was a good thing their mother had fallen in love with non-magical beings. The thought of the potential powers that could be brought into play if the twins weren't half-human was terrifying. Even so, they seemed to have inherited not only their share of their mother's abilities, but also any that should have passed to her son. His limited magical aptitude, which he didn't consider magic, consisted of the occasional feelings of impending problems or doom when the hairs on the back of his neck stood up and unfortunately, that usually happened when he was

around his half-sisters.

“Look, stupid. I told you, that’s wrong. You didn’t pronounce the last word correctly.” Mel’s green eyes glared at the mirror image standing in front of her.

“Did too. You don’t know what you’re talking about. Just because you’re two minutes older doesn’t make you the boss.”

Rand rubbed a hand across his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Maybe he could distract them with the pizza, then discuss why the book was out of its place. Both girls knew this particular tome was off limits to them, unless their mother or grandmother was present. He mentally added the damned cat to the list of beings to have a conversation with about the situation. Okay, conversation wasn’t exactly the right description; it would just be him doing a lot of bitching, but it would make him feel better.

“Here, I’ll show you.” Rand knew Mel’s superior elder-sister tone would set off another heated argument, but he watched in fascination as she raised her hand and pointed at a plant in the corner, to the left of the doorway where he stood. “You will breathe the air as animal. Come alive as I direct. Shamba-Ha...”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Rand’s question came out a bellow, and he watched in horror as Mel’s head turned toward him.

“...Loh,” the last word of the chant flowed out as Mel’s finger followed the direction of her gaze. Directly toward Rand.

A jolt of power surged through his body, stronger than the electrical shock he'd experienced in his teens when he'd grabbed an electric fence on a dare. The pizza box fell to the floor.

When the pain and rippling shock waves subsided, Rand realized he lay on the floor with his nose pressed against the cardboard box. The fall must have heightened his senses, because he had never smelled such a strong aroma from food. His salivary glands kicked in, and controlling the weather would have been easier than stopping the drool pooling on the floor beneath his mouth.

Why did his head feel so strange? He pushed up with his arms and paused for a moment to let the dizziness pass. *Okay, think I've made it to my hands and knees. Time to stand up.* A push upward and he went nowhere. Looking up, he saw two pairs of emerald eyes staring down at him in horror.

"What's wrong?" Damn, his voice sounded more like a growl. He looked down. *Holy shit.* Black, curly fur covered a small paw where his long fingers should have been. His heart raced. His body quivered in fear. What the hell was going on here?

"Mirror. Get me a mirror. Quick!" He looked up at the freckled faces hovering above him. "Get me a damn mirror! Have you gone deaf?"

Getting no answer to his question, he turned to search for the needed object himself, but fell flat on his stomach with a thud.

"Oh dear. What have you done?" Riz demanded of her sibling.

“Me?” Mel glared at her twin. “You’re the one who wanted to get the book down. I know better than to listen to you. We always get in trouble with your brilliant ideas.”

“My ideas? You’re the one who wanted to get the book down to begin with.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

*Damn it all, couldn’t they see he had some kind of problem here? There was no time for another of their stupid arguments.* A growl and sharp bark startled Rand with its menace.

Both sisters jumped and their verbal battle came to a halt.

“Oh dear, I don’t think he knows.” Riz chewed on her bottom lip.

“What? What don’t I know?”

“You tell him.” Mel pushed her twin forward.

“No. You.” Riz stepped back.

“One of you damn well better tell me something, and fast, or I’m going to gnaw your ankle off.” Rand’s brow furrowed at the thought. *Now where did that come from?*

Simma, the missing link, walked up and shot a haughty look of disgust in Rand’s direction. “Probably from the fact that you’re a dog, and you’re thinking like one.”

“I’m a what?”

“I don’t believe I stuttered, my friend. You’re a dog. A black Scottie dog, to be precise.

Simma's ears flicked. *Sort of cute, if one likes dogs.*" The large black cat sat down and lifted a paw for inspection before he licked the fur and proceeded to wash his face. "*It appears your sisters have once again blundered in their magical efforts.*" The cat followed his comment with a loud yawn. "*Oh well, not my problem.*"

He ambled out of the room, but Rand resisted the urge to chase after him. The cat would have to wait. The trouble-making witches in front of him were the priority of the moment. If he could get this walking issue coordinated, he'd show them a thing or two.

At this level, ankle biting presented a more probable alternative to sending them to their rooms. Besides, the bubbleheads didn't seem to understand his thoughts or his barks.

Come to think of it, the only communication he'd made since going to the dogs was with the damned cat. Now that was scary.

The twins held a whispered argument by the sliding glass door to the patio while he struggled to synchronize the movement of four legs. After several attempts, he finally succeeded in achieving the desired standing position, with all four legs working together instead of against each other. Baring his teeth, he advanced toward them in a stalking crouch. A growl rumbled low in his throat.

*"Oh, crap. I need to pee."* The urge hit suddenly, and he rushed toward the door.

"Open the door. He's going to bite us."

Rand wasn't clear about which girl screamed the command or who opened the door, and he didn't care as he rushed out into the evening dusk to find the nearest bush.

*I can't believe I'm peeing on a tree trunk with my hind leg in the air before any and everyone.* Oh well, he'd better get used to it until he could figure out a way to communicate with the two brain trusts and get them to undo the damage they'd done.

*What was that?* Something moved by the fence. *Damn, it's the Henderson's cat. I hate that big yellow tom. Can't understand why Simma hangs out with him. Well, I'll just show him who's boss.*

*No, wait. I will not lower myself to act like... a dog. Oh, but it's a cat, and a cat that I hate.*

Rand bounded across the yard in pursuit of what was now his natural enemy. He heard his name screamed and the sound of running footsteps as the twins chased after him, but he didn't slow his stride. He wasn't sure at what point he could no longer hear their voices. The only certainty was that he wanted to do major damage to the beast that zigzagged in front of him.

*Man, I'm tired. Doesn't that jerk ever slow down?* His sides ached from running, and he panted so loud, the whole neighborhood probably heard him. But he refused to give up on the chase. *Wait. He's cutting across the street, and there's a concrete barrier there. If I cut over here, maybe I can catch him when he doubles back.*

The sound of screeching tires alerted Rand that something wasn't right. Along with the sound came the sensation of flying through the air, then everything went black.

## Chapter Two

Amanda Livingston didn't think her day could get much worse. Her morning started with a phone call from Jess Morgan, giving the good news on his engagement to the ditzy bitch he'd dumped Amanda for last year. He'd known the slut less than a year and had already popped the question. Amanda had waited five years, but he'd never proposed. Instead, he'd so gallantly declared on the fifth anniversary of their first kiss, "Our relationship isn't working." Of course, two days later, Amanda discovered the reason—a very tall, gorgeous, chesty reason. Now, he had the gall to ask her if she'd like an invitation to the wedding. What a dick wad!

No, she wasn't still in love with him. Those feelings had faded over the past year. Okay, she'd admit the day he dumped her she'd been devastated. She'd sat on the bed and clenched her fists as she watched him pack his belongings, when what she really wanted to do at that moment was throw him and his meager possessions off the top of the highest building. And when she ran into him and sexy Brittany, radiating in their love glow, she regretted not doing exactly that.

It still stung a little to think of the five years she'd invested in their relationship. About the only thing he'd proposed during their time together was lots of kinky sex. He developed an interest in heavy BDSM. A little light bondage



might have been fun. But some of the games he'd suggest to spice up their love life she found repulsive, not to mention probably painful and...well her mind didn't even want to go there.

"Look on the bright side," she mumbled. "The jerk is truly out of your life now and you've just met a couple of yummy new men."

It was hard to believe Fate had dumped not one, but two of the most eligible town bachelors in her path. Even more amazing was after literally bumping into them on different days, they'd both called to ask her out.

Her good luck started the morning she slammed into Alex Jenkins in a rush to get to the bank. He reached out to catch her and saved her from falling flat on her hiney. Of course, her head bounced off his black rimmed glasses knocking them askew. That generated enough guilt she offered to offer pay to have them adjusted.

Alec was cute in an intellectual kind of way, with the glasses and a killer smile that lit up his face. And he loved animals. Rumor had it, he'd made a name for himself in the computer world and the money to go with it. Bill-Gates-rich he might not be, but the numbers floated in the paper from time to time were far more than she made.

Spilling coffee down the front of Phil Roberts, when she bumped into him at the local coffee shop, had appeared to be a disaster until he stepped back and

assessed her. He'd held his hand up at her apologies, told her "no problem," and had been the one to get the napkins to wipe off their clothes. He had a thousand times more potential than a wannabe rock n' roll musician like Jess. She stretched her neck from side to side in an effort to relieve the stiff muscles.

Yep, her life was looking up on the romance front. Who knows, she might even get laid some night in the not too distant future. After her call with Jess, she'd been called to attend to a patient out in the country. It ended up consuming more hours than she'd anticipated when complications in the horse's labor developed, and the birth dragged on until the sun set on the western horizon.

Thankfully, she'd saved both the mare and her foal, but the birth, long and difficult for the first-time mother, left everyone exhausted. Amanda shrugged her shoulders in attempt to release more stress. "Long hours are part of the job. Stop your whining, and when you get home, you can have a nice hot bath." Her eyes darted back and forth to the sides of the dark street. The city council really needed to get off their asses and have halogen lights installed in this neighborhood. "Note to self. Remember to not come this way after dark when you're so tired."

A movement from the sidewalk on the left caught her weary eyes. A cat streaked across the road in front, far enough ahead she only tapped the brakes. Another figure followed, causing her to stomp down on the brake pedal. Too late. The SUV hit the second animal and sent it sailing through the air.

“Oh my God.” Amanda scrambled from the vehicle, her heart in her throat.

Rushing to the side of the limp figure in the middle of the street, she fought back tears. “Damn, I sent you flying. Poor little guy, I’m sorry.” Her expert hands ran over the body, her fingers feeling for any obvious fractures. Internal bleeding would have to be determined by further testing. “Look at you—are you a Scottie?” The headlights were no help. It was too dark out here to tell for sure. She slipped off her light sweater and wrapped it around the soft form. “At least you’re still breathing. Let’s get you over to the clinic where I can examine you better.”

After gently placing the wounded dog in the back of the SUV she sped off. The trip resulted in lots of muttered “thank yous” for the traffic light timing that allowed her to make the drive quickly. Inside the clinic, she did a more thorough exam and x-rays. “A minor concussion. You’re lucky nothing is broken.” She stroked the wiry black coat. “The impact knocked you unconscious, but you should come around soon.”

The tickle of fur across her ankles drew her attention. Li’l Abner, the three-legged cat rubbed against her shins. His owners had dumped him after he’d lost a front limb, and as the clinic’s mascot, the white and grey cat made it his business to check out everything that went on in his home.

“Not now, Abner. I need to focus here. Go play with your toys.”

Ignoring her as usual, the cat jumped up on the examination table and

stared at her patient as she readied an injection to relieve the pain. “You know, curiosity killed the cat and I’d think after the close call you had with your leg, you’d get the drift.” The cat shot her one of the “piss off” looks he was so good at.

A whimper from the dog drew her attention away from her battle of wills with the feline. He opened his eyes for a second and attempted to lift his head. “No, it’s okay. The shot I gave you will kick in any minute and you’ll sleep. I promise you’ll feel better when you wake. But, you’re going to be sore, and probably have a headache.” She smoothed the curly coat as the little dog lay down and closed his eyes again.

Exhaustion flowed through her and a loud yawn escaped. Given tomorrow’s heavy office hours, staying up all night with him here in the clinic was out of the question. She had a cot in her office closet she kept for nights she needed to stay over with a patient, but the thought of hauling it out was more than she wanted to deal with right now. Since the little guy wore no identification, she had no way of notifying the owners. “Well, my friend you’re my only patient tonight. Since there’s no internal damage, you’re coming home with me until I can find your owners. Tonight I’ll keep you on the bed with me, so if you wake up and need to go out I can help you. Let me write up a few notes on your injuries and we’ll head out.”

Finished with the chart she set up for the little Scottie, Amanda looked over

and saw the cat had moved to the dog's head and had lain in front of him. Nose to nose, the two animals appeared to be in deep conversation. "Yeah, I'm really tired. A dog and cat talking, how dumb is that?"



Rand opened his eyes and groaned. His attempt to move sent pain ripping through his body and someone was using his head as a drum. Not even the dim lights and the soothing croon of Barry Manilow in the background made him feel any better, but at least someone had good taste in music.

*Damn, I feel like I've been hit by a truck.*

The closing of a drawer drew his attention toward an open door into what appeared to be the bathroom. A woman came into view and stopped. The light behind her made the t-shirt she wore transparent and did nothing to hide the curves beneath it.

"You're awake." She advanced toward him, and from the light of the bedside lamp he could see the deep rich honey color of the long braid hanging over her shoulder. "Do you need to go outside, or are you not up to that yet?"

Why the hell did she talk to him like a child? *Oh yeah. That's right. You're a dog.*

Memories of the earlier part of his evening came rushing back. Chasing the yellow tom had been exhausting, but the vehicle slamming into him had been worse. Yeah, guess he *had* been hit by a truck, or at the very least an SUV.

His sisters were dead when he got his hands on them.

Along with the events from earlier, a fuzzy recollection of talking to a grey and white cat while he was stretched out on a stainless steel table, tickled around the edges of his memory. What was it the creature had said? *Right. This must be the vet the cat raved about. The feline beast seems to think this woman is a goddess. I can vouch for the fact she sure looks like one.*

“I’m sorry, little guy. I really tried not to hit you.”

Gentle fingers stoked his side and rubbed behind his ears. *Damn, that feels good. Why is my hind leg kicking? It hurts like hell every time I move. I could actually enjoy the scratching if the thumping didn’t trigger so much pain.*

“Who do you belong to?” The angel sitting on the bed beside him had the sweetest voice. “I bet your owner is worried sick. You’re about the most adorable little fellow I’ve seen in a long time.” Her full lips made a little boo-boo pout, and if he could have moved without every nerve in his body screaming, Rand would have planted a big doggy kiss right on them.

He eased his head further under her hand, encouraging her to scratch more. Pain or not, the strong desire to stand up and kiss that pink mouth when she did the pouty thing, almost overcame the soreness. *Then again, dogs don’t really kiss. Doggy kisses are licks.* He didn’t care what one called them as long as he could get his tongue against those soft lips.

“Even though you’re awake, I’m still going to keep you in bed with me tonight. The sedative I gave you isn’t completely out of your system, and I don’t want you moving around too much.”

Hot damn jackpot! Too bad he found himself in some little dog’s body when he snuggled up against this luscious specimen of a woman.

“Let me get us settled. We’ll let Barry sing us to sleep.” The beauty pulled back the covers on one side of the bed. “You can stay where you are, though it’s my usual place. I don’t want to move you too much because I know you have to be sore from the banging you received.” She reached over and turned out the light. “Goodnight, little guy.”

Rand listened to her breathing, and from the steady rhythm, she fell asleep the moment her head hit the pillow. He snuggled closer and sniffed. Roses. She smelled of vanilla and roses; his favorite flavor and flowers rolled into one.

He was none too happy about the events that put him next to this beautiful woman, but at least he’d been smart enough to set up an arrangement with his law partner. The next couple of weeks would be iffy when he showed up in the office. John was cool and, if Rand didn’t check in for a few days, would understand. Knowing many of the details of each other’s lives was one of the many good things about a small partnership.

The soft strains of Manilow came to an end and he heard the CD player shut

off. *Her taste in music definitely made her a woman after his heart.*

Sleep searched him out and he moved again in an attempt to find a more comfortable position. Allowing his heavy eyelids to close, he inhaled the scent of the human beside him once again. The slumber that only a moment ago almost claimed him disappeared. *Oh, crap. How the hell did a dog deal with a boner?*



“Mom and Granna are going to kill us if we don’t figure out how to undo this spell.” Riz twisted her hands and blinked back the tears threatening to spill. “They’ll probably kill us anyway when they find out what we did, even if we do manage to fix things without asking for their help.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Mel’s watery green pools reflected the same fear as her sister’s. “Why can’t we ever leave well enough alone? You’d think after fifteen years of getting into trouble with stuff we aren’t supposed to touch, we’d learn.”

“So, true.” The large black cat sitting on the table between them shook his head. “*You do realize your mother has a special spot for Rand, even if he doesn’t have the magic abilities of you two troublemakers? After all, he’s the son of the first man she loved. If he’d lived, you two would have a different father.*”

“Shut-up, Simma!” The twins yelled in unison.



“Sometimes having a psychic connection with a giant cat is annoying.” Riz received a nod of confirmation from her twin.

*“My, my, aren’t we testy. Well, if nothing else, this mess you’ve created has you both working together for once.”*

“True.” Mel reached out and scratched behind one of the big cat’s ears.

Riz smiled and tweaked the other one. “Yeah, maybe we can accomplish more by working together.” She gave her sister a love tap on the shoulder.

“Ouch.” Mel rubbed the wounded spot. “Good thing we have this new spirit of cooperation going here or I’d have to hit back.” She dropped the balled up fist she’d raised to retaliate the smack. “Still, the question remains. How do we undo what happened?”

*“Ahem.”* Simma turned his head and cleared his throat again. *Excuse me. Hairball. May I suggest looking in the second volume of the book you used to create the problem?”*

Mel eyed the cat dubiously. “There’s a second volume? Mom and Granna never mentioned a second volume.”

*“Let’s just say your mother and grandmother know the pair of you well. Too well, in fact. They didn’t think you were ready for some of the magic contained in the second volume.”*

“Where is it?” Riz looked around the kitchen and selected the closest chair to pull over to the refrigerator. “Maybe it’s buried at the back of the cabinet and we missed it.” She started a search of the cabinet that stored Volume I.

*“Not here, kittens. Follow me.”* Tail straight up, Simma started down the hall and stopped at the door of the room where their mother kept her most powerful magic ingredients.

Riz shook her head. “We can’t get in there. Mom keeps the door locked.”

Mel’s shoulders slumped. “We’re screwed.”

*“Not so fast, Ladies. Are you forgetting who you’re dealing with? After all, I am the family familiar and have a certain amount of magic myself.”* The cat stared at the door and blinked until a soft click sounded. *“Shall we?”*

Entering into the room after Mel opened the door, Simma stopped in front of a large cabinet and once again stared until a slight noise indicated the lock released. *“Try the top shelf. And be careful.”*

Amazed at the ease with which the large double doors opened, Riz pulled a chair over and Mel climbed onto the seat in an effort to reach the top shelf. “Wow, this is twice as thick as Volume I.” She handed the book down to her sister’s waiting hands.

Making her way over to the empty table in the middle of the room, Riz dropped the weight down with a thud. “Man, is that ever heavy. No wonder Mom and Granna don’t use it often.”

Simma licked a paw and shook his head. *“Hello, dense ones. They are witches, and powerful ones at that. Do you think they’d use brute force to lift something weighing that much?”*

“Good point.” Mel said and her sister nodded in agreement. “Why didn’t we think of that before?”

Irritation caused Simma’s ears to twitch. “*Well, duh.*” Sometimes these two were too dense.

“I have another question.” Riz looked at her sister who tipped her head in agreement. “Why can we understand you when you do the mind talk, but we couldn’t pick up anything from Rand when he changed?”

“*Valid question for once.*” Simma hopped onto the table. “*If you recall, you can’t always read what I’m saying. Your abilities in that area are developing. Combined with the shock Rand experienced with the transformation, he blocked your limited efforts.*”

“Got it.” The twins spoke in unison.

Riz opened the book and groaned. “This is written in some language I can’t read.”

Mel looked over her shoulder. “Me neither. Why did Mom and Granna keep this book locked up? It’s not like either of us could use it.”

“*Allow me.*” Simma moved around to sit at the bottom of the thick volume of charms. “*This is a very ancient language and handed down through the ages to only a selected few. Fortunately, my long association with this family has given me some knowledge of it.*”

The large cat studied the pages in front of him and using magic, they began to turn slowly. After several minutes, he stopped. “*Hmmm. This may be what we are*

looking for: *'How to Reverse Animal Enchanting.'*”

“Sounds right.” Mel reached over and squeezed her sister’s hand. “Read it to us. Please.”

“Very well, since you asked nicely. It says here the change kicks in with the start of the waxing gibbous phase of the moon and lasts through the full moon. When the waning gibbous cycle starts he’s basically back to peeing on bushes.”

Riz interrupted with a question. “How? Tell us how that works.”

“Well, little Miss Impatient, if you’d let me finish reading, we might have an answer.” Simma returned to the pages of the massive book spread in front of him. Okay, so he couldn’t decipher it word for word, but close enough would do. “Looks like our boy will revert to human form for about a week while the moon is full. Let’s see, where is the moon cycle now?” He looked across the room to a calendar on the wall. “It appears your brother is going to be running around on all fours for another two weeks or so. It’s up to you two to figure out the exact timing. I’ve done my part.”

“Then he’ll become himself again.” Mel let out a sigh of relief.

“Only for a week. Remember, the charm only reverses for a week during the waxing gibbous phase, through the full moon.

“Oh.” Mel’s shoulders slumped.

Riz placed her arm around her sister. “We’ll need to continue our search for

a permanent reversal of the charm. With Simma's help of course." She shot a pleading look toward the cat.

"Yeah, we can do that." Mel stood up straight and looked at her two companions. "I just have one question. How are we going to find Rand to tell him about this?"

## Chapter Three

Rand laid his head in Amanda's lap and rolled his brown doggy eyes up at her as his short tail drummed the leather couch. The past few days she'd taken him to the clinic and he'd watched the gentle care she gave all her patients. Her concerned manner carried over into the way she handled the pet owners in difficult situations, too.

The first morning she took him to work with her, his heart almost jumped out of his chest when the receptionists greeted her with, "Good morning, Amanda. What do you have there?" While she updated the young woman on the prior night's happenings, Rand attempted to calm his racing heart at the coincidence of the woman of his dreams being named Amanda. That may be the name on her birth certificate, but "Mandy" was the melody that ran through his mind each time she glanced his way.

When she looked at him, so lovingly with those large violet eyes as she did now, his heart did little flip-flops. "You know, Alistair, I can't believe how much I've come to care about you in such a short time. I never realized how lonely it was around here. Let's hope no one responds to the ad I placed in the paper. That way I can lay permanent claim to you."

*Goddess, I hope not. At least not in the body of a frigging dog, no matter how cute you think I am.* Rand closed his eyes as her fingers worked their magic behind his ears. *Where did she come up with the name Alistair? She almost gave him a heart attack when she decided on his new name.* If she only knew how close she'd come to Randall McAllister's name.

"Well buddy, I need to get my butt in gear. My date will be here before I'm ready, if I don't get a move on. Can you believe I have men lined up for Friday and Saturday night?"

Amanda giggled, leaned over and placed a kiss on top of his furry head. Rand rewarded her with a doggy smooch in return. How he wished his human lips met hers instead of the soft contact on his nose. *Date?* That's right; she said she has a dinner date tonight and the lucky bastard would be the one getting a real kiss. Jealousy surged through him, and since he couldn't tell her how he felt, he dived on a sofa pillow to vent his frustration. The unfortunate stuffing became the victim of pent up doggy anger, as puffs of shredded foam flew in every direction.

"Stop it! Bad dog!" Amanda wrestled what was left of the pillow from him and glared. This was the first time he'd seen her really angry, but damn it, so was he. She hauled the vacuum from the closet and continued to grumble at him while she tidied up the mess he'd made. "You'll be fine for a few hours alone. Now behave yourself." After putting the sucking machine back in its hidden spot, she headed

for the bedroom, unbuttoning her blouse as she went.

Rand flung himself down on the sofa and sulked. He'd forego the chance to watch Amanda undress. He didn't need the stimulation of her nude body as she got ready for some other man to fondle her. *Come on fool. She thinks you're a dog, and you need to figure out how to turn back into a man. A few days of romping around on four legs, lifting your hind leg on bushes and trees and having someone clean up after you when you take a dump on the lawn is one thing. But it's not the life you want forever.*

This experience gave him a whole new apperception for his real life. He'd never bitch about his job or family again...at least not much.

*I need to find my empty-headed sisters, if they haven't killed each other with their fights, and make them fix their screw-up.*

The doorbell announced the arrival of Amanda's date, and a whiff of her perfume tickled Rand's nose as she rushed by to get the door.

"Alec, hi." She stepped aside to grab her purse and jacket, allowing Rand to get a good look at his competition.

Tall, a little on the lean side—hell, Rand had a better build when he was in human form—and nerdy glasses. Throw in the need for a haircut and pasty skin, and the guy was nothing special. Okay, he could relax a little here. This dude wasn't close to competition. If he were in a position to place a bet on it, he'd wager this date was going to be a bust.



“Bye. Be a good boy.” Amanda waved three fingers in his direction and walked out the door with the Friday night selection from the dating pool. Rand settled down for an early evening.

Three hours later, the sound of the key in the lock confirmed his suspicions, unless they got on so well they came back here to get it on.

“Thank you for dinner, Alec. Have fun on your trip.”

A quick kiss on the cheek was as close as Alec got to Amanda’s lips. *If I were human, this would be where I’d exhale a sigh of relief.* Rand moved forward to greet her, tail wagging and body wiggling with joy.

“Alistair, am I ever glad to see you. Let me get a soda and I’ll tell you about my date.”

Settled on the couch, Rand snuggled up against the woman who had his heart in her hands. She obviously didn’t get too close to her date, because he could only detect her normal fragrance. If she’d been involved in a make-out session, he would detect some of Alec’s scent.

“I sure hope tomorrow night’s selection is better than tonight’s.” Amanda took a swig from the can and set it down, freeing her hands and allowing Rand to push his head further into her lap. She scratched his ears as she spoke. “He’s a nice guy, but talk about boring. Watching paint dry would have been about as much fun as dinner. I know more about computer hardware design and programming

than I ever want to. And it turns out his love of animals is all about a cat he has. The poor creature spends most of its time with the housekeeper because Alec can't be bothered with an animal on all the trips he takes."

She drifted off in thought for a few minutes. "Do I know how to pick them or what? I'll try to keep an open mind about tomorrow night, but I'm not holding out high hopes here. "Let's watch a movie and forget about men."

The kiss she planted on Rand's nose gave him high hopes...hopes that someday he'd have a chance to be the man in her life. *One down, one to go.*



Saturday night's date was punctual and Amanda rushed past the couch where Rand sulked to answer the door.

"Dr. Livingston, I presume." Rand hated the deep baritone voice that made such a lame joke with Amanda's name. The jerk even had the nerve to laugh at his weak effort.

"Phil, hi. Come in, I'm running a little behind." She greeted the new arrival with a quick peck on the cheek and then headed back toward the bedroom. "Keep Alistair company while I finish. I'll only be a sec." Both pairs of male eyes watched the sway of her hips as she pulled the satin robe tighter with her exit.

Once Amanda was no longer visible, Rand turned his attention to the intruder. Women probably considered him handsome with his slick polished

appearance. *Yeah, he's slick all right, starting with the coifed brown hair shot with streaks of sunlight from a bottle, down to his wing-tipped shoes. Hell, bet that walking ad for a tooth-whitening smile is as fake as the highlights. Looks more like he works for a mobster than the financial firm Amanda mentioned earlier. Come to think of it, a lot of my fellow lawyers are considered mobsters by their clients, too.*

“Well pooch, guess it's just you and me for awhile.” The glow-in-the-dark suntanned male sneered down at the animal he so obviously considered beneath him. “Does the lady have anything to drink around here stronger than water?”

Rand watched as the competition made his way toward the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. “She does have lousy taste in beer, but a guy's gotta drink what's available. I don't think she'll mind if I help myself to one. Do you?” He plundered through drawers until he found a bottle opener and levered the cap off the microbrew that happened to be Rand's favorite. *The idiot wouldn't know good beer if it bit him in the ass.*

“I'm ready.” Amanda stood in the door and smiled at the pig as he swilled her beer.

*How can she be fooled by this jerk? Hells bells, the geek was a better choice. What happened to the smart woman I've spent the last few days with? Maybe women are as bad as men. Instead of a pair of big boobs, give them some muscle bound oaf and they forget they have a brain. Their*

*thinking can go south too, only they don't erect a tent pole to reflect it.*

“Be a good boy, Alistair.”

Wow, she actually remembered him. Amazing the way she seemed to focus on Pretty Boy's arm wrapped around her. *Enough of this crap. I'm not going to lie around here tonight with a hard-on.*

Rand darted across the room to the couple before they departed and wrapped his front paws around Phil's ankle. Maybe he couldn't shout 'fuck you' like he wanted to, but the humping he gave the owner of the expensive brown slacks left no doubt in his doggy mind he got his point across. Amid Amanda's shrieks to stop and swearing from the victim, Rand knew double satisfaction when he allowed his load to shoot against the fabric.

“God damned, dog. Look what he did to a five-hundred-dollar pair of slacks! I'll kill the little son-of-a-bitch.” Rand zipped across the room when Phil took a swipe at him.

“No. Phil, let's just go.” She pulled on the large man's arm. “I'll pay to have your pants cleaned. It's only a little semen. It'll come out.” Amanda hustled the angry man to the door. She paused and shot a dark look over her shoulder in the dog's direction. “You and I will discuss this later.”

*Talk all you want if I'm here, baby. Damn, I need to find a way to get home and quick. Though the main thing here is to determine where I am, so I can figure out where home is.* Rand

looked down at his paws in frustration. *Too frigging bad I can't use the internet.*



Amanda shook her finger at Rand and tried to keep a firm tone to her voice. “Alistair, you were a very bad boy last night. What got into you?” Lipid dark pools stared back at her with a hint of defiance. Surely, she imagined the anger she saw there. Dogs didn’t respond with attitude when chastised. If anything, their normal response was a hurt look and cowering when some spoke to them firmly.

“You know, we would have had this conversation last night if I hadn’t been so tired when I got home.”

Alistair continued to stare and she was sure her imagination heard the ‘humpf’ directed toward her.

“Phil seems like a nice guy, and I could use a nice man in my life. I’m sure he has a few flaws—after all, he’s male—but given the horse’s ass I wasted five years on, he’s a jewel. And unlike the computer geek the prior night, this guy can carry on a real conversation.”

A rumble emitted from the throat of the little black dog.

“Don’t grumble at me. I swear, sometimes you act almost human.” She plopped down on the couch beside him, reached over and pulled the Scottie onto her lap. “And the worst part is you act like a man.”

She smoothed back the wiry eyebrows, not sure how he could see with the

long strands hanging down over his eyes. Maybe she should trim them, but it was fun to sit and twirl the long hairs around her fingers. Besides, cutting them meant she would have to get up and find the scissors and right now she didn't have the energy.

"Don't ever act like a man, my sweet baby." She leaned over and planted a kiss on the warm nose. A tear slid down her cheek at the thought of her lack of success in the romance department. The little dog stretched his head up and licked the water from her face. Fate didn't seem to be on her side when it came to love unless it was animal. From men she either had none or bad.

"Yeah, I can just see your reaction to the Dick Wad if you met him. He used to complain if I didn't take a shower and change my clothes before I came home from work. Said I smelled like animals." The dark chocolate eyes watched her mouth and Amanda knew the furry creature in her lap understood what she told him better than any man in her life ever had.

"You wouldn't be my baby if he still lived here." She paused, the fights with Jess over pets in the house flooded back. "I had a cat when I met him. He insisted the cat go or he wouldn't move in. Do you believe to please him, I took my cat to live at the clinic? At least the little fellow became the office greeter until his nine lives were over." Alistair's blink encouraged her to continue.

"Plus, if I didn't rearrange my schedule to meet his whims, he'd pitch a fit.

Sometimes he'd spend two or three days not saying a word to me, then bless me with a cold, sullen stare when I tried to talk to him." She smiled as the pointy fur covered ears perked up. "Talk about the desire not to come home. A child's tantrums would have been easier to deal with." She sighed and continued to stroke the silk coat beneath her hand. "When we hit those periods of our idyllic life, I'd make up as many excuses as I could to work late. Pretty bad when a veterinary doctor wishes for an emergency to keep her at the clinic longer, isn't it?"

The short pointy tail beat on the couch in what she took to be an affirmative answer. "When we went to parties, I may as well have been alone. The minute we walked through the door he headed for the bar and I spent the evening with my friends. By the time we left, he'd be in no condition to drive."

The warm body in her lap pressed closer and whined. The need to show affection to someone caused Amanda to hug the animal to her chest. "Okay, enough. This has turned into a real pity party." She laughed and kissed the top of the black head.

"Then again, maybe I should listen to you about this Phil thing. I know animals have excellent people instincts. You're probably a better judge of men than me." Giggles erupted when the fur blanket in her lap jumped up to slather her face with doggy kisses.

"Stop, stop. Man, do we have to do something about your breath. I think you

need a different dog food. Maybe we'll get one that cleans tarter, because you have a severe case of halitosis, my friend." The hurt look in his eyes caused her to pull him close for another hug. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. You're a dog and with some of the stuff you put in your mouth I'm always amazed when I read silly statistics on dogs having cleaner mouths than humans."

She grabbed his head on either side and forced him to look at her. "Alistair, I really need you to be nice to Phil. Give the guy a chance. Do you have any idea how long it's been since I got laid?"

Alistair's resistance when she held his head caused her to release him. "No, probably not, and to tell you the truth, it's been so long I don't recall." She reached out to the dog again, only to have him butt her hand away. *Very puzzling behavior for an animal. Then again, this dog isn't like most of the ones I've treated.* "You have to understand I'm not a one-night-stand sort of girl. I don't jump into bed with a guy on the first date, no matter how horny I am. There's a need to feel the relationship will go someplace, or at the very least, has the potential to evolve into more than a wham-bam thank you ma'am."

The whine emitted by Alistair sounded almost human, and he crept forward to lay his head in her lap again. Why couldn't she meet a man who understood her the way her dog did?

Her dog? How quickly she'd come to think of the little Scottie as hers. If the



owners turned up, Amanda knew she'd be as heartbroken at his loss as she would over the loss of a lover. Maybe more so, since this little dog showed her more devotion in a few short days than any of the men in her life.

“So what do you say? Will you cut Phil some slack until I figure out how things are going, here?” The little pink tongue tickled her fingers, which she took to be a yes. “Okay enough of a walk down memory lane tonight, then. What say we go to bed and snuggle?”

The dog shot off the couch, ran to the bedroom door, and turned to encourage her to hurry. “I swear, sometimes I think you're really human.” Amanda turned out the lights, looking forward to the warm body stretched out beside her. She shook her head when she walked into her room and found Alistair on the bed waiting. “Too bad you're not a man tonight, though. Hot sex might've helped me feel better.”

## Chapter Four

“I’m tired.” Riz sat on the stone wall, slipped off her purple left Croc and massaged the bottom of the aching foot. “I don’t think my feet have ever hurt so much. Sneakers would have been better for a long hike.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” Mel dropped beside her twin and hunched over, holding her head. “It’s getting dark. We’d better get home. We won’t find Rand tonight.”

“Do you think we should have dropped breadcrumbs or something to find our way home? I have no idea where we are.”

Simma watched the two and almost felt a pang of sympathy...almost. *Nope, won’t go there. Remember how they tortured you when they were young, and still do when they feel the need. It’s about time they got a taste of the real world. The adult witches have protected the twins far too long, which in my opinion accounts for some of their unacceptable behavior.*

“Come, kittens. I’ll lead you home.” He jumped down from the wall and with tail in the air, led the parade. The girls followed him into the house and collapsed on barstools at the kitchen island.

“I’m so tired I may never move.” Mel crossed her arms on the counter and

rested her head onto them.

“Yeah, me too.” Riz kicked off her Crocs and wiggled her toes. “I think I have blisters on my blisters.”

Okay, he’d give them a few minutes to rest before he demanded dinner. Sure, his stomach met his backbone, and given its empty state, he’d pass out from hunger soon. Simma glanced across the room to the desk tucked in the corner and noticed the blink of the crystal ball. Uh-oh. More trouble brewing. Mama called to check up on them while they were out and he knew the first name on the list to discuss how things were going on the home front.

*“Sorry girls. I know you’re tired, but don’t you think you should respond to your call?”* His right ear twitched in the direction of the desk where the shining orb blinked.

“Man, oh man.” Simma watched Riz’s panic filled eyes turn toward her sister. “What are we going to do? Mom will want to talk to Rand.”

“I don’t know.” The normally assertive Mel sounded as frightened as her twin looked.

Simma didn’t attempt to repress a sigh. He needed to take over, as usual. *“Okay. Go over and get the communication device and let’s see if your mother is still there. She may have just left a message.”*

“Right.” Mel retrieved the crystal ball, brought it over to the island and set it down between them. “What do we say if she’s still there?”

*“Here’s the plan.” Simma padded back and forth across the counter top. “If she’s still on, then you tell her Rand worked late. He told you to order pizza for dinner and he’ll call to check on things later since he needs to finish up the project that’s due tomorrow.”*

Riz slid off the barstool and moved a chair next to her sister to lend moral support. Mel waved a hand over the glass orb and the swirling clouds cleared to reveal their mother’s smiling face.

“Hello my darlings! I tried to reach one of you earlier. Did you go out to dinner or something fun? Granna and I wanted to check in to see if you need anything.” Her grandmother stuck her head over Jorgia’s shoulder and waved.

Both girls waved back and chorused, “Hi Granna. We’re great, Mom.”

“Wonderful. We knew Rand would take good care of things on the home front. Put him on would you?”

“Sorry, Mom. He’s not here,” Mel said.

“Not there?” A frown puckered Jorgia’s brow.

The girls linked hands under the table. “Uh...he had to work late. He has a brief that’s due tomorrow and I guess he’s had trouble connecting with the client and it put him behind. We ordered pizza for dinner, and Rand’s calling later to see if we need anything.” Simma hoped Jorgia didn’t pick up on the gulp from Mel when she told the lie.

“Oh well, that happens.” Their mother smiled. “And you two are all right?”

Both girls nodded they were.

“Well, if you need him, don’t hesitate to call,” Jorgia continued. “We’ll be tied up with meetings for the next few days, so tell your brother if he wants to contact us, use the emergency signal. We have to run now. Bye, darlings. Talk to you in a couple of days.” Both women blew kisses as the fog swirled in, clouding the glass.

“Whew!” Riz went limp in obvious relief. The cat thought she’d fall out of the chair if she leaned any further to the left.

“So what do we do now?” Mel’s pale face reflected her sister’s and her eyes glistened with unshed tears.

*Here we go again. Why do I always have to come up with the ideas around here?* Simma twitched his tail in irritation. *“I do have connections. I’ve put a request out for the collection of information. Maybe someone in the animal world saw something and even as we speak, the word is going through our telepathic grapevine.”*

Color returned to Riz’s face, and he knew she felt like her old self when she questioned his logic. “Is it realistic to think cats will pay any attention to a dog? Don’t they run when they see one on the loose? That won’t help much.”

He really did have to educate these two on the ways of the world. *“Cat, dog, bird...in times of trouble it doesn’t matter. We all become one community. I should have done this sooner.”* *My bad in not thinking of it immediately. But, given the distractions I’ve had to deal with,*

*it's amazing I can remember my name. "If anyone one has seen our boy, we'll hear about it."*



Rand paced the floor. Amanda had another date with the Tan Man tonight and ran late in her efforts to dress for the evening. He'd come to realize late was a normal schedule for her, except when it came to work. That meant he'd be stuck with the jerk again. The doorbell rang, confirming his worst fear. His ears picked up the muffled sound of running feet as she rushed to answer.

"Sorry, Phil. I'm late as usual. A small emergency right at closing time put me behind." Amanda stepped back and motioned for the tall man to enter. "You know the drill. Help yourself to whatever. I'll be ready in a jiff." She hurried down the hall toward her bedroom.

"Well, little fucker, looks like it's you and me again." Rand watched as the man walked toward the refrigerator. "Shit. She didn't get the hint about beer. All that's in here is that microbrew crap." In spite of his unkind words, he pulled one of the bottles out and found the bottle opener. Popping the cap, Phil tipped his head and took a long drink.

*Sorry, we don't have any of the Horse Piss you normally drink, asshole.* Rand watched in hopes the arrogant prick would choke on his first chug.

"So, little black dog, what's it like snuggled up against that hot body?" Rand glared as Phil took another swig. "She tells me you sleep on the bed, but I'm here to

tell you pal, tonight it's the floor for you. I plan to be the one in her bed. Your horny little ass is going to be elsewhere."

*Wanna bet?* Rand fought the urge to bite the creep's ankle. Why the hell, if his sisters had to zap him with their spell, didn't they turn him into a pit-bull or a Doberman? Instead, in their usual amazing ability to screw things up, they turned him into a frigging Scottish Terrier, small even for his breed. If he sunk his teeth into this guy, the skin would probably be so tough, he'd break his canines.

"Yep, I plan to get me a piece of that luscious ass tonight." Rand ignored most of the inane ramblings from Pretty Boy, but that comment got his attention. "Made reservations at a fancy restaurant and I figure with a little dinner and a lot of wine, she'll be all over me. Hell, we may not even make it back here. I may just do her in the car." The man placed his hand over his crotch and squeezed the bulge that appeared in his pants as he made his plans to seduce Amanda.

*How can Amanda be so stupid and not see what a jerk this guy is?* Rand still wrestled with that question, but in all fairness to her, the guy acted like a different person when she came into the room. In fact, he became such a perfect gentleman when she appeared, Rand wanted to puke.

"So mum's the word, fur ball." Phil reached over to pet him and Rand snapped at the hand that almost touched his head.

*Fur ball. He wasn't a fucking cat.* This guy needed someone to teach him a lesson,

and he was just the dog to do it, small or not. Unfortunately, Amanda walked in the room in time to see the attempted bite.

“Alistair!” Amanda sped across the room and grabbed his collar. “Bad dog.”

She turned to look at Pretty Boy. “I’m sorry Phil, I don’t know what’s wrong him.”

“The little fucker doesn’t like me.” Rand watched in disgust as Phil rubbed the hand he hadn’t gotten close enough to nip. “Has he had his rabies shots?”

Amanda let go of Rand’s collar and stood up. She took the man’s hand in hers and examined it. “Did he get you? If he broke the skin I’ll get some antiseptic.”

“No, it’s fine. Take more than a little pansy dog like that one to get through Phil Robert’s hide.”

*Just like I thought.*

Phil brought Amanda’s hand to his lips and nuzzled it before she pulled it free. “We’d better go. I made reservations for a pretty special place tonight.”

“Right.” She looked around the room. “Let me get my purse and I’m ready. I tossed it around here somewhere when I saw Alistair snarl at you.” The missing purse lay on a chair, and she quickly grabbed it, along with the coat she had laid out earlier. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

Rand watched the door close behind them. She didn’t even say goodnight to him. He’d really upset her this time. Pacing back and forth, he knew a long night



loomed ahead. What would he do when they returned if Amanda decided to take Phil into her bed instead of him? His life had definitely gone to the dogs, and right now, *a dog's life sucked*.



The lock snapped and Rand jumped to attention. He stood on all fours, ears cocked toward the door in order not to miss any sounds. Instead of working on a plan to get out of here and find his sisters, he'd fumed and worried about Amanda, needing to fight off the brute in the car. Her poor choice in men needed serious discussion, but unfortunately, he wasn't in any position to do it at the moment.

Worse yet, the thought of her not fighting off the jerk had played through his head, and time moved even slower. He'd finally arrived at the conclusion that if Phil Roberts was the kind of guy that got her motor running, then she wasn't the woman for him.

He was lying to himself. Amanda was most definitely the woman for him. If he were a man, that was.

"Thank you, Phil. I had a lovely time, but I'm afraid I drank too much wine. Sorry if I made a fool of myself."

Amanda's voice caused Rand's heart to race. He should have been the one across a table from the woman who owned his heart, sharing a gourmet meal and wine. No, not wine. Champagne to toast her beauty would have been his choice.

And he would have encouraged her to drink as much of the bubbly as she wanted. He would have taken care of her, not taken advantage because she was tipsy.

“I’m glad you were able to relax. You work too hard.” The oiliness of Phil’s voice grated on Rand’s nerves. Even in his human form, this man would have sounded too smooth to him. “Are you going to ask me in for a nightcap?”

“I don’t think I’m up to anything else to drink.” Amanda smiled, but she didn’t move to invite him in.

“Then let me make you some coffee.” Phil slipped past her and headed toward the kitchen.

Amanda followed behind him, her expression none too happy. “Please Phil, I don’t want coffee. I think I really need to go to bed. It’s been a long day.”

Rand cringed when he saw the smirk play around the man’s lips before he turned to Amanda.

“I’m sure you are, darling.” He pulled her into his arms. “Let me make you feel better.” Phil’s hands roamed over her back and down to cup Amanda’s behind before his mouth claimed the soft pink lips.

Amanda made no resistance and the kiss continued much too long from Rand’s point of view. One would never know he’d had dinner, the way Phil feasted on the pretty lips as if he were at an all-you-can-eat buffet. Relief surged through him when she finally pulled her mouth away.

“I’m really tired. This won’t work for me tonight.”

“Come on, baby. This is our third date. Don’t you think you can warm up a little?” His hand snaked up and cupped a breast. “You’re not frigid, are you?”

“Phil, stop it.” Amanda slapped his hand away. “Just because you bought me a few dinners doesn’t mean you get free access to my body.”

*Woohoo.* Rand felt a happy dance in order and pranced around their ankles. She’d finally realized the true character of the ass.

“Honey, for what I’ve spent on meals, I could have invested in a high priced hooker without having to work so hard.” Phil moved in again and put his hands around her waist. “I’ve spent a lot of hours listening to you rave about this fucking fur ball.” He kicked at Rand’s attempt to wiggle in between his legs and Amanda’s, “and all the other stupid animals you deal with at your clinic. For Christ sakes, most fellows would have dumped you after the first date.” He kicked out again.

Rand decided to play this treatment for all that it was worth. He yipped and jumped to avoid the wing-tipped shoe. Out of range of the man’s feet, he whimpered and cowered, as he assessed his next move. A kick would hurt like hell, but no way would he let this jerk get away without some damage.

*Okay asshole. You want to play rough, do you? We’ll just see about that.* Rand moved in and lifted his hind leg, delighted at the sound of water splattering against perfectly shined leather. *I’ve wanted to do that since the first time I laid eyes on you, prick!*

“Why you little motherfucker. I’m going to break your skinny little neck.” Phil forgot his pursuit of Amanda and lunged for the little Scottie.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Amanda leaped between the angry man and her dog. She scooped up Rand in her arms and turned on Phil like a mother tiger defending her young. “Don’t you dare hurt my animal.”

Delight surged through Rand at her defense. He thought for sure he was in big trouble for pissing on the creep’s shoes. It appeared the Amanda he thought he knew had resurfaced. *Whoopee, my woman is back.*

“Ah, come on baby. Let’s be friends. I didn’t mean to hurt the little fur ball. Just got a little upset when he pissed on my shoe, especially after he ruined my slacks. You understand, don’t you? What man wouldn’t?” Phil extended a hand toward Amanda, and Rand bared his teeth, a loud growl emitted from his throat. “Why don’t you lock the mutt up so you and me can retire to the bedroom for a little slap and tickle? I’ll massage away your tension.” He actually had the nerve to leer.

*What an ass. The idiot didn’t have sense enough to realize he’d struck out.* Rand would have shouted with glee if he’d been able to, but settled for several short barks. Pretty Boy didn’t have to worry about the bedroom tonight or any other night. He’d just sealed his fate. *Don’t let the door hit you in the ass on the way out, prick.*

“The only slap that’s going to happen here is when my hand connects with

your face.” Amanda shifted Rand to left arm and raised her free hand. Rand was impressed with the force in which she applied her palm to the man’s cheek. Wow, did she ever have a good right hook.

“You stupid bitch.” Phil took a step forwarded and Rand went wild, impressed with his own ferocious barks and snarls and how quickly they caused Phil to jump back. The glare the man shot his way earned the creep barred teeth in what Rand hoped came across as a big doggy grin.

“Hope you have fun with that fucking dog, because with your holier-than-thou attitude, you’ll never get a man in your bed.” Phil stalked toward the door and slammed it on his way out.

“Whew. Ugly scene, and I for one am glad it’s over.” Still cuddling Rand in her arms, Amanda sat down on the couch. “I should have listened to you. You seem to have better instincts about men than I do.”

*That’s because I am a man. I know how we think.* He lifted his head and licked Amanda’s chin. *A lot of guys can’t get past thinking with their little head when it comes to bedding a beautiful woman.*

“Oh, Alistair, why can’t I meet a man like you?”

*Oh honey, if I ever find out how to get back to my manly self, I promise you will meet a man like me.*

She buried her face in his fur and he felt the hot release of the tears she’d

held back during the confrontation. After crying for several minutes, she let the dog go and stood up. “We’d better get to bed. I have a super long day ahead of me tomorrow.”

Rand jumped down from the couch and followed. He had a super long night ahead of him, attempting to heal her pain. A night that promised a lot of snuggling. Too bad he couldn’t reap the full benefit. *Oops, there I go, thinking like a man.*

## Chapter Five

Simma stretched out in the warm morning sunshine to think. He appreciated this favorite spot in the garden that shielded him from the eyes of the family if they looked out the kitchen window. A cat needed privacy to do serious thinking.

The family, especially the girls, drove him crazy at times. The twins needed to grow up, but how could they accomplish that when their mother and grandmother constantly bailed them out of the dilemmas they got into? He loved the Demon Duo, as their brother often called them, as much as anyone in the family, but finding their own solution to a problem they created would go a long way in making them responsible.

It was too bad the magic genes flowed with the women. In this case, Rand would have been the better choice, but the poor guy had very little in the way of magic attached to him. A little intuition was about it all Simma could ascertain.

The cat sighed and stretched. Who was he to question the fates? Right now he needed to focus on finding Rand. He'd spent last night prowling the neighborhood, putting the word on the grapevine for the other animals to be on the lookout, which resulted in very little rest.

Arriving home with the sunrise, he'd retreated to Jorgia's magic room and the large volume of spells and counter-spells to continue his research. Of course, with his superior knowledge on the subject, he'd found what he was looking for in a matter of moments. After he read the consequences of the spell the twins had produced, the need to find Rand became even more urgent.

Rand was not going to be a happy camper when he discovered his future, and the older witches were going to have nothing short of a shit-fit.

Faced with the option of sharing what he had discovered with the twins and calming their hysterics, or searching for Rand, he decided on the latter. Letting the girls continue their efforts to find a counter-spell would keep them occupied and out of his hair for most of the day.

*"Simma. Simma."*

He opened his eyes, ready to chew out this rude creature who dared interrupt his contemplations. Jiles, an orange tabby cat from a few blocks over who made a fence post appear smart, sat down in front of him.

*"I think I know where you can find your dog."*

The urge to wipe the proverbial feathers off the gloating creature's mouth passed through Simma's thoughts as he yawned and stretched, cracking each vertebrae one by one, to limber his back. *"Yeah, how so?"*

*"He's over in Eagle Vale,"* the excited cat danced with pleasure at breaking the



news.

*“Eagle Vale? Do you frigging know how far away that is?”* The dejected expression on Jiles’ face almost made him regret the harshness of his reaction...almost. *“How did you discover this?”*

*“The grapevine. Pokey heard it from Kitten, who heard it from Lucie, who heard it from Frankie, who lives in Eagle Vale It was all the howl on the grapevine this morning.”*

*“Hmmm.”* Simma chastised himself for not being tuned into the local gossip at a time he really needed to be. Oh well, at least his broadcasts last night may have produced results. The hours he’d spent howling and yowling perched on that narrow fence rail hadn’t been for naught. *“How does Frankie know this is the dog I’m looking for?”*

*“Well, Frankie said he spied a black Scottie that he’d never seen before patrolling the perimeters of the fence in the back yard. The house belongs to a veterinarian, and she doesn’t have a pet living with her. He thought the dog was trying to find an escape, the way he kept attempting to squeeze through any opening that looked large enough.”*

*“Sounds like a possibility. I’ll have to go investigate the situation. Good work, Jiles.”* The look of delight on Jiles’ face at the compliment gave Simma a moment of guilt at all the mean thoughts he’d had about the orange cat.

Traveling five miles to a strange neighborhood to check out the possibility

this dog might be Rand didn't appeal. His feet were still tired from last night's exploration to find the missing dog...man, plus all the time he'd spent putting the word out on the street, his throat was sore. Hells bells, the Fates really had it in for him.

"Woof, woof." The deep bark of a dog around front drew his attention. Maybe he wouldn't have to go it on foot if that was who he thought it was. With any luck, Brutus would be up to a bigger adventure than chasing squirrels up a tree.

*"Thanks again, Jiles. Catch you later, man."* Simma headed for the front yard.



Amanda flopped down on the sofa and set her glass of wine on the table at one end of the sofa. "I'm glad to be home tonight, Alistair. It will be great to have a quiet night with my favorite guy."

Rand thumped his tail in an attempt to convey how happy he was with an evening of just the two of them. Barry crooning in the background, Amanda curled up beside him with a glass of wine and a book, him snuggled as close as he could get—what more could a guy want? Except maybe to be in his human body instead of this fucking furry one. Somehow, ear scratches weren't meeting his needs. Too bad he wasn't his usual self. He yawned and closed his eyes. If he were human, he could show... her what...lov...

"I'm so excited." In his dream, Amanda squeezed his arm and smiled up into

his eyes. “You know how much I love Barry Manilow, and we get to see him in person.”

Rand slipped an arm around her waist and snuggled her closer. This second honeymoon trip to Las Vegas was one of his better ideas. The stars aligned for him when, after their arrival, he discovered Manilow was in town. Thanks to the concierge, he’d been able to score a great pair of tickets. With any luck, his bride of two years would show him how much she appreciated his efforts later.

His thoughts couldn’t go there or he’d have a hell of an uncomfortable evening nursing a hard-on. Down boy. Get your thoughts under control and focus. It’s not like you don’t get enough sex. Instead of quelling his passion for the woman beside him, marriage had only served to increase it.

“Ladies and gentlemen, here he is,” the announcer turned toward his left and let his hand sweep in that direction, “the man you’ve all been waiting for...Barry Manilow.”

Relief swept through Rand. Focusing on Barry’s performance should take his mind off the flush of passion that surged through him every time he thought about bed and Amanda in the same sentence.

Barry broke into “Copacabana” and from there he ticked off his long list of hits in an enthusiastic performance. In between songs, he shared stories and told jokes.

The look of sheer delight on Amanda's face was worth its weight in gold Rand paid for the front row tickets. When the singer broke into "Mandy," she looked at Rand and smiled. He sang that number to her often at home. Not as good as Barry, but he sang it with more love.

The lights went up and Manilow moved to the piano. "Ladies and gentlemen, I have a surprise for you tonight."

Ooohs and aaahs floated through the room. People scooted forward on their seats, anticipating what the singer had in store for them.

"I've written a musical and it is going to open on Broadway next year. Plus, we're also in negotiations for the film rights and if all goes well, shooting will start the following year. "

Applause roared through the small theater. The room may not hold the numbers of one on Broadway, but the audience couldn't be any more enthusiastic than this group.

"Tonight will be the first time I've played any of the songs publicly."

More applause, combined with cheers greeted this announcement.

"So it begins. Our hero, Prince Stephan, discovers two evil witches waiting when he enters his chambers. They demand he choose one of them as his wife." Barry broke into a song about the tortured love the witches had felt for the prince for so long.

“The prince says no—he is not in love with either of them; he’ll wait for his own true love. Furious, the witches proclaim he’ll regret that choice. They point their fingers at him and mutter ominous words.

“Stephan feels changes happening in his body and discovers he’s been turned into a dog—a furry little Scottie dog.” Eyes closed, a song about change rolled from Barry’s mouth.

“Scared, Stephan runs from the castle, and after several days hiding in barns and caves and traveling after dark, he comes to the land of Princess Sophie. She is walking along the riverbank when she spies the little dog and takes him home with her.

“Living with the beautiful Sophie, Stephan discovers true love. Now, he must leave to find out how he can become himself again. Sophie is heartbroken.” The piano cried the pain of heartbreak as the words flowed from Barry.

“In the end, the prince discovers it will take the tears of true love to break the spell and he returns to Sophie, happier to spend his days as her lap dog than without any contact at all. The tears of joy the princess sheds over his return are laced with all the love she has in her heart, and he changes back to a human.” The song that followed was upbeat and joyous.

When it was finished, Barry turned to the crowd. “There you have it, folks. A sample of my new musical.”

“What’s it called?” someone in the audience yelled out.

“Oh, guess I forgot that little detail. The name of the show is Dogspell.”

Dogspell, the words echoed over and over through Rand’s head. “Woof.” He woke up with a start and then attempted to focus on his surroundings. *What the hell? Barry Manilow is writing a musical about a dog. Imagine that.*

*Wait a minute, I’m not in a theater even if Barry is singing.* He looked down to see his head rested on two furry paws, and Barry crooned from the CD player. Looking up he saw Amanda returning with another glass of wine. Shit, he’d been dreaming, and what a realistic dream.

The part about marriage to Amanda was wishful thinking, but change the two witches in love with the prince to a couple of twin witch troublemaking sisters, and the princess to a veterinarian, and you had his life as he knew it right now. *Son of a bitch.* He couldn’t even share the dream with Amanda. He bet she’d get a kick out of it. All he could do was whimper his distress.

“You’re right boy, it is getting late. I’m going to regret drinking almost a full bottle of wine when it’s time to pry myself out of bed in the morning.” Amanda put her book down and stood, stretching her arms above her head, showing her belly.

If she were shorter, Rand would love to lick the band of creamy skin. Was he drooling?

“Come on. Let’s get to bed. Tomorrow is going to be another long day.”

Rand followed behind the woman he’d come to think of as his soul mate. The dream drove home the need to escape the silken bonds that held Alistair and find a way back to his sisters. They held the key to his true self. And only as Randal McAllister could pursue a chance at love.



“Alistair, you have to stay home today.” Amanda set the cup of coffee from which she’d taken a sip on the table. She slumped down in her chair and tilted her head back, wincing at the movement, before she placed a cucumber slice over each eye. “I wish I’d thought of this earlier.”

*Screw the cucumber. What do you mean I have to stay home?*

“Cold cucumber is supposed to be good to moisturize the skin, plus reduce swollen eyes. Can you believe I wasted all those tears the other day over another jerk who passed through my life? Then, in true Amanda style, I held a pity party with a bottle of wine last night. Still can’t believe I drank so much, I couldn’t see the print on the pages of the book I pretended to read.” She took the compress off one eye and squinted over at her companion. “It’s to the point I think I may swear off men. They’re more trouble than they’re worth, plus they drive me to drink. If I need sex...well, that’s what vibrators are for.”

*No, don’t swear off men. Let me get back to my normal self and I’ll show you how a man*

*should treat you.*

“Anyway,” Amanda removed the cucumber slice from her other eye and tossed both pieces on the plate, “I’d better get going.” She picked up her cup and took a last swig of coffee before placing the mug and plate in the sink. “You be a good boy today.”

*Shit, that’s right. She said I have to stay home. No fair, she never said why. Is she trying out some new stud? So much for her decision to swear off men.*

*Wait, this may be my chance to discover a way back to the Demons. They’ve had enough time to figure out how to return me to my true self.*

She made the little boo-boo face that always made Rand’s heart leap. “Don’t look at me with those sad eyes. I have to go to a charity event right after work and won’t have time to bring you home.” Her soft fingers scratched along his muzzle and she planted a kiss on his nose. “I’m sure you’d be better company than most of the people I’ll have to contend with tonight. There probably isn’t enough alcohol served there to make some of their jokes funny. Plus, since I’m driving, I can’t have more than a glass of wine, anyway.”

Okay, he could understand that. *Just make sure you come home alone...and early would be nice, too.*

Amanda stopped at the door and looked back. “I feel guilty leaving you home by yourself all day. I’m glad the man got the doggy door installed yesterday.



You'll be able to get some exercise in the back yard. I won't feel so guilty about you being shut in the house until I get home." She closed the door behind her.

*Well, that's that. Home alone. Okay, time to figure a way to get out of the yard and see if I can find my PITA sisters.* How two young girls could be such a pain in the ass at times always amazed him. When they were toddlers, it was to be expected, but now?

*It is a good thing the guy installed the doggy door yesterday. Otherwise, I'd be totally screwed in any attempt to get my real life back. I really have to find a way to break this dog spell.* Rand wiggled through the opening created for him and sniffed the air for familiar scents. Nope, nothing around here smelled like his mother's neighborhood.

He made his way slowly along the fence border searching for any avenue of escape. A small hole he could squeeze through would do the trick, was that asking for too much? Three times around the fence boundary produced the same results. None of the boards were spaced far enough apart for him to wiggle between, and there was nothing he could climb upon to get him high enough to jump over the fence. *Damn, I have to dig my way out. Oh well, it's a dirty job, but I don't see a long line forming to do it for me. Guess it's my team of me and me. Besides, daylights burning.*

Intent on digging, he missed hearing his name called. He didn't notice the big black cat staring at him through the picket fence until it yelled.

"Rand, what the hell do you think you're doing?" Simma glared through an opening in the slats that separated them. "You'd probably have better results if you used those eyebrows

*as a shovel.”*

Choosing to ignore the snide remark, he greeted the cat with emotion. *Simma, am I ever glad to see you!*” Rand would have hugged the family familiar if he’d been able to reach him and if he had arms instead of dog paws. *“Do you know where we are? Dumb question I guess, since you found me.”*

*“You could say that.”* Simma licked a paw and used it to wipe his face. *“The twins are beside themselves with worry. Why haven’t you found your way back home before now?”*

Just like a damn cat to cop an attitude. *“Because after I got hit by a car, I’ve been locked in a house or at the vet clinic since I’m a frigging dog. Do you want me to continue my list of reasons or let me get back to work here?”* Rand started to dig again.

*“So how’d you get out today?”*

Rand stopped and panted for a moment to get his breath. *“Dog door, guy came over and installed it yesterday. She has some event tonight and didn’t have time to bring me back here, so I’m home alone.”* The unblinking cat stare he received in response to his explanation caused Rand to squirm and want to attempt to justify himself, again. *Damned feline is almost as big as me and haughty enough to give animals, or humans, an inferiority complex with that evil-eye.*

*“Well, at the rate you’re going with your tunnel, we’ll be here when she gets home tonight and all your effort will have been for naught since she’ll fill it up again. Probably put a big rock*

over it, too.” The cat’s shout vibrated through Rand’s head. *“Brutus, get over here.”*

The largest Doberman Rand had ever seen ran up and sat down beside the cat. If his owner had children and put a saddle on the beast, he’d double as their horse.

*“What’s up, Simma?”*

*Damn, one bite and Simma would be this brute’s snack. Come to think of it, so would I. Not a secure feeling going on inside me here.*

*“Don’t worry, it’s cool. In times of need, animals band together.”* Simma turned his attention to the big dog. *“Brutus, we need your help to dig our boy out of here. As you can see, progress on his part is slow.”*

*“Yeah, well these puny little dogs aren’t good for much except taking up space on their owners’ laps and yipping, anyway. Get out of the way, short stuff. Let a real dog take over.”* The huge monster started to dig and in a matter of minutes created a hole large enough for Rand to squeeze through.

Rand wiggled under the fence. *“Hey, thanks man. Can’t tell you how much I appreciate your help.”* Rand wanted to high-five him, but wasn’t sure how that was done in the animal world.

*“No problem. If you need help again, just yell, or should I say, yip.”* The dog laughed at his little joke as he trotted off. *“Later, Simma. Think I’ll check out the hot bitch I heard lives*

*over in this neighborhood.”*

Simma nudged Rand on the shoulder to get his attention. *“We need to get going. It’ll be dark by the time we get back, and the twins are home alone.”* Tail high in the air, Simma streaked across the lawn. *“Stay close,”* he instructed Rand who lagged a little behind.

Rand followed the cat, unsure he’d have found his way back home with all the twists and turns if he’d been on his own. He cautioned Simma a couple of times to not climb fences and lose him.

*“Sorry bro, but dogs don’t have the ability to scale six foot redwood boards.”* This comment earned him a look of disdain. Truth was, he still enjoyed irritating the cat, even though he was grateful for the rescue.

The lights were on in the kitchen when they arrived, and Rand paused by the window to watch the girls as they worked together to prepare dinner. He didn’t know they could cook, but it appeared they knew their way around the kitchen pretty well, and for once seemed to work together.

Simma sat on the ledge and glared down. *“Shall we let them know you’re back, or do you prefer to sit here and watch like a perverted Peeping Tom?”*

*“Sure, I’ll go around to the door and bark. That should get their attention.”* Rand started toward the door, but stopped as a sharp pain shot along his back and down his leg.

The joints in his body were on the verge of exploding, and agony ran through his bones with an intensity that made him want to howl. *“What the hell is going on?”* He directed the question at Simma, but didn’t hear the cat’s answer as his body shattered into a million pieces. Lying on his stomach in the grass, Rand realized the nose in the dirt wasn’t on the end of a muzzle. He no longer had the body of a dog, but a nude human male who lay face down next to one of his mother’s prize rose bushes. Working to get out of the thorny situation without doing damage to his private parts, he rolled toward the grass and stared up at the full moon.

Simma jumped onto his naked chest and met Rand’s eyes when the man turned his gaze toward the cat. *“Damn, looks like the twins didn’t do the correct calculation on the arrival of the full moon.”* The feline looked upward at the bright ball of light that cast a pearly glow on all it touched. *“This wasn’t supposed to happen for another forty-eight hours.”*

*“You knew I would turn back to my human form again?. Why didn’t you tell me on the way over here, stupid cat?”* Crap, he could still use the mind talk thing. He’d better revert to his voice and make sure it still worked.

*“Oh, that won’t be necessary.”* Simma’s back claws dug into Rand’s bare skin as he jumped off. *“I’ve been able to read your mind for a very long time, and you could have read mine if you’d not been so determined to ignore your heritage.”*

“*Really?*” Rand started to explore this bit of news when it dawned on him; he lay bare-assed in his mother’s front yard. What if someone came by and saw him? The last thing he needed right now was a nosey neighbor calling the police. Somehow, he couldn’t envision local, uptight cops buying into his explanation.

He jumped to his feet, then scurried behind a row of bushes. “Okay, smart ass, how do I get in the house like this? I’m sure the front door is locked and I can’t slip in through the kitchen with the twins in the midst of a mad cooking spree.” Rand’s voice sounded rusty to him. He’d only barked or growled the past two weeks.

“*Must I do everything?*” Simma jumped up on the ledge and stared though the window. One of the twins turned in his direction. “*Let me in, please.*” A grin lit her face and she hurried to the door.

Hunkered behind the row of non-thorny bushes, Rand waited while the cat scooted in to break the news of his return. Moments later, he heard squeals of what he hoped to be delight. The back door opened and Mel appeared. “Rand. Rand, where are you?”

“I’m in the bushes. Get me a towel or something to cover up with.” He heard the running of footsteps and Riz’s head appeared over her sister’s shoulder. Ducking past her twin, she rushed toward the bushes where Rand hid and tossed the towel. He wrapped the terrycloth around his lower torso and came out from

his hiding place. In a mad dash through the door, he yelled back to the twins, “After I get some clothes, we’ll talk. And that includes you, cat.”



Sunlight put a different perspective on things. Rand drank his coffee and contemplated his options as he stood at the window and soaked up rays of morning sun. The conversation with the twins and Simma last night enlightened him to the probability he would have about a week in his own body before reverting back to canine form. So far, the trio that currently held his fate in their hands—and paws—had found no permanent cure to the dog spell.

Sleep had eluded him when he went to bed, not only because of the need to find a counter spell, but also because he didn’t have Amanda’s warm body next to his. Even as a dog, he appreciated the feel of her, and each time her arms reached out to snuggle him closer, he’d desperately wished to be Rand, instead of Alistair.

There were two problems to resolve today. One, try and figure out how not to revert back to Alistair and two, come up with a way to meet Amanda as his true self.

“*Sleep well?*” Simma’s tail swept back and forth across the breakfast bar as he made himself comfortable.

“Don’t you know cats aren’t supposed to jump up on kitchen counters?”

“*A misconception perpetrated by humans who want to be territorial.*” The cat licked a

paw and stroked it down the side of his face. *“Man has always strived to keep animals down, not giving them credit for their abilities. The things I could tell you about our abuse through history.”*

Before Rand could comment, the twins barreled into the kitchen and threw their arms around his neck.

“I thought I dreamt last night...” Riz squeezed harder and Rand worked to loosen her chokehold. “Sorry.” She planted a kiss on his cheek, and Mel smacked one on the other side.

“Lucky this Amanda chick that hit you was a veterinarian.” Mel reached over and swiped the toast he’d buttered minutes before.

“Hey, get your own.” He snatched his breakfast back and took a big bite, washing it down with coffee. Back to the situation at hand. “Speaking of Amanda, I need to figure out a way to meet her as my true self. Do either of you two have any bright ideas that won’t cause me more trouble?” Maybe soliciting their help wasn’t too smart on his part. Give either of the duo an inch, and they’d take a mile.

“Well,” Mel, who guarded the toaster as if it contained the last morsel of food on earth, stopped to grab the piece of toast that popped up, “we’re talking vet here, which, if I’m correct, is an animal doctor.”

“No duh,” Riz shot her sister a “how dumb can you be” look.

Ignoring her twin, Mel didn’t bother with butter. She bit a chunk out of the



crisp bread, then proceeded to talk around it. “So what you need is to find an animal with some sort of problem.”

“Yeah, then what?”

“Then take it in for her to treat.”

Damn, impressive. Rand wondered why he hadn’t thought of something so simple.

“Yeah. All we need is to find a dog. Or you could go down to the shelter and adopt one.” Riz wiped the back of her arm across her upper lip to remove the milk mustache. “You can take the doggie you decide on to this Dr. Livingston and say you just wanted to make sure the animal shelter didn’t make a mistake when they issued a clean bill of health for your pet.”

“Hmmm.” Rand tapped his fingers on the counter, and his eyes drifted toward the cat who now soaked up sun on the window seat. “I don’t think we need to go to that extent. After all, we have a cat here. Why do we need to acquire a dog? It’s safe to say our kitty is magical enough to develop some type of ailment, don’t you think?” As a unit, they moved toward the cat.

Simma lifted his head and squinted at the three humans who stood in a semi-circle around him. “*Hey, leave me out of this. I’m not going to the vet.*” His tail twitched back and forth, a strong signal of his irritation. “*You know I don’t do vets. Never have cared for doctors since my brush with that Frankenstein dude awhile back.*”

“He wasn’t a veterinarian, just some whacked out doctor who thought he could change the world, you crazy cat. Come on buddy, you owe me. You let the Demon Duo get the book out when you were in charge.”

“Excuse me!” Hands planted on hips, Riz glared at her brother. “Since when did we become the Demon Duo?”

Rand, braced for an attack from the other indignant twin, fired back. “How about since birth?” He hoped the frown directed toward Mel would be enough to keep her quiet, but decided to soften the nickname he felt aptly applied. “All big brothers have pet names for their little sisters.”

“Hey, don’t get all uppity with me, Big Brother. I kinda like the title. Not like I haven’t heard it before.” Mel grinned and gave her sister an elbow in the ribs. “Come on Riz. Admit we giggle about it in private. You’ve got a case of guilt about turning our brother into a dog, even if he does make a cute little woof.”

“Enough!” Simma’s tale twitched back and forth in a pendulum swing. “You,” he fixed a green-eyed stare on Rand, “*are as bad as your sisters with all the arguing.*” He transferred his glare to the twins. “*I hoped the efforts to find your brother would help you two grow up, but it looks like I was wrong. If you want to bicker, take it elsewhere. Since the only way I’ll get peace and quiet around here is to go to a stupid vet, I’ll do it. As much as I hate the idea, the thought of listening to all of you whine and nag for days is worse.*”

The large cat took a deep breath and mumbled something the humans

couldn't make out. "*There, are you happy now? Do you think this will get me into the doctor's office?*"

Rand shook his head in amazement and the twins broke into hoots of laughter.

## Chapter Six

*“Hey dude, what happened to you?”*

Rand turned from his stance at the window to see who Simma was talking to. He should have known. Abner didn't let anything or anyone come into the clinic without him checking out the situation.

The cat wore his artificial limb today, giving him the peg-legged look that would fit right into a pirate movie.

*“Lost my leg when I tried to get at a little peace. Decided a nap under the car parked in the drive was a good way to escape the tormenting houseful of kids I lived with. Pop had a few too many beers and backed over me he was in such a rush to get away from his nagging wife. Sucker broke my hip and crushed my paw.*

*“Ouch. Touch luck. What's your name?”*

*“His name is...”*

*“Was I talking to you?”* Simma's glare shut down the introduction of the two cats Rand started to make.

*“Abner. And you?”*

*“Simma.”*

*“From where I’m sitting, Simma, you’re the one with the touch luck. That is some honking big sore on your nose.”*

*“Nah, just magic. Pretty Boy over there needed me to fabricate a reason for him to bring me in to the vet. He’s got the hots for the doctor.”*

*“Yeah, him and half the men who come through the front door.”*

Both sets of feline eyes turned to appraise Rand.

Abner took a few steps in Rand’s direction, his peg-leg tapping against the tile. *“Say, do I know you? There’s something about your eyes.”*

Amanda’s appearance saved Rand from having to respond to the cat, and thankfully, Abner slipped out when Amanda came in. The cat accepted Simma’s explanation of magic for his nose without batting an eye, but how would he react to discovering the dog he’d been bossing around the past two weeks was now in human form?

*“Hi, I’m Amanda Livingston.”* She held out her hand and when Rand held it in his, he resisted the temptation to not let go.

*“Hmmm, this must be Simma,”* she glanced at the cat lounging on the table, *“and he has a sore nose.”* She stepped over to the cat.

*“My, how interesting. I don’t believe I’ve even seen anything like this.”* Amanda studied the growth on the cat’s nose and turned her violet eyes to Rand. *“When did you say you first noticed it?”*

“Well, I...um.” Rand fidgeted for an answer without telling an out and out lie. He really saw no way to avoid it though. If he told the truth and said about an hour ago, he didn’t think Amanda Livingston would believe him.

“Oh, we noticed it started a short while ago.”

Bingo, saved by a quick thinking Riz. Rand managed to stifle his guilt over the fact he encouraged his sister to lie. On second thought, that lie slipped out too easily. Something tells me these two cover up a lot of mishaps with fibs. Great, another conversation he needed to have with at least one of the Demon Duo.

“Then it seemed to really increase in the blink of an eye.” She smiled innocently at the doctor. “When we saw the size of it this morning, we knew he needed to get to a vet—fast.”

“I see.” From the way Amanda shook her head in bewilderment, Rand knew she didn’t. “This is really an unusual growth. I don’t know if it’s a wart or a tumor that I’ve never come across.” She stroked Simma along the jaw line as she held his head in her hands and studied his nose. “We probably should do a biopsy.”

“*No biopsy.*” The cat’s shout vibrated in Rand’s head as the animal squirmed.

“Can’t you just prescribe a cream or something to try first?” Rand watched the feline’s persistence in twisting his body in an effort to get away from Amanda’s hold.

The cat continued to scream at him. “*I didn’t sign up for needles or cutting, no*

*matter how horny you are. If you think you had problems with cats as a Scottie dog, you ain't seen nothing yet.*" The cat squirmed even more in an attempt to free the hold Amanda had tighten to keep him on the exam table. *"I'll cut you to ribbons, McAllister, just you wait."* To emphasize his point, Simma's claws extended, leaving little doubt of the pain he could inflict.

"*Calm down, I'll take care of it.*" Rand smiled at Amanda. "I mean, it's tough enough to catch him if he thinks a trip to the vet is involved. I don't want to make it completely impossible. Can't we try something else first?"

"Well," Amanda hesitated. "I'm really not sure what we're dealing with here. If you insist, I can prescribe an antibiotic cream and give it a few days. Then if I don't see any improvement, a biopsy will definitely have to be done."

Rand breathed a mental sigh of relief as the cat settled down. "Thank you. Yes, let's give the antibiotic a chance."

*"It's a good thing she's reasonable, or you'd be slithering out of here instead of walking erect."* Simma fumed on the way to the car. *"Somebody get a tissue and get this crap off my nose."*

Great. Now the black beast reverted to threats of magic. Rand wasn't sure which would be worse: Simma's claws or one of the many spells the cat knew. "I forgot the tube of ointment the doctor wants us to use on you." Rand placed the large cat on the back seat of the car. "I'll leave you in the capable hands of the

twins.”

“Screw the ointment. There will be no more of that crap close to my nose. Simma glared, daring anyone to contradict him. “*You better get back in there and ask her out. I didn’t go through all this trouble for you to lose your courage, big boy.*”

Returning the bossy cat’s glare, Rand slammed the car door and retraced his steps into the clinic. Let the girls listen to Simma’s complaints. He didn’t have the time. The cat was right about the need to invite Amanda out, though. He wasn’t sure how much time he had in his human form before he became a little black dog again. If the twins were wrong about their full moon calculation, who knew what else they were wrong about.

“Mr. McAllister?” Amanda looked up from behind the reception desk as she hung up the phone. “Is there something else I can help you with?”

“I forgot the cream you prescribed for Simma.” He admired her shapely bottom as Amanda walked ahead of him into the treatment room to retrieve the tube of antibiotics. What the hell, if he didn’t go for it, he’d blow the chance to ask her out.

“Say, how would you like to have lunch?” Rand flinched at how awkward the invitation came out. He sounded like a teenager asking a girl for his first prom date, and braced for the same rejection he received back then.

A smile spread across Amanda’s full mouth. “That would be nice. When did



you have in mind?”

“Now...I mean, today.” Crap, he could feel the blood rush to his face at the blundered invitation. Thankfully, Amanda didn’t seem to notice.

She flashed him one of her brilliant smiles. “My receptionist should be back soon and I could probably take a short break. Will that work?”

“Great. Let me take the family home and I’ll be back to pick you up.” Rand hurried out the door before she had the chance to change her mind.



Well aware she took too long for lunch with Rand, Amanda rushed into the office and smiled a quick hello to her waiting patients and their owners. Her afternoon appointments vanished from her mind the moment he walked back through the door to pick her up and looked at her with those dark, soulful eyes. Eyes that reminded her of the little Scottie she’d grown to love. Alistair disappeared out of her life last night as quickly as he’d entered. The little dog had dug his way out under the fence and had probably gone to find his real owners. She needed to accept that a family had missed him during the weeks he spent with her, as much as she missed him now.

But he had been with her long enough for her to realize she needed more in her life than work. The unconditional love he’d shown in the short time she had him left a void in her heart. A void that needed filling. Did she think this quick

attraction to Rand could do that?

*How stupid. Get real—you don't replace a dog with a man, any more than you'd replace a man with a pet.* Come to think of it, she knew some people who had better luck in getting the love they needed from a four-legged animal instead of the two-legged variety. Maybe she was one of those. Frowning at the idea, Amanda pulled the chart for her first patient.

She reached for the doorknob and paused as memories of the fleeting kiss Rand placed on her lips when they said goodbye in the parking lot surged forward. Even now, she felt the chills run down her body all the way to her toes. He'd startled her with the bold move, but never had a man's lips brought such a strong reaction.

"Be careful with this one," she whispered to herself. Squaring her shoulders, she glanced over the chart in her hands and plastered a smile on her face. Opening the door, she greeted a large German Shepherd and his owner and turned to address the problem that brought them in today. "Let's take a look at that foot, Shotsy."

Examining the paw, her mind drifted to the dinner date she'd agreed to. Why had she accepted so quickly? She already had plans. Tonight was her book club meeting. Oh well, she hadn't read the book anyway.

"That's it, Mrs. Johns. I removed the thorn and he should be as good as new."

Amanda patted the large head and scratched behind the dog's ears in an attempt to get back on his good side. Removing the deeply imbedded thorn had caused the animal pain, obvious from whimpers he omitted as she worked to get it out. "Poor baby." She continued to scratch behind his ears and along his muzzle in way of apology. Her reward for restoring his trust was a face-washing from the large dog and a big smile from his owner.

The rest of the afternoon flew by, and before she realized it, work was over. Rushing home, Amanda tore through her closet with the care and concern of a mad woman. She ignored the outfits scattered across the bed and on chairs. The ransacked room had the appearance of a teenager whose mother didn't pick up after her. Even the necklaces and earrings from her jewelry box hung from open drawers or lay strewn across the top of her vanity. Instead, she focused on putting the finishing touches on her appearance before Rand showed up to collect her.

Checking the mirror once again, she still was unsure if her choice for tonight hit the right note. Maybe. Her goal was not to be too conservative, but to avoid trashy. She hoped the knee length skirt and scooped neck blouse achieved that.

A loose curl brought a sigh of frustration and sent her scurrying into the bathroom in search of hair spray. The sound of the doorbell ended her attempts to tame her hair. "Guess that's as good as it gets." She wrinkled her nose at the reflection in the mirror.

A quick glance at her watch told her he was on time, another check mark in the plus column.

When Amanda opened the door, words failed her at the sight of the dark-haired, Roman god standing on her doorstep. Strong shoulders gave way to a broad chest that tapered down to a slim waist. This was not a case of clothes making the man, but the man making the clothes. He was a designer's dream. As for Amanda, no clothes were her dream.

"Hi." He leaned down and brushed her lips with his.

She wondered if his pulse jumped as much as hers did with their brief contact. What would it be like when he actually kissed her with a deep tongue thrusting, hot, passionate kiss, if she reacted so strongly to such brief contact.

"Hi." Amanda stepped back and fought the desire to jump the bones of the man who created strong emotions in her. *Don't act like a bitch in heat.* "Let me get my wrap." Glad for the excuse to put distance between them, she picked up the shawl and purse from the table where she placed them earlier and started for the door that Rand held open.

Her cell phone rang as she stepped out onto the porch. Crap. The urge to ignore the shrill demand tempted her, but common sense took control. "Sorry," She smiled at Rand as she grappled to get the phone from her purse.

"No problem." He stood quietly while she talked with the hysterical woman

on the other end.

“I really am sorry. Dinner’s off. I have to go into the clinic. One of my patients has been hit by a car.” Memories of her slamming into Alistair the night he ran out into the street in front of her SUV flooded back. Once all of her compassion would have focused on the dog, but now she also felt pain for the person driving the vehicle that hit him. Did they stop to offer aide, or was she wasting her sympathy on someone who considered animals not worth the effort? She bit her lip to fight back the tears threatening to flow.

“I’ll drive.” Rand took her arm and led her to his car, a silver sporty model she would have admired under different circumstances.

They pulled up in front of the clinic at the same time as the owner of the hurt dog. A sobbing Millie Adams jumped out of her vehicle as soon as it came to a stop. “Please, Doctor Livingston. Don’t let Max die.” The distraught woman opened the back of the station wagon and reached in to pick up the blood smeared white poodle.

“Here. Let me.” Rand moved Millie aside, lifted the limp form and followed Amanda. Inside the clinic, she directed him to the trauma room, where he laid the little body on the table.

“Max, oh Max, I’m so sorry. I should never have let you outside.” A guilt ridden Mille stroked the head of her beloved pet. “I know how he chases cats and

if there's one within a mile, he sniffs it out."

A fresh round of sobs shook Millie's body. "Thank goodness I heard the screech of tires. My neighbor helped me lift Max out of the street and into my car."

Amanda flinched as she recalled the impact of her car against the soft body the night it collided with Alistair. Once again she wondered what became of the little dog she'd come to love.

"Why don't Millie and I go make some coffee?" Rand's soothing voice interrupted Amanda's trip down memory lane.

"Great idea. The kitchen's down the hall on the left." Relief flooded through her as Rand slipped an arm around Millie's shoulder and steered her toward the door. She'd be able to focus better without the distraction of the emotional owner. Hopefully, he saw the smile of gratitude she flashed his way.

Once she had Max settled, Amanda found Rand and Millie sitting around the table in the small kitchen the staff used for lunch breaks.

"Is Max going to be okay?" The red-rimmed eyes in Millie's pale face were dark with worry.

Amanda smiled and nodded. "He should recover with time. His right femur is broken, plus he's got a couple of cracked ribs. I had to splint the leg for now. We need to let him stabilize before I do the surgery to put a pin in the break. He may have a limp after he recovers, but otherwise he's one lucky dog."

Rand placed a cup of coffee on the table and pulled out an empty chair. "Sit." He softened his command with a smile. "Millie said the person that hit Max just sped off into the night." He shook his head. "I don't understand people like that."

Nor did she, but she knew there were people callous enough to drive away after hitting a person.

Exhausted, Amanda leaned back in her seat and sipped the coffee. How did he know I take cream? Oh, yeah. I had coffee when we went out to lunch. Lunch. That seemed like a lifetime ago now. A glance at the clock above the stove showed midnight. No wonder she wanted to crawl into bed. The cot she kept in the closet of her office called her name.

"Millie, I'll keep Max in the clinic for a few days. You should go home and get some rest." Amanda patted the woman's hand. "I'm staying here the rest of tonight to make sure there are no complications."

A yawn escaped and Millie laughed. "I admit, I am tired, but you look beat, Doc. I feel guilty leaving you here alone sitting up with my dog."

"Don't worry, you won't feel so guilty when you get my bill." Amanda walked the woman to the outer door and locked it behind her. She sensed Rand come up behind her as she watched Millie's taillights drive away.

His arms circled her waist and pulled her back against him. "Do you want me to take first shift?"

“Whatever are you talking about?”

“I’m staying with you, and I’ve already unfolded the cot you keep in your office. Put the sheets and a blanket on it, too. You go get some sleep and I’ll keep an eye on the patient. If there’s a problem, I’ll call you.”

A surge of anger bubbled to the surface, and Amanda pulled out of his hold. How did he know she kept a cot in her office for nights like this? *And who does he think he is ordering me around in my own clinic?* “I do this type of thing all the time when I need to. I thank you very much for your consideration, but you need to go home, too.”

“Not gonna happen.” Rand leaned back against the desk and folded his arms. He met her glare without flinching. “Get used to it Mandy, I’m in your life and I’m staying.”

The old reflex of not wanting to rely on anyone surged forward. How dare he talk to her like that? In her life? She didn’t need a man in her life other than for an occasional fling. Or did she need more?

Too tired to argue the point right now or understand her confusion, Amanda turned and stomped down the hall to bed for what was left of the night. She’d set Rand McAllister straight in the morning when her muddled brain could focus. If a dog broke her heart by running off, what the hell would happen when a man dumped her for the next good thing who came along? No way was she going



to repeat the mistakes her mother made. Amanda had learned that from her last long term relationship. She was the only one she could depend on.

## Chapter Seven

After getting several hours sleep, Amanda wasn't sure why she'd been ready to fight with Rand about staying at the clinic with her. The promise of a beautiful day took away any resentment she had over his determination to help. She couldn't remember the last time a man cared enough to inconvenience himself for her. Could it be that all men weren't alike?

Once she made sure Max was still of this world and improving, she left her day-time assistant with instructions on his care. Rand took her to breakfast and afterward, dropped her off at her house so she could change and go back to work. Before he left, they made another date for the dinner that didn't happen last night.

Glad to have the workday over, she rushed home to get ready for her date. When she took her purse and shawl into the living room, she realized how much she missed Alistair. He'd been there in her last attempt at dating. For some reason, she thought he might like Rand better than he did her prior choice. "Silly little dog, why did you run away? I didn't think *you'd* break my heart."

Still, it was odd that a man came into her life with a name so close to the one she'd selected for her dog. Was fate directing her here? Gave a girl goose bumps to think along those lines.

The doorbell rang. Rand was prompt again. *Let's hope there is no emergency phone call tonight.*



Amanda's hand trembled in her attempt to fit the key in the lock. Would he kiss her goodnight? Her mind dwelled on that thought most of the night as she watched his full sensuous mouth smile, chew, laugh, and talk. She hoped for a deep, toe-tingling, lip-scorching smooch that set her soul on fire. Maybe she had too much wine tonight, which would take her down a dangerous path. *Talk about sex on the brain.* Lord, if the man didn't accept her offer to come in for a nightcap, she might have to jump his bones right there on the porch. The neighbors would probably throw popcorn in the microwave and drag out their lawn chairs for the free show.

Rand's fingers brushed against the back of her neck and she jumped. *Damn.* She needed to stop acting like a schoolgirl on her first date. "Would you like to come in for coffee or a brandy?" There, that sounded like the sophisticated woman she didn't feel like at this moment.

"I'd love a cup of coffee. Here, let me get the door for you." His strong fingers took the key from her and inserted into the keyhole without a problem.

*Well, he was a man and used to inserting things in holes.* Shit, she had to get her mind

out of the gutter.

She dropped her purse on a chair and headed for the kitchen. Rand followed, and while Amanda emptied the coffee pot of morning leftovers, he pulled coffee and filters from the cabinet. How odd. He seemed to know the lay out of her kitchen because he reached into the exact cabinet for cups.

“You’re spooking me.”

“How so?” He pulled his head from the refrigerator and looked at her, a puzzled expression on his chiseled face.

“You know where everything is without asking. The first time someone helps in the kitchen is usually a game of twenty questions on where to find stuff.” Did she see his grin slip or were her eyes playing tricks? A nervous flutter ran across her stomach. “You haven’t been stalking me have you?”

Laughter danced in his eyes. “I thought you saw me sitting here watching you each day.”

Okay. He thought she was being silly and was teasing her. Two could play that game. “No, that would have been my dog.” She put in the last scoop of coffee and hit the brew button.

“Amanda.” Rand stood behind her, his breath warm on her hair.

Her throat tightened to the point she wasn’t sure words would come out. Finally, a strangled, “Yes,” managed to escape.

Strong masculine arms slipped around her waist and his hands caressed her stomach. It had been a long time...no, make that never, when a man's touch had this effect on her.

"Kiss me, Mandy." His hoarse command against her ear was just what the doctor ordered. Turning to face him, her lips met his and offered no resistance when his tongue sought entry into her mouth.

After a few minutes of an intense tongue war, she had to come up for air. "Wow, you're some kisser."

"I'm more than that, if you'd like to find out."

Her heart pounded louder than a kettledrum against her ribs. "I bet you are." She took his hand and led him toward the bedroom. *Screw the coffee*. If they wanted a cup later, they'd heat it up. Probably one of the reasons microwaves were invented.

A quick trip to the bathroom would be nice, but it would also give her intended victim the chance to change his mind. After an evening of lots of wine and drooling over the hunk across the table from her, there was no way in hell she'd give him an opening to escape.

Her clothes came off before she made it to the bed and looking across to the other side, she saw Rand in the same state of undress. His cock standing at full attention waved at her, and a vision of whipped cream with a cherry on top

danced through her head. Maybe next time. For some reason, she knew this would be more than a one-night fling.

“Mandy?” Rand lay on the bed, his hand stretched out to her. “Have you changed your mind?”

Suddenly, Amanda felt shy. No, she hadn’t changed her mind, but maybe she needed to slow down. She didn’t want him to think she jumped into bed with every first date, and this was their first real date. Taking the offered hand, she let Rand pull her down against him.

His kiss sent shock waves down to her toes. When his lips started the journey along her neck to her breasts, Amanda was afraid she’d pass out from pleasure. Yes, it had been a long time since she participated in an evening of sex, but this went way beyond that. With this man, she wanted to make love.

“Oh.” A gasp escaped when his teeth slid over her nipple. As Rand worked the tender buds with his mouth, his fingers tracked down to the vee between her thighs. Her body screamed for release and she raised her hips to encourage contact with the part of her that throbbed for his touch.

When he inserted a finger into her wet folds, a shudder raged through her body. Good heavens, he barely touched her and she’d exploded like a fireworks display into which someone had tossed a match.

He moved his body up and claimed her mouth again. The dance of his warm

tongue against hers, increased her desire to consume him. His erection pressed against her hip seemed, if possible, to have grown larger. Most impressive. The man had no issues in the equipment department. His cock slipped between her thighs and rubbed back and forth. If he kept that up for much longer, she'd go off again. That would be a first for her. She wasn't a multi-orgasm kind of gal.

His fingers kneaded her flesh and moved to her thighs in long slow strokes. Passion built with each caress of his long fingers and she needed the feel of him buried deep into her core.

"Rand, I want to feel you inside me."

"Not as much as I want to be inside you." He lifted up and positioned his body between her knees. "I've dreamed about this since the moment I laid eyes on you." In one thrust, he buried his shaft in her heat and she welcomed each powerful thrust.

Tension built in her body. When the spasms of another orgasm hit, she gave in to the pleasure of the release. An explosion that surpassed her earlier one flowed through her, to her very core. A moan from Rand told her he'd reached his peak and his hot seed spilled into her.

Cuddled against him, relaxed with afterglow, it dawned on her they'd just had unprotected sex. *Damn, I should have asked if he had a condom. And if he didn't, what would I have done? It's not like I have a supply on hand.* Well, nothing she could do about it

now. She sighed as Rand covered them with a blanket and snuggled her close. He did the male thing of falling asleep after sex, and it wasn't long before she joined him.



## Chapter Eight

*“Looks like our boy scored last night.”*

Rand glared at the big cat that appeared to have been waiting for his return.

“Shut up Simma. I’m not in the mood for any smart-assed cat comments.”

“My, my, *aren’t we testy?*” Simma’s tail twitched back and forth as it always did when he was irritated. *“Just because you were out tomcatting around last night doesn’t give you cause to bless the rest of us with your grumpy-glow. I thought sex put humans in a good mood.”*

Rand fumbled in the cabinet for coffee filters, in desperate need of caffeine. “Sex does, but exhaustion doesn’t.” Damn, where did the twins put the coffee? It should have been on the shelf with the filters.

“So, *she was a real animal in bed?*” Simma chuckled, finding his question amusing.

“Be gone, cat. Get out of my head with the mind talk stuff, and leave me alone.”

The huge cat sniffed. *“Very well. Have it your way.”* A black streak raced across the kitchen floor and into the living room.

Rand sighed. From the pissy tone of Simma's parting words, he knew he would pay for his grumpiness at some point. Right now, he didn't care. He wanted coffee, sleep and a shower, in that order. He should take a shower before getting into bed, but that would wash the scent of Amanda off and he wasn't ready to do that.

Last night was everything he dreamt it would be. The most fantastic sex he'd ever experienced, but it went beyond that. No doubt about it, he was in love with Amanda Livingston. Totally, hopelessly in love, and he only had a few more days to get her to fall in love with him before he disappeared. Then what? His gut told him even if she did come to feel the same way he did, once he vanished for several weeks without contact, it would take more than "I'm sorry" to get back in her good graces.

Depressed, Rand headed up the stairs, still searching for a way to avoid reverting back into a dog.



Happy her appointment-filled day had finally ended, Amanda sat down to tackle the stack of paperwork on her desk. Anything to avoid thinking about last night. How could she have been such an idiot? Give her a little wine, and she fell into bed with a hot guy at the blink of an eye. On top of that, they hadn't used protection, and she wasn't on the pill. She never bothered to refill her prescription

when she ran out several months ago. When you weren't having sex, why invest the money? If opportunity knocked, there were always condoms.

Well, opportunity pounded down the door last night, and she'd spread her legs with nary a thought of birth control, or for that matter, STD protection. That is until after the fact. Obviously, she needed to be saved from herself. What if she discovered down the road she was knocked up? Or as bad if not worse, blessed with a heavy dose of the clap...or worse still, AIDS. Now that ugly possibility gave her chills.

*Be honest with yourself, fool. You didn't fall into bed with him, you jumped his bones. Truth be told, if he hadn't started things rolling with the first kiss, you would have.*

Yep, she'd had a case of sex on the brain during dinner. Of course, the fact it was the best sex of her life didn't help matters any. One night wasn't enough. The taste she received of Rand McAllister only whetted her appetite. She could spend the rest of her life feasting on him.

Her fingers toyed with the four messages he'd left throughout the day. The receptionist didn't lie when she told him each time that Amanda was with a patient. He just had bad timing, because every time he called she was in the middle of something she couldn't leave. Fingering the pieces of paper in her hand, thoughts about what she was doing when each was written, danced in her head.

Once it had been splinting a broken leg on a Doberman, then he called when

she was in the middle of a c-section to deliver a litter of kittens for a champion show cat. Another call when she was in process of spaying a dog and the last while she was breaking the news to an owner there was nothing she could do to save the woman's beloved cat. Maybe it was just as well. She would have sounded like a silly schoolgirl since her stomach turned to jello just thinking about him.

Okay, she was a coward, and she was avoiding the man because he made her feel out of control. "Enough of this crap." She picked up the phone and punched in the numbers on the top paper in her hand. No man would ever turn her into a sniveling female again.

Listening to the phone ring on the other end, Amanda's mind wandered. Was this what her mother used to go through when she continued to cling to a guy when yet another of her relationships failed? She always swore she'd not become her mother, needing a man to make her feel complete, yet here she was needing one to answer the phone so she could hear his voice.

Great, he wasn't in. She dropped the phone like it was a hot potato. Drumming her fingers on the desk, Amanda ran through a list of reasons she should be glad, other than repeating her mother's history. Things were different for her, though. Her mother depended on the men that weaved through her life, not only for emotional support, but also for financial contributions.

Amanda didn't need anyone to bring home a paycheck for her. No, this was

all about her emotional safety. The more she talked to or saw this man, the more trouble she was in, and that was number one on the list of reasons to avoid Randall McAllister. Close, at number two, was the heat surging through her body just thinking about him.

The last thing she wanted was for him to realize how strong her attraction had become. That decided, she would handle the situation going forward. If he asked her to go out this evening, she would say no. Let him pant after her for a change. Then again, who said his interest went beyond a couple of dates? Damn. Why did her love life have to be so complicated? Could she consider this a love life—more like her dating life. Maybe she should become a nun and forget about dating since, at least for her, it involved men.

So, why did she jot down the address from Simma's file? In the trauma of the two nights before and the heat of last night, she forgot to check on her patient. She was a veterinarian, after all, and the cat had a strange growth. A concerned vet would make sure it hadn't worsened.

She could swing by on her way home and check on the poor thing. It wasn't too far out of her way, only about twenty or thirty minutes. *Liar. Try to convince yourself otherwise, but the real truth is that you want to see Rand.*

Amanda pulled into the driveway and admired the house. She loved old Victorian homes, and this one was a classic with the gables and gingerbread trim.

Rand's car wasn't in the driveway. A surge of disappointment swept through her. "Stop it, you foolish woman."

With any luck, he wasn't home and she'd do exactly what she told herself this trip was about. See her patient and leave before the man who turned her upside down emotionally made an appearance. The twins could let her in and she'd take a quick look at the cat.

"Mandy!" Rand's smile of delight when he opened the door sent her heart into overdrive. "What a surprise. Come in." He stepped aside and motioned her into the entryway.

He wasn't the only one surprised. She'd convinced herself that not seeing his car meant he wasn't home.

Casting a quick glance around, Amanda decided Rand's mother was a woman of good taste. Elegant, yet comfortable, best described the living room with its antiques and overstuffed seating.

When he'd shared with her over lunch that his mother was out of town and he was staying with the twins until her return, Amanda had been impressed. He was a good son and his sisters seemed to adore him.

The touch of Rand's hand on her elbow made her knees weak. She could use one of those overstuffed chairs right now. "I was in the neighborhood and decided to stop and see how Simma's doing." Did that sound as lame to him as it did to her?

“He’s fine. Come out to the kitchen and you can see for yourself.” Rand’s hand slid down her arm, capturing her fingers in his large palm and leading her toward the back of the house. “We’re in the process of preparing dinner. Why don’t you stay and eat with us?”

The tantalizing smells coming from the kitchen reminded her that her last meal had been a granola bar washed down with yet another cup of coffee. “Are you sure? I don’t want to impose.” *Please, please, tell me I’m not imposing.*

“We’d love to have you. When the Demon Duo cook, there’s enough to feed an army.”

Amanda laughed at Rand’s name for his twin sisters. He’d shared with her over dinner what a challenge the two could be at times, but she’d heard the love in his voice for the girls that drove him crazy. “The question is, how is their cooking? Quantity doesn’t always equal quality.”

“True, though in this case it does. Hey, look who’s here.”

“Amanda.” Mel grinned a welcome from her position at the stove. “Great to see you.”

Riz greeted her with a bone crushing squeeze. “Or should we say, Dr. Livingston, I presume.”

“Smart ass.” Rand tweaked a strand of his sister’s hair, then turned to Amanda. “What would you like to drink? I’m having red wine. Goes good with pot

roast.”

Amanda’s heart slammed against her ribs in response to the lopsided smile Rand gave her. “Red wine is good.” Her voice came out in a husky whisper and she caught the look exchanged between the twins. They knew she liked their brother. Like hell, the more she watched him, the more the ‘L’ word worked its way into her mind.

Mel glared at her brother. “Pot roast. You call *beef burgundy* pot roast. Next time, Big Brother, you cook.” She dipped a spoon into the sauce, tasted and pulled a spice bottle from the rack beside the stove. Adding a dash, she stirred and tasted again, then gave a nod of satisfaction.

Rand winked at Amanda as he set a glass of merlot in front of her. “Okay, lady. To eat in this fine establishment, you have to earn your dinner.” He handed her a stack of plates. “Table setting falls to you.”

Listening to the laughter and bickering as she set the table for the four of them brought a longing that Amanda thought she was past. Her mother’s death when she was in her early twenties still left a void. Flawed as their relationship was, Mom had been her only family after Amanda’s father had high-tailed it out of town when he discovered a baby was on the way.

Amanda realized now that the loss of her mother was the reason she’d fallen so quickly for Jess—to fill the void left by the loss of her only family. Jess also



helped bring about the realization that she was falling into the same pattern of her mother's life. When he walked out on her to pursue another woman, Amanda knew she wasn't going to repeat her mother's mistake and fall into the arms of the next guy who walked through the door.

A streak of black jumping onto the window seat caught her eye, and she remembered the reason she stopped by, or at least the excuse. "Simma, let me see your nose." The cat's unblinking stare made her a little uncomfortable. In some ways, he reminded her of Alistair. Maybe the coloring, or perhaps more the way he seemed to read her mind. Stroking the large cat's head, she studied the nose. Relief and disbelief came into play. The large growth that caused Rand and the girls to bring him to her a few days before was gone with no evidence of its existence.

"Is the table ready?" Mel asked as she juggled three bowls before setting them on the table.

Riz directed Amanda to a chair beside Rand. As the meal progressed, the teasing and laughter increased, and Amanda wondered 'what if' she became part of this family. How would her life change? Chastising herself for being silly, she pushed the thought away. No way could she be in love with this man in such a short time. *Besides, look at what love got you in the past...a broken heart. Do you really want to open that door again?*

## Chapter Nine

Rand hadn't believed his luck when he'd opened the door and seen Amanda. He'd tried to contact her all day without results. It seemed the forces were against him, because every time he'd called, she'd been unavailable. Instead of the dinner he wanted to set up with her, he'd come home and let the twins talk him into a mad cooking spree. If he could reach Amanda, he hoped to get an invitation for dessert. Of course, the sweet delights he had in mind involved the bedroom.

Inviting her to join them for dinner came naturally. So did her blending into the joking and teasing he and the girls had exchanged before she arrived. He tried to give her space and act normal, but what he wanted was to wrap her in his arms and make love to her until they were both exhausted.

Okay, so he wanted more than sex. For the first time, he could see spending the rest of his life with someone. The thought of waking up beside her in his bed every morning and coming home to her at night gave him chills. "Happy," for him, was spelled A-m-a-n-d-a.

"Hey, big brother, what's for dessert?"

Riz sat back in her chair and rubbed her stomach in anticipation of the cake Rand made because he knew it was her favorite. "I made it, so I think one of you

should serve.”

“No way.” Mel shook her head in denial. “I don’t want my name associated with the disaster I saw earlier.”

Rand laughed and gathered up the dishes around him. “Okay, but you two have to clear the table while I dish up my gourmet delight.”

He enjoyed the easy banter between Amanda and the twins as he sliced the chocolate cake. So it was a little crooked, and the frosting was a bit gooier than he hoped, but a quick taste with his finger verified its quality.

Placing the last piece of cake on a dish, he started to announce he was ready to serve when an odd feeling rushed through his body. He’d felt a little itchy while he cut the cake, but now the urge to scratch won. The knife fell to the counter as Rand dug at his ear and then started to nibble on his arm.

“Rand, are you okay?” He looked up to see Amanda and the twins watching him, concern on their faces.

“Sure. Fine, fine.” Why did his tongue roll out of his mouth? Good grief, he was panting like a... *No. No. Not now, it’s not time.*

Pain shot through every inch of his body, leaving his joints on fire. He resisted the urge to scream, both from the agony of the change raging down him and the frustration of this happening *now*.

“Rand!” Amanda called his name again and he heard one of the twins begin

to sob.

His mind resisted the change, but it was a losing battle as it tore through him like a wolf tearing at road-kill. He knew by the hysterical shouts from Amanda and the tearful voices of his sister, he was now a little black Scottie. No way would he ever be able to explain his way out of this with the woman he loved.

Just when he didn't think things could get much worse, a new voice entered the mêlée.

“QUIET!”

The silence that followed hurt Rand's ears.



Simma sat on the window seat and watched the scene. The arrival of the two older witches gave him a surge of relief. He wasn't sure they'd received the urgent message he sent through the crystal ball.

A feeling of anxiety he couldn't identify earlier in the evening caused him to use the emergency contact method to get them to orb back before their scheduled return tomorrow. If he'd learned anything over the past decades as the family familiar, it was to heed those feelings.

Jorgia's demand for quiet got the desired results and Simma watched her look around, appraising the situation at hand. When she spoke, it was to the group. “Would anyone care to explain what is going on here?”

A chorus of explanations flew at her, verbally from the twins, and in mind speak from the shivering black dog on the floor. Simma kept his peace, knowing she'd get to him when she was ready.

"Enough. I can't comprehend all of you yelling at once." A movement from Amanda drew Jorgia's attention to the pale-faced woman holding onto the counter, looking as if a slight breeze in her direction would topple her over. Simma felt sorry for the veterinarian, even if she had been ready to cut a hunk out of him when they first met. "Who are you and how are you involved in this mess?"

The subject of her scrutiny opened her mouth to speak and instead slid to the floor, out cold.

Simma shook his head in disgust. Jorgia needed to work on her people skills.

"Cat!" Simma flinched. He'd forgotten to block his thoughts, and though Jorgia now kneeled beside Amanda's limp form, Granna Lila stood in front of him. "It's probably best you keep your thoughts to yourself." Hands on her hips, she glared down at him and her blue eyes skewered him to the window seat. Simma now understood how a mouse felt when he had it cornered.

"Could I get some help over here?" Jorgia held one of Amanda's wrists in her hand, checking the pulse. "We need to get her into the living room. Girls, bring her a glass of water. Then someone can explain what the hell has been going on while we were gone." She directed a look at Simma, and he knew he'd be the one

explaining.

Done with the tale of the past few weeks, Simma sat back and licked a paw. A fellow had to keep tidy in a situation like this. He watched Jorgia cradle the canine version of Rand on her lap.

“My poor baby. I’m so sorry you had to go through all of this. Don’t worry. Mama will attempt to make everything right.” She paused in her stroking of the black fur and glared at Simma and the twins, who fidgeted on the loveseat. “Fortunately, I’m familiar with this spell, but the unfortunate part is it’s a real bugger to reverse. I’ll have to do more research to figure out how to counteract its effects. Then I’ll deal with those who created the problem.”

“*Hey, now. I tried to help.*” Simma wasn’t about to take the rap for this mess.

“Watch it, cat food breath.” Lila didn’t sound too happy. “If you’d called us when this first happened, we could have probably found a counter-spell. Now, it’s going to take more effort and who knows if it will work.”

Rand lifted his head from his mother’s lap, “You have to make it work, Granna.”

“We can’t promise, son.” Jorgia sighed deeply. “You may end up living a dog’s life the rest of your days.”

“Plus, Simma, part of the problem lies with your misinterpretation of the old language,” Jorgia pointed out.

“Right.” They were trying to make him feel guilty and doing a damn good job of it. *The only cycle I know about is the full moon, and I can howl with the best on that night. All those waxing and waning gibbous cycles have always confused me. Then throw in an ancient language, plus letting the twins calculate...hell, a cat doesn’t stand a chance.*

A moan from Amanda pulled everyone’s attention toward the couch, where Jorgia had covered her with a blanket. The little dog moved from his mother’s lap to snuggle against the groaning woman.

“Mom, take Rand and the twins to the kitchen. I want to talk to Amanda alone.”

While Lila hustled her charges out the door, Simma slipped behind the loveseat. He wasn’t about to miss this conversation.

Jorgia helped the young woman sit up and handed her the glass of water Riz had brought. “How do you feel, dear? Are you okay?”

Amanda brushed a strand of hair from her face. She stared at Jorgia for a moment while she appeared to gather her thoughts. “How the hell do you think I feel?” The errant strand fell into her eyes again and she blew at it. “I just frigging saw a man turn into a *dog*. And, to make matters really great, it was the same man I slept with last night.”

Pink tinged Amanda’s cheeks when she apparently realized what she’d disclosed. Simma had to admire her pluck. She didn’t turn into a sniveling mass of

goo after witnessing magic.

“By the way, who are you?”

Jorgia smiled and patted her hand. “No one to worry about, dear. I’m only the mother of the man you shared bedtime with.”

“Oh.” The pink tinge now burned flame red

The witch smiled and winked. “I’m sure watching him turn into a dog was a bit of a shock.”

Simma chortled and received a warning glare from Jorgia. He slunk back into his hiding place hoping for out of sight, out of mind, if he could remember to block his thoughts.

Amanda closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she asked, “Can you tell me what is happening around here? What kind of insane asylum have I stumbled into?”

Jorgia took the empty glass from Amanda’s hand and set it back on the table. “You may find this a little hard to accept. We’re witches, or at least my mother and I are. The twins have strong natural abilities, but need to learn discipline and train in the use of their gifts.”

Simma watched Amanda mull over the information. “And, your son? Is Rand a witch too? Is that why he can become a...” She whispered the last word. “Dog?”

“He has a few minor gifts, but Rand doesn’t care to develop them. Possibly,



because most of the magic passes through the females in the family, and he's afraid of disappointment. I'm sure you understand how poorly most males handle disappointment." Jorgia may have smiled at Amanda, but Simma felt certain the last comment was meant to include him.

"But, how...I mean, why, does he..."

Simma felt sorry for the confused woman. Vet or not, she was a nice person, one with an open mind, and she was trying to understand a situation most people would laugh at or dismiss completely.

Jorgia sighed. "I'm afraid the blame for Rand's problem lies with his sisters and Simma."

"Simma? The cat?"

Jorgia nodded. "One and the same. You see, he's the family familiar and has a great deal of magic, also." *"He's just not as smart as he thinks he is when it comes to the old languages."*

*"Ouch. That hurts."*

*"Nothing like the pain you're going to feel when I come up with the punishment for your part in this mess. I think training the girls in the magic arts may become your responsibility."*

Damn. She was right about pain. Stuck with the twins for who knew how long would be worse than most of the punishments she could hand out. Simma wished he'd left with the others and had let Jorgia cool down.

Thankfully, Jorgia turned her attention back to Amanda. “Do you have any questions?”

“Oh, let me think. A houseful of witches, a magical cat, I sleep with a man who is actually the dog I ran over with my car and then took home with me for two weeks, and she wants to know if I have any questions. Nope, can’t think of a one.” The sarcasm in Amanda’s voice elevated her status in Simma’s eyes several more notches.

“Well, I have one.” Jorgia smiled and took Amanda’s hands in hers. “How do you feel about my son?”

“Listen, lady. It’s none of your damned business. Right now, I’m not sure I ever want to see any of you again.”

Amanda jerked her hands free of Jorgia’s hold and stood, swaying for a moment. Simma saw her take a deep breath, as if gathering her strength, and look around the room.

“Where did you put my bag?” It wasn’t a question, but a demand.

“Dear, I don’t think—?”

“I don’t care what you or any of the fruitcakes around here think. I’m getting out of this nut house, and I’m getting out now. Screw the bag.” On her way to the door, she spied the bag in question sitting on the entry way table and grabbed it without breaking stride. The door slammed behind her with a loud bang.

“Well, I guess that’s that, for now.” For a brief moment, Simma thought Jorgia was going to burst into tears. Instead, she squared her shoulders and speared him with her glare. “Cat, the only way to fix this mess is to convince that gal she’s in love with Rand. If he ends up spending the rest of his life as a dog, you’re going to find yourself hopping the rest of yours.”

*“What? I didn’t cast the spell. You need to take that issue up with your daughters.” What does she mean I’ll be hopping?*

“You were to keep an eye on the twins when Rand was at work.” Jorgia tapped her foot as she stared at him. “When I give you instructions, I expect them be carried out. Where were you? Out catting around with that Siamese slut down the block?”

*“Excuse me, but your son isn’t the only male around here with a high dose of testosterone.”* How dare she bad mouth FiFi. The feline in question was very selective about her playmates and he was fortunate to be one of them.

Jorgia threw up her hands and stalked from the room. “You’d better figure out a way to get that veterinarian to admit she’s in love with my son, or else. I think green would be very becoming on you, and warts would match your personality.”

Simma glared at the witch’s departing back. Okay, she had him scared.



“Nuts—the whole family is certifiable.” The realization she was discussing the sanity of Rand’s family with her toaster caused Amanda to pause in her latest tirade. Maybe she wasn’t playing with a full deck, either.

A fresh wave of tears burst out and flowed down her cheeks. She’d fallen in love with a madman and his crazy family.

Worse than madman, he was a shifter—turning into a dog right in front of her. If she hadn’t seen it with her own eyes, she would never have believed such a thing possible. That was the crap that happened in paranormal books, not in her life.

And the dog he’d become was the little black Scottie that stole her heart. Did he understand all the confidences she’d shared? She’d poured her heart out because he was a safe creature to bare her soul to. Now she was terrified that he still had the logic of a man and found her deepest secrets entertaining.

But if that were true, why did he seek her out in his human form? The man she had dinner with and made love to didn’t appear to find her silly. If anything, he treated her in a way that she’d come to think was just a dream.

Blowing her nose in a paper towel, she headed for the freezer and pulled out the item that helped in the darkest of times—a half gallon of mocha chip ice cream. Not bothering with a bowl, she grabbed a spoon and retreated to the living room.

One empty container later, the pity party concluded. “Get your ass off this couch, get in the shower, and get dressed. Then you will get on with your life.”

There. A little self-talk made her feel better. Time would heal this broken heart, just like it had healed the pains of the past. The last thing she needed, or wanted, in her life was not knowing what shape the hunk would be when he crawled into bed with her at night. Man or dog, she did love them both, but like her crappy childhood, she’d get over it.



With his head resting on his paws, Rand stared out the rain splattered glass from the window seat he’d claimed. The grey skies matched his gloomy mood.

*“Are you going to spend another day doing nothing?”*

He turned his head briefly and glared at Simma. The cat was more of a thorn in his side these days than ever. *“Beat it, cat. Leave me in peace.”*

*“You’ve spent the past week up here doing nothing. You barely get down to take care of personal business. Of course, since you don’t eat or drink much, there’s probably not a lot of need in that area anyway.”*

*“Piss off. If I wanted your opinion, I’d ask for it. Do you hear me asking?”* Rand lifted a paw to his ear. *“The sound of silence is all I pick up. I think the nothing you’re hearing translates into, ‘Mind your own business.’”*

Simma moved over beside the dog and made himself comfortable. *"This is my business, Scruffy Boy. Your mother and grandmother blame me for the situation."* His tail twitched in irritation. *"Although we both know I'm innocent."*

"Look," Rand stood up, hovering over the cat, *"we both know the Demon Duo were the catalyst with their unauthorized practice of magic. But, you're in hot water because you know how their minds work and should have been here to stop them. Instead, you were out and about."*

*"Hey, I felt the call of love. You should understand that."*

"Right." Rand flopped back down on the cushion and watched the rain. *"For sure I understand that logic."*

Did he ever. Since Amanda walked out, he was amazed to discover his heart still managed to beat. He understood all the talk about broken hearts, but his was shattered when he thought about the woman he loved. And he thought about her all the time.

Which led to another problem. He had a constant boner to add to his pain, not just pain of the heart and depression. When he stayed so damned depressed, how the hell did he manage to keep a hard-on? What happened to depression affecting libido? At least that would have been a positive, but no, not for him. There were times when the need for relief in the lower area was so strong, he humped the closest piece of furniture. Talk about pathetic.

*"Well, dog dude, I'm going outside for awhile. This place is way too much of a downer for*

*me to hang around any longer. You're no fun and the Demons are grounded, banned to their room, no visitors allowed."* Simma jumped over to a kitchen chair. *"Besides, out of sight, out of mind and that's what I want to be when it comes to the real witches in this house."*

"Whatever." Rand returned to staring out the window. Too bad the only one he seemed to be able to communicate with right now was the beastly cat. Yeah, he was depressed. Depressed, broken hearted, and with a raging boner. What more could a guy want?



"Simma, it's been three weeks. I'm still waiting for your solution to the mess around here."

Crap, he should have listened to his inner warning bell about avoiding this room, but the mood in this house had rubbed off on him and he wasn't exactly up to snuff. *"I know, Jorgia. I know."* He hung his head and slunk out of the room.

If he had a solution, she and Lila would be the first ones he shared the information with. He hated being on his best friends' bad side. He and Lila had been together a long time and before that, he'd belonged to her mother. Being a family's familiar could last hundreds of years, and lately, he felt every one of them.

Maybe that was it—he was losing his edge because of age. He understood now why humans went to the doctor when they weren't up to par. *Doctor. Hmmm,*

*that may be the answer. When a cat wasn't well, their owners took them to a vet. As much as he hated vets, a visit for a real problem couldn't be any worse than when he went in the last time on the fabricated nose sore.*

*What if he had Jorgia take him to see Amanda? At least they'd get a sense of how she was feeling now that enough time had passed for her to calm down. Jorgia wouldn't have to lie when she told the doctor her cat was acting strangely. Simma went in search of the powerful witch to ask her to take him to the vet.*



*What the hell had he been thinking? If he weren't in a cage, he would have beat paws out of here right now. The astringent smell of the place assaulted his nose when Jorgia walked them through the door.*

He hated the smell of anything medically related. Memories of Dr. Frankenstein's lab danced through his head. That had been a close call, and if he hadn't made friends with the monster the crazy doctor created, ol' Simma would have been the next victim with bolts sticking out of his head. Thank the stars Herby, the name Simma dubbed the monster, helped him escape.

The receptionist showed them to an exam room. "Dr. Livingston will be with you in a few minutes." She closed the door behind her, but not before Abner thumped in.



*“Hey, Dude. You back again?”*

*“Yeah, not feeling up to par.”*

Jorgia set the cat carrier on the table with a thud. Simma managed not to snicker when she whirled around to see who he was talking to. The peg-legged cat tapped his way over to the table and her eyes widened in surprise with the ease in which he jumped up.

*“Abner, meet Jorgia. She’s my witch.”*

*“Ah, another magical being. You have the life Simma. I’d love to live in a house full of magic.”*

*“Trust me, being a familiar’s not as easy as it’s cracked up to be.”* Simma ignored the glare Jorgia directed at him. *“You have to be on your best game all the time, or they get into trouble.”*

*“Yeah, it’s tough taking care of the normal humans around here. Especially the Doc when she’s in a bad mood like she’s been lately.”*

*“Well, some creatures don’t do a very good job of taking care of things when they’re supposed to.”* Jorgia unzipped the carrier and opened the door. *“Come out, cat. If she’s like most doctors, we’ll be here awhile. But I don’t want to hear any more whining from you and your friend, here, about your tough lives.”*

The words were barely out of her mouth when the door opened and a none too happy looking Amanda entered. *“What are you doing here?”* She glared at

Jorgia and continued without giving her time to respond. “Did Simma manage to manifest another unknown disease?”

There was little doubt about how not happy she was to see them. Picking Abner from the table, she put the protesting cat out the door and slammed it before he could get back in.

The response on the tip of the witch’s tongue wasn’t one Simma wanted to come out. “No”, he shouted. “*Don’t get your nose out of joint and say something to make matters worse.*” Relief surged through him when Jorgia took a deep breath and plastered a smile on her face.

“I think this time he may actually be sick. He’s not been himself for several days.”

“How so?” Amanda looked at the chart in her hands and back at Jorgia.

“He’s been very lethargic, and lethargic isn’t a word I’ve ever used to describe this one.” The look she shot in his direction reminded Simma of some of the words she had used, especially recently.

Amanda moved over to the table and Simma allowed her to examine him. The woman had a gentle touch. Her compassionate mummers of “poor baby” as she moved her hands over his body, caused him to understand why Rand fell in love with her.

“I’m not sure what the problem is. I can run some blood tests, but the last

time I wanted to do that, he went crazy.”

*Not this time, babe. I feel so crappy I don't care.* Simma stretched out on the table and met her gaze. *Besides if you run tests, we'll be here longer and maybe the witch will get down to business at some point.* He glanced at Jorgia to make sure he had blocked his thoughts. The puzzled expression on her face confirmed his success.

“Okay. If there are no objections, then I'll draw blood.”

At the sight of the needle Amanda pulled out, Simma fought back the panic and closed his eyes. If he didn't watch, may be the ordeal would be over soon.

When the veterinarian left to run the blood workup, Simma turned to Jorgia. “*Woman, when are you going to do something besides stand there with your finger up your ass? I've heard more questions from a mummy.*”

“I'm really not sure how to broach the subject. What do I say, ‘oh by the way, are you still in love with my son, or do you consider us to be a bunch of lunatics?’ Though she may be more perceptive than I originally thought. Didn't you pick up some magic vibes from her?” She walked over to a cabinet filled with scary instruments and picked one up. “Watch how you talk to me, cat.” She turned and waved a particularly nasty looking device at him. “Using this on you might be more fun than turning you into a frog.”

He chose to ignore the frog reference and focused on her comment about Amanda. “No magic vibes there, witch. You must be slipping.”

“Maybe you’re the one that’s slipping, cat.” People. Even the magical ones were hard to understand. Simma turned his back on her and stared at the wall. He would not be intimidated, even if she held a sharp, jagged device in her hand.

The opening of the door brought their battle of wills to an end. “The blood tests didn’t show anything for the standard tests I ran. You said he’s not been eating, so let’s try a vitamin shot and see if that helps improve his appetite.”

While Amanda loaded the needle with a solution she pulled from the cabinet, Simma watched Jorgia shift from one foot to the other several times. “Well?”

Jorgia cleared her throat. “When you finish there, I do have a question for you.”

“Fire away.” Amanda jabbed the needle into the scruff of Simma’s neck and emptied the syringe.

“This concerns my son.”

The vet’s head shot up, the blood draining from her face. “I really don’t want to discuss your son or anyone else in your family. I only treated your cat because I can’t bear the idea of an animal sick or in pain.” She backed away from the table. “I think you need to find another veterinarian for him.”

Simma watched the doctor’s face and knew there was a battle for self-control waging inside her. He watched Jorgia close the distance, move to the other

woman's side, and take her hands.

"Please, leave me alone. Hasn't your family messed up my life enough?"

Amanda jerked her hands from Jorgia's grasp.

Jorgia resisted Amanda's attempt to pull her hands free. "You're not being honest with me. I see the opposite of what you're saying in your eyes. I know this is confusing to you, but it's imperative you be honest with me, and more importantly, with yourself about your feelings for Rand."

Simma watched the two women lock stares. He tried to read Jorgia's thoughts, but she blocked him, and somehow, Amanda had a natural ability to prevent him from accessing hers. Maybe there *was* some magic in her.

After several minutes, Amanda's shoulders slumped. "I love him." Tears trailed down her cheeks. "No matter how crazy I feel about all that's happened, I do love him."

"That's what I needed to hear. You see, Amanda, your love is what will save Rand. At this point, only love has the power to counteract the spell placed on him." Jorgia gathered the sobbing woman in her arms. "Will you help me return my son to the man we both love?"



"When the moon rises shortly after sunset it will begin the waxing gibbous phase and trigger our little friends change back to Rand." Jorgia reached down and

scratched the head of the little black dog. “This will be our best chance to reverse the spell.” She studied the yard and gave a satisfied nod. “The evergreen trees and bushes will block the prying eyes of neighbors.” Her gaze dropped to the little dog at her feet and then to Amanda.

The intense stare made Amanda want to seek shelter. Jorgia was more formidable than usual in her ceremonial garments of long flowing purple with a hooded velvet cape. The hood now rested over her back, draping over the woman’s shoulders, but when she had it pulled up earlier, Amanda had felt the power.

“Amanda, where does your magic come from?”

“Huh...?”

“You have magic in your blood. I sensed it the moment I set eyes on you.”

Amanda wasn’t sure how to respond. The only magic she knew about in her family was the magic her mother created. The booze she drank to chase down the drugs made the woman think she could fly. “My mother had no magic and my father disappeared before I was born. Come to think of it, guess he did have magic since he did a vanishing act.”

“Could have been from him. Some warlocks have trouble making commitments or putting down roots.” Jorgia pursed her lips and nodded. “But not to worry, the magic is in you and a lot of what happens tonight will depend upon you.”

*Great. Now the success or failure of the spel, is on me. Nothing like a little guilt to bring a girl into line.* Life was much simpler when she believed magic, shape shifters, and the paranormal were tales created by people with rich imaginations.

Jorgia glanced at the southwestern horizon. “The moon is starting to rise. We need to form a large circle with Rand and Amanda in the center.”

The twins entwined hands and reached out to their mother and grandmother. “Not a joined circle, girls...there’s not enough of us. We will dance, but freely.”

It occurred to Amanda she was the only one not wearing a hooded cloak. Somehow, her jeans didn’t seem to fit the dress code and her t-shirt needed a hood to pull over her head, as the others did now with their hoods.

“Amanda, you need to undress.”

“What?” Was Jorgia out of her frigging mind? No way was she going to strip in front of this group. Rand had seen in various states of undress numerous times, but she wasn’t ready for a full body display in front of the women. Besides, there was the cat. The little beastly impressed her as another male with a dirty mind.

“You are the main link to make this counter-spell work. Dancing nude in the moonlight will carry the love in your heart to the goddess who has the power to bless the reversal of the spell. Do you love him enough to set aside your insecurities and reach out to her?”

Did she? Insecure was her middle name when it came to her body. Her mother's frequent words of "your ass is too big" played through her head. *Like Mama had room to talk.*

Amanda looked around at the females who formed their group. Jorgia and her mother were years older and their bodies couldn't be that great, but the twins... *What are a couple of teens going to think about my flabby thighs and...and—oh crap, I haven't shaved my legs in weeks.*

*"Better do it fast, babe. Time's a wasting, and the moon, she be a'rising."*

The unfamiliar voice jerked Amanda from her thoughts. She glanced around in an effort to discover who made the remark. A tap on her leg caused her to look down. Simma sat at her feet, staring into her eyes.

*"Yep, that was me. And, I do not have a dirty mind."*

*Holy crap. Was there something in that tea Jorgia served before we came out here?. If anyone discovered she heard talking animals, she'd be committed to a looney bin for sure. Stunned, Amanda began to remove her clothes. The other participants, including the cat, started to move in a circle around her and the little black dog sitting on the grass a few feet away from her. The cool night air hardened her nipples and goosebumps rippled over her skin as she shed her bra. She stepped out of the jeans that now pooled at her feet and kicked them aside.*



The growing moonlight turned her pale skin a pearly hue and she began to sway to a song that hummed in her head. She recognized the tune as Manilow's "Copacabana" and the urge to dance took over. The sway turned to whirling and twirling, and she moved into her own world of music, which she realized was provided courtesy of a humming cat. Forgetting the oddity of the situation, Amanda let her body take over while her heart cried out for the love she had discovered to be returned to her.

"Look. It worked. It worked!" The girl's excited squeals barely penetrated her thoughts as she looked at the moon hanging in the dark sky and continued to dance.

"We don't know that." Jorgia's words floated on the plane where Amanda now existed. "He would have changed without the spell, but we don't know if it will last."

The music she heard in her head changed when a new voice entered the mix and the song became "Mandy." A movement to her left caught Amanda's eye and she came crashing back to reality.

"Rand?" She focused on the nude man who now stood in front of her. All the emotions she'd fought to suppress over the past few weeks surged forth, released in a gush of tears. "Rand," she whispered again.

He held out his arms and she flew into them. This was the love she'd sought all her life and she wasn't about to let it go. Man or dog, she'd accept whichever. Wrapped in Rand's arms, contentment flowed through her and she knew she'd made the right choice.

Rand's mouth came down to meet hers and Amanda felt the heat that surrounded them as their lips met.

One of the twins screamed and the other shouted, "Wow, would you look at that glow?"

In the distance, Amanda heard Jorgia declare, "I think now the spell is reversed."



Simma grumbled to himself all the way down the rose strewn aisle. The two rings tied around his neck with a ribbon swayed back and forth, creating a gentle clinking sound. *It is so not dignified for a feline of my status to be a ring barer at a wedding. Once again, Fate is getting her jollies off at my expense.* Stopping at Rand's side, he sat down and waited to be relieved of his cargo.

Rand bent down and slipped the ribbon over his head. "*Thanks buddy. I really appreciate you doing this for me.*"

The scratches behind Simma's ears helped to restore his lost dignity. "Well,

*maybe it wasn't so bad after all."*

Music announced the entrance of the bride and all eyes turned as Amanda made her appearance. The older witches dabbed at their eyes as the new member of their family walked down the aisle.

The Demon Duo looked proud and beautiful in their bridesmaid dresses as they led the way, but they didn't come close to the beauty of the bride. Simma sat down and watched Amanda approach, and Rand stepped out to greet her.

The cat twitched his tail and looked over the people he called his. His eyes settled on Amanda as she whispered, "I do." *Yeah, she's definitely a keeper.* The big black cat blinked to remove the cinders from his eyes. A glance over to the chair occupied by Abner told him the three-legged cat had the same problem. *Yep, damned cinders.*

## Epilogue

“No.” Rand looked over at the sandbox where Sophie played. “You cannot.”

Amanda glanced up to see Sophie glare at her father.

“I don’t care what your aunts did when they were three, darling daughter.”

The little girl shrugged and went back to scooping sand into her bucket.

Fighting back laughter, Amanda watched the exchange between father and daughter. Thankfully, when she was around, Rand verbalized his end of their mind-speak conversations for her sake.

Adjusting to the idea of her daughter as a witch took effort some days. But, she knew the family motto of ‘do no harm’ would be instilled in Sophie. Even her aunts had become reliable and focused on their niece not making the mistakes of their childhood. It had been fun watching the initial battle between Simma and the twins when Jorgia turned over their tutelage to him as punishment. Everyone had laughed when Jorgia told him, “It’s that, or you’re a hopper, cat.”

The twins worked to set a good example for the niece they doted on. The question now was, where did Sophie hear this latest tidbit about her aunt’s antics?

“Simma. He’s been entertaining her with stories of the old days.” Rand grinned at Amanda’s startled jump. “You need to take Mom up on her offer to help

you develop your mind-speak, honey. She also needs to teach you to keep your guard up. You don't want darling daughter reading your every thought."

"Hmmm. Right. Jorgia is certain there's magic in my family line and that I can learn, but I'm not so sure." Why did she feel defensive when someone mentioned the possibility of witches as part of her heritage? Probably because she was afraid they were wrong and she'd be the outsider in this family forever.

"You're not an outsider, Mommy." Sophie climbed into Amanda's lap and awarded her with a sand filled hug and kiss.

"You're right dear, but to make sure I can keep better tabs on you when your father isn't around, I think I will take Grandma up on her offer."

Sophie climbed down and returned to her sandbox. Rand leaned over from his lounge chair and kissed her. "Good idea. Who knows what kind of magical powers this one will have." He placed his hand over the bulge of her stomach and smiled.

"True. Now, go talk to your daughter so I can get a nap." She leaned back and closed her eyes, placing her hands where Rand's laid moments before. Another witch on the way, and she knew this one was a girl. She saw it in a dream last night. Maybe she did have a family line of magic, after all.

*The End*

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## Author Bio

Lizzie T. Leaf is known for her ‘humor with heat.’ She has numerous e-books in varying lengths and her print book, *Struck by Lightning*, won the 2007 Beacon award for Erotic Romance and tied for Best First Novel, in addition to being a finalist in Author Island’s Reader’s Choice Award and Colorado Romance Writer’s Award of Excellence. Her Novella, *Dead Faint* was a 2008 Nominee for Best Vampire at Love Romances Cafe.

Since discovering the fun of writing paranormal, she plays with creating vampires, faeries and other immortals. Currently she is working on a full length paranormal novel set in Scotland that brings in Celtic folklore. On the planning board for 2009 is also her first venture into mainstream/women’s fiction.

## Red Rose Publishing

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