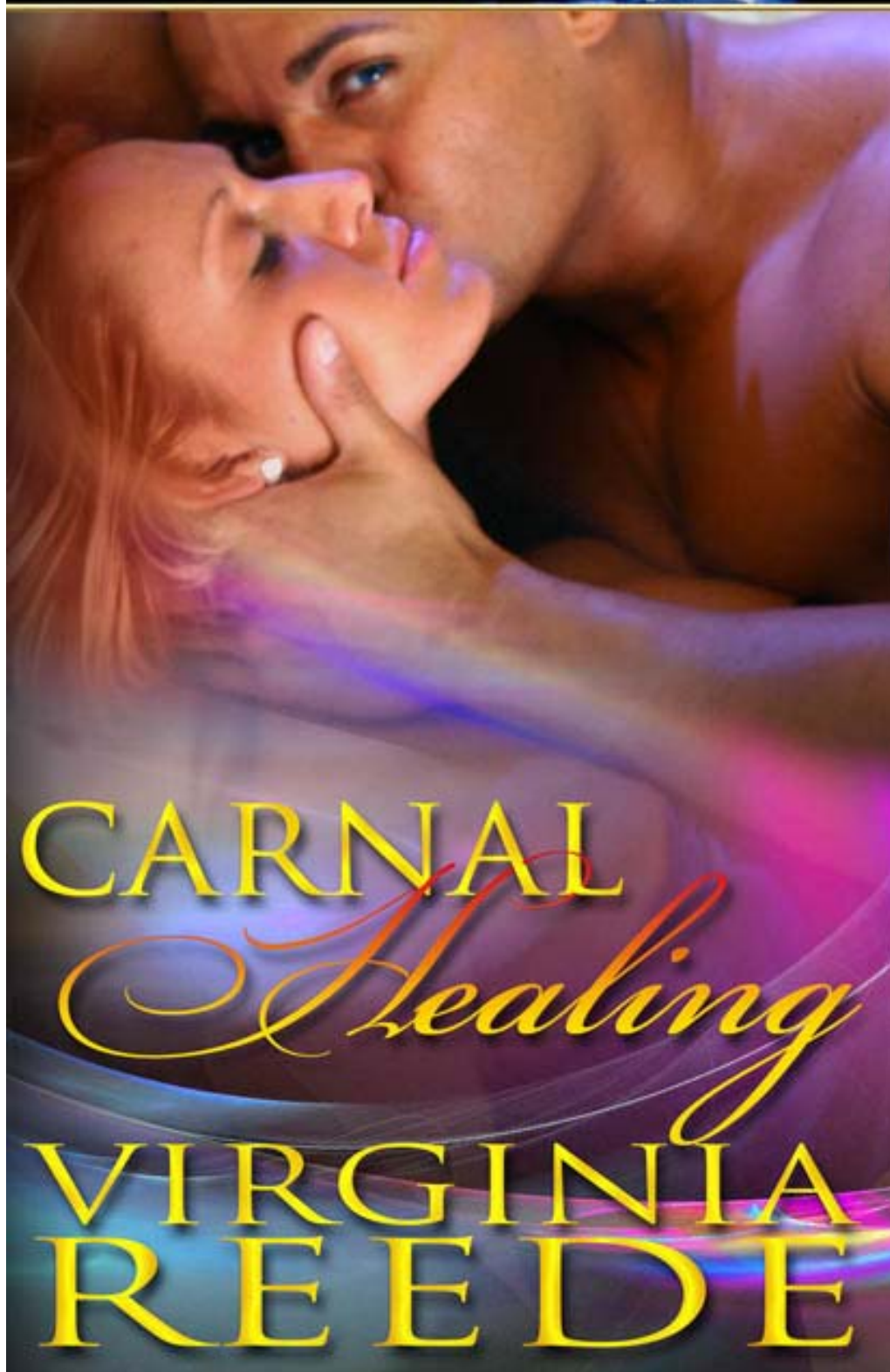


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



## Carnal Healing

Virginia Reede

Leonore has always known she's a witch—the direct descendent of the legendary Witch of Caernathen, whose power flowed from the sensual pleasures of sex. After years of searching, Lenore has found six women, each of whom has one of the magical gifts of their mutual ancestress. The circle of seven now prepares to perform the ritual that will restore all of them to the awesome power that is their birthright.

Dr. Jeff Carson thinks Leonore is only interested in a one-night stand. But he soon learns the mysterious woman is impossible to forget, and not only for the astonishing—and puzzling—sensations that he experiences during their lovemaking. For once, Leonore is having a hard time leaving a lover behind once she's used him to restore her power.

Jeff and Leonore barely have time to explore their new connection when an ancient enemy appears. The *Draíodóir*, an order of sorcerers who will do anything to stop the ritual from happening, threaten not only Jeff and Leonore's love, but their very lives.

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Carnal Healing

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# *CARNAL HEALING*

Virginia Reede

### *Author Note*

If you would like to know more about the original Leonore and Geoffrey of Carnaethen, you can read their story in *Witch's Knight* by Virginia Reede, another Ellora's Cave title.

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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## Forward

In the time of King Arthur there lived a powerful witch named Leonore. A woman of legendary beauty and wisdom, she had many lovers, for she drew her magic from the pleasure given to her by sex. Leonore's adventures were numerous and varied, as were her powers, and she was content to live her long life in the company of the men—some powerful, some humble—from whence her strength was drawn. It was, however, not until she met her one true love, Sir Geoffrey, that her powers reached their full potential.

Despite her belief that she had grown too old to conceive, Leonore and Geoffrey had many children together, for her magic preserved her youth and his love made her fertile to the seeds he planted. These children, having sprung from the potent magic created when they were conceived each grew to discover they carried at least one of their mother's powers. This was especially true of the daughters, who were numerous and inherited their mother's beauty along with her magic.

Hundreds of years later, the female progeny of Leonore and Geoffrey still carry the seeds of her magic. When they are fortunate enough to find one another, they can become a powerful force for good.

But in their lifetimes, Leonore and Geoffrey made enemies, and they too, have passed something along to their descendents—a dark power that has been nourished and honed for centuries. These warlocks—for the seeds of resentment flourished best in the hearts of men—have one purpose that unites them: To find and destroy the Leonoreans.

## Chapter One

"She won't come," said Ludmilla, noisily sucking the foam from her cappuccino. "She thinks it's all a bunch of hocus-pocus."

"She *says* that's what she thinks," said Letisha. "She knows it's real. She just doesn't want any part of it. But I agree with you, she won't come."

Leonore listened to the other women as she sipped her own coffee. She sincerely hoped they were wrong. "She's showed up before, even if she argued beforehand."

Letisha's snort expressed a world of disdain. "That's because we all browbeat her into it." The foam from her chai had left a mustache that contrasted with her cocoa-colored skin, and Leonore suppressed a smirk before replying.

"Then we'll do it again. She's too important to the circle. She's probably the most powerful of us all."

Ludmilla shook her head. "I don't think you realize how dead set against it she is this time. And *you're* stronger than she is, Leonore. You've even got the Ancestor's name."

"Coincidence," said Leonore. "My mother just thought it was pretty." This comparison always made her uncomfortable. She knew her own magic was strong.

Letisha snorted again. "Your mama knew exactly where that name came from, girl. She studied the legends too. Ain't no coincidence and you know it."

"It doesn't matter," said Leonore, dismissing the subject. "Millie, would you try to talk to her? She's still mad at me from the last time and she'll listen to you."

"I'll try," said Ludmilla. "But I'm not making any promises."

"Well, do it soon. We're running out of time. The equinox is in less than a month, and she'll have to request the time off work. You two already take care of that?"

"Yeah, I took care of it," said Letisha. "It's gonna use up the last of my vacation, though. And Jamal's pissed off—he wanted to take me to Jamaica. Why do we have to go to England, anyway? It always worked just fine right here in Massachusetts."

Leonore sighed. *Getting seven of us to agree on anything is like trying to herd cats.* "We've been over this all before, Tish. The stone circles here are replicas and, although they do seem to help magnify the power in rituals, it's not the same as the real thing."

"So? I mean, this is all just an exercise, right? It's not like we're gonna save the world or something."

"Maybe not," Leonore conceded, "but that doesn't mean we won't have to someday. And we need to be ready, in case the *Draíodóir* decide to cause trouble."

"The Dr – gawd, I can never pronounce that word."

"Dry-oh-dwar," Millie enunciated, rolling her r's elaborately.

"Yeah, yeah. Anyway, the *Draíodóir* are a myth," Tish scoffed. "My grandmother used them and the word 'bogeyman' interchangeably."

"You wouldn't say that if you paid attention to the writings," Leonore argued. "They're all over the Vycerian manuscripts—"

"Which were written six hundred years ago," Tish interrupted.

Leonore ignored her. "And when the sisters of that age united against them, saving the world might not have been too far off the mark."

"The *Draíodóir* were more interested in wiping out the Leonoreans than the Earth," When Leonore raised her eyebrows, Tish continued. "Yes, I read the damn Vycerian manuscripts. All eight volumes, if you must know. And even if you believe they're not about three-quarters fairy tale, the sisters destroyed the *Draíodóir*. Totally kicked their collective asses."

"Defeated, not destroyed. Depending on the translation, they may have just been driven underground." Leonore said, not backing down. "If even one survived, he could have passed on the powers. We need to be ready."



"Which we will be," Millie cut in. "I was trying to find out more about this henge we're going to use. It's not very famous. I would think you'd want to try Stonehenge or another one of the big ones."

Tish laughed aloud. "Girl, can you imagine what Stonehenge would be like on the autumnal equinox? Half the Wicca wannabes in the world all trying to jam in there at once, covered in crystals and chanting some spell they got off a website. Most of them wouldn't know a real witch if they tripped over one."

"Some of those wannabes might be Leonoreans, and just not have been as lucky as we have been, to know one another," chided Millie. "You shouldn't make fun."

Leonore looked with affection at the two women, closer than any sisters. Ludmilla's high cheekbones and almond eyes gave her an exotic look, especially when she had her waist-length hair coiled up in the elaborate coif she favored for work. She claimed eastern European royalty in her ancestry, and it was probably true—some Leonorean women had certainly formed liaisons with men of power.

Letisha, on the other hand, was pure American home-girl, and even the stern lines of her police uniform couldn't disguise her lush curves. Contrast the two with Leonore's own freckled face and too-curly red hair and she figured they probably looked like the cast of a politically correct sitcom.

"Tish is right, though," she said. "We need to make sure we don't have to compete for space in the circle when the time comes. The equinox happens at exactly nine minutes before noon, and we need to time the ritual precisely or we'll miss the peak of power. You *have* been practicing your parts, haven't you?" Leonore eyed Millie pointedly—she was notoriously sloppy about her spells.

"Relax, Leonore, I'll be ready. Why are you so cranky, anyway? When was the last time you had sex?"

"Too long ago," admitted Leonore. "I've been busy, and it's such a pain in the ass to go out and find someone."

"If you kept a regular guy around, you could just make a booty call whenever you

need a little pick-me-up.” Letisha grinned wickedly. “Did I tell you girls how fine Jamal’s ass is? And his cock—”

“Is so long he can’t even wear shorts,” finished Millie, rolling her eyes. “You may have mentioned it twenty or thirty times. Spare us another description. Leonore prefers anonymous lovers, don’t you, darling? Less complicated—gives you more time for all your precious research.” She stretched like a cat. “Me, I like to keep a few on the line, begging and pleading for it.”

Leonore laughed out loud. Mille’s lovers really did pursue her endlessly, which would have driven Leonore crazy, but she seemed to thrive on the attention.

“Whatever,” said Tish, pouting a little at Millie’s rebuff. “But you gotta get laid, girl. You keep telling us to practice the rituals, but you know it takes power even to do that. And you can’t make any sparks if your battery’s dead. Besides, it’s fun. Go on out tonight and get you some. Promise?”

“Okay, okay. It’s time, you’re right. I just need to figure out where to go.”

“Try that new sports bar over near the hospital—Jake’s. Wednesday is ladies’ night, so of course it’s all men.” Tish looked at her watch. “I need to get back to the station. Sisters?” She offered one hand to each of her companions, and Leonore and Ludmilla each took one, then joined their own to form a small circle.

They chanted softly and quickly, so that no one else even noticed the small ritual that always marked their parting. “*Dominatus consociatum*. I give to you and I accept your gift.”

As Letisha headed down the sidewalk in the direction of her patrol car, Millie stood and gathered the assortment of accessories she always seemed to carry—handbag, sunglasses, scarf, cigarette case and lighter—and looked at Leonore with concern.

“Your powers *are* weak, Leonore. I didn’t realize how weak until we joined. You need to keep strong.” Ludmilla’s special power was the ability to sense emotions and even read thoughts through touch.

“I’ve already told you I would do something about it tonight, Millie. It’s not like

you to be concerned about my ability to perform spells. You barely practice your own."

"It's not that." Millie made no move to leave, and her face was uncharacteristically serious. "I think you need to stay strong all the time, not just to get ready for the equinox."

"What's wrong, Millie? Is there something you're not telling us?"

"Maybe. I don't know." Ludmilla's brow furrowed, and Leonore felt a mild sense of alarm.

"Tell me."

Without putting down her burdens, Millie sank back into the chair. "I had a walk-in customer yesterday—a man. He said he was from out of town, and he wanted a manicure. All my technicians were busy, and I was done with the bank deposits, so I took care of him."

Leonore nodded. She knew that Millie's day spa had grown to such a size that she only handled a very few favored customers personally, but would sometimes do a manicure or pedicure when things got especially busy.

"He was very handsome, if you like that too-smooth Latin-lover look."

"Which you do," interrupted Leonore, who was surprised when her jibe did not draw a smile.

Millie just shrugged. "Yes, sometimes. But there was something about this man that gave me the squirms. And not the good kind, either. He sort of scared me"

Leonore was intrigued. "Did you read him? Did you find anything bad?"

"That's just it," replied Millie. "I started to, and an image was just starting to form, and then *wham!*" She made a sharp gesture with the hand still holding the scarf. "It was like a door slammed closed right in my face. I got the impression that he...that he felt me reading him and blocked me out intentionally."

"Really?" Leonore was surprised but not shocked. "Well, it's not common, but it certainly wouldn't be the first time this happened to you. What's different about this

incident?"

"It wasn't the blocking me out that scared me, although I don't think anyone has ever done it that violently before. It was what I was starting to see just before the wall came down."

"What did you see?" Leonore felt a chill, as if she was catching a bit of her friend's apprehension.

Millie shook her head, a gesture of frustration. "I'm not sure. Something bad. It felt like...hate. I couldn't really tell. It was over too fast."

Leonore considered. "Well, that's not very pleasant, but I'm sure you have clients who have negative thoughts like that every once in a while. People have a tendency to open up to you, even when you don't read them."

"This was different. This felt..." Ludmilla seemed to search for the right word. "Directed. Personal, maybe."

"Directed toward *you*?" A frisson of alarm prickled the back of Leonore's neck. "Did he want to hurt you?"

"Not exactly," Millie said, sounding less than confident. "But I thought about it afterward. I think...I felt like if the image of his thoughts had come fully into focus, I would have seen something I recognized, and that's why he cut me off."

Leonore took a deep breath and asked the question. "Millie, do you think he could be *Draíodóir*?"

Again, Millie shook her head. "No, nothing like that. I'm probably being silly. I mean, I didn't really see anything, and he was perfectly pleasant to me. Gave me a huge tip, even though I told him I owned the place and it really wasn't necessary."

Leonore wasn't convinced. "Maybe when you talk to Vinnie about the equinox, she can conjure up a vision—see if this guy shows up."

"I doubt it." Millie got back to her feet. "Denial about her power is the reason Lavinia doesn't want to participate in the ritual in the first place. I'll have enough

trouble talking her into the trip to England without trying to get her to predict the future."

"You're probably right. It would be a long shot, anyway." Like most Leonoreans blessed—or cursed, if you took her word for it—with the sight, Lavinia had little control over the subjects of her precognition. "Call me after you talk to her, okay?"

"I will," promised Millie, and the two women both headed for their cars, parked in opposite directions.

## **Chapter Two**

Jake's sports bar was surprisingly crowded for a weekday night, and Tish had been right about the male-to-female ratio. It was a big place—three large rooms, each centered around an oversized projection screen and dotted with many smaller televisions, all tuned to sports channels. Most showed baseball games, but the Red Sox apparently didn't have a game that night, and the commentary was mostly drowned out by jukebox music, which was piped to all corners of the building. The four bars were all full, as were most of the tables, and waitstaff scurried by carrying trays laden with burgers, chicken wings and potato skins.

Perfect. Packed with men, and with too many people for them to all be regulars. No important ball game on that it would be hard to drag someone away from. The best kind of place to find what she was looking for without the complication of questions.

Millie had been accurate about Leonore's preference for anonymous lovers. She had the rapacious sexual appetite that was her birthright, but sometimes got so caught up in her work as a writer and her research of Leonorean lore and magic that she didn't take time to satisfy it. Once her powers were restored, the last thing she needed was some smitten man hanging around, taking up time she couldn't afford to give him.

But tonight Leonore was on the hunt and, while she had the ability to put sex out of her mind while she was working, now that she had committed to the pursuit, her body thrummed with anticipation. She scanned the crowd, looking for just the right candidate. He didn't have to be alone, but he couldn't be part of a tight group, one that would try to prevent him from leaving in a hurry. She spotted an attractive blond man sitting by himself at a booth, watching one of the big TVs, and sidled closer to size him up, taking a sip of the martini she carried mostly as a prop. Too drunk, she decided.

She was moving toward the main bar when her progress was interrupted by a man

stepping out of the restroom. Barely avoiding a collision, she looked up and met his eyes, and a strange thrill ran through her, starting somewhere in the region of her stomach and spreading outward.

"Excuse me," he said, and crinkles appeared at the corner of very blue eyes. "Did I spill your drink?"

"What?" Leonore said stupidly before realizing what he had asked and looking at her martini glass. "No, not really." Had some spilled? She couldn't remember how full the glass had been before the near miss.

"Yes I did," he said, reaching out and touching her hand. "Look it's dripping all over your fingers. Let me buy you a replacement." Before Leonore could react, he had her by the elbow and was steering her toward the bar.

"Really, it's not necessary," she sputtered, unaccustomed to someone else taking charge.

Ignoring her protests, he reached for a stack of bar napkins. "Let me dry you off." He removed the half-full glass from her hand and set it on the bar, then started mopping her hand and wrist with the napkins. Again, she felt the current that seemed to flow between them. "I'm not usually so clumsy."

"It wasn't your fault," she said, trying to regain her composure. "I was walking one direction and looking another."

"Apparently, so was I," he said. "Although if I'd seen you coming you can be sure I wouldn't have been looking at anything else. You're by far the most beautiful woman here." He managed to give the impression of checking her out without actually breaking eye contact and Leonore felt a flush rise to her cheeks.

What the hell was going on here? Leonore had been flirted with by a lot of men—hundreds, certainly. Maybe even thousands. But she did *not* blush every time someone paid her a compliment. *She* was supposed to be the alpha-bitch huntress, stalking through the crowd and deciding on her prey. Yet she had the very distinct impression she had just been singled out of the herd.

"Leo, could you get the lady another martini?" The amazing blue eyes swiveled back toward Leonore. "It was a martini, wasn't it?"

"Yes," she managed to say. "Yes, a vodka martini, just a little dirty."

"Excellent choice. Make it two, Leo, and put in some of those blue-cheese-stuffed olives."

Leonore was about to protest—she hated it when men ordered for her—but blue-cheese-stuffed olives *did* sound nice...

"Let's sit down and drink them together. Unless..." He scanned the room behind her. "There's someone waiting for you at a table."

"No," said Leonore, "No, I'm by myself." She told herself there was no reason to be reluctant. She had come in here with the express purpose of picking someone up, after all. This man just wasn't exactly what she expected. She sat down on a barstool and appraised him surreptitiously as he paid the bartender.

Gorgeous, certainly. Tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed and with a body that was no stranger to a weight room. Physically he was perfect for her purposes. It was just that she usually liked someone a tad tipsy and not too bright. Someone easy to manipulate, who could take care of business without a lot of chatter afterward. Intelligence fairly sprang from this one's eyes, and he didn't look like he'd even been drinking.

Of course, the bartender had just slid an enormous martini in front of him. Leonore had yet to meet a man she couldn't drink under the table. What the hell, after he finished that cocktail he might be just about ready.

"So, what brings someone as attractive as you out on a Wednesday night?" he asked, lifting his glass to his lips for a sip.

"I wanted to get laid," she replied, and was gratified when he actually spit out some of his martini. *Not as smooth as you look, are you?*

He put the glass down and turned to look at her. "You're kidding."

"Not at all." She put what she hoped was a sardonic expression on her face and



sipped her own martini, then fished out one of the blue cheese olives and popped it in her mouth. "Ummm. You're right, these are good."

He was still staring at her, if not quite open-mouthed, with an expression of complete astonishment. "You came out to get laid," he repeated.

"That's right. Interested?"

To Leonore's annoyance, he threw back his head and laughed. She felt the flush rising to her cheeks again. This was *not* the reaction she had been expecting.

"I'm sorry," he said, still laughing. "You really had me going for a minute there. I guess I deserved it for asking such a clichéd question. You're out on Wednesday night for the same reason I am. Because you felt like getting out of the house and having a drink." He raised his glass. "And maybe talking to someone interesting."

After a moment's hesitation, Leonore raised her own glass and clinked his. *Let him think it's a joke—for now.* She knew from experience that if she stayed too quiet, most men would start asking questions about her—where she lived, where she worked—and she had no intention of giving out a lot of information when her only purpose here was to have sex.

"Why here?" she asked him. "Do you work nearby?" Not that she really cared. Not at all. Really.

"It's between where I work and where I live. I walk on nice days."

*Or you don't have a car,* thought Leonore, who was accustomed to meeting relative losers in bars. Although this guy didn't look like any loser she'd ever met. Too well groomed, although she wondered where he worked that he could dress so casually, in jeans and a UCLA sweatshirt.

"Been in the area long?" she asked quickly, to ward off the "what about you?" that was sure to come any minute.

"No, just moved here a couple of months ago. From Southern California. So far, I like Boston a lot, although it's different from what I'm used to."

*Ah, a safe topic.* “Are you from Southern California, then? Ever lived through a real winter?”

“No, just what I’ve seen when I went skiing in the mountains. I loved the snow and cold, clean air there, though.” He took a good-sized sip of his martini and Leonore was pleased to see he was drinking fairly rapidly.

“It’s a lot different when you have to deal with it every day,” she said. “And the late fall and early spring, when it’s slushy during the day and icy at night...”

“Yeah, I know. But it’s a great city. I figure it’ll be worth a little ice.”

“We like to think so.”

“So, you a native?” he asked her, and smiled again. *God, he’s hot.* Leonore felt a flame of desire lick her all the way to her toes, and decided she didn’t care if he was too smart and too sober. He was a man, after all. And when it came down to it, what man was going to turn down hot sex with an attractive woman?

“Yes,” she said in reply to his question, then drained the last of her martini. “Look, I know you think I was joking earlier, but I wasn’t. I came here to find someone to have sex with. I really did. And you...” She swept her eyes pointedly up and down his body. “You look like you’re up for the job. So what do you say?”

This time he didn’t spit out his drink or laugh, but his eyes narrowed slightly. He finished his own drink, never taking his gaze from hers. “I don’t even know your name.”

“Do you need to?” she asked, not breaking eye contact.

He didn’t hesitate for long. “No,” he said. “No, I guess I don’t.” He put his glass down on the bar with a resounding click. Getting to his feet, he asked, “How do we...I mean, where do you want to go?”

“You said you live in walking distance. Any problem with your place? Roommates? A girlfriend?”

“My place is fine,” he said, and gestured toward the door. Leonore slid from her

stool and walked past him, not turning to make sure he was following her. She knew he would be.

He caught up with her at the sidewalk. "It's this way," he said, and she fell in beside him. They didn't talk, but she could feel a buzzing in the air around them, as if the full knowledge that they were about to have sex had created a cloud of vibrating pheromones.

Leonore suddenly felt a little panicked at the idea of going into his home. She never brought anyone to her place—she didn't want them to know where she lived—but she usually didn't have a problem going to their run-down houses or shabby apartments, which were almost always anonymous, revealing little about their personalities. The types of men she chose didn't hang pictures or do anything that could be called decorating. But she had a feeling this man was different. He would choose a home that reflected his character, and she didn't want to know about his character.

She stopped in front of an alley, and he took a few steps before he must have realized she wasn't moving. He turned and spoke.

"What's up? Change your mind?"

"Right here."

He looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"I can't wait any longer." Leonore gestured toward the alley. "I want it now. Come on."

"It's only a couple more blocks," he protested. She ignored him and stepped into the shadows, hoping he would follow.

He did.

A car was parked next to a windowless brick wall, most of it beyond the wedge of light that spilled in from a streetlight. She put her back against the vehicle, hoping it didn't have an alarm triggered by a motion sensor. "Come on," she said, for he had hesitated in the mouth of the alley, causing a long shadow to fall on the pavement

before him.

He came to her then, reaching around her with muscled arms and lowering his head to search for her lips.

She turned her head away. "You don't have to kiss me."

"Yes, I do," he said, reaching one hand up to grab the side of her face and turn it back toward him.

"No, you —" Her protest was cut off by his mouth, which came down over hers in a rush of sweet, wet warmth. His tongue slid between her teeth, and all thoughts of resistance were abruptly swept away as he probed and explored. He pulled her against his chest and a prickling heat erupted in her pussy and spread upward and outward.

God, he could kiss. Her arms went around him as the strength left her legs, but she was leaning back against the hood of the car and his arms held her upright. She could feel the hardness of his cock stretching against the front of his jeans and pressing against her belly. She dropped one hand to support her weight in order to push farther back on the car hood, so that she could spread her legs and feel it push against where her clit was already starting to throb.

Yes, the magic deep in her body said, sensing imminent renewal and shaking its head to rise from its dormancy. Yes, her own female desire answered. As it had happened before, the two needs would be filled at once. With an effort, she broke away from the kiss.

"I want you in me," she breathed, and pushed farther back so that she was sitting entirely on the car, freeing her hands to reach for the front of his jeans. *Damn button fly.*

To her relief, he didn't protest, but began pulling up the long silky folds of her full skirt. She wasn't wearing underwear, and in moments he had the skirt up and she felt the rush of cool night air against the soft folds of her cunt, which was starting to gather moisture in anticipation of what was to come.

"God, you really were ready for this," he said, sliding an index finger into her slick opening as his other hand reached around to grab her ass. Again, his mouth searched

for hers and this time she didn't resist, and instead sucked greedily at his tongue, even as her fingers finally opened the last button and her hands pushed down his underwear and grasped his throbbing cock.

Her eyes, which she hadn't even realized she had closed when he kissed her, flew open, and again she broke off the kiss. She had to see what she held in her hand.

"You're big," she said, and she could hear an unfamiliar purring quality to her voice. While size didn't matter if her only purpose was to renew her power, she always hoped the men she chose would have big cocks, but was usually disappointed. Not this time.

"I'm glad milady is pleased." His tone was probably meant to be sardonic, but was ruined by the catching of his breath when she squeezed her prize.

"Put it in me," she commanded, and pushed herself forward, but was hindered by the hand he still had partially inside her, two fingers inserted now, another rubbing against her clit. *How does he do that?*

Although they were now completely out of the wedge of light, a flicker at the front of the alley caused her to glance that way and realize a pedestrian had passed by on the sidewalk. Someone could come upon them at any moment—it wasn't that late and this neighborhood had plenty of residences mixed in with the businesses. Her sense of urgency increased and she pushed forward again, simultaneously pulling his throbbing cock toward her.

"Put it in me," she repeated.

"Wait, let me get a condom," he said, withdrawing his hand.

*Shit. He's either worried about getting me pregnant, or me giving him a venereal disease.* Neither outcome was possible, but Leonore could hardly explain that right now.

"I'm on birth control," she said instead. "And I've been tested. Recently."

"But you might—"

"Just do it," she said, surprised at the pleading tone in her voice. "Now!"

"Whatever you say," he breathed, and she felt the first delicious moments of pressure as the head of his cock began to push into the tight, wet opening between her thighs. She wrapped her legs around him, using her calves to pull his ass against her as the long shaft of his dick slid farther and farther into her cunt.

"Fuck me," she said. "Hurry!"

"Jesus," he said, but he followed directions, and started pumping his enormous cock into her, his hands on her ass, pulling her in to punctuate each thrust.

As her pleasure mounted, Leonore felt the coiling magic in her stir, rise and engulf her. "Ah, *yes!*" She threw back her head, loving the familiar sensation of her sexual passion and her magic combining and intertwining, each one heightening the enjoyment of the other. She removed her arms from where they had wound around her lover's back and raised them in the air, and felt them wave and coil in a rhythmic dance. She tilted her head back and watched to see the barely discernable glow as threads of magic began to emanate from her fingertips. "Yes! More! Harder! *Faster!*"

He groaned as if such efforts were impossible, but his pace quickened and it felt as if his huge member was touching the very back of her core. The beginning of her orgasm started to thrum along her nerves and the magic found it—stroked it—enhanced it—enraged it. She wanted more sensation—*more!*

"Put...your...fingers...in...my...*ass!*" she managed to say between gritted teeth, and he complied.

The moment she felt his thick forefinger slide into her anus, coupling with the enormous pressure of his sex and the teasing, pushing sensation of her magic, her orgasm exploded, full force and ragged. She just had time to see the tendrils coming from her fingertips flash into vividly colored rainbows before she squeezed her eyes shut against the intensity of her coming.

"Ay-eeee!" She shrieked before she could catch herself. She had momentarily forgotten where she was and that anyone could come upon them at any moment. She opened her eyes and saw that the light show above her was dimming, which was good.

Her body shuddered and bucked, and still her lover had not slowed his tempo.

She squeezed with every interior muscle she could command, her strength boosted by the magic that now thrummed in her as if she was a giant beehive. She knew some of it was leaking over into this man—this incredible male specimen—and she couldn't stop it, even though she usually had no problem preventing the power from escaping into her lovers. What must he be feeling? Did he even know?

Finally his rhythm stuttered and then stopped, and he gave a great heaving thrust, growling deeply but not crying aloud. The finger was pulled abruptly from her anus as he used both hands to crush her ass against his exploding orgasm. She felt the hot fluid shoot into her—it felt warmer than her already raging body. Every muscle in his back seemed to tense and spasm and then he relaxed against her.

"Jesus," he said again. "Holy..." He stopped, panting, and looked at her. She could not make out his blue eyes in the darkness but thought she could see a little light reflected against the shine of his corneas and the sweat on his forehead. "That was...I don't think I ever came that hard before."

*No, you probably didn't,* thought Leonore. She was a little annoyed with herself for having shared her magic during sex. She had never—*never*—done that before. Some of her Leonorean sisters did so occasionally, and had described the feeling, but she herself didn't think it was right to waste her magic in this fashion.

*But it didn't feel as if I was wasting it.*

Voices at the opening of the alley and the sound of laughter as a group of people walked by reminded Leonore that she was sitting in public with her skirt hiked up to her waist, her naked pussy exposed to the night. She pushed against her lover's chest. "Come on, we need to get out of here before someone sees us."

"Now you're worried about someone seeing us?" To his credit, his voice sounded steady, not out of breath.

"We've been lucky so far. Let's not push it." As he backed off, she jumped off the car, smoothing the folds of her silk skirt as it fell back around her calves. She reached up

to her face, wondering if her makeup was smeared everywhere. Her lips felt swollen.

As if reading her thoughts, the man, already finished buttoning his fly, again bent forward to kiss her. She dodged him.

"I told you – you don't have to kiss me."

His deep chuckle resonated in the alley. "And I told *you* that I did." Again, he took her face in his hand and turned it so that he could kiss her. But this time she kept her lips shut and, after a moment of exploration, his kiss turned chaste and he released her.

The silence felt awkward. "Thank you," she said finally. "I needed that."

He laughed quietly. "Yeah, it seemed like you did."

Leonore sensed that he was about to reach for her again and took a step backward. "I'm going to go now. You might want to wait a few seconds before you follow me."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because we'll look..." Leonore stopped. She was about to say they'd look suspicious, but who cared? She really just wanted a head start so he couldn't follow her to the car.

"Go ahead then," he said, and something in his tone said he was humoring her but Leonore didn't care. She turned and fled.

"Good night," she said as she quickly turned the corner on the sidewalk and resisted the urge to bolt for her car.

She didn't look back. But she was surprised how difficult it was not to do so.



## Chapter Three

Leonore had awakened before dawn, still tingling with the fresh charge of her magic's renewal. By ten, she had already finished the edits to her latest magazine article and sent it off to the editor, and was settling in with a second cup of coffee to research some websites that Lily, a sister from Rhode Island, had sent her. Lily had a theory that some Leonoreans had reached the Orient, and that certain famous female members of Chinese dynasties may have in fact been descendents of the original Leonore and her husband, Geoffrey Caernathen.

It was a fascinating premise, and Leonore had been looking forward to exploring the theory, but she was having a hard time concentrating. Her mind kept wandering back to the night before and her lover's blue eyes. She kept imagining his scent on her, although she had showered as soon as she'd gotten home and again this morning. And she kept remembering the twin throbs of his cock and her magic climaxing together...

After reading a paragraph for the third time and coming no closer to grasping its meaning, she put down her now-tepid coffee and stood up. Picking up her purse and her car keys, she headed for the door. She knew where she was going before she even let the thought form.

She was heading for the hospital.

*It's not out of guilt,* she told herself. It was always said among her sisters that Leonoreans were under no obligation to go out looking for ways to use their powers for good—they could wait until the opportunities inevitably arose.

But it was easy to think that way if your powers were like those of her sisters—precognition, moving objects, sensing emotions and the like. It was different for Leonore.

Because she had the power to heal. And there were so very many people who were

in need of a miracle—the kind of miracle Leonore could give them.

“But it takes so much out of you,” Ludmilla had argued the last time they had discussed it. “Even if you fucked ten guys a day, you could never even heal all the people in one section of one hospital.”

“If she fucked ten guys a day, she wouldn’t be able to *walk into* the hospital,” Letisha had responded. “Never mind heal anyone once she got in there.”

“But I feel like I should be doing *something*,” Leonore had responded. “It’s not fair to keep it all to myself.”

“You’re not,” Tish had argued. “You saved Mrs. Blodgett, when her body was trying to reject her liver transplant. She never even knew how close she came to dying.” Mame Blodgett owned a local diner where Leonore liked to have breakfast. She had been on the waiting list for a long time before she got her new liver, and had been doing well for the first few weeks after the operation. Then, a few days after her doctor had given her the go-ahead to return to work, she had shown up at the counter to pour Leonore’s coffee, pale and shaky. As soon as Leonore had touched her hand she had felt what was going on. After finishing her breakfast, she had suggested Mame take a break and enjoy the beautiful spring day by resting for a few moments on the park bench outside.

When the older woman had sunk gratefully on the seat beside her, Leonore had slipped an arm around her, and asked Mame to tell her how her many grandchildren were doing. As the woman droned on about the mundane doings of little Tiffany and Bobby and whomever else—Leonore had never really tried to keep them all straight—she had let her power rise and slip into Mame’s body. She had searched out the cells that were trying to force the new and foreign organ from its new home and calmed each one. She had strengthened the tenuous, budding connections between the old and the new tissues and calmed the inflammation and killed anything that felt like infection.

By the end of the conversation, color was returning to Mame’s cheeks and her story had become more animated. Leonore was tired and had to go home and take a nap.

Exhausted as she was, she'd had no choice but to go out to the bars that night and find a not-too-sober fraternity boy who'd been more than happy to fuck her in the back seat of his car.

*But I hadn't just renewed myself that time,* Leonore reminded herself as she pulled into the parking garage at Mass General Hospital for Children, and found a space near the elevators closest to the oncology department.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What's the matter, Jeff? Hung over?"

"What?" Jeff Carson looked up from the desk he shared with several other residents to see Mike's smirking face. "No, no hangover. I feel fine."

It was true, he reflected. He really should have had a hangover, considering how much he'd had to drink the night before. And how little sleep he'd had. But instead, he felt terrific. Not only did he feel wide awake and full of energy, but the soreness in the knee he'd twisted playing basketball a week ago seemed to have finally healed.

"Rough night?" Mike had been at Jake's sports bar last night, but had been busy playing pool. Jeff didn't think his friend had seen him leave with that crazy redhead.

"Not particularly." Jeff tried to keep his voice neutral.

"I saw you drinking a martini. After all that scotch, I figured you'd be shit-faced."

*I should have been. But as soon as I touched that woman's arm, my head cleared.*

"I'm fine, Mike. I'm just thinking about what I'm going to say to the Thomases this morning."

It wasn't true. He should have been planning the conversation, going over the points he needed to make. But he'd been thinking about her. That woman. The one who hadn't told him her name.

*She's just some horny woman, out to get laid, like she said.* What other kind of woman would demand sex in an alley with a man she'd met less than a half hour before? She wouldn't even come to his apartment, for chrissake. If he could have gotten her home,

he could have really showed her a thing or two. The sex hadn't lasted more than ten minutes. And that weird thing about not wanting to be kissed...

"Earth to Jeff. Hello! You have a consultation to go to, buddy."

Jeff sighed and got to his feet, straightening the lab coat he wore over hospital scrubs. He wasn't looking forward to this meeting, but it had to be done.

\* \* \* \* \*

Leonore, clad in a jacket that looked vaguely medical, with an ID badge that, although it would not bear close inspection, was similar to those given out to social workers and other professional visitors to the hospital, walked down the hall as if she belonged there. Although there was more security than at a hospital that catered to adults, Leonore had learned that looking semiofficial and carrying a clipboard rather than a handbag would make her as invisible as a five-foot-eleven redhead could be. Additionally, she had learned to cast glammers, and that they could as easily be designed to make a witch *less* imposing as the opposite. She usually didn't have to resort to this extreme, but it had come in handy a time or two.

Now to find the right child. She purposely had timed her visit to coincide with visiting hours, but she didn't want a parent to walk in during a healing. With a touch of glamour, she could usually convince a doctor or nurse she had a legitimate reason to be there, but parents of gravely ill children tended to be somewhat...intense.

A couple stepped out of a room a few feet in front of her, and the man spoke back through the doorway. "We need to go now, baby. We're going to meet with your doctor. We'll be back in just a little while, okay?" Leonore couldn't hear a response from the room, but there must have been one, because the two people, presumably the child's parents, turned and passed her in the opposite direction, their faces solemn.

*Perfect. Both the parents and the doctor will be away for a few minutes. It's all I need.* With a glance back to make sure the pair turned the corner, Leonore slipped into the room and closed the door behind her.

The child in the bed was very still, but her eyes were open. She was almost as white as the sheet pulled up to her chest, the only color provided by a pink cap, gaily festooned with white flowers, that hid what Leonore knew must be a bald head.

"Hello," said the child. "Are you a new nurse?" Her voice was quiet, but had an oddly cheerful lilt, and Leonore felt her heart squeeze. The brave ones always got to her.

"Something like that." Leonore moved to the side of the bed and held out her hand. "I'm Leonore. What's your name?"

"Lucy." A tiny hand was raised and Leonore took it. It felt as insubstantial as a butterfly's wing, but it squeezed in a momentary grip. Someone had taught this girl to shake hands.

"That's a pretty name. Do you know what it means?"

The eyes, which Leonore now saw were hazel, got very wide. "No. I didn't know it meant anything. It's just my name."

"It means 'light'," said Leonore. "Isn't that a nice thing to be named after?"

"Yes." The girl smiled, and again Leonore felt that squeeze in her chest. "What does your name mean?"

"Well, my name has 'light' in it too. It means 'the Goddess is my light'."

Lucy's mouth formed an "o". "Wow. That's a wonderful name."

"Do you mind if I sit with you for a few minutes?" At Lucy's nod, Leonore sat on the side of the bed. "Can I feel your heartbeat?" Again, a nod, and Leonore settled her hand on the small chest. It seemed barely wider than the span from her wrist to her fingers.

"You don't use a stethoscope like the other nurses?" The word was carefully pronounced. Leonore imagined this child, who was no more than six, knew a lot of medical terms.

"I like to feel how strong it is with my hand. Here, you can feel mine if you want." Leonore leaned forward and guided the small hand to the spot just above her own

breastbone where the pulse beat against the thin skin of her throat. “That’s right. Now, close your eyes and count the beats. Can you count to a hundred?”

“Yes. One...two...”

As the tiny voice droned, Leonore closed her own eyes and tuned out the sound. She reached for her magic, which leapt easily in response after so recent a renewal. She harnessed all her senses – touch, smell, taste, hearing – and searched for the cancer.

After so many secret visits to oncology wards, she knew what she was looking for. The cancer cells had a certain texture and feel. When she found them, a bitter taste filled her throat and heaviness, like a sudden drop in barometric pressure, made her ears pop. Then, one by one, she started to destroy them.

Other foreign things swirled in the child – the poisonous medicines of chemotherapy, which attacked the same cells that Leonore targeted. She demolished these as well – once her work was done, the child would have no need for them. She could also feel what she had come to think of as soldiers – the defenses of the girl’s own immune system, and she carefully moved these aside so as not to damage them.

She sensed something else as well – something that seemed to be working with and propping up the weakened soldiers. Some medicine or treatment the child was receiving? She avoided harming this element, as it felt wholesome and good.

“Forty-two...forty-three...”

The counting droned on, and Leonore found more of the cancer around every turn. The little body was riddled with it. The magic danced and parried like a wielded sword, stinging and piercing the diseased cells. *Pop, pop, pop*, they exploded and swirled away, pulled out of the child by tendrils of magic.

“Seventy-four...seventy-five...” The voice was starting to sound sleepy, and Leonore knew Lucy would fall asleep before she reached one hundred. The little hand had slipped and no longer really rested against where the pulse throbbed.

Leonore’s magic found the last vestiges of the cancer, eviscerating it without mercy.

“Eighty-three...” The voice trailed off and then stopped completely, and the hand fell back to the sheet. Leonore removed her own hand from Lucy’s chest and stepped back. The girl was sound asleep.

She felt lightheaded. There had been so much cancer! But it had felt wonderful to destroy it. She took a few deep breaths and assessed her own strength. Not bad. It was a good thing she’d had such a powerful lover last night.

Leonore looked down and arranged the collar of her jacket so that it mostly obscured the phony identification badge and stepped back to the door. Opening it, she peeked out into the hall to make sure there was no sign of returning parents. It had only been a few minutes, but something might have happened to delay or postpone their meeting. All clear.

She took one look back at the sleeping child and noticed with satisfaction that her ivory cheeks were already looking a little pinker. Picking up the clipboard she had left on a bedside chair, Leonore stepped into the hall and walked briskly in the direction of the elevators. As she rounded the corner near the nurses’ station, she almost skidded to a halt.

There, talking to the man and woman who had come out of Lucy’s room, stood...*him*. Her lover from the night before. Clad in scrubs and a white lab coat and wearing a stethoscope, he spoke earnestly to the couple she had seen coming out of the room when she first arrived.

*Oh my god, he’s Lucy’s doctor!*

And he was standing between her and the elevator.

Abruptly, she made a U-turn and went back around the corner, feeling the heat rise into her face. *I can’t let him see me here*. Leonore especially did not want him to see her in the quasi lab coat with the fake ID badge. She could say she was visiting a patient, but not in her disguise, which would lead him to believe she had some connection to the hospital.

Frantically, Leonore searched for a stairway. There it was, at the end of the hall. She

picked up her pace, terrified he and the parents would be rounding the corner to visit Lucy's room. As she got closer to the door, a sinking sensation gripped her stomach as she made out the sign—Emergency Exit Only. Alarm Will Sound. *Shit!*

Afraid to make another U-turn, she noticed an open doorway to her right. A sign over the door said Visitors Lounge. She darted inside.

The room was diagonally across the hall from Lucy's, and had a television, a few comfortable-looking chairs, and a table with a partially completed jigsaw puzzle. At the moment, Leonore had it all to herself. She positioned herself so that she could just see the door to Lucy's room, and caught her breath when Lucy's parents, accompanied by her lover, entered the room only moments later.

*God, he's gorgeous. And I hadn't realized how tall he is.* As soon as the thought popped into her mind, she chastised herself. It was no time to be thinking about that now. She needed to get out of here while he was busy with his patient.

But they hadn't closed the door. Surely they would all be facing the bed, not the open doorway.

Not necessarily. Lucy would still be asleep. Maybe they wouldn't want to wake her up, and would come right back out of the room again. If someone else would just come down the hall in the direction of the elevators, she could walk alongside them, positioning herself so that they were between her and the open doorway to Lucy's room.

Any other time, the hall would be full of nurses, orderlies, doctors and visitors. But now that Leonore wanted someone to come, they wouldn't. Oh well, she'd just have to gut it out.

She looked down at her jacket, badge and clipboard. She hated to abandon them—the clipboard would be easy to replace, but it had been a lot of work making a badge that looked just right, and also finding a jacket in this style. She put the clipboard on a chair, removed the badge and slipped it into her pocket. The jacket she folded and tucked under her arm. It probably looked awkward, but it was better than wearing it.



No one would stop her on the way out—it was only those arriving who were likely to come under scrutiny.

Taking a deep breath, she headed for the door, but just as she stepped into the hall, four people almost ran into her on their way in.

“Oh, excuse me,” said an elderly woman, and Leonore had to step sideways in order to let the group pass. They moved excruciatingly slowly.

Finally they were out of her way, and she took a few brisk steps toward escape, turning her head away from Lucy’s room.

And he stepped into the hall, directly in her path. She swerved, but was unable to avoid brushing his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I wasn’t paying attention to—” He stopped, his eyes widening in recognition. “*You!* What on earth are you doing here?”

“I’m—I’m dropping off some books. My book club donates books and-and sometimes we leave them in the waiting rooms.” Feeling ridiculous, Leonore gestured vaguely in the direction of the visitors lounge, then flushed when she realized she was using the hand that was carrying the incriminating jacket.

He didn’t notice. His eyes were riveted on hers.

“I didn’t think I would ever see you again,” he said. “You didn’t even tell me your name.”

Leonore suddenly became aware of where they were standing. Lucy might already be awake and might call to her or point her out. She took a few steps toward the nurses’ station, relieved when he followed.

“No,” she said. “No, I didn’t. I’m sorry. I didn’t think it mattered.”

“It mattered,” he said. “It does matter. I—” He lowered his voice. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about last night.”

“Neither have I,” she said, then gulped. *Did I really just say that?*

“So what is it? Tell me your name.”

Leonore had a sudden sensation of falling—of letting go. “Leonore,” she said. “My name is Leonore.”

“Leonore,” he repeated. He put out a hand. “Pleased to meet you. My name’s Jeff. Doctor Jeff Carson.”

Dazed, Leonore took the hand, which was warm and dry.

“Dr. Carson?” The woman, presumably Lucy’s mother, had come into the hall. “I’m sorry to interrupt you, but you said there would be more tests this afternoon?”

Jeff seemed to have a hard time pulling his eyes from Leonore’s. “Don’t go anywhere. Promise?”

She nodded wordlessly. Moments ago she had only been able to think of escape. Now...what? What was she feeling? Something unfamiliar.

Jeff had turned his focus to the other woman. “Yes, and we probably won’t have results until the morning. Shall we meet again then, and go over them?”

As Jeff made arrangements for a meeting with Lucy’s parents, Leonore tried to figure out what was going on. How long had it been since she had told a lover her name? Or had anything at all to do with one, once she’d gotten what she needed? She could almost hear Ludmilla laughing.

As Jeff turned back to her, his conversation concluded, she swallowed nervously. He took her arm and turned her toward the elevator. “I want to talk to you,” he said. “Do you have a few minutes?”

“Yes,” Leonore surprised herself by saying. It would have been easy to claim she was late for an appointment or something. So why hadn’t she?

“I have an office on another floor,” he said. “Or, sort of. I’m a resident, so I share one.”

“Oh.” Leonore didn’t know what to say. She mentally kicked herself for her inability to articulate. She was always confident with men, completely in charge. Just what the hell was going on here?

The elevator was crowded, which gave her a few moments to compose herself. When the doors opened on a lower floor, Jeff again took her arm and lightly steered her in the right direction. "It's just down this way," he said.

*Run!* said Leonore's head. But the rest of her body disagreed. And so did something else. She was startled to realize it was her magic. It was stirring and coiling in her body, drawn to the spot where Jeff touched her arm like a bolt to a lightning rod. She pulled her arm away before power could flow into him as it had the night before. *What in hell is going on here?*

He gave her a questioning look, but he had been holding her so lightly that she hadn't had to jerk her arm free, and she was still walking with him.

"No one else should be in here right now," he said, opening a door. It was dark, so he turned on a light. Leonore went in first and looked around the room without really seeing it. She realized her arms were crossed over her chest, such a clichéd stance of nervousness that it annoyed her. She forced herself into a more relaxed position. She wished Jeff would sit down, because it would mean she could.

He closed the door then, making sure she was looking, clicked the lock. "First," he said, "I'm going to kiss you." Before Leonore could protest, she was in his arms.

Her magic, which had not gone completely dormant with the loss of his touch, surged up with a vengeance. She knew she should stop it, should exert her will and take control of it. But that would require thinking.

And how could she think when he was making her feel this way? As his lips closed over hers, the heat of desire combined with the rushing flow of Leonorean power and the two ignited like embers that had been hit by a fresh breeze. Startled, Leonore broke from the kiss before the power could surge into him like water from a fire hose.

She was almost in time.

"That's not normal," he said. He was still holding her, and power still tingled wherever they touched, and although it was not the flood that had almost poured through the kiss, she knew he could sense something. She should break completely

away, but she didn't want to. Yet she needed to know how much he had felt.

"What isn't normal?" she asked.

"When I kiss you." His eyes seemed as blue as the arc from a welding torch, so intense was his gaze. "It's...different."

His head dipped, and he would have kissed her again, but she put her hands on his chest, holding him back. She needed a few moments to collect herself.

"You said you wanted to talk to me." She took a tentative step backward. Her thighs hit the desk, giving her no room to retreat.

To Leonore's relief, Jeff released her and moved back a few inches. "So I did." He seemed to give himself a mental shake. He glanced at a clock mounted on the wall. "It's the middle of my shift, and I don't really get a lunch break. So..." He moved toward her again, smiling. "We should go on a date."

"A date?" she repeated stupidly. Leonore did *not* go on dates.

"Yeah, you know. Two single people meet at a previously agreed upon location, maybe share a meal, have a little conversation. It's done all the time." His brow furrowed as if with a new thought. "You *are* single, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Yes, you're single? Or yes, you'll go on a date with me?" He lifted an eyebrow. Had he gotten closer? Her greedy magic seemed to sense his proximity and her skin prickled. Gooseflesh rose on her arms.

"I'm single," she said.

"And? What about the date?" He was definitely closer. Leonore could feel his breath on her face. It made her want to put her mouth over his and inhale.

"Yes," she said before she could change her mind. "Yes, I'll go out with you."

"Tomorrow night?"

Leonore actually gulped. "Tomorrow night."

"Good." He opened a desk draw and searched through it, then handed her a

business card. "Now you have all my numbers. Do you have a card?"

"Yes. I mean, no, not on me."

"Then write them down here." Jeff lifted a pad from the desk, and handed it to her, along with a pen. Wordlessly, Leonore wrote her home number. *Why did I just do that?*

"Excellent," Jeff said, tearing the top sheet off the pad, then folding it and slipping it into his pocket. "You can come to my place—I'll call you with directions—and I'll cook for you. Now, before I go back to work..." He closed the last few inches between them and their lips met in a rush of heat and power. It poured from her center to her limbs, and she didn't even try to keep it from rushing into him. He groaned.

*Take him,* whispered the power. *You need to replace what you gave to the child.*

*Oh, why not?* She already knew how good he felt inside her. She wrapped her arms around him and pressed her body against the hardness of his chest.

Jeff reached around and pulled her up so that she sat on the desk, then reached down and lifted the edge of her skirt, slipping his hands underneath.

"Ah," he lifted his mouth from hers just long enough to breathe, "I see you don't always go around without underwear."

As his fingers slipped under the edge of her panties, she lifted herself from the desk so he could pull them down. Breaking contact, he stepped back and dragged them all the way off, leaving her pumps in place. He spread her legs and stepped between them.

"You didn't give me a chance to do anything last night," he said, running one hand along the inside of her leg while the other reached around to pull her toward the edge of the desk. Then he sank lower until he was smiling up from between her thighs. "I never got a chance to try...this."

Spreading the curls of her pubic hair with his thumbs, he leaned in and slipped his tongue along the slick opening of her pussy. "Mmmm." The tongue traveled up in a long stroke, subtly catching on the bud of her clit. He used the pressure of his tongue to push it lightly against his upper teeth.

Every muscle in Leonore's ass tensed, lifting her higher on the desk. She gave a little moan of pleasure, and Jeff drew back.

"Like that, do you?" Not waiting for an answer, he plunged back in with another long, excruciating stroke.

Pleasure and magic warred in Leonore. Her cunt spasmed and she felt a warm surge as her own fluids filled her. Despite her many lovers, she had become so perfunctory about sex that she seldom took time for real foreplay. And this man was a master. His tongue and teeth and lips darted and dipped like a hummingbird pulling nectar from a flower. She shuddered and writhed, but did not pull away. Magic hummed through her body, buzzing in her ears and making her scalp tingle.

He slipped a finger between the folds of her pussy, moving it in and out in counterpoint rhythm with his tongue. *Yes, said the magic. This is what we need.*

Her orgasm started like a point of flame where he again had her clit caught between his tongue and his teeth, and then spread to where his finger probed and danced. She moaned aloud and her pussy clenched.

He responded to her body's signals by simultaneously sucking and lightly biting the throbbing bud, and increasing the rhythm of his fingers to a frenzied pace. Leonore panted, trying not to scream, mindful of their surroundings.

"Oh...oh!" She managed to keep her voice to a hoarse whisper as the point of flame licked and spread outward. She shuddered, digging her fingers into his shoulders. She climaxed like an explosion, struggling to stay quiet. Jeff released her clit from his teeth and kissed it, then the inside of each thigh. When he withdrew his fingers, she opened her eyes and saw him smiling up at her.

"You're delicious," he said, rising to his feet. "Taste." He kissed her, and Leonore tasted her own juices on his lips. It was more pleasant than she thought it would be, and sexy as hell to think how he'd come to have that flavor on his mouth.

She felt his cock pressing against her, hard enough to cut diamonds. God, he'd given her all that pleasure and she hadn't even touched him yet. She reached out to

caress it, then pulled on the drawstring at the waist of his scrubs. In a moment her hand was inside, stroking him through his underwear.

Something on the desk buzzed, making Leonore jump. A tinny voice said, "Dr. Carson, you're needed in exam six."

Jeff groaned and put a hand on Leonore's, removing it gently from his pants. With his other hand, he held down a button on the intercom. "Be right there," he said, a little hoarsely.

Disappointment stabbed Leonore. "But we weren't finished. You didn't get to...you know." She was surprised that she cared, but she did.

"As much as I'd like to have a turn," he said, "I wasn't kidding when I said I was in the middle of my shift. It's a miracle I've gone this long without being paged, and one of the other residents could come back to the office any minute."

"But you didn't get to..." Leonore trailed off. Since when did she care about a man's orgasm? Her magic purred contentedly inside her, fully recharged and needing no further replenishment.

And yet she was disappointed she wasn't going to get more of that glorious cock.

"I'll take a rain check. Who knows? Maybe I'll get lucky after our date."

## Chapter Four

As Leonore made her way to the parking garage, she had the ridiculous sensation that everyone was watching her, and they were all smirking because they knew exactly what she'd been doing. God, am I actually *blushing*? She slipped into the driver's seat and adjusted the rearview mirror and took a look at her face.

Mascara was *not* streaking down her face and lipstick was *not* smeared everywhere. Her hair was in no more disarray than usual. So why did she look like she'd just had sex?

Because she was practically glowing.

*It's the magic*, she told herself. *It's because I've renewed twice in less than twenty-four hours.* And the healing had been especially wonderful today. She'd felt so connected with that little girl, so satisfied at feeling the last of the cancer wiped out. *No one is looking at you. Just drive on home.*

But someone *was* staring at her, she realized. A dark-haired man was walking by the car, toward the elevator from which she'd just come. He broke eye contact when she noticed him, but glanced back after punching the down button. Again, he looked away, then stood with his back partially to Leonore.

Something about the man made her uncomfortable. She wanted to study him, but she also didn't want him to see her doing it. She put the key in the ignition and turned it, then looked over her shoulder before backing out of her space. As she put the transmission into drive, she glanced back at the man, who was still waiting for his elevator to arrive.

He was staring at her again, and his expression gave her a sensation so unpleasant that it almost dampened the glow of her sexual contentment. *Like the man Millie was talking about.* Leonore put her foot on the gas and pulled around the ramp and out of his



line of sight. This time the gooseflesh on her arms had nothing to do with pleasure.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I don't even have to ask if you got laid, girl," said Tish. "You look fabulous. I think your hair even got curlier."

Letisha often stopped by Leonore's south side row house on her way home from a shift, if the lights were on. It wasn't very far out of her way.

"I told you I was going to," Leonore said, handing her friend a beer. "Don't act surprised."

"It's not that you had sex that surprises me. I'm not kidding, Leonore, you really look different. You're..." She seemed to search for a word. "Luminous. Like they say about pregnant women sometimes, that they're glowing." She grinned, her teeth very white in her dark face. "You aren't, are you?"

"Aren't what?" Leonore took a sip of her own beer.

"Pregnant."

Leonore laughed. "Don't be ridiculous, Tish. You know perfectly well Leonoreans can't get pregnant by anyone but their one true partner."

"Yeah, I know the rules. But you do look good." Tish stretched "Man, it was a long day. And I had to climb a fence to catch this stupid kid. Damn crackheads, think they can outrun me."

"You love every minute of it," said Leonore. "Don't even try to convince me otherwise."

"I truly do," acknowledged Tish. "By the way, I spoke to Lupita."

"I didn't know Petey was back from Mexico."

"She just got back last night. She's all fired up about the equinox. Brought crystals back from some mine down there, claims the Mayans used them to keep malicious elements from disrupting ceremonies. Some kind of protection thing."

Leonore frowned. "I don't want to deviate from the established rituals, at least not at the equinox. We can try them some other time if she really wants to."

"What I can't figure out is why she's worried about 'malicious elements' anyway. No one's ever tried to mess with our magic. At least not that we know of."

"No." Leonore thought about what Millie had said, about the customer who had made her so uncomfortable.

"Something wrong?" asked Tish.

"No, not really."

"Yes there is," said Tish. "You're forgetting who you're talking to."

Leonore sighed. Letisha's special power was the ability to know when people were lying, and to compel them to be truthful. It came in pretty handy when questioning suspects, a talent that had not hurt her career.

"It's not anything concrete," she said. "Millie had a customer who spooked her. He didn't say or do anything that threatened her, but I could tell she was shook up and a little scared. She'll have to describe it to you herself."

"Is that all?"

"Yes," said Leonore, then, when Tish raised an eyebrow, she went on. "Well, there was a man watching me today. He gave me the creeps. Probably nothing."

Tish's gaze sharpened. "Where was this?"

"At Mass General Children's," Leonore admitted. No point trying to hide anything from Tish, once she got on the scent. "In the parking garage."

"You did a healing today?" Tish's tone showed surprise. "But that usually takes a lot out of you. And your power is obviously not depleted."

Leonore felt her face flush. If she was with any of her other Leonorean sisters, she could have kept part of the story to herself. But Letisha-the-human-lie-detector would get every detail out of her, one way or the other. She may as well come clean.

"I had sex again, right after the healing."

"At the *hospital*?" Tish practically shrieked.

"With one of the doctors," Leonore said, her cheeks now burning. "The same guy as last night."

"Oo-whee! I can't wait to tell the sisters you actually had sex with the same guy twice. Who are you, and what have you done with Leonore?" Tish's grin practically split her face in half.

"There's more," added Leonore stoically. She may as well get this over with—Tish would find out anyway. "I'm having dinner with him tomorrow. He's cooking for me at his place."

Letisha choked on her beer.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What kind of things do you write?" asked Jeff, stirring something in a big pot. Leonore was seated on a barstool with a glass of wine, able to watch but not close enough to get in the way. Jeff had firmly refused to allow her to help him prepare dinner, which was just as well. Leonore was admittedly a terrible cook.

"Stories for magazines, mostly." She sipped the wine, which was excellent. "I've written a novel, but haven't sold it yet."

"So, you're a journalist." He covered the pan he was concentrating on, then lifted the lid from another. A savory aroma filled the kitchen, causing Leonore to salivate.

"Sometimes," she said. "And, like every other writer I know, I'm working on a novel. But mostly I write essays or short stories."

"And you make a living at that?"

Leonore hesitated. The truth was, she wrote because she loved to. She had a trust fund that was more than sufficient for her modest lifestyle, but she'd never told a man about it.

"I get by," was all she said. She changed the subject. "That smells incredible. What is it?"

“Linguini Fra Diavolo.” He grinned. “You said you like seafood, and it’s a family recipe. I’m a quarter Italian. My grandma made sure I knew how to make a decent sauce before I left home. I love to cook—it’s in the genes. But I don’t have much time to do it on a resident’s schedule.”

Leonore just nodded, content to watch him work. She admired the efficiency of his movements as he first tossed the salad, then pulled some bread from the oven where it had been warming. The table had already been set when she arrived and he waved her away when she tried to carry the salad bowl to the dining nook near a bay window.

She’d been right when she speculated that his home wouldn’t feel anonymous. Although it had none of the clutter that tended to accumulate with long-term residence, neither did it have the bare walls or unpacked boxes that would be understandable for someone new to the area. The prints on the walls were well mounted, and there was an abstract sculpture, made of fused bronze, marble and glass, that bespoke obvious quality.

“Soup’s on,” said Jeff, carrying a large platter to the table. He’d spread the linguini out and covered it with an enormous pile of mixed seafood—she could see shrimp, calamari, clams in their shells and scallops—all covered by a red sauce.

“How much do you think I can eat?” She seated herself. “This is way too much food for just the two of us.”

“Italian food is even better heated over,” he said. “Play your cards right and you’ll even get a doggie bag to take home with you.”

This was nice. Leonore couldn’t remember when she last had a relaxed evening like this with anyone other than one of her sisters. Had she ever?

But there was an undercurrent to this evening that had certainly never existed between the Leonoreans, and it wasn’t just the knowledge that the night would probably lead to sex. Leonore couldn’t quite put her finger on it, but it had something to do with her magic. It was usually quite simple for her to quiet it when she wasn’t using it, but it was restless around this man. Like a caged animal, long accustomed to the

bounds of its confinement, suddenly testing the bars of its enclosure.

Jeff hummed as he spooned pasta onto a plate for Leonore, grinning.

"Are you always this cheerful?" she asked him.

"When I'm having dinner with a beautiful woman who I've successfully lured into my apartment? Absolutely." He put down the platter and handed her a bread basket. "Also, I had an excellent day at work. I got back some test results for a patient I've been having a particularly hard time with, and they were just amazing. In fact, they showed so much improvement I was afraid there was some kind of mistake, and I had them run a second time. Same results."

"That's great." Leonore hid a smile, remembering that Jeff had told Lucy's parents there would be tests yesterday afternoon, with results available this morning. "I'll bet it's wonderful to be able to give good news to a parent."

"It's the best feeling in the world," he agreed, "but that's not the only reason this particular case was so important."

"It wasn't?" If she seemed a little too interested, he didn't notice.

"No. You see, I'm researching a new treatment and although I've had some good results, this is by far the most dramatic case."

An alarm bell, faint but distinctly discordant, struck somewhere very far back in Leonore's mind. "So Lu — I mean your patient was part of some kind of test?"

"Yes. For a new combination of drugs and therapy that haven't been put together quite this way before. I'm trying to qualify for a research grant, and this case may be the one that seals the deal."

She put down her fork, her appetite suddenly gone. "I thought grants were decided on the basis of hundreds of cases, if not thousands."

"Sometimes," he agreed. "If we were talking about totally new drugs or something, that would likely be the case. But this is a new course of treatment using existing drugs. And it's not a very big grant. I just have to have enough information to convince a

panel.” He took a sip of wine and smiled brilliantly. “And with the results from this case to show them, my chances just rose exponentially.”

*But the results of this case don't have anything to do with the treatment.* Leonore almost spoke the words aloud.

The alarm bell was no longer distant. It was bonging away in her brain with a volume that threatened to make her head explode. In all the times she'd been healing sick kids, it had never occurred to Leonore there might be a negative consequence.

Something must have shown on her face, because Jeff's brow creased in concern. “You're not eating. Is the sauce too spicy?”

“What?” She looked at the plate of pasta, which had been so appetizing only a moment before. She knew she couldn't take another bite to save her life. “The sauce is perfect. It's just that I...I suddenly felt a little faint.”

“But you've barely taken a bite.” He reached for Leonore's hand, but she moved it under the table.

“I'm sure it's not the food,” Leonore hedged. She noticed the glass of wine and clutched at it like a lifeline. She took a big swig, swallowing most of the glass's contents in a single gulp. Jeff's eyebrows rose. She stood up.

Jeff followed suit. “Do you want to lie down?”

Leonore shook her head firmly. “No. I'll be all right. I just think I had better go.”

Jeff was obviously dismayed. “But...you were fine a minute ago. If you would just rest a minute...”

She felt a surge of annoyance, which was completely unreasonable. It wasn't his fault. As she looked around for her handbag, he came around the table and put his hands on her hips.

“Whoa. I'm a doctor, remember? If you're feeling unwell, you're better off here. With me.”

Leonore, about to flee, hesitated. She was torn—she wanted to be alone to think

about the implications of what she just learned. On the other hand, she felt oddly calmed by his touch. And, as it had every previous time he'd touched her, her magic rushed toward the point of contact, tingling with anticipation.

"I-I think it's passing." She didn't want him to start treating her like a patient. "I'm fine now, really. I'm not sure what came over me." *Except for a tsunami of self-doubt about the one thing that's always made me feel good.* To prove she wasn't lying, she sat back down, picked up her fork and skewered a scallop, then put it into her mouth. It was delicious, and her fear that she'd be unable to eat vanished.

"I do. You were enjoying yourself too much." Jeff used a fork to point at her, the playful tone of his words belying their seriousness. "You were afraid you'd forget to be careful and actually tell me something about yourself."

"That's not true," Leonore protested. The reasons she generally avoided anything beyond small talk had nothing to do with fear. It just wasn't necessary to know anything about the men she bedded.

"Then prove it. You were telling me about your novel. What's it about?"

"It's just, you know, a novel." Leonore took another bite of the pasta and determined that her stomach was going to cooperate. Suddenly she was ravenous.

"No, I don't know," said Jeff. "I read all kinds of novels, everything from horror to romance. What's yours?"

"*You* read romance novels?" Jeff nodded, and Leonore continued. "I'm surprised. Most guys wouldn't admit it. I picked you for medical thrillers."

"My life *is* a medical thriller. People leave stuff around the doctors lounge, and residents work all kinds of crazy shifts. Believe me, the last thing I want to do after spending a day with medical personnel and dying kids is read about doctors and sick people. A good old, sappy romance novel is the perfect escape."

Leonore grinned. "Sappy?"

"I mean that in the best possible sense. Good wins the day, the guy gets the girl..."

He raised an eyebrow over a bite of food. "Does this mean your novel is a romance?"

"No," said Leonore. "It's more of a...a book about an ancient quest." She had a little more of the excellent wine. "Tish says it's a wannabe autobiography—how I would have been if I'd lived in the sixth century."

"Tish?"

"Letisha. My...friend." *Gawd*, had she just mentioned another Leonorean to a virtual stranger? Leonore eyed the wine bottle to see if they'd had more than she thought. Nope, still half full.

*What is it about this guy?* Her arms were still literally tingling from where he'd touched her a few minutes before. Maybe it was affecting her mind.

"So your protagonist is a woman, and she's on a quest in the sixth century. An historical adventure, then? I'd like to read it."

Leonore wondered if he was just being polite, or if he was really interested.

"I don't generally let people read unfinished work."

"Except Tish?"

*Touché.*

"Tish—Letisha—is more like family than a friend. And she badgered me into it."

"I'm prepared to badger." The way he said it, with an exaggerated eyebrow wiggle, made it sound like an indecent proposal. Leonore laughed.

"Maybe," she conceded.

She realized she was completely relaxed again. The disquiet caused by his revelation about the research was still there, but another voice seemed to be telling her not to worry, that no bad could come from being with this man.

It was a completely new sensation.

"If you'll excuse me," Jeff said, standing up, "I have to get out the heavy equipment for the *pièce de résistance*."

"Huh?"



"You'll see."

He moved to the kitchen island and opened a cabinet underneath. He removed a metal canister and put it on the bar with a clunk.

"Is that a blow torch? Are you planning on welding something?"

"It's a chef's torch. Probably doesn't get hot enough for welding, but I haven't tried it." He turned to the refrigerator and took out two shallow white dishes and placed them on the counter next to the torch.

"Crème brûlée," he explained. He removed a striker from a drawer, turned a lever on the can and lit the gas coming from the nozzle. Leonore watched, fascinated.

"It's trickier than it looks," he explained as he began to move the flame over the surface of the custard. "The idea is to harden the sugar on the top, browning it without burning it. You should be able to break through it easily with your spoon, but not too easily."

"Sort of an edible miniature skating rink," she said. "I'm impressed. I'd probably catch my hair on fire."

He was doing the second dish now. "It's easy to look like an expert after dozens of failed attempts. But now..." He turned off the torch and set it aside, then carried the two dishes to the table. "*Voilà!* Sweets to the sweet."

Leonore rolled her eyes but found she didn't really mind the corny expression. She was about to plunge her spoon through the crust when Jeff, who had come around to sit next to her, took it from her hand.

"Allow me." There was an audible crunch as the spoon broke through the delicate crust, then he placed it in her mouth.

The warm crust combined with the cool creamy custard was perfect, and Leonore's eyes almost rolled back into her head in ecstasy. She savored it for a moment before swallowing.

"Amazing," she said. "Truly amazing."

"Have another," he said, spoon hovering. She opened her mouth to accept the bite. Before she could swallow it, Jeff had put down the spoon and leaned forward to kiss her. Leonore, who had closed her eyes to truly appreciate the flavor of the creamy dessert, was startled at first. Then, she relaxed as his tongue slid into her mouth, capturing some of the custard.

He pulled back and licked his lips. "Ummm. And I thought kissing you tasted good before."

"Eat your own dessert," she said, only pretending to be annoyed. "This one's mine."

"I'll eat my own, if you let me use you as a plate."

Leonore gauged his expression to see if he was serious. He was.

"That," she said, putting her spoon down slowly, "is a wonderful idea." His kiss had set the magic in her buzzing. She glanced over at the sofa.

"Oh, no," he said, following her gaze. "Not here. We've had sex on a car and a desk. I told myself that if I made love to you tonight, it would be done properly. In a bed."

*Made love?*

Before Leonore could think about what this meant, Jeff was pulling her to his feet. "Come on." She started to stumble toward the stairs, suddenly clumsy with desire.

"Wait!" he said, and she looked up, puzzled.

"You're forgetting the crème brûlée."

## **Chapter Five**

Upstairs, Jeff just managed to carefully place the dessert plates on the nightstand before reaching to pull Leonore's blouse over her head, revealing the lacy bra that Ludmilla had bought her for her birthday—months earlier—and she was wearing for the first time. He paused for a moment, stepping back to look at her appreciatively.

Leonore felt oddly self-conscious. Dozens of men—hundreds, really—had seen her body, at least in the brief glimpses she allowed them before getting down to business. She hadn't minded or worried that they would find her attractive. She knew the power a lush, healthy woman's body could hold. It was a power she'd used to her advantage many times.

Now, she warmed under the huger in Jeff's gaze. "Wow," he said. "You're beautiful."

"I...thank you." Leonore didn't know what to say. She'd heard the compliment before. She just hadn't really paid much attention. She lowered her eyes, then focused on what was right in front of her. His crotch. With a very big bulge, not much camouflaged by the drapey fabric of his trousers. She reached for it, connecting. He groaned.

Leonore's tantalizing view was blocked as he again leaned forward to kiss her, his hands sliding under the bottom edge of her bra until his thumbs and forefingers found her nipples. Her magic rushed to the points of contact, tingling along breast, lips and tongue. His cock throbbed in her hands, and she fumbled for his zipper. She got it open, pulled at his underwear and, finally, it was free.

"Let me..." she said, pulling back so she could see her prize. "Ah, yes." She leaned forward, intent on taking it in her mouth.

"Wait," said Jeff. "Let's take the rest of our clothes off. It's high time we actually got

naked together.”

“I—” Leonore almost argued that she had something she wanted to do first, but suddenly laughed. He was right. They’d had sex twice without removing more than her panties. And she wanted to see his body. All of it. She released him, then reached behind her back to unhook her bra. She straightened to unzip the long skirt she was wearing and realized Jeff was standing stock-still.

“You’re not undressing,” she said, as she slithered out of the skirt. “And it was your idea to get naked.”

He broke out of his trance. “You’re right. It was. I was temporarily frozen in awe. Forgive me.” He stepped out of his trousers—*when had he gotten barefoot?*—and started unbuttoning his shirt. When he finally got it off, Leonore was treated to an expanse of chest that was truly worth the wait. She stared.

Now it was Jeff’s turn to laugh. “We’re standing here staring at one another like a couple of virgin teenagers who’ve never seen a member of the opposite sex naked before.”

Leonore felt herself blush. “I’ve seen plenty of naked men before. But I’m not sure I’ve seen one quite so...” *Perfect.*

“So what?” Jeff stepped closer, and Leonore felt his breath on her forehead.

“Never mind. You’ll get a swollen head. Oops!” She grasped his cock in her hand and squeezed lightly, making him gasp. “Looks like you’ve already got one.”

“Careful,” he breathed. “You don’t want this to be over before we even get started.”

“Oh, I’ll be careful,” Leonore replied. “I—”

She got no further because his mouth closed over hers. Instantly, her magic swelled like a rising tide, rushing to all points of contact as he pulled her body against his. She managed—just—to keep at it within the confines of her skin, but she tingled at every spot where they touched.

Leonore pulled her head back, gasping, and his lips began to move over her throat.

She ran her hands up the sides of his back, appreciating the feel of powerful muscles rippling under smooth skin. *Maybe if I concentrate on giving pleasure, I'll have a better chance at keeping my magic under control.*

She pushed lightly at his chest, and he looked at her, questioning.

"Here," she said, moving so that the two of them would rotate until the bed was at his back instead of hers. "Lie back. And give me one of those plates of crème brûlée while you're at it."

"I think I see where you're going with this," said Jeff, spreading himself backward on the bed and reaching toward the nightstand where the desserts sat. "And I like it."

"Oh, you're going to more than like it." Leonore took the plate from Jeff and set it on the floor next to her feet, then sank to her knees and dipped a finger into the still-warm custard. She grasped his cock in her other hand and spread the creamy substance over the head and down the top of the shaft. Jeff groaned.

"That feels—" His words were cut off as she started to slowly lick up the sweet confection. She pulled the head into her mouth, applying just a little more pressure than was needed to clean it of the last drops.

"I think I need a little more dessert," she said, and began dipping and applying a second helping. This time, she let her lips glide a little farther down, pulling more of his cock into her mouth and toward the back of her throat. Jeff shuddered and moaned.

"Mmm," purred Leonore. She was thoroughly enjoying Jeff's reaction. Her magic, although bubbling just below the surface, was staying easily in check as if it too, was enjoying this teasing game. "One more helping, I think."

Again, she applied the custard and again, she plunged her mouth over his organ. This time, she swallowed the dessert, then opened her throat and slid the head all the way in. She'd never deep-throated anyone with a cock this big before, and had been unsure she'd be able to do so now.

Not, however, as surprised as Jeff, judging by his reaction. "Oh god, I'm going to come if you keep doing that."

"Go ahead," Leonore surprised herself a little by saying. "What's a little more custard?" She again sucked the big head all the way into her throat, then started up a rhythm. *Let's see how long you can last while I'm doing this.* Her magic gave a funny little undulation, as if it was amused by Leonore's game.

She started to count mentally. *One...* She plunged, sucked, pulled back just enough and surged forward again. *Two...*

She had made it to twenty when her magic gave a sudden thrust outward, spilling into Jeff. Or maybe surrounding him, she couldn't tell. "Ah-aaaahhhh!!!" He almost shouted, and Leonore felt a great throb, followed quickly by a second, and his seed was spurting into her mouth. She steeled herself for the taste she had always found mildly unpleasant, and was surprised when it was instead quite...what? Not good, exactly. More...*right*. He pulsed a third time and she swallowed again.

Leonore felt her magic retreat, just as Jeff's cock started to soften. She released him, finally able to look up at his face. He was staring at her with an expression she couldn't quite name. Shock? Amazement? He seemed unable to speak.

Leonore was a little amazed herself. She'd given men plenty of men head, but mostly in order to get them hard and keep them that way, so that they could serve her purpose. The few times they'd come in her mouth, it hadn't been her idea, and the primary emotion she'd experienced was annoyance at having to start over, to get them ready to give her what she needed. And, if her magic had been affected by the act, it had only been to telegraph urgency to get it over with and move on to the main event. This time, both Leonore and her power had felt...what? Playful.

"Come here." Jeff had apparently recovered his powers of speech, and he was gesturing for Leonore to get off her knees and join him on the bed. Making sure she didn't step in the dessert plate, she complied, and he pulled her into his arms. Letting her head nestle against his shoulder felt both odd and comfortable at the same time.

"I hope you don't think we're done," said Jeff, a little huskily. "Although that was the most amazing blowjob I've ever had."

"I have the feeling you have pretty good powers of recovery," said Leonore. Her magic purred silkily just under her skin, as if agreeing with her and, thus, willing to be patient for the moment.

"And, by the way, *I* was supposed to be using *you* as a plate."

"I didn't use you as a plate, exactly," said Leonore. "More like a...a popsicle stick." She giggled. *Gawd, did I actually just say that? And I don't think I've ever actually giggled in bed before.*

Jeff, who had no way of knowing how uncharacteristic the joke was, chuckled appreciatively.

"Well, lucky for you, your intuition is good."

"Hmmm?" Leonore was distracted by the vista from her position against Jeff's shoulder, which afforded an excellent view of his chest and abdomen. He'd draped a corner of the sheet across his loins, but she could see the beginning of the dark line of his pubic hair.

"About my powers of recovery. You said you had a feeling they would be good."

"Oh?" Leonore looked more closely at the sheet. Sure enough, a trace of movement stirred the soft cotton folds. She rolled a little farther onto her side so that she could reach a hand down and slip it under the smooth edge of the sheet. His cock was still mostly flaccid, but there was an unmistakable swelling, and she felt Jeff tense a little as she tested it. "Very nice."

"I'm glad you think so." Jeff's hand cupped her breast. "Because I've barely gotten to show you what I can do with it."

Leonore felt her magic jump, or was the tingle of anticipation just her healthy body's response to the promise of more pleasure? She was finding it increasingly difficult to separate the two. Maybe this was why the magic kept getting away from her.

Her musings were interrupted as the shaft in her hand swelled noticeably. She squeezed again. "Just what do you plan to show me?" She could hear the unfamiliar

teasing tone in her own voice and liked it.

Jeff pulled himself up onto an elbow and reached down, slipping a finger into the cleft of her pussy. "You're soaking wet."

She was. Leonore felt his finger slip in as easily as a knife through butter. He straddled her, but didn't settle his weight against her, and Leonore stretched luxuriantly against the soft pillows. She felt herself open, ready for him. His fingers made feathery movements along her clit, teasing her. Her magic prickled but did not threaten to erupt, seeming to enjoy the titillation along with her.

He moved back far enough to use his hands to spread her legs apart, and positioned the thick head of his cock at the wet entrance to her cunt, then put his hands on either side of her head. Leonore started to close her eyes, but Jeff protested.

"No, look at me." And she did. Staring into pupils so large they almost hid the intense blue of his irises, Leonore kept her gaze locked as he leaned forward, slowly forcing his huge cock into her pussy. Her body clenched, but she was so wet and he was so hard that he continued to slide and he thrust all the way into her in one single, long, excruciatingly slow stroke.

Just as he reached the point where he could go no farther, he put his mouth over hers, kissing her and probing with his tongue. She responded in kind, their tongues dancing and tasting, entwined. She felt his cock slide slickly back and thrust again, this time not as slowly. Still the kiss went on as Jeff found a rhythm, and Leonore was lost to an interior world where drumbeats seemed to keep time to the pounding in her cunt.

Dimly, she realized she was hearing the response of her magic but it seemed to be content to join the dance while remaining in her, which was good because, as Jeff continued to hammer into her, she suspected she was helpless to control it. And she didn't want to think about her magic right now – she wanted to give herself over fully to the wonderful, aching breadth of his cock and the cadence of his thrusts.

The building tension that portended her orgasm suddenly intensified, and Leonore had no time to prepare for explosive burst before it was upon her. Her back arched and



she lifted her ass from the bed, despite Jeff's not insubstantial weight. She pulled her mouth from the kiss and cried out inarticulately.

Jeff's plunges slowed but did not stop. "There you go," he said, his voice almost normal. "That's what I like to hear."

"You can — come if — you want to," she managed to gasp in response.

He chuckled. "Oh, not yet. Not this time." He pulled out of her abruptly, causing her to almost whimper. She felt as if her power was reaching through her cunt, trying to pull him back. Then, he was lifting her, turning her around, so that she was on her knees and facing away from him. She could feel the hot juices running from her pussy, and knew them to be unmingled with his.

*Have I ever been this wet?*

Again, she felt the head of his cock pressing against her, thrusting inside her. She was so wet and open, and he slid in so easily that, in this position, it felt as if he was even deeper inside her. One hand reached around and circled her mound, then found her clit. It flicked and circled, intensifying the pleasure. She could hear the slap of their bodies joining as he drove into her again and again.

"Oh...oh...OH!" She was coming again, her inner muscles grasping tightly against his rock-hard shaft. In and out, in and out. He seemed tireless, barely winded. Her magic sang against the surface of her skin. She opened her eyes and the very air around her seemed full of dancing colors. She wondered if Jeff could see them, too.

Again, he withdrew. "Having fun?" he purred in her ear.

"Oh, yes!" was all she could manage to say before he spun her around, pulling her so that her ass was even with the edge of his tall bed. He stepped back and came to stand between her spread legs, which he grasped and lifted so that her calves rested on his shoulders. He was back inside her in seconds, resuming his rhythm. The angle made the top of his cock press against her clit as it slid with an increased tempo, and yet another orgasm rocked her. *How many times can I come?*

But it seemed that the intensity and the pounding rhythm was finally affecting Jeff,

because she felt his body bathe suddenly with sweat and his breathing take on a ragged note. "Leonore," he said. "Oh, *god*, Leonore!"

His body stiffened and his head went back, and she saw the veins standing out plainly in his neck, his heartbeat clearly visible in the cleft above his breastbone. And, in that moment, when she had forgotten caution, her magic burst from her like water from a fountain. The colors in the room glowed like the Aurora Borealis, then winked out, but the tingle of the magic did not diminish as quickly. Jeff's eyes, thankfully closed during the fireworks, opened slowly.

"What *is* that?" he said, sounding a little stunned.

"What is what?" Leonore managed to reply. The magic was receding, but not fast enough. It buzzed like a mild electrical current.

"Can't you feel it?"

Leonore regained a little more of her control, and the now-faltering magic finally withdrew completely. "Feel what?" She pulled back a little on the bed and felt Jeff's now-flaccid penis slide from her body. It left a noticeable void.

"Come on, Leonore, I know you know what I'm talking about. That...*rush* that seems to happen whenever we have any kind of sex."

"It's called an orgasm, Jeff." Leonore hoped her tone was dry. If she just didn't acknowledge the sharing of magic, maybe he'd buy that it was just exceptionally intense sex.

Jeff shook his head. "No, I assure you I know what an orgasm feels like. This is something else. Are you seriously telling me you don't feel it, too?"

"Oh, I felt plenty, believe me." She hoped that by sounding playful, she could distract him. *And I should think about getting out of here.*

But she didn't feel like leaving – not just yet, anyway. The bed was comfortable and the sensation Jeff's substantial bulk settling in next to her was oddly pleasant. Maybe she'd stay for just a little while. Twenty minutes. Thirty, tops.

"Okay, be mysterious if you want to." Jeff's voice was starting to sound a little sleepy. It should, considering he'd just come like a freight train. Twice. "I'll get it out of you eventually."

"That's what *you* think." But Leonore wasn't sure she felt as smug as she sounded.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I can't believe I actually spent the night with him.*

"I can't believe you actually spent the night with him!" Millie's voice boomed through the remote earpiece that connected to Leonore's cell phone, causing her to wince. "I can't wait to hear what Letisha says about it."

"Don't you dare tell Tish. I'll never hear the end of it." Leonore squinted in the glare reflecting off the hood of her car.

Ludmilla snorted, an uncharacteristic sound that contrasted with her ultra-feminine image. "As if she isn't going to get it out of you in the first ten seconds, next time you see her. And if you didn't intend her to know, you never would have told me."

"I wouldn't have told you if you hadn't caught me off guard," said Leonore.

"Oh, yes, you would have. I'm giving you a manicure this afternoon, remember? I would know the moment I touched your hand."

"Maybe," Leonore conceded.

"Definitely. And don't try to change the subject. Tell me everything about him. What does he do for a living? Is he gorgeous? Rich? Details, sister, I need details!"

It was impossible to be annoyed with Millie for any length of time, and Leonore laughed. Or was it Leonore's own mood that put her in this irrepressible good humor?

"I don't kiss and tell," she teased, gratified to hear Ludmilla groan. "But I'll let you try to drag it out of me later anyway." Leonore looked up, realizing she had reached her destination. "Millie, I have to hang up now. I'll see you at two."

"Okay, but don't be late. My schedule is packed this afternoon and, besides, I'm dying to hear everything." Millie made a kissing sound and ended the call, and Leonore

concentrated on steering her car through the security gate and into the Mass General parking garage.

Although she'd managed to sneak out before Jeff woke up, he'd told her his schedule last night, and she knew he wouldn't be in the hospital until late morning. She wanted to see Lucy before he arrived.

Leonore generally didn't check up those she anonymously healed. But something had been nagging at her ever since she awoke, despite her lovely mood. It was like a sour note in the background of a beautiful symphony. She had finally identified it as a mild sense of anxiety about the child she had met the previous morning. She'd been almost home when she found herself turning her car around and heading back in the direction from which she'd come. Her route hadn't taken her directly in front of Jeff's apartment building, but she'd still felt a flush rise to her cheeks as she passed his block.

Her sense of foreboding increased as Leonore got off the elevator. The quiet sour note had grown into a discordant gong, and apprehension prickled the back of her neck.

*Something is wrong.* Checking the hallway for anyone who might stop her, she edged quickly into Lucy's room and closed the door.

The child's appearance shocked her. The rosy glow that Leonore had noticed with such satisfaction less than twenty-four hours before was gone, replaced by a pallor even more alarming than the original had been.

"Lucy?" She spoke softly, and the little girl did not stir. She was entirely too still, and Leonore felt rising panic as she placed her hand on the small chest, to be replaced by relief when she felt the steady heartbeat.

The relief was short-lived, however. Nausea rose in Leonore's throat as she perceived the unmistakable sensation of cancer cells.

*Impossible. I know I got all of it yesterday.*

Leonore shook off her own puzzlement deliberately. It didn't matter how the cancer had returned—right now, the important thing was to destroy it. As she had the day

before, Leonore began to seek out and destroy the malignant cells, again carefully avoiding the “soldiers”, easily identifiable by their wholesome feel.

It took longer than it had the first time, and Leonore began to be afraid that Lucy’s parents would show up at any moment and demand an explanation. *Why are these new cancer cells more evil than the old ones? Why are they even here?* Again, she was thankful for the strength imparted by her recent lovemaking with Jeff. Strong and plentiful as the corrupt cells were, Leonore’s magic destroyed them easily, seeming to relish each tiny victory. *Pop, pop, pop.*

Finally, Leonore could find no further signs of cancer, and Lucy was beginning to stir. Not wanting the child to see her again and, perhaps, mention her to her parents, Leonore went quickly to the door and opened it. Seeing no one in the hall, she slipped past, leaving it open as she had found it. She headed toward the elevator.

She took no more than three steps before stumbling. A horrible sensation seemed to spread everywhere though her body at once, making her gasp. Her magic recoiled like a finger that had come in contact with a hot flame.

*What is this?* Leonore’s vision blurred and panic threatened to overcome her. There was something familiar about the sensation, but she couldn’t quite remember why. She looked around her, both to check whether anyone was noticing her discomfort and to try to find a source for the ghastly sense of...of *evil* that was weighing her down. Luckily, no one seemed to be paying any attention to her, and Leonore began to feel a lessening in the panic and apprehension that surrounded her.

Then, from the corner of her eye, she saw something dark move quickly. She spun just in time to see the figure of a man turning the corner near the elevator. The suffocating sensation seemed to lessen as he moved farther away.

Leonore looked at the elevator and then at the hallway where the man had disappeared. She longed to escape the floor where, at any moment, Lucy’s parents might appear. Or Jeff might decide to come in early. But suddenly, Leonore felt—no, *knew* with complete certainty that the figure she had glimpsed was responsible not only

for the cloud of malice that was even now dissipating, but for Lucy's relapse.

Running would attract unwanted attention, so Leonore strode very briskly toward the corner where the man had disappeared. She couldn't remember ever being in this particular section of hallway, which she usually avoided because it required walking very closely past the nurses' station. Luckily, only one person was currently behind the desk and he was engrossed in a telephone conversation. He took no notice as Leonore rounded the corner and headed down the hall, trying hard to display a sense of confidence she did not feel.

Longer than the hall where Lucy's room was located, this one also ended in a glass door with an exit sign above it. The man, who Leonore could now see had very dark hair and clothing to match, had almost reached the end of the hall, and seemed to be heading for the stairwell. She wondered if an alarm would sound if he opened the door, like the sign in the other hallway warned.

Leonore soon had her answer. The man reached the door and pushed it open without hesitation. No sound ensued, and Leonore felt a sense of panic. *He's getting away!* She was tempted to sprint.

The man paused, turning. As his face came around and his gaze met hers, Leonore felt a flash of recognition. She knew, also, why the sensation of evil had felt familiar. It was the man from the parking garage yesterday morning, the one who had stared at her as if he knew she was hiding a secret. She had felt the same stir of malice then, although to a much lesser degree. Unbidden, she slowed down and then stopped, wanting to pursue him but unable to do so. Her magic hummed, communicating a warning beat. *Danger! Danger!*

Then, he smiled. Malevolence seemed to engulf Leonore like a cloud, leaving her breathless. Then the man turned and slipped through the doorway, and the sensation of ill will was gone as suddenly as it had appeared.

## **Chapter Six**

"I'm sorry you had to wait. One of the girls came in an hour late, and we've been trying to get back on schedule all day." Ludmilla settled herself in the chair opposite where Leonore sat with her hands soaking in a bowl of warm, fragrant water. Unlike less elegant spas, Millie's customers were served in private rooms with curtained doors. She lifted the fluffy towel she had been carrying and held it in front of her, an indication that Leonore should withdraw her hands from the moisturizing solution and dry them. The towel was soft and warm, and Leonore tried to relax as Millie gently massaged through the fabric.

"What's with the worried expression? After our phone call, I was expecting you to be a picture of post-coital bliss."

Leonore shivered. "Something strange happened after we spoke. It was...weird."

Millie withdrew the towel and wheeled her chair back to deposit it in a wicker hamper. "Weird, how?" She sorted through her manicurist tools, nodding as if completing a satisfactory inventory.

Leonore had been thinking about what she would tell her sister about the incident. "Remember when you told me about the strange customer you had? The one you thought was directing some bad feeling toward you?"

Now it was Millie's turn to shiver. "Yes. I-I've been dreaming about it."

"Have you really?" Leonore felt her concern heighten. "Well, I think I met someone like that. But with this guy, there's no doubt about it. He hates me, Millie. He wishes me harm."

"Did he say that? Where was this?" Alarm was plain on Millie's face, and she was sitting very still.

Leonore shook her head. "No, he didn't say anything. He just...just looked at me,

and I could feel it. He knew I could feel it too, and I got the impression he was doing it on purpose. He wanted me to know...something." She was frustrated that she couldn't make herself clearer. "I was at the children's hospital," she went on, ignoring Ludmilla's rising eyebrows. "Healing a child. Or, re-healing a child, I should say."

Leonore described the incident in as great a detail as she could manage, explaining about how she had become worried about Lucy, and having seen the man once before. Millie listened without comment but with great concentration. When Leonore was done, she was silent for a moment.

"I wonder if it was the same man?" she said. "The description fits—dark-haired, handsome, not too tall."

"That's a pretty general description," Leonore said. "If Lily was here, she could draw him, but I couldn't produce much more than a stick figure."

"Me, either." Ludmilla sighed deeply. "Do you think they could be...you know."

"Members of the *Draíodóir*?" Leonore shook her head. "Of course, I considered it. It's way too coincidental, with the equinox coming up. And our plans for the power-building ritual, although I can't imagine any way they'd have found out about that."

"If they even exist," Millie said, but she didn't sound as skeptical as Letisha had the other day.

"Well, the man I saw existed, whether he was *Draíodóir* or not. The Druid language must have been a tongue twister." Ludmilla seemed to shake herself a little. "We need to talk to all of the circle members about this, to make sure they're on their guard. And, as long as you're here, we may as well do your manicure. And you can finally tell me about your new lover."

"Do you have time? I took a long time with my story."

"I'm fine. My three o'clock cancelled." Millie froze in the act of reaching for Leonore's hands. "Do you think that little girl—Lucy, I think you called her—is in danger?"



"Maybe. I'm positive that she was completely healed before the...the stranger showed up. I'll figure out a way to stop by and check on her again."

"Good idea. And, you'd better make sure you keep having regular sex, in case you have to heal her again." She held her hands open, and Leonore place one of hers into them.

Ludmilla gasped, and her mouth formed an "o".

"What?" Leonore tried to pull her hand back, but Millie tightened her grip.

"*Leonore*. You didn't *tell* me!"

"Tell you what?" Leonore was mystified at Millie's reaction, but she could see that her friend was beaming, all traces of her earlier concern having vanished.

"Give me your other hand." Without relinquishing the hand she already held, Ludmilla gestured emphatically for the other.

"Millie, tell me what's wrong," Leonore said, but put her left hand into Ludmilla's right, and felt light pressure as both were squeezed. Millie closed her eyes, and her smile became positively beatific. She signed ecstatically.

"Will you tell me what is going on?" Leonore was starting to get annoyed.

Ludmilla opened her eyes and grinned like the Cheshire cat. "You've been with him."

"You mean Jeff? I told you I spent the night with a lover."

"His name is Jeff? *Oooh*, better and better."

"Tell. Me. What. You. Are. Talking. About."

"Oh, all right. I was just savoring the moment." She squeezed both hands again. "You've found him, Leonore. You've found your one true love."

This time Leonore managed to pull her hands away. "You're out of your mind!"

Ludmilla raised her eyebrows and shook her head. "Oh, no, I'm not. You, Leonore, have met your one true love and have had sex with him. I can't believe you didn't figure it out yourself. Your magic is practically singing it from the rooftops."

"My magic isn't..." Leonore trailed off. She had been about to say that her magic wasn't doing anything in the least bit unusual, but that wasn't true. Ever since she had met Jeff, her power had become increasingly unpredictable and difficult to control. But she wasn't ready to concede so easily.

"Look, Leonore, Jeff Carson is just an ordinary man. I don't think you can be sure —"

Ludmilla cut her off. "*Jeff Carson?* Jeff is short for Jeffrey, no doubt. Oh, come on, Leonore. You're named after the Ancestor, and her lover was *Geoffrey Carnaethan*. And you finally meet a man you like well enough to see a second time —"

"Third," interjected Leonore, before she could stop herself.

"A *third* time, *and* spend the entire night with him, *and* your magic has undergone the Transformation, *and* —"

"We've never confirmed that the Transformation is a real phenomenon and not just a myth," argued Leonore, feeling a little panicky. *Jeff can't be my one true love. He just can't.*

"Well, of course we haven't. You're the first one of us to find her one true love. Come on, let me feel it one more time." Again, Millie took Leonore's hands into her own and squeezed them, closing her eyes. "Oh, it's *wonderful*. Now I can't wait for it to happen to me." She opened her eyes. "Tell me you haven't been feeling extra terrific."

"Well, I was, until I ran into Mr. Evil."

Ludmilla sobered slightly. "Yes, that seems like an odd coincidence. Meeting your one true love—" She made a motion as if to cut off Leonore's protest "And coming across someone who wishes you harm within twenty-four hours. We definitely need to talk to the circle about this."

"Now," she went on, "I'm going to enjoy the sensation and give you your manicure, and you're going to tell me every single, solitary detail about Mr. Jeffrey Carson while I do it."

"Actually," said Leonore, bowing to the inevitable, "It's *Doctor* Jeffrey Carson."

"A doctor? Be still my heart!" replied Ludmilla, and the shadow of the morning's unsettling incident was banished, at least temporarily.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You have to tell Jeff." Letisha said for the third time. Leonore restrained an urge to get up from the sofa, cross the room, put her hands around Tish's cocoa-colored throat and strangle her.

"Tell him *what*?" she said, trying to keep her tone reasonable. "That he's my one true love? That I'm a witch? That it was magic, and not his treatment, that saved Lucy? Or that some unnamed evil man who may or may not be my mortal enemy might sneak into the hospital to magically bring the cancer back?" She shook her head. "He won't even have to call an ambulance to take me to the psychiatric ward—it's in an adjoining building. He can have me hauled over there on a stretcher. In restraints."

"He may believe you," argued Lupita. It was the first time she'd seen her sisters since her return from Mexico, and she'd driven up from Connecticut for the emergency session at Leonore's apartment. Two of the other members of the circle lived farther away, but were anxious to hear what they'd discussed. Lavinia, the seventh sister, had not returned Ludmilla's call, but this wasn't unusual.

"Why would he believe me? It would sound crazy to anyone who wasn't a Leonorean."

"You *said* he could feel it when you shared magic during sex," said Lupita, her tone reasonable. "And he already tried to get you to explain it. You could start with that."

"Petey, it's a long way from, 'I have this little special ability that makes your cock tingle' to 'You need to put a guard on Lucy's room to keep the evil cancer monster out'," Lenore insisted, stubbornly.

"Well, he's got to find out he's your one true love eventually," said Millie. "Otherwise, he might never propose marriage." She ducked, and the sofa cushion

Leonore threw at her sailed over her head.

"How the hell did you get from protecting Lucy to a marriage proposal?" Leonore seethed.

*"When a Leonorean will fynde her one true love, and laye with him, she will soon quicken with child, even if she be barren,"* recited Millie. Leonore looked at her suspiciously—Ludmilla was the least disciplined of the circle when it came to Leonorean teachings. She had to have looked the passage up and memorized it this afternoon.

Letisha laughed gleefully. She hadn't bought as completely into Ludmilla's theory as had Petey, but she was enjoying Leonore's discomfort. "Hell, you may be pregnant already."

Leonore flushed, but Millie shook her head. "No, I would have felt it. But if you accept that Jeff is her one true love—"

"Which I don't," interjected Leonore.

"Then it follows that she'll be pregnant before long. I just assumed she'd like to get married before she starts having children."

"What I don't get is why you're fighting it so hard," Petey said. "If I found *my* one true love, I'd be thrilled." She sighed dreamily.

"Yeah," said Tish. "What's the deal, baby? Why are you so sure Millie's wrong?"

"Because—" Leonore started, then stopped. Why *was* she so opposed to the idea? If the Leonorean legends they had discovered so far were to be believed, finding her true love was not only inevitable, it was the only way she could reach her full potential as a witch.

"Because I'm not ready," she finished, the excuse sounding lame even to her own ears. "I thought I'd have more time to explore the group magic first. It's been barely a year since we found Lavinia, and had the seven to complete the circle. And there's so much we don't know."

"Leonore, honey," Millie said, the teasing tone was gone from her voice, "You don't

get to choose when it happens. Fate decides.”

“But I thought I’d get some kind of warning. Leonore – the Ancestor, I mean – had a premonition before she met Geoffrey Carnaethen. Nothing like that happened to me. I need some time to think about what it might mean, before I go blurting everything out to him.”

“Look,” said Letisha, “you don’t have to tell Jeff the truth, whatever that is. But someone has got to watch over that child. And since he’s her doctor, he seems like the person to start with.”

“No.” Leonore didn’t care what the rest of the circle said, she would not tell Jeff. She would *not*.

Her tone must have finally gotten through to them because even Millie stopped arguing, although her expression showed it cost some effort.

“What if I volunteer at the hospital?” said Lupita. “I have some time off. I could be one of those candy stripers or something.”

Letisha shook her head. “I don’t think volunteers get to pick the areas they work in, and there may be some kind of training period before you start. No, Leonore’s going to have to be the one. Jeff can get her in to see Lucy.”

Leonore’s irritation rose again. “I told you, I’m not –”

“Gonna tell him. I know. But you have an excuse to be on that floor. You can stop by, say you couldn’t wait to see him. Ask him if he’ll let you watch him with some of his patients.” Letisha pointed at Leonore’s answering machine, where the numeral four blinked red. “Tell me those four calls aren’t all from him. He’d be thrilled if you showed up.”

Leonore resisted the urge to snort. “Oh, yeah, that’s just what I want to do. Be that needy woman who stalks some man she barely knows at his job. He’ll think I’m a psycho.”

“No, he won’t,” said Millie. “He’s your one true –”

*"Don't say it!"*

Ludmilla ignored her. "Love. And, whether you believe it or not, you let him feel your magic. You may not have done that before, but some of us have, and we know what happens to the guy afterward. Right now, you're all he can think about. He's dying to see you. If you show up at his job, he won't question whether it's appropriate behavior. He'll just be glad you're there." Lupita and Letisha nodded in agreement, and Leonore threw up her hands.

"Okay, okay. I'll go by there." She glanced at the clock—it was six thirty. "He's going to be there for at least another hour, I think. I'll tell him I'm stopping by on my way home from somewhere."

"Good girl." Letisha stood up. "Now, get going. I have to get back to work."

"So go," replied Leonore. Letisha didn't move, just arched one eyebrow in a significant expression. Neither Lupita nor Ludmilla showed any sign of rushing out either, and Leonore sighed and got to her feet. "Okay, fine. I know you think I won't go over there, but it's really not necessary for you to watch me until I leave."

"Of course not," said Letisha. She crossed her arms and still didn't move. With what she hoped was a world-class eye roll, Leonore crossed the room and picked up her car keys and purse. "Fine. Just lock the door behind you when you leave." She didn't quite slam the door behind her.

"It's like having six nannies," she muttered to herself as she unlocked her car. But as she slid into the front seat and started the car, Leonore realized she wasn't really annoyed. She even grinned a little, remembering the stubborn expressions on her three closest friends' faces. She would have agreed to go to the hospital in any case, because she probably wouldn't be able to sleep without checking up on Lucy. And she had a sudden certainty that the girls were absolutely right about Jeff being happy to see her. Heat rose to her own cheeks and a tingle of anticipation spread from her belly to her inner thighs, as both her body and her magic responded to the idea that she'd be seeing him again in a few minutes.

“No, Dr. Carson hasn’t signed out. But that doesn’t mean he hasn’t gone home—they leave without signing out all the time.” The nurse’s tone made it clear she considered this disregard of the rules to be a personal affront. A light on the console next to her started to flash, and she turned toward it and punched a button, changing it to a steady glow. “Excuse me, I just need to check on a patient.”

Leonore watched her step from behind the desk and head toward one of the corridors. It wasn’t the one that led to Lucy’s room. She eyed the other nurse. He was deep in a telephone conversation, holding the phone with his chin while reading information from a file, and didn’t seem to be paying any attention to her. Leonore didn’t have her fake lab coat or identification badge with her—she had not wanted to have to explain them to Jeff—but she didn’t think anyone would stop her once she had gotten past the desk. Her real purpose for being here was to make sure Lucy was okay, not to see Jeff. Nevertheless, as she walked quietly down the hall in the direction of the child’s room, she found it hard to ignore the sour taste of disappointment.

The door was open, and Leonore walked past it, glancing in. Both parents were in the room, seated on either side of the bed. Father and daughter were absorbed in a book, with the mother apparently listening in. No one glanced up.

*Damn.* Leonore’s first reaction was irritation, but she quickly reassessed the situation. The stranger was unlikely to return as long as Lucy was not alone. Though she had only gotten a quick glimpse, Lucy had been sitting up and appeared to be quite animated, which meant she was probably feeling well.

Leonore stepped into the visitors lounge, unsure of what to do next. With Jeff missing in action, she didn’t have any excuse to hang around. The visitors lounge was empty at the moment, but unlikely to stay that way for long. If she went home, she’d just spend the evening worried that the stranger would come back.

She looked around. Like the last time she was in this room, a partially completed jigsaw puzzle was on a low table. She decided to wait just a little while. Jeff might

return to his office, and Lucy's parents would have to leave eventually. She tried one of the comfortable chairs, but felt too restless and soon stood back up. She perched on the arm of the sofa and tried to focus on the puzzle, but it was no use. She got up and went back to the door and peeked out.

Looking down the corridor, Leonore felt even more edgy. She couldn't see inside the room from this vantage point and, if she kept walking up and down the hall in order to look inside, someone was going to notice her. Why hadn't she gotten Jeff's cell phone number? She pulled her head back into the room, returned to the arm chair, and sat down.

*Relax*, she told herself, taking a deep breath. Patience had never been her strong suit, but it was a trait often required in the rituals she had learned to help channel her magic and her connection with other Leonoreans. Closing her eyes to the still-empty room, she called to mind the words of a chant she sometimes used when she needed to settle her mind in preparation for a ritual, or to calm herself afterward.

*Animus alcedonia, sententia quietis. Animus alcedonia, sententia quietis.* Tranquil soul, peaceful thought. The familiar, rhythmic words of the inwardly spoken chant soothed her disquiet. She felt her magic coil around and settle itself like a cat curling up for a nap.

*Animus alcedonia, sententia quietis.* She wondered vaguely why her power had been vigilant in the first place. Maybe it was because she had anticipated using it to make sure Lucy was still cancer free. *Animus alcedonia, sententia quietis.*

Too bad Jeff hadn't been in his office. She could be in his arms right now. In reaction to the thought, her power lifted its head but, soothed by the chant, returned to rest. *Animus alcedonia, sententia quietis.*

Although her eyes were still closed, Leonore knew she would be instantly aware if someone else came into the quiet room. She let the tension lift from the muscles in her neck and ease from her arms and legs. The chair really was quite comfortable. *Animus alcedonia, sententia quietis.*



She woke with a start, momentarily disoriented. Had she fallen asleep? The room didn't seem to look exactly as it had when she had closed her eyes only moments before. Leonore's gaze fell on the jigsaw puzzle. Was it her imagination, or were more pieces in place than she remembered?

The light filtering through the Venetian blinds seemed different as well. She looked blearily at her watch. What she saw brought her out of the chair and to her feet in a single motion—it was a few minutes after ten o'clock. She had not only fallen asleep, she had slept for over three hours. The light coming through the blinds was the ambient light of the city at night, not the last rays of the evening sun. The room was empty, but it gave Leonore a shiver of apprehension to think that people had been in and out while she slept.

The hall was quiet now and no light shone from Lucy's door as Lenore approached. It was possible that one of the parents was spending the night in the room on a cot, so she looked into the doorway with caution, but saw only the sleeping child. Pleased that her shoes didn't make any noise, she moved to the side of the bed and, very carefully so as not to awaken her, placed a hand on Lucy's chest.

Calling her magic, she scanned the tiny body for signs that the cancer had returned, and was immediately reassured. There was no sign of the malignant cells and the girl's own defenses felt stronger. The "soldiers", which Leonore now assumed to be the medicines Jeff had administered, were in place, vigilant but not currently engaged in fighting disease. She withdrew her hand, relieved.

She was still torn about whether it was safe for her to leave. Surely the stranger would be noticed entering the hospital. And it seemed unlikely that he was already here, waiting for his chance to be alone with Lucy.

*But isn't that exactly what I just did?*

Leonore wished she could make a quick patrol of the ward, but she was far too conspicuous at this time of night. If she simply walked to the elevator and exited, it would probably be assumed she was a parent, who had probably stayed until her child

was asleep. But if she started wandering the halls, someone would question her.

She decided to go home. She could always stop by again in the morning.

She'd had a difficult time finding a parking space when she'd arrived, having to settle for the far corner of the roof. Now her car sat alone, the other visitors all having left hours before. The breeze was pleasant as she exited the elevator—September could be stifling in Boston, but it could also be beautiful.

As she crossed the garage, an especially strong gust of wind blew her hair into her face, and seemed cooler than it had a moment before. Leonore, fumbling in her purse for her keys, felt a sudden chill, but before she could shiver, knew it wasn't the wind that was making her cold.

A figure stood in the shadows near her car, and she knew with complete certainty that the coldness emanated from him. She stopped abruptly, her keys not yet in her hand. She considered turning and running back toward the elevators, but she'd heard the car she'd departed rumble down and out of her reach the moment she'd exited.

"Hello, witch." The man's voice carried easily over the sounds of the city, although he spoke softly. He pronounced the last word as if it was a curse.

"What do you want?" Leonore was pleased to hear the steadiness of her own voice. Her power thrummed in her ears, on high alert.

"Have you no idea?"

The man seemed to glide a few steps closer to her, and Leonore involuntarily backed up a step. She tried to glance around. The stairwell was at the opposite corner, with the stranger between her and its glowing red exit sign. His movement had not quite brought his face into the light, but she felt she could sense his eyes, glowing in the darkness like a wolf's.

"You made Lucy sick," she said, mostly to gain time. "Why did you do that?"

His laugh was like music, dark and seductive. "Kittens grow up to be cats. Best to drown them before they get old enough to scratch."

*What is he talking about?* Leonore's confusion must have showed on her face, which she now realized was fully illuminated by same light that the man seemed to be avoiding, because he answered the unasked question.

"Don't pretend not to understand, witch. The child is one of you. Or, she will be when she grows up."

"How can you know that?" Leonore burst out without thinking. *Leonoreans don't begin to manifest their powers until puberty.*

"Did you think to keep it a secret? Although," the purring voice went on, "I was surprised to see you here. Our genealogists find no close connection between the girl and your branch of the witch's bloodline."

Ice tentacles curled around Leonore's stomach. What did this man know of the Leonorean bloodline? *She* had been unable to trace her own ancestry with complete surety, and some of the circle members were only recognizable by the feel of their power. And this stranger not only knew of Leonore's lineage, but had somehow traced Lucy's as well.

*Kittens grow up to be cats.*

"You stay away from her," she said, suddenly incensed at the thought of anyone harming the still-fragile child who slept so nearby.

"Or you'll what? Cast a glamour to frighten me? *Heal* me to death?" The lyrical laugh pealed again. "You have no powers dangerous to me, witch. While I, on the other hand—" Another smooth movement finally brought his face into the light. "Have any number of unpleasant ways to hurt you. Unpleasant for you, that is."

Leonore felt as if she had been mesmerized. He was the most breathtakingly beautiful man she had ever seen. She'd glimpsed him once before, of course, but had not noticed the perfect arch of his brow, or the sculpted perfection of his lips. And his eyes...

With an effort, she shook herself free of the spell. The man's grin widened and one brow slowly lifted. He was just a man—a handsome one, but not astonishingly so.

Leonore found her voice.

"If you're so scornful of glammers, why do you bother to cast one?"

He shrugged. "Vain of me, I suppose. I just wanted to show you how minor a talent it is, and how easily performed. Even on someone who thinks she is powerful." He had come even closer, and Leonore tried to think through the beginnings of panic. *What is he going to do to me?*

"You're *Draíodóir*," she blurted.

"Of course I am," he replied. "And you—" For the first time his voice lost some of its smoothness. "Are a Leonorean witch. Although you obviously have little in common with the woman whose name you have the arrogance to take."

Leonore, who had been about to protest that the name was on her birth certificate, held her tongue. Again, she gauged the distance to the exit sign.

The man must have seen the direction of her furtive glance, because he said, "Go ahead. You might make it. I'm really not much of a runner."

*Well, I am.* With a sudden burst of effort, Leonore bolted in the direction of the stairwell, running past the man's right. He turned, but made no move to follow her from what she could tell, although she didn't dare to slow down enough even to look over her shoulder.

*I'm going to make it. I'm going to —*

Leonore was just reaching for the door handle when she was seized with the sensation of her chest being wrapped in iron band. Her last panting breath was forced from her lungs and she looked down as, impossibly, she was lifted from her feet and pulled backward through the air as if lifted by a giant hand. She struggled to speak but could not draw in air.

Her toes dragged the ground, but not enough to get a purchase on the rough concrete. It seemed her lungs would burst, and dark spots, ringed with fire, invaded her vision. Then the invisible hand seemed to release her and she felt herself falling toward the pavement. She thrust her elbows back, and they slammed against the concrete but

not fast enough to prevent the back of her head from smacking the floor with a jarring impact.

The pressure on Leonore's chest was abruptly released and she gasped. Her vision cleared and the face above her swam into focus. The stranger, smiling. Leonore wanted to shrink away, but there was nowhere to go.

"So, witch," he said, purring like a big cat. "I have you. Now, how shall I kill you?"

## Chapter Seven

"But her car's still here," Jeff told the nurse manning the station. "Did you actually see her get into the elevator?"

The nurse shook her head. "No, but she was sound asleep in the visitors lounge not twenty minutes ago. I've only been away from the desk one time since then, to check on a patient, and I'd just gotten back when you stopped by."

*How could I have missed her?* Jeff sighed. He knew he should just go home and catch up with Leonore later. He'd been annoyed when Leonore hadn't returned his calls earlier, and the surge of happiness that he'd experienced when he found out she'd actually come by to see him at work had caught him completely unaware. What was it about the woman that the mere thought of seeing her made him feel...what? Giddy?

Something must have shown on his face, because the nurse smiled and said, "Maybe she stopped at the restroom or something, and was going up in the elevator while you were coming back down."

"Wouldn't you have seen her?" Jeff asked.

The nurse shrugged. "Maybe not, if she was coming from the direction of the bathrooms. It's worth a shot."

Even if this unlikely scenario were true, Leonore would be long gone by the time Jeff made it back to the top level. "Thanks," he said, and headed back to the elevator, where he hit the button for the level where his own car was parked.

Once behind the wheel, he took out his cell phone and checked it for new messages. There were none, and he almost punched in Lenore's number, but he only had her home phone and, even if she had just left the hospital, she wouldn't have had time to get home. Not that he even knew where she lived.

He slammed a palm against the steering wheel, wincing at the pain. *Get a grip on*

*your hormones, Jeff. Just because the sex was great doesn't mean you have to act like a lovesick teenager.* He put the key into the ignition and started the engine.

And promptly turned left out of the parking space. Away from the exit. In the direction of the roof parking where he'd seen Leonore's car. Just in case. Shaking his head, he chuckled softly to himself.

"Dr. Carson, you have got it ba-a-a-ad."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Why do you want to kill me?" Leonore panted as soon as she had regained enough breath to speak. "What did I ever do to you?"

"Don't play ignorant." Her captor sneered. "It's not going to do you any good." He was no longer looking at her, instead turning his attention to the garage surrounding them, his expression assessing. Leonore didn't like the look of that.

"I'm not playing anything. Until about two minutes ago, I wasn't even sure the *Draíodóir* weren't a myth."

That got his attention. His head snapped back around toward Leonore. "You lie, witch. I know exactly what you're planning."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Leonore replied, but a seed of doubt started growing in her mind. She *was* planning something, after all. Something that had everything to do with being a Leonorean. But how could the *Draíodóir* know anything about her plans for the equinox or, even if they did, why would they care?

"That will do nicely," the man said, as if to himself.

"What—" Leonore started to ask but, once again, she felt the invisible steel band start to tighten around her chest, and her words were cut off, along with her breath. She was pulled to her feet and, as if pulled by ropes, started to slide toward the concrete barriers that ringed the parking garage—barriers that ended at chest height, exposing four or five feet of space that was open to the night air beyond. As she was lifted from her uselessly kicking feet and through the air, Leonore suddenly understood what her

captor meant to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

Even though he fully expected to see the space where Leonore's car had been parked sitting empty, Jeff couldn't help but hope he was wrong. When he turned the corner and saw the shiny blue car sitting exactly where he'd last seen it, he blinked, for a moment sure that his wishful thinking had caused his mind to play tricks on him.

*But if her car's still here, where the hell is she?*

Something moved in Jeff's peripheral vision, and his foot automatically went to the brake as he searched the shadows to see what had caught his attention.

Two figures, one impossibly tall, stood near the concrete and cable barrier that marked the garage's perimeter. There was something unnatural about the way the taller one moved. Jeff squinted. Why was it so dark? The garage was well lit, but something seemed to obscure the beams, as if a dark veil had been pulled across them.

Finally, his brain started to make sense out of the images he was seeing. The figure Jeff had thought to be so tall was actually *hovering above the floor of the garage*. No, he realized, not hovering. It was floating—moving slowly but inexorably toward the open space that yawned darkly beyond the lighter surface of the concrete slabs of the barrier.

And it was Leonore.

\* \* \* \* \*

If Leonore didn't control her panic, she was going to die. Unfortunately, every method she'd ever learned for controlling panic started with taking a deep, calming breath. Which wasn't an option with the invisible belt continuing to tighten around her chest.

*Get a grip, Leonore. It's only been a few seconds. You can hold your breath for a lot longer than this.*



The thought helped, a little. Leonore forced her eyes to stop darting around, looking for a way out that didn't exist, and concentrated on the barrier. He was going to lift her up and over it. Could she get a hold on something, make it more difficult?

She realized she'd been kicking her feet, trying to get a toehold on the floor of the garage, which was useless because she was hovering at least a foot above the pavement. Whatever this man was doing to her, Leonore wasn't paralyzed. She stopped struggling—what strength she had, she couldn't afford to waste.

The barriers appeared to be held in place by cables, which were attached to concrete pillars that rose between each slab. The cables ran diagonally across the barriers, crisscrossing when they intersected a matching set of cables attached to the pillar on the opposite side. At each end, the ladderlike wires rose at least a foot higher than the barrier. Leonore tried to gauge the distance—could she grab one?

As she moved closer to the edge, lifting ever higher, she flexed the fingers of her left hand, but resisted reaching out. If she passed closely enough to the cables, she might be able to grab one.

Closer...higher...she had to time her movement for exactly the right moment, or her captor might notice and lift her up and away from any chance at snagging a cable. Leonore glanced toward the *Draíodóir*, but he wasn't looking at her.

She followed the direction of his gaze and, momentarily forgetting that she couldn't breathe, tried to gasp. Panic threatened to grip her again.

A car was bearing down on the man, tires screeching and powerful engine growling. And behind the wheel, face caught in the watery light of the September moon, was Jeff Carson.

Something sparkled in the twin beams of Jeff's headlights—something that made him think of ropes or cords, but without substance. Impossible. But, real or not, they extended from the outstretched hands of the figure on the left, who Jeff could now see was a man. They were somehow attached to Leonore, encircling her and holding her off

the ground and moving her, inexorably, closer to the edge. Without even touching her, the man was about to throw Leonore off the roof.

There was no time to make sense of it, no time to do anything but stop it. Jeff aimed the car at the man and pressed down on the accelerator. Whatever the man was, he was about to be dead.

A pale face with dark eyes like glittering holes turned to face Jeff, and he just had time to see the gleaming cords that held Leonore dissolve like smoke when the front of the car seemed to lift as if shoved back by a wave of air. The last thing Jeff saw before the car rolled sidewise was Leonore, tumbling over the barrier and into the void beyond.

The abrupt cessation of the pressure on Leonore's chest would have been wonderful, except that it happened simultaneously with the resumption of gravity. Her left hand, already poised and ready, shot forward and made painful connection with the row of cables. She grasped one, but knew even as she felt the cold steel against her fingers that the one-handed grip wouldn't be strong enough to hold the full momentum of her weight. The arc of her descending body snapped her arm up, swung her around, and slammed her chest against the concrete of the building, jerking her shoulder nearly from its socket.

The impact would have knocked the wind out of her, except that she hadn't actually had time to take a breath yet. Gasping, she scrambled frantically with her toes. Amazingly, they caught on something that extended from the exterior wall, taking some of her weight. She reached up with her right hand, just as the squealing sound of tires turned into a grinding, screaming cacophony of glass breaking and metal being crushed against concrete. The building vibrated, as from an impact.

*Jeff!* Her groping right hand found and grasped a second cable and, with her face pressed against the back side of the barrier, she clung to the wall like a wounded spider.

The airbags, which had deployed the second the roof of the car hit the floor, flopped over Jeff's face, and he nearly choked on the residue of the powder that clouded the air and stung his eyes. He pushed the deflated bag aside, then reached for the buckle of the seat belt that held him, suspended, upside down. He automatically pressed the other hand against the roof of the car, barely noticing the sting as his fingertips and palm encountered the glass fragments that rested there.

Had Leonore really gone over the edge? It had all happened so fast. He pulled himself through the window and onto the floor of the garage, then up on his hands and knees. Something sharp scraped his skin, right through his trousers, but he didn't have time to worry about that right now. If there was any chance she was still alive...

He peered cautiously over the bottom of the car, quickly spotting the man who had...done what? Pointed at the heavy Volvo and made it blow back like chaff in the wind?

The strange darkness that had obscured Jeff's vision when he'd first turned onto the roof was gone now, and he could see the man clearly in the glow of the garage lights. He had one hand against the concrete barrier closest to him, and he seemed to be leaning against it. The bastard looked winded, as if he was panting. Maybe moving full-sized cars around like toys took a lot out of him. *Good.*

The man wasn't looking at Jeff, but rather at the spot where Leonore had disappeared.

No, not quite disappeared. Jeff's heart gave a great leap in his chest as he made out something white, just at the top edge of the barrier, where the cables that held the massive concrete slabs steady were attached to supporting pillars. It was a hand, fingers wrapped tightly around the inch-thick rope of twisted wire. And, as Jeff looked, a second hand appeared, then grasped a higher diagonal rung of cable.

Leonore was alive. Alive, and climbing.

The ledge under her stuck out no more than four or five inches, and it was a good two feet below the floor of the garage's roof. Now that Leonore had a cable in each hand, it was wide enough to abate the sickening certainty of a fall, but not enough to give her the leverage to easily pull herself up far enough to see over the barrier. But the thought of what the *Draíodóir* had done to Jeff—might be doing to him at this very second—put strength into Leonore's arms that she didn't know she had. Her shoulder screamed in protest, but the adrenaline that sang in her veins, so like the familiar buzz of magic, enabled her to ignore the pain as she pulled herself up with her right hand enough to loosen the left and reach for a higher cable.

Another breath, and another cable. Leonore heard a car horn blare and glanced down. There was traffic on the streets eight stories below, but she doubted anyone would look up and see her. She refocused on the cables. One more, and Leonore would be able to reach the top edge of the barrier. She was tensing to reach for it when a voice colder than the steel and concrete to which Leonore clung froze her.

"So, witch, you've got something in common with your ancestor after all." The *Draíodóir*'s laugh made nausea rise in Leonore's throat. He went on, "She always had some cunt-addled man skulking around, willing to risk his life for another chance to stick his cock into her."

"Fuck you." Not a very creative insult, but the best Leonore could come up with under the circumstances. She looked up at her hands, knowing they were in his line of sight. Why didn't he just flick her off the side of the building like a speck of dust? He would surely do so if she pulled herself up into full view. Instead of climbing, she cautiously moved the uppermost hand down onto a lower cable. Instantly, the cable she had released broke apart with a mighty *twang*. As the tension on the ends released, they curled back on themselves, one jagged end flying past her face so close that, for a moment, she thought it had cut her.

Quickly, she moved down another rung.

*Z-z-zing!* The next cable split, and a stab of pain told Leonore that some of her hair had been caught between twisted wires as the end whizzed past. The slab that the cables held in place shifted about an inch, and her stomach clenched as she realized what the *Draíodóir* was doing. She looked frantically around for something to grab, other than the cables. There was nothing and, once they were gone, there was no way she'd be able to balance on the narrow ledge.

*Z-z-zing!* A third cable, one of the two she'd been holding, snapped, and Leonore pulled her hand back, fast. Not fast enough—the razor-sharp end of the broken cable sliced the back of her wrist, and she shrieked at the sudden pain. She grabbed another cable—*only four left now*—and pressed her face against her hand, the coppery scent of her own blood sharp in her nostrils.

Without the upper cables securing the barrier, her weight on the lower cables acted like a lever to stretch them across the end of the slab, and it slid again, so that a few inches now hung out, away from the parking garage and over the empty space below. Leonore tried to push herself closer to the building, but the ledge was too narrow to be of help, and the slab moved another inch. Her hands were starting to feel slippery, as perspiration greased her palms. "*Shit.*"

Again, the cold laugh sounded above her. "What's the matter, Leonore? Running out of handholds?" With a loud *twang*, a fourth cable came apart and there was a sickening, split second of falling as the concrete barrier slid and then tilted a few degrees outward. The three remaining cables now supported only the bottom few inches of the slab. One more, and it looked as if the whole thing would topple into space. Taking Leonore with it.

*Screw it.* Whatever her enemy was going to do to her, Leonore was going to go down fighting. Summoning every last bit of adrenaline left in her system, she pushed off with her toes and sprang, if such a short motion could be called a spring, releasing her right hand from the cable and reaching toward the edge of the teetering slab of the barrier. It moved and, for a stomach-turning moment, Leonore thought it would fall

over the edge. Then, she was on it, bent at the waist and pulling herself forward, even as it tilted back and forth, as if deciding which way to fall.

Jeff eased around the misshapen wreck of his car, sure that the man would turn toward him and toss him away as easily as he had the vehicle. Jeff wondered why he didn't come over to see if he was alive—maybe he didn't care right now. Jeff certainly hadn't been much of a threat to him so far.

At the edge of the garage, a heart-stopping sight arrested Jeff's attention. Leonore, her red hair flying around her like the mane of a jungle cat, was clinging to the concrete barrier, which was now almost completely torn loose from its supporting cables. Jeff held his breath as the slab wobbled and fell with a crash, slamming onto the garage floor. Leonore lay flat on top of it, then lifted herself up on her knees and forearms and glared at her attacker.

The last time Jeff had launched himself directly at this—this whatever he was, it had turned out to be a bad idea. He looked around for cover. About twenty feet to his right, four or five white utility vans emblazoned with Mass General's familiar blue-and-white logo were parked in a row, probably for the night. Glancing once again to make sure that the man was still turned away, he ran a few crouching steps to the shadows behind the closest one.

Jeff was sure the man would hear or see him, but his running shoes were quiet against the concrete floor. He skirted the back of the first van. The row sat perpendicular to where the man, his back now nearly turned fully toward Jeff, stood about forty feet away. He quickly moved to the other end of the row, then stood with his back against the van closest to the wall and inched toward the front of the vehicle.

When he reached the passenger window, Jeff peered through it and the windshield. From this angle, the man stood almost directly between him and Leonore. Could he rush him from behind? If the man heard him, and had time to turn and send another of

those weird gusts of power his way, Jeff would never stand a chance. He had to get closer.

The shedlike structure that housed the emergency stairs would provide little cover, but it was better than nothing. The dim light that illuminated the few steps between seemed as revealing as the blazing sun, but the man seemed fully occupied. Jeff dashed to the shelter, put his back against it, and then peered around the corner.

He could see Leonore's face clearly and, although her attention on her captor never wavered, Jeff sensed some flicker of change. He was sure she had seen him. Would the man notice? Jeff pulled his head back into the shadows and stood there, listening to the rushing of the blood in his ears.

As Jeff's face disappeared into the shadows beyond the exit sign, Leonore struggled to keep her gaze locked on that of the *Draíodóir*. She'd seen the motion in her peripheral vision only, and it had taken every ounce of resolve Leonore had not to focus on the movement, but even that blur had been enough. It was Jeff, and he was alive and moving, not trapped in the twisted heap of metal that had been his car.

The man's eye's narrowed—had he seen something in her expression? Leonore needed to keep his attention.

"How," she asked, her voice coming out as a croak, "do you know so much about me? And why are you so much stronger than I am?" That last bit was intended to stroke his ego. She didn't know if he'd take the bait or not. With the concrete barrier down, Leonore figured he could probably send her over the edge with no more effort than swatting a fly. She was hoping that, given the opportunity to gloat, he might start swaggering like the villain in a James Bond novel and buy her the time to—what? She hadn't thought that far ahead.

"It's my business to know about you," he said, and Leonore felt a tiny mote of relief. *Just keep talking, asshole.*

"Your business?" she asked, trying to put a pathetic note into her tone. It didn't take much effort.

"The business of all *Draíodóir*. Our sworn business."

"Are there...a lot of you?" Again, Leonore caught movement in her peripheral vision. To keep herself from glancing toward it, she looked down at her hands, hoping it looked like she was cowering.

"There are enough," he replied, scorn plain in his tone. "And we don't stumble over one another by accident, like you and your so-called sisters. No wonder your powers are so diminished. Your blood has been diluted by centuries."

"And yours isn't?" she asked, looking up again. "Are there female *Draíodóir*, then?"

"No!" he spat, and Leonore feared she had gone too far. She wanted him to feel superior, not angry. "Our women are vessels, nothing more. They carry the blood, not the power."

Leonore sensed his impatience, and sought desperately for another question. "Do you each have different powers? Or are you all the same?"

He laughed, and Leonore felt whatever interest he had in taunting her evaporate. "They won't do you any good, you know, all these questions. You're going to be dead before you have a chance to tell anyone what you've learned."

"But—"

"Enough!" he thundered. "You've been enough trouble, and taken enough of my time, witch." He pulled himself up to his full height and, at this proximity, Leonore could feel the power crackling off him like the mild buzz of electricity one felt when standing too close to a transformer. As she watched, he seemed to gather power from the very air, and she could see a shimmer forming around him like an aura. She knew that, in moments, he would send that power toward her in a wave that she would be helpless to fight.



The hair on Jeff's arms rose as the very air around him filled with a charge that was horribly, tangibly malevolent. As he once again peered around the corner, the same sparkling, wavering light that he'd seen holding Leonore suspended was now gathered around the man. As Jeff watched, it seemed to pull inward, to coalesce into something solid. It was as if it was being gathered and formed into something compact and lethal.

With no further thought, Jeff ran toward the pair. As he drew closer, the man drew back as if to throw something, and the concentrated energy flowed and coiled into a glowing ball of pure evil, and seemed to roll itself into the upraised hand.

*He's going to throw it at Leonore.*

The thought gave wings to Jeff's feet and, at that split second, he knew that he didn't have time to stop the missile from being hurled. Instead of launching himself at the man, he threw his body into the narrow space between the juggernaut and its target, the still-kneeling Leonore.

## Chapter Eight

*This can't be happening.*

The *Draíodóir's* magic was like nothing Leonore had ever seen or imagined—more powerful than anything mentioned in any of the writings she'd studied. She had no defenses against it. Her own magic buzzed around her helplessly. Even if she had known how to force it to coalesce into some sort of shield, it would have been like holding up tissue paper to block a bullet.

As the dark orb flew from the man's hand, there was little Leonore could do but throw up her hands and brace herself for the blow that would probably kill her.

Then, a blur of motion rushed at Leonore from her right and an impact made her fall back. Her elbows and the back of her head connected with concrete, just as a deep, visceral scream rent the air.

For a moment, Leonore thought the scream had been her own—that this was the moment of her death—but something wasn't right. She was breathing, and a weight lay across her knees. She was looking up at stars. Leonore lifted herself up onto her elbows and saw, with horror, that the weight that pinned her legs was Jeff.

Or his body.

"Jeff!" Leonore pushed Jeff's legs to one side and got onto her knees, then tried to reach for his face. Something was wrong with his chest. Leonore tried to make sense of what she was seeing in the dim light, then froze at the sound of the *Draíodóir's* voice, colder than ever. She looked up, and gasped at the way hate had twisted the handsome face into a ghastly mask.

"How touching." The scorn was so palpable that it seemed to burn Leonore's skin, like liquid nitrogen. "Another fool sacrifices himself for his witch whore. Useless—all he's done is buy you a few seconds of life."

Fear left Leonore — there was no room for it, she was so filled with rage. She looked down at where Jeff lay on his back, awkwardly supported by the edge of the barrier, and saw that something protruded from his chest. It was the gleaming end of one of the broken cables — in throwing himself between Leonore and the *Draíodóir's* missile, he had been impaled. She looked up at her enemy, who was already gathering another of those deadly, shimmering globes of power, and, as she stared, Leonore's magic...changed.

The familiar, sensual buzz she wore as casually as her own skin reared up, seeming to pull Leonore along with it. It was as if a calm sea was suddenly invaded by a tidal wave, and she rose to her feet as effortlessly as flotsam on the ocean's surface. As the dark orb sped toward her, Leonore — or the magic, she couldn't tell — reached for it and...*caught* it, as easily as if she were catching a lightly tossed ball.

Time seemed to stretch and the world moved in slow motion. As Leonore held the *Draíodóir's* projectile in her hands, she realized she could perceive his power. It was dark and bitter, and, although Leonore's magic recoiled in distaste, it also surrounded and absorbed it. She looked up at the man's white face and suddenly knew — *knew* — that she could use his power against him. As if the knowledge itself had incited the action, the orb began to glow with a new, brighter light in Leonore's hand, asking her to hurl it.

Leonore saw the moment that the *Draíodóir* understood what was happening. His hate turned to terror and, with a glance behind him, he turned and fled.

Leonore hurled the malevolent ball toward him, but her aim was wild, and it exploded against one of the parked vans, just as the *Draíodóir* dove behind it.

Leonore laughed and, to her ears, the tone sounded hysterical, insane. Maybe she was crazy. She didn't care. She stalked toward the point where the man had disappeared and started gathering her own missile. It was easy, as if she'd done it a thousand times, and somehow she knew she was channeling the *Draíodóir's* power and experience. The evil was palpable, and she still didn't care. This bastard had killed Jeff.

“Not as much fun when you’re the target, is it?” she said, marveling at the sound of her own voice. It was hers and yet...not. “Come on out and die like a good little sorcerer.” Leonore reveled in the cruel tone, even as part of her shrank from it.

As she rounded the first van in the row, Leonore saw movement at the opposite end of the garage. The man, running. He was heading for the barriers at the edge. Did he think he could fly? Laughing, Leonore tossed the orb toward him.

Her aim had improved, but she still missed her target. One of the concrete barriers exploded into shards and powder and he swerved away from it.

“There’s nowhere to go,” Leonore taunted, forming yet another power globe. She paused, realizing this one was more difficult. It was as if she were reaching into a well and finding it almost empty. The foreign magic was still there, but she had to work harder to pull what remained into her hand, to make it stick together.

She returned her concentration to her foe and saw he had reached the edge of the garage and stood, panting, one hand on the top edge of the barrier.

He must have been able to see, or sense, Leonore’s hesitation, because he spoke.

“This isn’t over, witch,” he said, but his voice no longer held menace, only peevishness. Finally, the magic ball felt solid in Leonore’s hand, and she prepared to throw another missile, confident that her aim would be true this time.

It was, but too late. Agile as a cat, the man vaulted up and over the edge and into the blackness beyond, moments before the barrier exploded into fist-sized chunks of concrete and a cloud of gray dust.

She ran toward the spot where the man had disappeared and looked down, fully expecting to see a dark and broken form on the ground eight stories below. But the sidewalk, illuminated by streetlights, was empty. Her gaze raked the side of the building, looking for some ledge or outcropping that might have snagged the body, but there was nothing. Then there was movement on the ground below, and she just had time to see something dark and fast disappear around a corner of the building on the opposite site of the street, like a black cat running away from a pack of wild dogs.

Leonore screamed in wordless frustration. She realized she knew how he had escaped—in that split second when her own magic had risen to deflect and then envelop the *Draíodóir's* missile, she had understood his power. He would have used his ability to move objects to slow his own fall, just enough to land on his feet without injury.

She turned away from the rubble of the barrier and, suddenly, her gaze was riveted on the dark figure on the opposite side of the garage floor. Jeff.

The knowledge that he was dead, and that he'd died to save her, and that, in her lust for revenge, she'd momentarily forgotten about him, hit Leonore like a blow.

"Jeff!" A sob caught her, hard, and she ran toward his lifeless form, the last of the *Draíodóir's* loathsome magic draining away.

As she got closer, something was different. Leonore still saw the bright end of the cable coming through the chest, but now one of Jeff's hands was wrapped around the protruding wire.

*It wasn't like that before.*

An enormous bubble of something—hope, she realized—pushed its way up through her despair as she skidded to his side and fell to her knees.

Impossibly, Jeff's eyes were open and he looked at her, blinking.

"Le-Lenore," he said. "Need...emergency."

"Hush, Jeff. Let me see." She put both hands on him, palms pressed against his chest on either side of the protruding cable.

"Call the E.R.," he gasped.

"No time," Leonore told him, and it was true. As her magic—hers, not the foul, borrowed magic of the *Draíodóir*—flowed down and into the wound, Leonore could see the cable's path. It had missed his heart by a fraction of an inch, but had nicked some sort of tube or artery—Leonore didn't know its name—and was partially plugging the tear it had made. Jeff's life blood was leaking around it, filling his chest cavity.

As if reading her mind, Jeff said, "It's the subclavian artery. Got...the lung too, I think." There was blood on his lips and Leonore saw that he was right—one lung had been nicked as well, but that wasn't what was killing him.

Leonore had never tried to repair a rapidly bleeding wound before—had never had to, even if her magic had been strong enough. But she knew with absolute certainty that she could do it now. Her magic simmered around the ragged edges of the wound, eager to stitch flesh together, to build cells, to join severed ends. The nick in the lung seemed to almost patch itself, and Leonore saw the rise of Jeff's chest and the surprise in his eyes as the lung suddenly reinflated.

But she couldn't repair the artery with the cable in the way.

"Jeff, I'm going to lift you off the cable," she said, and he immediately started to protest.

"No, Leonore, I'll bleed out," he gasped, trying feebly to push her hands away. "You have to call the emergency room." Even though Leonore could feel the strength leaving his body along with that precious blood, his voice was stronger now that both lungs worked.

"*You have to trust me!*" she said, willing him to understand, and she felt the magic flare around her, surrounding her in a glamour, giving her words authority. Jeff's hands, which had moved from the cable to Leonore's wrists, relaxed, and she read and felt the absolute trust in his eyes. He nodded.

She moved her hands under his arms and rested one beneath each shoulder blade. He was heavier than she was, and her normal strength would never be enough to lift him, but she reached for the last of the *Draíodóir's* magic, which she now realized had been leaking away like fog under a hot sun. But there was still enough of that power to bolster her strong muscles and, in one smooth movement, she lifted Jeff up and off the twisted coil that had impaled him, then laid him carefully on the floor of the garage, so that his head rested on the fallen barrier. She knelt next to him and laid her hands back on his chest, close to the wound.

The moment the obstruction was removed, the flow of blood leapt from a trickle to a gush, and Leonore hurried to plug the leak with her power. After a heart-stopping moment of hesitation, the blood and tissue bent to her will, and the torn edges of the artery began to knit and reform. The blood stopped leaking out and began to pulse strongly through the artery and into the network of veins beyond.

She turned her attention outward, along the channel that the cable had cut, first through the skin and strong muscles of Jeff's upper back, scoring the top of one rib and the bottom of another, along the edge of the lung and out between the same two ribs in the front. It had then traveled through two layers of chest muscle and come out on the skin above and to the right of his nipple. Inch by inch, Leonore repaired skin, bone, muscle and sinew, as the magic whirled and flashed and shimmered around her.

She took the blood that had leaked into Jeff's chest cavity, cleansed it, energized it, and pushed it through the walls of the organs and back into the veins where it belonged, and it seemed to sing with joy at regaining its home. As Leonore's magic answered, it was as if *she* were running through Jeff's veins, floating along the blood like a raft over rapids, spinning and bouncing and splashing in exhilaration. She entered his heart, and felt the rush as the huge throb of that muscle propelled her along, even faster. Then she wasn't just in his veins, she was everywhere—in his muscles and organs and skin. She heard his gasp—or was it *her* gasp, articulated through Jeff?—and then finally burst free, back in her own body.

She took a deep breath and opened her eyes. She was still on her knees on the concrete, her palms against Jeff's chest. The last shimmers of magic seemed to fall around them, like the dying sparks that fell to earth after the last burst of a fireworks display.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jeff opened his eyes, then closed them again when the light streaming through the window blinds hit him full in the face. Something was odd about the light. The

bedroom of Jeff's condo faced west, which was why he seldom bothered to pull the curtains. The morning light in the room was gentle, which meant —

He looked at the clock. Four fifteen. How long had he been asleep?

Jeff sat up and immediately looked down at his chest. Had he dreamed it all? No, there was something on the right side, near the top of his pectoral muscle. He got up and went into the bathroom, hitting the switch that turned on the fluorescents on either side of the mirror.

It was faint, but it was real — a line, about two inches in length, slightly lighter than the surrounding flesh. It looked like a long-healed scar.

He positioned the bathroom door so that its full-length mirror was behind him, then turned to face it, so that he could see the reflection of his upper back in the more brightly lit mirror over the sink. There was a scar there, too, shaped like a crooked asterisk. He stretched, expecting soreness. There was none.

He turned and faced the mirror again, almost expecting someone else to look back. But, no, it was just his own familiar face — a little more tired than usual, perhaps, and in need of a shave.

"So, Jeff. Anything new with you?" he asked his reflection.

*Well, Jeff, old buddy, I got skewered by this evil sorcerer on the roof of the hospital parking garage. Luckily, this witch I've been fucking was there at the time, or we'd be having this conversation somewhere in the vicinity of the pearly gates. Other than that, no, nothing new here. How about you?*

He stared at the mirror for another few seconds, then shook his head, as if that would make everything clearer. It didn't.

He heard voices downstairs, and recognized Leonore's. Another voice, also female, was unfamiliar. He went back to the bedroom, got a pair of jeans out of his closet, and put them on. Leonore was sitting at his kitchen counter, opposite an African-American woman in a Boston Police Department uniform.



The stranger saw Jeff first and nodded toward him, which caused Leonore to turn her head.

"You're awake," she said, then smiled. "Jeff, this is Tish—Letisha. She came by to say that the thing with your car is all taken care of."

Letisha, who had stood while Leonore was speaking, came around the counter and extended a hand. Jeff shook it automatically.

"Taken care of?" he asked, stupidly. The last he saw his car, it was an upside down wreck.

"I made sure I caught the call," Letisha explained. "A flipped car on the roof of a parking garage isn't something you see every day." She grinned. "It took some creative writing, but I managed to prevent anyone from opening a case file on you. Your insurance company might be another matter, though."

"I, uh, thank you," Jeff replied, not knowing what else to say. Then he remembered something. "What about the cameras?" There were security cameras all over the garage, at least on the floor where he parked.

"It seems that something was interfering with the signal. The last thing that showed was Leonore getting out of the elevator. After that, it all goes blurry."

"The *Draíodóir* must have done that," Leonore said.

"The what?" Jeff asked. He felt like someone else was having this conversation.

"The sorcerer who was trying to kill me," Leonore said. "The *Draíodóir* are—well, it's a long story."

"Something to do with you being a—" He couldn't quite make himself say it.

"A witch," Leonore replied. "Yes, they have something to do with it. Ancient enemies who, up until last night, we *hoped* were mythical. We don't know much about them."

"And," Letisha supplied, "from what Leonore told me about them, they seem to know everything about us."

“About you—*Leonoreans*.” The word still sounded strange to Jeff, but Leonore and Letisha both nodded, perhaps thinking that because he had used the word, he was accepting the situation.

Well, he was still working on that. Weirdly, the stuff that had happened *after* the bizarre happenings on the roof—the attack and the subsequent healing—seemed more like a dream than the magical events. Leonore had helped him to her car, although he’d hardly needed her support. His injury, which should have killed him, had seemed to be—absent. They’d driven out of the parking garage and come back here as if they were returning from a night at the movies.

Except that Leonore was covered with concrete dust and grime, and his bloody shirt had a couple of ragged holes in it. She’d calmly pulled her cell phone from a pocket and called Letisha, explaining briefly what had happened, and asking for help with the police report. Jeff had listened in silence, still too stunned to react.

Once back at the apartment, his tongue had finally started to work again. Leonore had patiently answered his questions, sometimes the same ones over and over, until he was too tired to ask any more. Then she’d coaxed him into the shower, persuaded him that he should call the hospital and explain that he wouldn’t be in the next day, and put him to bed like a child. He’d thought his swirling thoughts would keep him awake, but he’d slept like the dead.

He came out of his reverie to see that the cop—Tish, Leonore called her—was talking to him.

“I gotta get back to the station. See you tomorrow, okay?” Letisha gave Jeff a sideways glance, then, shrugging, took both of Leonore’s hands. The two women quickly chanted a few words in what sounded like Latin, then the policewoman released Leonore’s hands, nodded at him, and walked out the door.

Jeff sat down on the barstool Letisha had just vacated opposite Leonore, and they stared at one another for a moment.

“You must still have a million questions,” she said.

He looked at the counter, then at her. "Yeah. But you already answered most of them. I just can't seem to process the whole thing."

Leonore got up and poured a mug of coffee, then returned to the counter and slid it in front of Jeff before sitting back down. *Such a typical domestic scene*, Jeff thought. A woman has spent the night at her boyfriend's apartment and, when he wakes up, they have coffee.

Except that it's late afternoon, the woman is a witch, and the man should be dead.

A new question did occur to him.

"Why were you at the hospital, anyway?" Jeff sipped the coffee, surprised that it tasted totally normal.

Leonore was silent for an instant before she answered. "I was...healing someone. A child."

He thought about that. "Do you do that often? Lurk around hospitals and heal people?"

"Sometimes. Not as much as I'd like."

"Why not?"

She sighed. "I don't want you to think I'm some kind of saint. I don't do this all the time. I might if it was possible, but it's not. It takes too much out of me."

"What do you mean?"

Leonore took a deep breath, as if marshalling her thoughts. She stood up and started to pace.

"When I first found out I had the ability to heal," she started, "I was still pretty young. A teenager. I thought it meant I was destined to be some sort of healing angel—that I was supposed to become an Army nurse, and save wounded soldiers, or maybe join the Red Cross and swoop in after a natural disaster and reattach limbs or something." Her smile was rueful. "I was naïve. And I didn't understand my gift—I thought it would get more powerful. But—"

She stalked back over to the barstool she had abandoned. "It turns out that every time I heal someone, it drains my magic. I have to recharge in between healings. And that can be...complicated."

"How do you recharge your magic?" Jeff asked.

Leonore looked up at him, and he thought her cheeks looked pinker than usual. He hadn't imagined Leonore would blush at anything. "I, um, have sex. To the point of orgasm."

"Do you mean that you masturbate?" Jeff asked.

Leonore shook her head. "No, that doesn't really work. I—we—haven't ever really figured out why. No, there has to be another person involved. Something about drawing on their sexual energy."

The full implication hit Jeff. "You mean when you met me in that bar—when you said you were out to get laid—you were telling the truth? You were just, like, recharging your battery?"

This time, Jeff was sure that the deepening of the blush on Leonore's cheeks was not his imagination. But, mortified or not, she looked him in the eyes. "Yes," she admitted. "That's exactly what I was doing."

Jeff wasn't sure how he felt about that. "Then, when you ran into me at the hospital..."

Leonore shook her head firmly. "No, that was different. I'd never actually done that before."

"Done *what* before?"

Leonore shrugged. "You know...gotten together a second time with someone I'd previously, um..."

"Used as a fueling stop?" Jeff could see Leonore was becoming increasingly uncomfortable, but he wanted to understand.

Leonore nodded again. "Right. Exactly. And I have to tell you, I really surprised myself when I agreed to go on an actual date with you."

To Jeff's surprise, Leonore's last statement made him feel a little better. She'd used him, sure. But he believed her when she said that her decision to accept a date with him had been an unusual step for her.

"Okay," he said. "That explains what you were doing at the hospital the other day. But, what I meant was, why were you looking for me last night?"

She took another deep breath before replying. "I was there to see Lucy."

It took a moment to register. "Lucy? As in my patient Lucy?"

She nodded. "I wanted to make sure she was still...healed."

Jeff stared at her, trying to comprehend. Then, light dawned. "You mean it was *you* who...who made Lucy well? You healed her cancer?"

Leonore's voice was soft. "Yes."

The world reeled and, if Jeff hadn't been sitting, he would have staggered. "It wasn't the treatment," he said, and his voice sounded strange in his ears. Dead. "It was you and your...your magic. The experimental treatment —"

He stopped talking, afraid he would choke on the bile rising in his throat. He got up and walked to the sink and poured the still-warm coffee down the drain. Suddenly, he couldn't imagine drinking it.

Leonore stepped behind him, and Jeff felt hands on his back, massaging. It felt good, but he pulled out of her grasp and took a couple of sideways steps, putting distance between them. He crossed his arms, waiting to see what she had to say.

"I couldn't tell you," she said, no hint of apology in her tone. "When I...healed her the first time, I had no idea she was part of a study. I just felt all that cancer and I had to get rid of it." She searched Jeff's face and must not have like what she saw because she went on, "Surely, you're not angry that I healed her. The cancer would have killed her, Jeff. I felt it. I wasn't trying to sabotage your treatment — I was just trying to save her."

“Don’t be ridiculous, Leonore. Of course I’m not sorry you healed her. I’m a fucking pediatric oncologist, for god’s sake. How could I not want you to heal a child?” He still couldn’t believe it. “Jesus, I’ve been totally deluding myself. I thought I was saving her – that the new treatment might save a lot of kids. And, all the time, it was you.”

“I’m not being ridiculous,” she said. “Don’t say that. Look, Jeff, every once in a while, yeah, I heal a kid. But in my whole life, I’ve probably helped a couple of dozen. I never thought that healing one child could compromise...”

She looked up at Jeff, seeming to implore him to understand. “How many children have you helped, Jeff? Hundreds? And, once your new treatment gets approved, it will be even more.”

Jeff wanted to shake her. “Don’t you get it, Leonore? The treatment *doesn’t work*. It was *you* who healed Lucy. The grant – there’s no way I could take it now. And all those months of research...”

“But it *was* working,” replied Leonore.

“No.” Jeff shook his head. “I wanted to believe it was, but I was kidding myself.”

Leonore looked like she wanted to shake *him*. “You’re not hearing me. I’m not just saying this to try to make you feel better. I know it was working because I *felt* it.”

“What are you talking about?”

Leonore went on. “I’ve healed cancer before. I know what cancer feels like. So, when I...first felt Lucy’s illness, it was totally familiar. I knew what to do.”

She looked up at Jeff, as if waiting for confirmation that he understood. He nodded and she continued.

“Well, I could feel the cancer cells, and everything about them felt bad – unwholesome. But when I’m healing someone, I can feel other things too.”

“What kind of things?” Despite being upset, Jeff couldn’t help but be interested.

“I can usually feel someone’s immune system, if it hasn’t been totally destroyed. I call the cells ‘soldiers’, and I have to be very careful not to harm them.”

This didn't make sense to Jeff. "By the time you met her, Lucy's immune system should have been destroyed by chemotherapy and radiation."

"That's just it. It wasn't. I felt it very clearly. The soldiers were weak, but they were definitely there."

Jeff felt a cautious hope. "You can't be sure of that."

Leonore took his hand and, this time, he didn't pull it away. "Jeff, I know it's difficult for you to comprehend what I do, but if you think about it, it's not really all that hard to understand. You can look at someone's blood under a microscope, or do a lab test, and you can determine how many cells of a certain kind there are. I can ascertain the same information, just in a different way."

"Okay, let's say for a minute that you can sense someone's immune system working. I'll even buy that Lucy still had some immune function at that stage in her cancer. It still doesn't mean the treatment was working."

"Yes, it does." Leonore, still holding his hand, went on. "There was something else in her body, something I'd never experienced before. It was as if—as if something foreign was there, propping up the 'soldiers'. Protecting them or making them stronger, or both. I didn't know what it was, but I could tell it was good, so I left it alone."

It took Jeff a moment to grasp the implications.

"Are you absolutely certain?" he whispered. He felt as if saying the words too loudly would make them untrue.

"I'm positive, Jeff. One hundred percent."

He believed her—absolutely *knew* she was telling the truth.

"Do you realize what this means?" he asked.

"Yes. It means your research is valid and that you can take that grant in good conscience."

"No. I mean, yes, it means that. But...there might be more to it."

Leonore narrowed her eyes. "I'm not following you."

To Jeff's immense surprise, a laugh bubbled in his throat. He struggled to suppress it, but it was no use. It burst forth into a snort and a guffaw. After a moment, he got hold of himself but, when he saw the shocked expression on Leonore's face, another sprang up and, before he knew it, he was on a full-on laughing jag. He couldn't catch his breath. His sides ached and his eyes filled with water, but he laughed on.

By the time the attack of hysteria ran its course, even Leonore was starting to smile.

"I'm not sure what's so funny," she said. "But it's better than what I expected."

"What did you expect?" Jeff asked, wiping his eyes. He realized that he felt much better.

"That you'd tell me you never wanted to see me again."

He nodded. "It crossed my mind. But I don't think I could manage it. Not seeing you again, I mean. Could you?"

Lenore frowned, then she shook her head slowly. "No. No, I don't think so. "Then," she sighed, "Jeff, there's more I haven't told you."

"More?" The helpless laughter threatened to return, but Jeff managed to check it. "What more could there possibly be?"

"Well..." She looked around, as if for the right words. "What we—I mean, me and Tish and the other Leonoreans—what we know about the history of our magic is spotty at best. Most of the lore was passed down through generations and, by the time someone bothered to write it down, it was changed to the point that you can't tell what's real, and what's been exaggerated or just plain made up."

Jeff nodded, and she continued. "More than one source references something called the *Mutatio*—the Transformation. It's something that happens to a Leonorean's magic when...when a certain event takes place in her life."

Jeff was intrigued. "What event?"

"I'll get to that. I don't know how clearly you remember what happened when you were—impaled on that cable."



"I remember there was a commotion going on, and then I remember arguing with you about calling the emergency room."

She nodded. "Well, that commotion was me, fighting the *Draíodóir*. I was able to sort of reflect his own power back onto him — use it to push him over the edge."

"You told me that," Jeff replied.

"Yes, but what I didn't tell you was that *I've never done anything like that before*. No Leonorean has, at least not the ones I've met or read about. Except for the witches in the legends, after they underwent the Transformation."

"And you think that's what happened to you?"

Leonore took a deep breath. "Yeah. I think that's exactly what happened. Which means..." She stopped, and Jeff thought she might be blushing again.

"Which means what?"

She looked at him, her expression wry. "Which means Millie — Ludmilla — was right about you."

"I don't understand," Jeff replied. "I've never even met Millie."

Leonore smiled. "You'll like her. Ludmilla's power is different than mine — she can tell a lot about what's going on with a person by touching them. And, when she touched me, she told me I was undergoing the Transformation. I didn't want to believe her."

"This is all very interesting," Jeff said, meaning it. "But what does it have to do with me?"

Leonore took another deep breath, blew it out, then said. "I think it's because, when you threw yourself between me and the *Draíodóir*'s missile, you were willing to sacrifice your life to save mine. According to the legends, a Leonorean only undergoes the Transformation when...when she is loved by the man who is destined to be her ultimate — her final — lover. Her one true love."

## Chapter Nine

Leonore couldn't believe she'd actually used the words—*one true love*. Even more astonishing was that she believed them. But she'd had a lot of time to think while Jeff had been sleeping, exhausted as much from the emotional roller-coaster ride as physical trauma, no doubt.

The Transformation had been real. Millie claimed it had started the first time Leonore had sex with Jeff, but she'd been able to ignore those first, more subtle changes. But the power that crackled around her now was undeniably different.

"Leonore," Jeff said, calling her back to the conversation at hand. She tried to read his expression and failed.

"What?" she asked.

"What you just said—that I'm...that we're..." He seemed at a loss for words.

"Destined to be together," she finished. "I know, we've only known each other for a few days. But the magic doesn't lie, Jeff. Believe me, I fought the idea myself. I didn't think this would happen so soon. I thought I'd have more time."

Jeff looked puzzled. "More time for what?"

"More time with my sisters."

"You mean Letisha, and the other...witches?"

Leonore nodded. "Yes. I've always known I was a witch. My mother told me, when I was still a child. She knew a little about the history of the Leonoreans—it's why she gave me the name. And she'd met some other witches, but the idea to find others—to form a circle—that was mine. I thought I'd have more time to learn about what we are, and what we can do, before..." She trailed off. This was still new to her too.

"Before you met me," Jeff finished.

"Right," she said. "I'd always studied the lore, what I could find anyway. My mother always thought of it as a fun little hobby. She was proud of what she was, but never thought about taking it farther."

"Did she heal people too?"

Leonore shook her head. "No, it doesn't work that way. Daughters in the Leonorean bloodline usually have *some* power, but it's not necessarily the same as the mother's. Mom can—could, she passed away three years ago—see through objects."

"You mean, like x-ray vision?" Jeff smiled. "I'll bet she was wicked at blackjack."

He was joking. Good. Leonore felt some of the tension leave her face, and she smiled back. "Yes, you did *not* want to play cards with my mother. She was too honest to run a serious scam, and she certainly didn't need the money, but I had some suspicions about her popularity as a bridge partner."

"You took magic more seriously, I guess."

She nodded. "Maybe it was because I'm a healer. I felt like I had a responsibility to understand what I was—what I am. So I got serious about the magic. One of the first things I found out was that there are rituals to strengthen power, but that they could only be performed by groups of witches. Leonorean witches, I mean. So, I started looking for them."

"When?" Jeff asked. "Did you find them right away?"

"Not at first. I was still a teenager, and I didn't know where to look. I thought Wiccan groups might be a good place to start, but that was a bust."

"Not the real thing?"

"No," she said. "Not that I'm saying all Wiccans are powerless—far from it. Some of them take their magic very seriously and study hard. And some achieve a certain degree of power. But, without the blood, they aren't of any use for the Leonorean rituals. I was pretty frustrated. I almost gave up. Then, I ran into Tish."

"Where?"

"At a Summer Solstice festival in Vermont. She was doing the same thing I was—checking out the Wiccan events, hoping to run across another Leonorean, not really expecting to find one. She shook my hand and, *bam*." She smiled at the memory—the astonishment on Tish's face, mirroring the shock Leonore had felt. "That really energized us both to step up the search."

"And now there are seven?" Jeff asked.

"Yes. The number required for the most powerful rituals. We just found Vinnie—Lavinia—a few months ago. Now the circle is finally complete."

Jeff grinned. "And, just when everything was going so well, I came along and upset the apple cart."

*Does this mean he's accepting it all?* "Well, yes, in a way."

His grin turned to a frown. "Maybe..." he started, then stopped.

"Maybe what?"

"This is all new to me, and you're the one who's been living with it for years. But it seems like a pretty big coincidence. You get your circle together, then you meet your...you meet *me*. At the same time, this sorcerer guy shows up, and it turns out he's a member of some group that's sworn to destroy you."

The hair stood on the back of Leonore's neck. "It's a bigger coincidence than you know," she said. "In a few weeks, it's the autumn equinox. And not just any equinox—the position of the planets this year is special."

"Special, how?"

"Any ritual performed at the exact moment that the earth reaches its closest point to the sun will be more powerful than in over three hundred years."

"I don't suppose," Jeff said, "That you and your sisters are planning just such a ritual."

She nodded. "Yes. We're flying to England, in order to perform it at a place near where the original Leonore's children—her seven daughters—are supposed to have

first done it.”

“Whoa.”

“Yeah.”

They sat in silence for a moment.

“I, uh, had another thought,” Jeff said. He was smiling again.

“What’s?”

“You said that healing drains your magic, and sex replenishes it.”

“Yes,” she replied and, like a dozing cat overhearing its name, her magic seemed to stir and stretch.

“Well, I’d imagine that after what you did for me last night, your tank must be just about empty.”

Leonore laughed. Trust a man to think about sex, right in the middle of a heavy discussion. “Yes, it’s pretty drained. Although, not as much as I’d expect. I think the Transformation makes it a little more resilient.”

“Do you need to recharge?” His smile was becoming positively lascivious.

“It wouldn’t hurt,” Leonore admitted. “Also, there’s something I’m curious about.”

“What’s that?”

“Once a Leonorean has undergone the Transformation, and she’s met her true—well, you know.” She was still not totally comfortable calling Jeff her true love. Not until he acknowledged it aloud. But he nodded, and she went on. “The sex is supposed to change. To intensify.”

His eyes widened. “It’s been pretty damn intense already,” he said. “I told you, before I even knew what was going on, that I didn’t think it was normal.”

“That’s because I shared magic with you. Unintentionally—I’ve always been able to control that before. But with you, the power kept slipping through.”

He nodded. “I see.” Leonore could practically smell his arousal.

“But after the Transformation, it’s supposed to get more extreme. The lovers—the

predestined couple—are able to sort of experience one another’s sensations. It’s supposed to be incredible.”

That got his attention. “I guess,” he said slowly, and the sound of his voice made Leonore’s senses—and her magic—dance. “There’s only one way to find out.”

He walked over and took her hand, and she stood to meet him. Leonore expected him to kiss her, but he reached up and held her face in his hands and just stared at her for a few seconds.

The magic flowed up her body and into the skin of her cheeks—and into his hands. His eyebrows rose, then he smiled.

It was incredibly arousing. Leonore almost whimpered, so badly did she want him to lean forward and put his lips on hers, but she waited. She realized she was holding her breath.

Then, finally, he kissed her.

The magic surged through Leonore and into Jeff, and he made a small noise in the back of his throat but didn’t break the kiss. Their tongues touched, explored and danced, and the sensation of the kiss combining with the magic was like champagne bubbles bursting in their mouths. Leonore wanted to melt, to go limp, but still the kiss went on.

When he finally broke the kiss, her face was still cradled in his hands. Without realizing it, she’d moved so that their bodies were touching from toe to chest, and they were cocooned in the power’s embrace. The air shimmered, as if they were inside a cloud of sparkling dust.

Jeff’s hands slid down to her back as he gazed around, wonder in his expression.

“If this is what your magic is like when it’s depleted, I can’t wait to feel it full strength.”

“Neither can I,” Leonore breathed, and he looked puzzled.

“It’s transforming,” she explained. “After we...make love, it’s going to be stronger

than before.”

“Let’s go,” he said, and his voice was deep and full. He took her hand and pulled her toward the stairs.

They made it about halfway up the flight of steps before the magic seemed to take control of Leonore. She stopped, and Jeff, still holding her hand, turned to see why. Her arms flew up, as if of their own volition, and wrapped around him, and her weight pushed him back onto the steps.

“Leonore, we’re almost—” he started, but she stopped him with another kiss.

The awkward position should have made it hard to get his jeans unzipped, but Leonore’s fingers were nimble with power. In seconds, she had his cock in her hand. It wasn’t fully hard yet, but it throbbed and twitched and stiffened, even as she squeezed it.

Leonore felt the wonderful, aching pressure as if it were happening between her own legs. Caught off guard, she gasped, pulling her mouth away from his.

Jeff looked at her face. “Did you...feel that?” he asked, his voice husky.

“Yes,” she managed. “It was as if...” She squeezed again, and again she felt the throb. She was Leonore and yet not Leonore. “Jeff, you have to...you should...”

“I’m way ahead of you,” he said, as he reached to unzip her pants. Within moments, he had a hand inside her panties, his forefinger dipping into her wetness as his thumb brushed against her clit.

She gasped again, and as her body tensed from the pleasure, Leonore involuntarily gave his cock another squeeze. The twin sensations—his and hers—crashed against one another like roiling waves, and she almost lost her breath.

“Oh, my god,” Jeff said, sounding as breathless as Leonore felt. “That’s...that’s...oh, my god.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I thought I wanted to do it right here. But if this keeps up, we’re going to roll down the stairs.”

"It would be worth it," he said, and his finger slid farther inside her.

"A-a-a-ah," Her moan was a rising note. She rolled to one side, her back against the banister rails, so her arm was free, and started to slide her hand rhythmically, up and down the shaft of his cock, which was now rock hard. She could feel the smoothness of his skin against her palm, and at the same time she felt the pressure of her hand as it slid from his balls up to the head. He groaned.

"Jesus," he said. "We need to...we need to get somewhere so I can touch every part of you."

"Not unless I get a turn too." Reluctantly, Leonore released his cock, then felt his finger slide out of her cunt. Her breath was already ragged, but she reached for the banister and pulled herself to her feet.

Luckily, it was only a few steps to the bed.

They wouldn't have made it otherwise.

Leonore's jeans were already unzipped and pulled partway down her hips, so she pulled them past her ass, then sat on the bed to tug them the rest of the way off. Before she could finish, Jeff lifted her and tossed her onto her back in the center of the bed, then grabbed the hem of both jean legs and tugged. Laughing, Leonore lifted her legs so they could slide off more easily.

"You too," she told him, and he stepped out of his jeans and crawled up the bed so he was kneeling between her thighs.

"Off with the T-shirt, woman," he commanded, then helped Leonore pull it over her head.

He grinned and did that eyebrow dance Leonore was already starting to love. "Let's see...where to start," he teased, then slid backward and leaned toward her pussy, tongue already visible between his lips.

"Whoa," she said. "Just wait a minute. If you get to feel what it's like when you go down on me, then I want to know what a blowjob is like for you. Lie on your side."



He stopped, shrugged and obeyed. Leonore pivoted, then lay facing him. The tip of his cock was right in front of her mouth, and she reached to pull it closer, just as she felt the side of his head rest against her thigh as he nuzzled his face between her legs and put the tip of his tongue against her clitoris.

She felt his body tense, and she opened her mouth and slid her lips around the head of his cock.

The simultaneous tingle of her clit, which he was licking and sucking and pushing against the edge of his teeth with his tongue, and the unfamiliar throb of her phantom cock as she sucked, hard, almost made Leonore come on the spot. But she was afraid that if she did, he would too, and she didn't want this new, amazing sensation to stop.

With her free hand, Leonore encircled the shaft of his penis and rubbed her thumb along the line of taut flesh on the underside. The intensity of the pleasure made her understand why almost every man she'd ever touched in that spot moaned aloud. Leonore did so herself and almost laughed when she heard Jeff doing the same. They sounded like they were performing in stereo.

Which, she supposed, they were.

She let his cock slide out of her mouth and nibbled along the underside, then caught the shaft between her teeth, gently. She felt the pressure and played with the line between pain and pleasure. *Amazing*. She cupped his balls, squeezed experimentally. *Careful*, she told herself. Too much of that particular good thing could be dangerous.

Leonore's attention was wrenched away, back to her own body. Jeff's fingers were in her, his lips around her clit, sucking as he flicked his tongue against its center. Leonore's orgasm was close, and she released his cock, hoping it wasn't too late. She wanted to feel him come, but...not yet.

He pulled a slick finger from her pussy and slid it into her anus, and she came almost instantly. Her back arched, and Jeff pulled his mouth off her clit, panting.

Leonore had closed her eyes, but she opened them to see if he was coming too. She didn't think so — she would have felt it — but she wanted to make sure.

Jeff's cock glistened wetly with her saliva, and it looked hard enough to cut diamonds, but he wasn't coming yet.

"I have to fuck you right now," Jeff said, his voice raspy, and Leonore scrambled to change positions as he got to his knees and spread her legs wide. He plunged his cock into her, like a sword sliding cleanly into its sheath, all the way to the hilt.

Leonore shrieked and he growled.

She thrust her hips forward, easily finding his rhythm, and the twin pounding of his cock and her cunt was almost too much pleasure to bear.

Almost.

Leonore realized Jeff was saying something, speaking almost in a chant. She tried to make out the words.

"Oh god, Leonore, let me fuck you. Let me fuck you. Let me fuck...ahhh."

The muscles of her pussy gripped him tight, and it was as if she could feel every ridge and vein in his cock, just as she knew he could feel every hot, wet crevice of her cunt.

"I always wanted," Leonore panted, between thrusts, "to know what it felt like to fuck me."

"Now," Jeff said, groaning, "you know."

She wanted to squeeze him harder, tighter.

"Fuck me in the ass," she managed to say. "I want to feel...how tight it is. Please, Jeff..."

She sensed his hesitation—was this too much? But he pulled his cock from her, leaving an excruciating void. His groan told Leonore that he felt it too, and he helped her as she scrambled to her knees and turned her back to him.

"Slowly," she warned him. "You have to give me time to relax and open up. If you go too fast, it'll hurt."

"If I hurt you, I'll know," he said, and Leonore realized he was right.

She felt the head of his cock pressing against the tight muscles of her anus, then begin to slowly push inside. She gave an involuntary squeeze, and felt the shock from both sides of the equation, his and hers. *Delicious.*

"A little more," she breathed.

"I know," he answered, and pushed farther inside. Leonore felt the moment when her muscles, after a last hesitation, opened to admit him, as his throbbing cock slid more deeply into her.

"Ohhhh," she moaned. "That's so tight."

"I don't know how long I can do this," Jeff said, as he slid back a few inches, then thrust again.

"Let's find out," she said, pushing back and accepting all of him. "Come on, Jeff, fuck me. Fuck me until we both come."

Groaning, he did as she asked.

Leonore's magic, which had been enveloping them with a warm buzz, letting them just feel the sensations, not interfering, suddenly flowed into them with a vengeance. Every mirrored thrust, every twin pulse, every stereo throb sizzled and popped with current. Leonore was in her body, in his, in the room watching them. Colors swirled, sparks rose, and wave after wave of pleasure reverberated through their flesh and into the surrounding air.

A voice was screaming, and Leonore didn't know if it was hers or Jeff's, and it didn't matter. As her orgasm began to rise, she was aware of an increasing intensity in the throbbing pulse of his cock, a contraction of his balls. She could feel these things from within her own body and from inside his skin. When his cum burst into her, the release, for both of them, felt as if Leonore were being lifted into the air.

The tendrils of her magic slowly, tenderly withdrew, like tide retreating from a shore. Leonore opened her eyes, almost surprised to find she was not floating, but lying amid a tangle of sheets and pillows. Jeff lay on top of her, his cock still deep in her ass. As he slowly pulled it out, Leonore realized she could no longer feel what he was

feeling, only the slide of his withdrawal from her very tender flesh. She rolled to one side, and he settled next to her, then pulled her head onto his shoulder.

"If it's always going to be like that," he said, "I'm not sure whether it's a good thing or a bad thing."

"What do you mean?" Leonore asked.

"I may never make it to work again," he said. "I'll just stay home and fuck all day."

Leonore laughed. "You have babies to save, Jeff. You have to get out of bed eventually."

"Do I have to?" He pulled Leonore closer. "Can't I save them from here?"

"I can't see how," she told him. "As attractive as I find the idea."

He was silent for a moment, then drew back and settled on one elbow, looking down at her. She couldn't read his expression.

"I was thinking," he said.

"No good can come of that," Leonore said. She didn't want to change the mood, to go back to a reality where livings had to be made, and dangers avoided. She wanted to stay in their comfortable sex cocoon.

"Leonore, I'm serious."

She sighed, resigning herself to the inevitable. But when he went on, what Jeff said surprised her.

"I may not be able to save children from this bed, but I think there may be a way I can save them with you by my side."

Leonore lifted her head from the pillow enough to shake it. "I already told you, it drains my magic. I can't heal your patients for you."

"That's not what I mean." His expression was even more solemn, and a tinge of worry threatened to ruin Leonore's sex-induced euphoria. "Leonore, I think there's a way you can use your gift to safely help children. Without depleting yourself too much, and without compromising the treatment of others."

Leonore waited. He stroked her hair. "You can help *me*. If what you tell me is true, you would be able to tell whether a treatment is working long before the lab tests and comparisons against control groups yield any valuable information."

"I-I could?" Of course she could.

"Yes." His smile was absolutely gleeful. "All I can tell from a test is that the subject has more or less of the right kind of cells in his body. I can't know whether that's being caused by the treatment. That's why it takes so long to tell if something is actually working, to get the right dosages, to know if there are any side effects. If I understand what you told me earlier, *you* can."

Leonore was dubious. "Even if I helped you, you'd still have to go through all the regular testing before you got approval from the AMA."

"That's true. But a huge amount of the normal trial and error I have to go through, before getting down to the real testing, would be eliminated. You could help me shave years off the process."

He stared into her eyes as if willing her to understand. Had those eyes always been so blue, so intense? "Leonore, together, we could save a lot of children's lives. Thousands."

Leonore felt a pressure in her chest, like a sob about to break. But it wasn't sadness. "Thousands?"

"Maybe tens of thousands."

Leonore barely had time to process what that might mean, when she heard the strains of *Spooky* coming from somewhere in the house. Jeff started to laugh.

"I just realized, that's your cell phone. I thought I heard it playing while we were having sex and I thought I imagined it. I never would have guessed you would pick that song for a ring tone."

"I didn't," Leonore said, as the opening bars trilled again. "Ludmilla—Millie—is always taking my phone and changing the custom tones. *Spooky* means that she's the

one calling—it's her idea of a joke." She looked at him. "Seriously, you heard it during *that*? I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have heard a police siren, if it was going off next to my head."

"Like I said, I thought it was just part of the whole experience."

The ringing started again and Leonore groaned. "She's not going to give up." She pulled herself from his arms. The air in the room was warm, as if the heat of their sex magic lingered.

"There's a bathrobe on the inside of the closet door," Jeff said, pulling the comforter up to his chin.

Leonore retrieved the robe, and put it on as she headed down the stairs. Her cell phone was in her purse, which sat on the coffee table. She managed to grab it before the call went to voice mail.

"What?" she asked, trying her best to sound annoyed.

It must not have worked, because Millie just laughed. "What, yourself. You ignoring your phone? Were you and the good doctor doing the nasty?"

"Never mind," Leonore replied, her face flushing, even though she knew no one could see her. She sat down on the sofa. "What's so important that you keep calling back?"

"We need to meet," Ludmilla said, the teasing tone abruptly gone from her voice. "All of us."

Leonore sighed. Millie was right—if the *Draíodóir* was still alive, they had to find him, or some way to deal with him. "When?"

"Tonight," she said. "At seven."

"Okay," Leonore replied, resigned. "I can be home in twenty minutes."

"Not at your house," Millie said. "According to what Tish told me, the *Draíodóir* knows who you are. He probably knows where you live too. She's stopping by your place and picking up some clothes and you're staying at her house."

"What about you?" Leonore asked. "He came to your shop."

"We don't know it was the same guy," she said. "But Letisha thinks I should let one of the girls take over managing the shop for a week and tell everyone I'm taking a vacation, just to be safe. She wants me to stay at her place too."

"There's only the one spare bedroom," Leonore told her. "If we both stay there, someone's going to have to sleep on that horrible sofa of hers."

"You can stay here," said a voice from behind Leonore. She turned. Jeff had put his jeans back on and was coming down the stairs. "Sorry to eavesdrop, but as long as that guy is still out there, I wouldn't get much rest if I thought you were somewhere he could find you."

"Is that him?" Millie gushed in Leonore's ear. "Oooh, sexy voice. And he wants to protect you – that's so sweet. When do I get to meet him?"

"Soon," Leonore said, not sure if it was true. Oh hell, it probably was. "So, we're meeting at Letisha's? Did someone get hold of Lavinia?"

"Vinnie says she *might* come. I'm considering driving down there and picking her up, since I promised Tish I'd stay away from the shop."

"Okay, I'll see you at seven," Leonore told her, and she ended the call.

Jeff sat down next to her on the sofa. "So, is the coven meeting?"

"We don't use that word," Leonore said. "We're a circle of sisters. But, yeah, we need to figure out what to do about the *Draíodóir*."

"I'm serious about you staying here," he said. "If you don't, I'll just worry about you."

She was quiet. The old Leonore would have said no without thinking. But the idea of being here, of seeing him every day, of waking up in his bed...

"Besides," he said. "You have to drive me to work. My car is a total loss, and I have a feeling your friend Tish is right about the insurance company."

"I thought you walked to work," she said.

"Yeah, but it'll be getting cold soon. You wouldn't want me shivering out there, would you?"

He was smiling, but there was something serious in his expression too. She needed to be sure. "Jeff, I've never even dated anyone seriously before. I'm not sure I'd be very good at..."

"Cohabit? Don't worry, I'm a pro. I can get you letters of recommendation from former live-in girlfriends if you like."

"Jeff!" She picked up a sofa pillow and whacked him with it. She was joking, but was surprised to feel a tinge of jealousy at the thought of other women in his life. That was new too.

"Leonore, we can take it a day at a time. If it's not working, you can always stay with one of your sisters." He put both arms around her. "But I have a strange feeling it won't come to that."

Weirdly, so did Leonore. But she wasn't ready to tell him that. "Well, if you're sure..."

"I'm sure," he said. He put one hand on her chin and lifted her face so their lips were inches apart. "Besides, I'm supposed to be your one true love. And who are we to fight destiny?"

Who, indeed?

*The End*



## About the Author

Virginia welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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