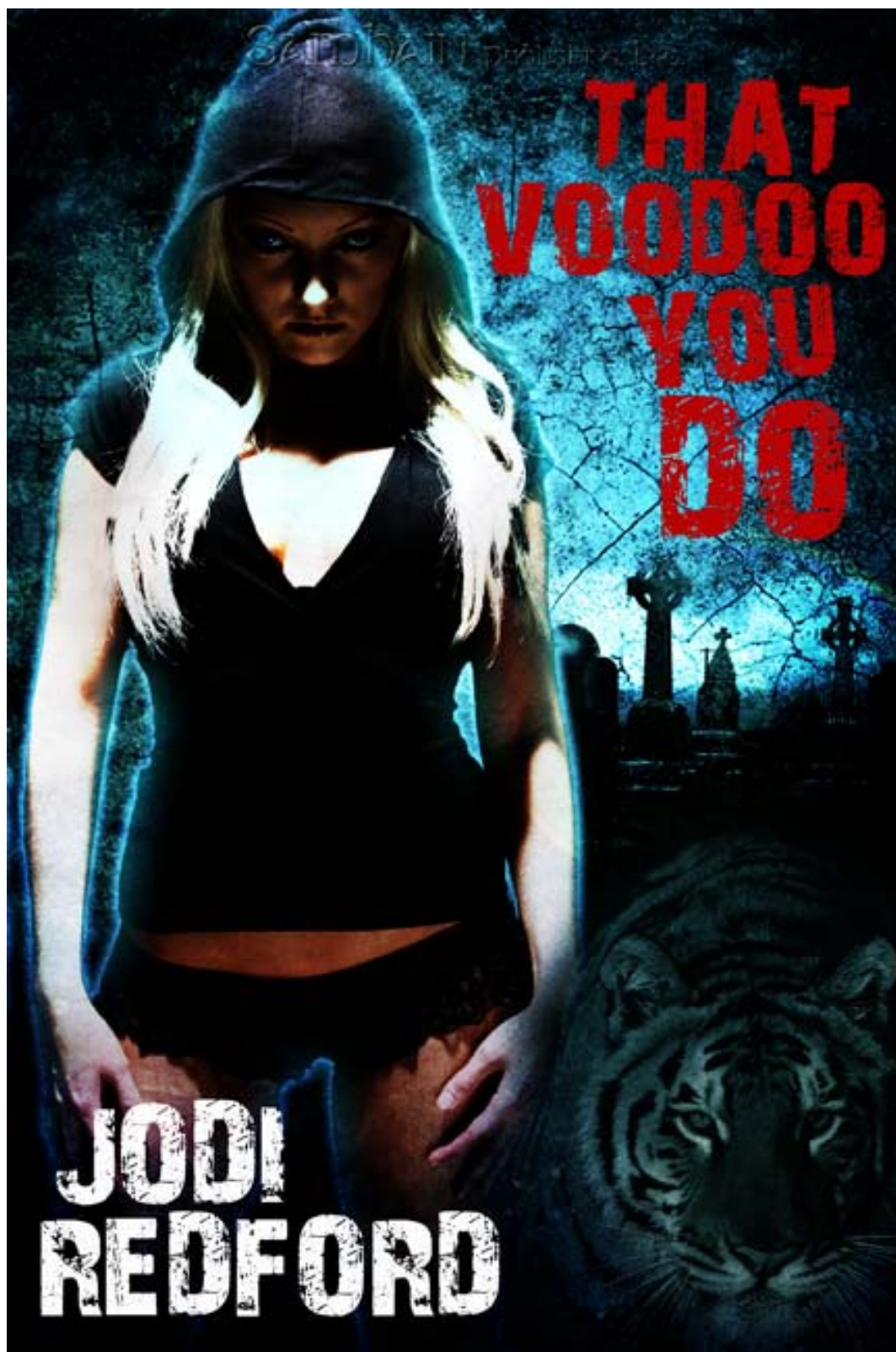


SANDHILL PRODUCTIONS

THAT VOODOO YOU DO

JODI
REDFORD



Something dead this way comes...

That Old Black Magic, Book 1

For ten long years Griffin Trudeau has managed to keep his paws off Jemma Finnegan, best friend and leading star of his kinkiest fantasies. As her appointed cat familiar, indulging those fantasies with the delectable witch is strictly forbidden. But when Jemma shows up at his door with seduction in mind, control goes right out the window.

Too late he realizes making love to Jemma is the trigger that launches a zombie apocalypse.

Jemma's been dealt a double whammy: she's just discovered she's a witch. And Griff has been hiding whiskers and a tail. Oh, and if her life wasn't crazy enough, a dead voodoo queen needs her blood to raise a legion of zombies.

There's one plan that might work to increase Jemma's powers so she can put an end to the looming holocaust. A sexy threesome with Griff and Logan Scott, a werewolf familiar with a history of rubbing Griff's fur the wrong way. A cat and a wolf playing nice, much less sharing? It'll take a miracle.

Warning: A witch, tiger and wolf doing naughty things. A dead voodoo queen doing evil things. And zombies doing zombie things. Get your shovels ready.

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

That Voodoo You Do
Copyright © 2010 by Jodi Redford
ISBN: 978-1-60928-225-7
Edited by Sasha Knight
Cover by Kanaxa

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: October 2010
www.samhainpublishing.com

That Voodoo You Do

Jodi Redford

Dedication

To Dave. For all the years of love and laughter. And putting up with me more times than I can count. Love you always, sweetheart.

Also to my wonder woman of an editor, Sasha, who is simply the best. And last but never least, to all the wonderful readers out there who make it possible for me to do this job that I love.

Chapter One

Griffin Trudeau didn't know it, but he was about to have his bones jumped.

Bumping her car door shut with her rear end, Jemma Finnegan resituated her corset top, strategically plumping her cleavage to maximum overload. Satisfied her best assets were properly displayed, she strolled toward the log home nestled in the thick stand of white pines. The butterflies that'd taken up residence in her belly for the past hour started doing a drunken version of the Macarena. Sure, she'd taken this walk hundreds of times, but never with the end goal of seducing her best friend.

Hell, one of them had to get the ball rolling. If she left it to Griff to act on their mutual attraction, her vagina would shrivel up.

The windows flanking the front door were cracked an inch, allowing the spicy aroma of oregano and thyme to waft outside and taunt her nostrils. Okay, maybe she'd wait until *after* gobbling a bowl of Griff's world-class spaghetti before tackling him into bed.

She gave a warning rap on the door and stepped inside the foyer. Normally she'd kick off her shoes and enjoy walking around barefoot, but the sexy high heels she'd splurged on gave her a much-needed boost of confidence. Not to mention they made her short legs appear longer. Hell, she needed to use all the ammunition at her disposal to get Griff panting after her.

"Lucy, I'm home." Following the faint strains of Bob Seger playing on the radio, she trekked into the kitchen and found Griff hunkered in front of the étagère. The overhead track lighting accentuated the natural highlights in his sable strands, making her fingers itch to run through his hair. Apparently oblivious of the effect he had on her, he continued inspecting the various labels before reaching for a bottle of red wine. His broad shoulders shifted enticingly beneath his forest-green polo shirt and she dragged in a deep breath, willing the delicious scent of Griff's cooking to beat her libido into submission.

"Hey, Jem? I don't have Chianti. Will you lower your lofty standards this once and drink merlot instead?" He swung his head in her direction. The expression that crossed his face made the contortionist dance it'd taken to squeeze into her skintight jeans and the corset top totally worth it.

Smothering her grin of triumph, she rounded the kitchen island, her black patent stiletto heels clicking on the wooden floor planks. She stopped in front of him and leaned down, planting her breasts squarely in his face. "Would you like me to get that?"

He didn't immediately answer. His focus, however, remained glued to her cleavage.

Ground control, we have contact. "Griff...the wine?"

Snapping out of his trance, he passed her the bottle. She repaid his mute obedience with a smacking kiss on his forehead, an action she'd indulged in more times than she could count. This time the gesture had the hidden benefit of awarding him a bird's-eye view down her corset. His loud gulp music to her ears, she pivoted and strode to the center island, making sure she put plenty of sashay in her booty. She couldn't say for sure, but she swore a whimper trickled from Griff.

Yanking open the middle drawer, she pulled out the corkscrew. Sounds of him shuffling around and the melodic clinking of stemware competed with the raspy strains of Seger crooning about "Night Moves" and the roiling bubbles building in the pasta pan. The familiar backdrop of the noises surrounding her were both comforting and arousing, adding to the heady buzz of sexual tension that hung thick in the air. Swiveling, she caught the spastic twitch in Griff's jaw and knew he felt the brewing chemistry too. Biting the inside of her cheek in an effort to stifle her smile, she worked the pointed end of the corkscrew into the foil cap topping the wine bottle. "So how did everything go at the store today?"

"Your dad was his typical slave-driver self." Beneath the mock sarcasm, genuine affection laced Griff's tone. He and her dad were not only boss and employee, but good buddies. A fact she was eternally grateful for. If things did progress beyond friends-with-benefits between her and Griff, she didn't need to worry about her parents not supporting the relationship. Crap, who was she kidding? They'd be so overjoyed they'd probably throw a party.

"Dad's lucky to have you. No one runs that place like you do." *Or looks as hot in a tool belt.* For that reason alone she made sure to stop in at Finnegan Hardware at least three days a week. Something her cousins loved to tease her about unmercifully, the brats. Chewing her lip, she smoothed a hand over the waist of her top. She noticed Griff's unblinking fascination as he visually tracked the path her fingers took. Tingles skipped across her skin. "You haven't commented on my outfit."

His gaze immediately veered to her boobs again before shooting away. "You look...different." The gravel in his voice betrayed him and he cleared his throat. "Maybe I shouldn't have made spaghetti. I'd hate for you to accidentally splatter sauce on your white top."

Hoo boy. Could he have given her a better lead in? "Hmm, should I take it off then?" Conjuring her inner mischievous vixen, she reached for her top's uppermost eyhook. The glasses slipped from Griff's hold and clunked onto the kitchen counter, miraculously without breaking.

"Jesus, Jemma. Don't joke around like that."

"Who says I'm joking?" She ran a fingertip along the girly ruffles edging the top of the corset.

As if hypnotized, Griff watched the progress of her finger. He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. The timer on the stove dinged, making him jump. Looking suspiciously relieved by the interruption, he dashed to the boiling stockpot and slid it from the burner. Water sloshed over the rim of the pot, and he jerked his hand back with a sharp curse.

She rushed to his side, trying not to wipe out on the water splashed on the floor, and gaped at the angry red burn spreading near his knuckles. “Oh no.”

“I’m fine.”

“Don’t give me that shit, Mr. Macho.” Snagging him by the belt loop, she towed him toward the sink. She cranked the faucet to the coldest setting and dunked his hand beneath the spray. The icy water stung like a million sharp needles pricking her, but she ignored the discomfort. “Do you have any first-aid cream?”

“Jemma, I’m *fine*.”

“Stubborn is more like it.” She pointed to the lineup of barstools fronting the island. “Sit.” Leaving him to follow her orders in grumpy compliance, she turned off the faucet and hurried to the master bathroom. She sidestepped a towel and gym socks that’d somehow missed the hamper. *Men*. A little scrounging in the medicine cabinet coughed up a tube of ointment. She returned to the kitchen and perched on the barstool beside Griff. Uncapping the tube, she dabbed a fat dollop of the cream onto the vivid red splotch on his hand, trying to keep her touch light and gentle. “This is a change of pace. Usually it’s you coming to *my* rescue. I swear I’ve lost count of how often you’ve saved me from near disaster.” Most of those times he’d mysteriously shown up without her even needing to call him. It was almost like he possessed a sixth sense where she was concerned.

Shaking off the fanciful thought, she chuckled. “Remember when I got stuck in the doggy door at my parents’ house? Man, that was embarrassing. Teach me to misplace the keys.”

Dead silence greeted her observation. She glanced up and caught Griff staring at her mouth. Unmistakable desire simmered in his chocolate-brown eyes. A dizzying rush of excitement flooded her bloodstream. *It’s now or never. Go bold or go home*. She leaned forward and his hand clenched beneath hers. Heart thumping, she stroked toward the crook of his elbow, her fingernails feathering over the dusting of sun-kissed hairs that sprinkled his forearm.

A deep rumble came from Griff’s chest, almost resembling a purr. Encouraged by the sound, she inched closer and pressed her mouth against his. His shaky exhalation sailed across her lips, but he didn’t draw away. Taking that as a good sign, she increased the pressure a smidgeon, refusing to rush the moment. A first kiss should be savored...explored in infinitesimally delicious increments. They had all night to get around to the scorching, I-want-to-eat-you-up, tongue-wrestling part of the festivities.

She played the tip of her tongue against Griff’s lips. They were firm yet soft, splendidly kissable. Uttering a deep, hungry groan that seemed to emanate all the way from his toes, he hauled her off the stool and dragged her onto his lap. Her crotch bumped the massive erection tenting the fly of his jeans. Shock ricocheted through her. Good Lord, she’d been missing out on *that* all these years?

Okay, screw taking things slow. She rubbed along the delicious length of Griff’s shaft, undulating her hips in a rhythm that’d do a stripper proud. He rewarded her with a husky, tortured moan. A millisecond

later his mouth crashed over hers and she automatically parted her lips. Taking her up on the invite, his tongue dipped inside, hot and seeking.

He kissed her like a death-row inmate scarfing down his last meal. Insistent fingers sifted through her hair, tilting her head, granting deeper access for his questing tongue. She returned its parrying thrust and earned another of those sexy purrs of his. The sound shimmered across her nerve endings, creating a decadent spiral of heat that coalesced into a tight, sweet ache between her thighs. She whimpered. Griff immediately jerked his head back, harsh breaths sawing from his lungs. Regret didn't quite dampen the passion swirling in his darkened pupils.

"Christ, Jemma, I'm sorry." His voice as unsteady as his hands, he clamped onto her hips and started to put her back on the barstool...away from that delicious erection.

Oh hell no. Hooking her legs around the rear of Griff's stool, she wedged herself tight against his lap and slid her mouth along his bristly jaw. His drawn-out moan rushed past her ear, ruffling her hair. She reached his neck and nuzzled her nose into his warm skin, his yummilicious musky scent making her giddy. God, he smelled good enough to eat. Putting her theory to work, she nibbled the taut tendon that ran along the side of his neck.

"We shouldn't be doing this." His words came out in a desperate, agonized croak.

Cupping his face, she skimmed her lips over his in soft entreaty. She'd known he'd be reluctant to risk their ten-year friendship by getting physical. Good thing she wasn't averse to bringing out the big guns. Scooting back, she unfastened the eyelets on the corset and tossed the garment aside.

Griff stared at her naked breasts, his expression a strange mix of misery and lust. "Jemma..."

"Touch me. Please. I need this. I need *you*."

He gulped—hard—and loosened his grip on her hips. After a brief hesitation, his fingers quested upward and grazed her navel. Her belly quivered. His hands ghosted along her rib cage, taking forever to reach the under swells of her breasts. He traced their soft curvature with slow reverence, his thumbs coming to rest on her nipples. The barely there touch made her clit throb with a greedy ache. God, she needed his hands and mouth on every part of her. Now. "Griff—"

His hooded, sexy gaze lifted. He looked like a man on the edge. Like a man who was a breath away from ripping the rest of her clothes off and fucking her senseless. She wished he'd damn well get on with it.

"Jemma, I'm going to suck on your nipples until you're begging me to make you come. So think you can be quiet for the next two seconds?"

Well, when he put it that way...

Kneading the weight of her breasts in both hands, he leaned down and flicked her nipple with his tongue, the wet friction causing her spine to arch. His teeth scraped her flesh, not painfully, just enough to create a pleasurable sting.

“You have sensitive nipples.” He didn’t phrase it as a question. Apparently her gasping moans were answer enough for him. He divided his attention between both breasts until their tips were rosy and swollen, glistening with his saliva. “Is your clit as sensitive?” The inquiry made her squirm in his lap. Griff lifted his head from her breasts, his expression carnal. “How about if we find out?”

“Oh yes,” she said, breathless with anticipation. She started to wiggle down from the stool, but he hiked her onto the island counter instead. While she slipped off her high heels, Griff wrestled with the button on her jeans and rasped the zipper down. Pushing her hips forward, she granted him easier access to shimmy the tight denim free of her legs. Her skin met the chilled surface of the granite and she shivered.

“Sorry, baby. We should be doing this in the warm comfort of my bed, but I don’t have the willpower to wait that long to taste you.” Growling, he hooked his thumbs into the elastic of her bikini and dragged the scrap of scarlet silk down. He brushed the insides of her thighs, the touch soft and teasing. Sweet Jesus, she couldn’t wait to have his mouth on her pussy.

The intense look in his eyes hinting that he shared a similar sentiment, Griff spread her legs and settled between them, the stool affording him the perfect height and angle. He tugged her toward the edge of the counter and draped her thighs over his wide shoulders. Inhaling with an appreciative groan, he lowered his mouth to her pussy and licked along the length of her dripping slit before swirling over her hardened clit. A sharp and sweet melody of sensations rocketed through her and her hips bucked. Sliding his palms beneath her buttocks, he held her steady against his busy tongue.

“Griff...oh *God*.” She clamped onto his bobbing head, holding on for dear life. The silky ends of his hair tickled her fingers, providing a marked contrast to the rough abrasion of his whiskered jaw. As for his tongue. Holy hell, it should be considered a weapon of mass destruction.

A part of her couldn’t believe they were finally doing this, that the man going down on her and detonating fireworks in her body was Griff. But it felt right. Perfect. He lifted his head and speared her with a smoky look, his mouth and chin glossy with her juices. “Let yourself go, Jem. Come for me.”

“Trust me, keep up what you’re doing and that’ll be a certainty.” Panting, she slid her thighs along his collarbone.

“Baby, that was just the appetizer.” He eased a finger inside her before suckling her clit between his teeth. Holding the tormented nub hostage to the agile voraciousness of his tongue, he steadily worked her into a shrieking, quivering mess. He let up right when she was teetering on the brink. She gave an outraged wail and he grinned. Bastard. Slipping two fingers along the rim of her labia, he spread her juices around before easing both digits inside her pussy. Her inner walls hugged the welcome intruders as they advanced inward.

“Almost...there.” Satisfaction rumbled deep in Griff’s chest as his seeking fingers zeroed in on her G spot. His mouth returned to her clit. Feather-light swirls of his tongue accompanied the firmer, insistent

pressure of those wicked fingers. “You taste wonderful, baby. So. Fucking. Good.” Griff’s purr-like hum reverberated through her flesh.

She was such a goner.

“Oh my G—” Her words morphed into a breathless squeak. An orgasm bigger than life roared down on her. In a blinding flash it caught her up, bowing her body into a tight arch before she shattered. That old cliché about seeing stars? Not just bullshit. In fact, she was pretty damn certain she spied a glimpse of an entirely new galaxy.

Dazed and blissfully limp, she floated back to earth. Griff slipped his fingers free but continued lapping away, drawing out the aftershocks still trembling through her. Holy crimoly, the guy had some serious oral skills. Wobbling up onto her elbows, she watched him with a heavy-lidded stare, her body not entirely sated despite her bone-melting orgasm. She wouldn’t be truly satisfied until every inch of Griff’s cock was buried deep inside her. Just the thought of him taking her, being connected in that most intimate of ways, coaxed a needy whimper from her.

“Griff...please...fuck me.”

A tremor ran through the strong hands encircling her hips. Griff stopped his delicious licking and glanced at her, his expression a jumble of indecision and lust. He scooted the stool back, his arms dropping. For one heartbreaking moment she worried he was about to start in again with claims of why they shouldn’t be doing this. Instead he stripped off his polo. Her mouth instantly watered like one of Pavlov’s dogs, and she resisted the urge to check her chin for drool.

In all the years she’d known Griff she’d never seen him bare-chested. What a damn shame. The guy was *gorgeous*. She let her gaze rove over the acres of bronzed flesh and rippling muscles comprising his torso. His sculpted pecs and abdominals were devoid of hair. *I wonder if he shaves everywhere*. Biting her lip, she dropped her scrutiny to the impressive bulge in his jeans. She’d be finding out soon enough.

“Son of a *bitch*.” Griff’s curse managed to drag her focus back to his face. He tunneled a hand through his hair before dropping his arm with a frustrated growl. “I don’t have any condoms in the house.”

“It’s okay. I’m on the pill.”

He frowned. “You’ve never mentioned being on them before.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I’ve also kept you in the dark about my crampy periods and not-so-fresh-feeling days. Aren’t you deprived? Now are you going to take those jeans off or do I have to rip them off you myself?”

He seemed intrigued by her suggestion but ended up shucking his shoes and jeans on his own. Quite fortuitous, since it allowed her to sit back and ogle to her heart’s content. He had a physique that’d been well earned from his routine trips to the local gym. Damn, maybe she shouldn’t have turned down his invitation to become workout buddies. Here she could have enjoyed getting an eyeful of his half-naked, sweat-glistened body all these years. Shifting her focus from his firm, muscular calves, she zeroed in on the

impressive organ between his thighs. Well hell, she had her answer. The russet hedge flanking that sequoia of a cock sported a perfect trim. Amazing the number of guys who didn't understand the appeal of good manscaping.

"You're staring at my dick."

"I know. I'm visualizing it inside me."

Griff moaned before kicking his jeans aside. "Baby, you don't need to imagine. It's going to be all yours in five seconds."

He pushed the stool out of the way before snuggling between her legs. She reached down and stroked his cock, catching him off guard. Ignoring his sharp inhale, she continued her thorough investigation of the rock-hard shaft gripped in her hand. Luxuriating in its satiny-steel texture, she gave it a good pump with her fist. He jerked, his cock pulsing against her fingers.

His head fell back, revealing the strained cords in his neck. He licked his lips, his breath escaping in a ragged pant. "If you keep that up, I'm never going to last long enough to make you come again."

"Sorry. Stan just looked so happy to see me I couldn't resist."

His mouth twitched. "You've named my dick *Stan*?"

"What? Stan's a great name. Honest, hardworking. A real *upstanding* citizen." She waggled her brows.

"What the hell am I going to do with you?"

"Hmm, I have an idea..." She scooted forward on the counter until her pussy grazed the head of his cock. They both groaned at the slick contact. Exploring the prominent, rigid veins of his shaft, she moved toward the fat, plum-shaped cap. She teased herself with the silky gland, running it up and down her slit. On the fourth pass, Griff took over, spreading her slippery folds enough to ease just past her opening.

"I love seeing you like this. All open and wet for me."

Griff's words uttered in that husky low growl drove her crazy. She hooked her ankles behind his muscled ass, encouraging him closer. He took the hint and rocked his hips. His thick cock thrust deeper. Stretching her to the limits. Setting fire to her nerve endings.

Claiming her mouth in another soul-deep kiss, he plunged the final few inches, lodging to the hilt, and skimmed his thumb over her clit. She lost it. Pleasure bursting in uncontrollable waves, she grabbed onto him, her nails digging into his biceps. An electrical current zipped along her spine and throughout every cell in her body. Griff's mouth absorbing her cries, she shuddered as the orgasm exploded within her so forcefully it felt like the entire room shook from its impact. Dimly, she became aware of the rattling of utensils in the island's drawers.

"Holy crap, the room really *is* shaking." She clung to Griff, her shriek turning into a laugh. Didn't it just figure? She finally got to experience the most amazing sex ever with Griff and a damn earthquake was probably about to do her in.

No sooner did she have that thought and the fierce rattles stopped. Loosening her death grip on Griff, she looked up to find him frowning at the counter.

“That was weird.”

Grinning, she tweaked his nipple playfully. “You better be referring to the earthquake, not about making love to me.”

His expression softened. Leaning down, he brushed his lips over hers. “Making love to you is a dream come true. Sublime, in fact.”

Griff’s sexy hum of pleasure stoked a renewed flush of desire. She shifted on the island and noticed that his cock was still buried in her and harder than granite. Either he hadn’t come yet or he possessed the quickest recovery time in history. Regardless, there was no way she’d let that magnificent erection go to waste. Looping her arms around his neck, she nibbled his jawline. “Hmm, sublime is good. Want to go for mind-blowingly awesome next?”

Griff opened his mouth but his cell phone suddenly went off, the driving beat of AC/DC’s “Back in Black” cutting short whatever he’d been about to say. His shoulders tensed. Intuiting that she was two seconds away from losing her shot at another earth-shaking orgasm, she kissed her way down his sternum and circled the dusky areola, outlining his nipple with her tongue. Sometimes a gal just had to play dirty.

Uttering a hoarse groan, Griff eased out of her and stooped to grab the ringing phone from his pants pocket. She trailed her hand between her legs and danced a fingertip over her clit. Griff’s nostrils flared, a rough exhale gusting from his chest. “Ah hell.” Yanking the island’s middle drawer open, he tossed his cell in and slammed the drawer shut, right before slamming her onto his cock.

Griffin listened to the soft whir of the ceiling fan blades whipping the air overhead. Cuddled beside him, the woman he’d loved and craved for longer than he could remember slept soundly. He’d worn her out. Hell, he’d worn himself out, making love to Jemma like each time would be the last. Unfortunately, it was probably all too true.

Plowing his hands through his hair, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood. After glancing behind him to ensure he hadn’t awakened her, he headed out to the kitchen. He padded to the island and fished his cell phone from the drawer. A tap of his finger on the display triggered the backlight. Thirty-three missed calls.

Aw fuck. He didn’t need to check the caller ID to know they were all from Clarissa.

He’d broken the cardinal rule—no sex with Jemma. There would be hell to pay.

Weariness plunging like a two-ton anchor in his chest, he turned off the cell phone and returned to the bedroom. He climbed in next to Jemma. She stirred with a sleepy sigh and curled against him. “I missed you.”

He smoothed aside a lock of her strawberry-blonde hair and kissed her forehead, his heart swelling with everything he was forbidden to reveal. Forbidden to feel. “I was barely gone two minutes.”

“Two minutes too long.” She nuzzled his collarbone before embarking on a tantalizing journey down his chest and abdomen. By the time she reached his cock he’d been reduced to a quivering mass of tortured nerve endings. The wet warmth of her mouth engulfed his shaft, employing enough suction to make a Hoover envious. His eyes rolling back, he groaned and dropped his head to the pillow.

Hell could wait until tomorrow.

Chapter Two

“I don’t have any coffee in the house.”

Jemma cracked one eye open and gave Griff a bleary stare. “No condoms. No coffee. What kind of swinging bachelor are you?”

He leaned down and nipped the back of her neck. “The kind who has plans for you when I get back.”

She speared him with a suspicious look. “These plans better not include cleaning your bathroom. I’m not falling for that again, you sneaky bastard.”

Griff tried for an innocent look that fell way short of authentic. “What? I told you it was an emergency.”

“My cousins coming over to play poker was *not* an emergency.”

Chuckling, he pushed off the mattress. “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be back in twenty. Make sure you’ve lost that T-shirt by then.”

A shiver of expectation raced through her. Who knew Griff could be so sexy and demanding? She indulged in the delicious view of his sculpted buns before they disappeared beneath the faded denim of his jeans. He shrugged into a dark gray T-shirt and traipsed from the room. Snuggling into the sheets with a blissful sigh, she closed her eyes.

Her own snore snapped her from a light doze several minutes later. Thank God Griff wasn’t around. Kind of difficult to maintain her sex-goddess vibe when she sounded like a damn foghorn.

Footsteps scrunched across the carpet and she groaned. “Oh shit, you are home.” Remembering that she hadn’t obeyed his earlier command, she wiggled her butt beneath the covers and snickered. “Guess what, I didn’t ditch your shirt. Does this mean you’re gonna spank me?”

Griff didn’t answer, but she knew he was still there. She could hear him breathing. Loudly. Either he was severely out of breath or brushing up on his obscene phone caller skills. A foul odor wafted to her nostrils, and she scrunched her nose. “Dude, that better not be the coffee because it smells like something fell in there and died.”

Rolling onto her side, she glanced toward the doorway. Her uncle Harold stood a couple of feet away, puddling dirty rainwater on the bedroom carpet.

Pretty damn freaky, since he’d been dead for the past sixteen months. She blinked. “Okay, this is officially going down as the weirdest dream ever.” Not to mention amazingly lucid. Even the rain that sluiced from Harold’s severely bad comb-over looked eerily realistic.

One mud-caked wingtip stomped forward with a wet squelch. Harold's opaque eyes focused on her with malevolent intent, prompting her skin to prickle with the creepy-crawlies. *If this was real, I'd probably be peeing myself right about now.*

Deciding that it was way past time to wake her ass up, she pinched her arm—and yelped at the resulting sting. “Holy shit, I *am* awake.” Numb disbelief paralyzed her limbs. There could be no way in hell this was actually happening. Only it was. Dead Harold definitely wasn't a figment of her imagination.

Her eyes widening, she stared at the corpse's shuffling advance. A mix of fear and panic raced through her, competing with the irrational part of her brain that kept dredging up images of her uncle teaching her how to play his old Gibson guitar while they both belted out the words to Otis Redding's “Dock of the Bay”. She'd sung the song in tribute at Harold's memorial, certain he'd been watching from the afterlife with a huge grin on his face.

Only he wasn't smiling now. If anything, his face held the scariest expression she'd ever seen. She gulped and struggled to fight off a renewed surge of terror. This was *Harold*. He would never hurt a fly, much less—

His pale, waxy features twisting with ugly menace, Harold lunged forward. Long, boney fingers swiped the air inches away from her head. “*Graw.*”

She'd seen enough zombie movies to know that loosely translated, *graw* meant *Hmm, which of your tasty appendages should I snack on first?* A pathetic excuse for a scream gurgling from her throat, she scrambled sideways, battling to escape her uncle's windmilling arms and the imprisoning blanket. Finally free of the covers, she tumbled off the bed and ducked to a crouch near the closet. Crawling toward the corner of the mattress, she peeked past the dangling quilt. Yep, deceased relative still there and blocking the only means of exit.

Heartbeat roaring in her ears, she considered her options. Only one sounded good at the moment—getting the fuck out of there, with all her limbs still attached. Which meant she needed a weapon. Keeping low to the floor, she scanned her immediate area. On the far side of the dresser, a piece of exercise equipment caught her eye. A part of her couldn't believe she was actually considering defending herself with a freakin' ThighBlaster. An even bigger part wondered why the hell Griff *owned* a ThighBlaster. She'd have to give him major shit about that one.

Assuming she lived long enough. Of course, there wasn't much chance of that happening if she didn't leave her pathetic hidey hole and haul ass over to the dresser. Easier said than done when her stubborn toes were currently fused to the carpet.

She sucked in a deep breath. “Damn it, you can do this.” With Herculean effort, she pried her feet from the floor and scrambled toward the dresser. Another loud “*Graw*” rasped nearby—way too close—and she dove for the ThighBlaster, her flattened palms and bare knees plowing through the carpet. Her

fingers wrapped around the ThighBlaster's rubber handle at the exact moment a dark wingtip squished into view. The stench hit her full blast. Wet, moldy wool and the sick sweetness of formaldehyde.

Holding her breath, she jerked her gaze upward and locked stares with Harold. Any thought of trying to convince her uncle's corpse that he didn't want to make a snack out of her instantly died. The creature looming over her with murderous zeal in its eyes wouldn't be swayed by her pleas. His hand swiped at her. She ducked, striking out with the ThighBlaster. It hit him square in the ankle, hard, and he wobbled. Seizing the opportunity, she struck again, swinging her makeshift weapon with a howl of determination. It crunched against his kneecap. Grunting, Harold clamped onto the ThighBlaster and jerked it upward. Jemma—still holding her end tight—slammed into him, her nose indenting his left breast pocket.

Oh God, dead person cooties. Shuddering, she scooted backward. Zombie Harold lashed out with the ThighBlaster, and she catapulted over the dresser's edge to avoid getting bashed in the head. "If this is about the butt-ugly flower arrangement my parents sent to the funeral, I swear I had nothing to do with it."

Harold made another swipe.

Sometimes there was just no reasoning with dead people.

Griffin was halfway home when Jemma's scream pierced his consciousness. His muscles seized. Pushing through the murky haze of her panic, he tried to zero in on the source of the threat against Jemma. It came to him. Not in a mental image but a phantom scent. His stomach pitched. "Oh, fuck no." Fear surging through his bloodstream, he stomped on the gas pedal, nearly fishtailing on the wet asphalt. His heart remained lodged in his throat for the excruciating eight minutes it took to reach home. Screeching to a halt in the driveway, he threw the Pathfinder into park and leapt from the vehicle.

The front door of the house stood wide open. He thundered into the entry and was greeted by the crash of breaking glass echoing down the hall. Adrenaline pumped to high gear, he raced toward the sound, barely registering the muddy footprints leading to his bedroom. The zombie had Jemma pinned to the wall with a ThighBlaster, of all things. With a strangled roar, Griffin hurtled over the splintered shards of mirror littering the carpet and knocked the corpse to the floor. He flattened himself against the flailing creature and slammed its head down. Angry growls rumbled from the zombie as it chomped through the carpet fibers.

Griffin risked a quick peek in Jemma's direction. Other than looking terrified out of her skull, she seemed to be in possession of all her body parts. "Is this the only one?"

Jemma remained frozen in place. The corpse beneath him bucked wildly, howling.

"Damn it. Jemma, are there any more?"

"N-no." She took a step forward, her teeth chattering.

"Good, then go get me a shovel out of the garage."

Fortunately she didn't wait around to ask why. The second she scurried from the room, he gripped the zombie's head in both hands and snapped its neck. Relieved he didn't have to explain to Jemma how he managed that feat so effortlessly, he sat on the zombie's torso. The corpse still fought for dominance but at least having no control of its neck muscles slowed it down.

Jemma sprinted back into the room a few seconds later, a spade clenched in her fist. "I couldn't find a shovel."

"Doesn't matter. Bring that here."

She did and he grabbed the handle. He gave her an apprehensive look when she didn't back away. "Sweetheart, I doubt you want to see this."

"W—what are you going to do?"

"Sever its head. It's the only way to completely stop it."

Her complexion went as white as chalk. Gulping, she turned and stumbled from the room. Griffin stood. Planting his foot in the middle of the zombie's back, he hacked the spade through the corpse's neck, putting a permanent end to its second lease on life. He tossed the garden tool aside and went in search of Jemma. She was perched on the sofa, her arms wrapped tightly around her upper body and trembling violently. Loping to the couch, he scooped her into his arms. She leaned into him, still shaking, and he rocked her gently until the tremors quieted.

Her hand curled into his shirt, and she clutched him like he was her last link to reality. "What the hell is going on, Griff? Dead people don't come back to life and attack their relatives for no good reason. That sort of stuff only happens in Stephen King novels or low-budget B movies. Right?"

He stopped stroking her back as her statement registered. "Relative?" Tipping his gaze down, he caught the disbelief swimming in the blue depths of Jemma's irises. "Are you saying that zombie was a family member?"

"It was Uncle Harold."

Oh shit. He'd just lopped off her uncle's head. Sure, not like he'd had any choice, but this definitely wasn't a story he planned to recount at the next Finnegan family reunion. He extricated himself from Jemma's limbs. "I think you need a drink." Actually he did too, but there was a good chance they'd be taking a long road trip in the immediate future, which meant he needed to stay sober.

He crossed to the liquor cabinet and grabbed a bottle of whiskey. After pouring two shots into a glass, he returned to Jemma. She took one look at the offering and shook her head. "I'd like to keep my wits about me in case any more of my dead relatives decide to stop by and say howdy. Or bite off my ear."

"You're safe for the time being. It'll take at least a couple hours for the next grave to be unlocked and at least twice that long for its occupant to pick up your trail."

She gaped at him. "What the *hell* are you talking about?"

He averted his gaze and instead stared out the adjacent window at the soggy landscape. This all had to be more than her mind could process, and it'd only become more overwhelming once she heard the whole story. But better for him to lay it on her now, before taking her to Clarissa. The Beaumont coven mistress didn't have the patience to slowly ease people into anything.

Returning his attention to Jemma, he nodded his chin toward her glass. "Drink. You'll need it for what I have to tell you."

"Nothing's going to shock me at this point. Compared to having my dead uncle try to take a chunk out of me, pretty much everything else pales in comparison."

"Don't be so sure."

Heaving a frustrated breath, Jemma took a sip from the whiskey and nearly choked on a rasping cough. "God, that's awful."

"Give it a sec."

"Griff...please, I just need to understand what in the world is going on." She looked at him, pleading, and his insides turned to mush. He'd always been her willing slave, incapable of denying her a damn thing. No point trying to change that status now.

"Jemma, you're not who you think you are. You're not *what* you think you are."

Frown lines scrunched toward the bridge of her nose. She plunked the glass onto the coffee table. "What do you mean?"

"Your parents told you they adopted you from a young unwed mother. That's only partly true. They didn't tell you that the girl was living with a band of gypsies at the time and she wasn't your actual mother."

She stared at him mutely, her mouth hanging open.

Hell, if he didn't know the entire truth, he'd find it unbelievable too. "Your real mother's name was Lillian. She was murdered during an attempt to steal you. Lillian's people put you in the care of the gypsies. They tried their best to protect you in the beginning, but it eventually became clear you needed a better cover."

"A better cover for what?"

"Who you are."

She worried her bottom lip between her teeth before shaking her head. "But I'm just me. Not anyone particularly important."

Christ, she couldn't have it more wrong. She was everything. And that was just in regards to *him*. Aside from that, her importance to the world was staggeringly scary. "You come from a long line of very powerful witches. Trust me, the untapped potential within you is mind-boggling."

Her nose twitched, a tried-and-true warning that Jemma had an argument in the brewing stage. “Where are you coming up with this shit? So help me, if you’re fucking with me right now, I’ll never forgive you.”

“I’m not. And I know this stuff because I was assigned to watch over you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Griff, I’ve known you since college.”

“I was assigned to you then. Now do you want to know who you are or continue arguing instead?”

“I’m not argu—” She sighed, apparently clued in by the arching of his eyebrows. “Fine. Continue.”

“You were born Jemma Beaumont. Your grandmother—Rose Beaumont—was the founder and leader of the Beaumont coven in Savannah, Georgia.” He searched her face for any spark of recognition. Though Jemma had been separated from her coven sisters for nearly twenty-nine years, the magical connection she shared with them was strong. It wasn’t unheard of for coven members to mentally interact with each other over time and space. Perhaps she’d subconsciously communicated with them without realizing it.

Jemma continued staring up at him, her expression blank. So much for any lingering psychic ties she might have with the coven. “This is all fascinating, Griff, but what does it have to do with my dead uncle showing up in your bedroom this morning?”

“When Rose was alive her biggest rival was a woman named Antoinette Delacroix, better known as Bloody Nettie. Antoinette performed darker magic than your grandmother. Voodoo so steeped in evil it ate away her soul.” He shuddered in remembrance of the tales he’d heard of Antoinette’s black rituals. “When Rose found out Nettie had discovered a spell that would permanently unlock the doors of death, freeing every corpse from its grave and granting Antoinette unholy power over the dead, Rose knew she had to stop her.”

Jemma gulped. “Hell yeah. A mass legion of dead Uncle Harolds running amok? Not a pretty sight. So what did Rose do?”

“She cobbled together a counterbalancing spell and proceeded to work on another that would rob Nettie of her powers for good. But Nettie caught wind of Rose’s scheme and sent one of her raised dead to murder Rose while she slept.” He heard Jemma’s hard swallow, and grimaced. Unfortunately, there was no way to paint this picture in a prettier light. “Antoinette was only partly successful. She did manage to kill your grandmother, but Rose lived long enough to enact her own death spell against Bloody Nettie.”

“Why the hell didn’t she just do that to begin with?” Jemma tossed her hands up with a grumble.

“Trust me, Rose would have. But the laws within magic can’t be trifled with. Rose was a white witch. Practicing the black arts in any form produces undesired consequences. Furthermore, killing a voodoo queen with that dark magic would only rob Rose of *her* powers, which it ultimately did.”

“But she stopped Bloody Nettie and her army of zombies. Isn’t that all that matters?”

“It isn’t that simple. Nettie will never rest until she gets her way.”

Jemma's eyes threatened to bug out of their sockets. "Never rest? The woman is *dead*, for God's sake."

"Dead, but still around." He scrubbed his hand across the back of his neck when Jemma frowned. "She's a ghost. A very mean, vengeance-seeking spirit, which only complicates things further."

"Call me crazy, but a ghost who enlists dead people to run her errands is complicated no matter if she's the wicked bitch of the west or not." Jemma snatched her glass of whiskey. She slugged down the remaining liquor and sputtered. He started to reach for her but she waved him off. "Okay, what exactly is Bloody Nettie's grievance against me that she had to dispatch dead Harold to come after me?"

"She needs you."

"For what?"

He unscrewed the cap from the whiskey and topped off her glass. She'd need another fortifying dose of alcohol.

"Raising her legion of zombies."

Chapter Three

“Oh man, this keeps getting better and better.” Groaning, Jemma plopped her elbows on her knees and buried her face in her palms. Griffin settled beside her and curved his hands around her shoulders, his heat branding her through the T-shirt. Despite the insanity that’d become her world, his presence soothed. Good ole Griff. He’d always been her rock. He massaged circles across her shoulder blades, working his own brand of magic. Her muscles started to give and she exhaled weakly. “Mind explaining to me how I’m able to raise zombies?”

“Technically you can’t—that’s Nettie’s department. But once freed from Rose’s counterbalancing spell, Antoinette would be able to finish unlocking death’s final door. Your blood is the only thing that can break your grandmother’s spell.”

She dropped her arms and peered up at Griffin. “My *blood*? Oh man, I don’t think I like the sound of that. Especially if it involves killing or maiming me. You know, two activities I typically try to avoid.”

Griff’s expression remained pensive. Not exactly confidence inspiring. “We’ll keep you out of Nettie’s reach, just like we’ve always done. Rose’s spell will stay intact and everything will be fine.”

“Easy for you to say. You don’t have a big, bad voodoo ghostie and her legion of zombies thirsting for your blood.” She shivered at the horrific vision playing out in her head.

Griff leaned down and cupped her cheek, forcing her to meet the fierce determination in his stare. “The only way Nettie will ever get to you is over my dead body.” He sealed his promise with a quick kiss before standing. “I hate to cut this short, but we need to hit the road.”

“Where are we going?” Not that it mattered. Anywhere free of zombies was fine by her.

“Savannah.”

She blinked at him. “Are you nuts? That’s ground zero—where all of this crap started.”

“The coven house is the safest place for you now.” Griff cleared his throat, his gaze skittering to the bottle of whiskey, then the floor, until finally resting on his running shoes.

His shifty behavior stirred her suspicions. “If it’s so damn safe, why do you look uncomfortable as shit with the idea of taking me there?”

“Don’t worry about it. It has nothing to do with you.” The red flush crawling along his neck hinted otherwise.

“I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what’s behind your nervous Nelly routine.”

“Nothing.”

She tightened her jaw. “You always were a crappy liar, Trudeau.”

“Damn it, Jemma, we don’t have time—”

“I mean it, I’m not budging.” She latched onto the cushion beneath her butt, just in case he doubted her sincerity.

A weary sigh snaked from Griff. “I swear you were put on this earth to test me.” Digging his knuckles into his forehead, he paced in front of the sofa. “Our...intimate relationship...isn’t going to go over well with Clarissa, the coven’s mistress.”

His admission left her puzzled. “Why should she care? It’s none of her damn business.”

Griff wouldn’t meet her eyes, and her doubts started buzzing louder than a swarm of killer bees. Releasing the cushion, she shoved to her feet and glared at him. “Should I be asking what sort of *relationship* the two of you share?”

“It’s complicated.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“There isn’t time to explain it now. I need to dispose of your uncle’s corpse and then get packed.” He pivoted and strode down the hall to his bedroom. She stared at his retreating rear end and imagined the faceless Clarissa squeezing a handful of his butt while he plowed into her. Jealousy speared her heart.

Great, her best friend and lover had a chick on the side, and an evil ghost needed her blood to start a zombie uprising. Far as discoveries of the day went, both majorly sucked.

They arrived on the outskirts of Savannah shortly after five. Griffin rolled his window down and inhaled the sweet, grape-soda scent of the wild kudzu growing rampant along the roadway. It’d been nearly a year since his last trip to the city. At the moment, he’d give anything to be anywhere else.

Jemma had remained unusually quiet during the majority of the drive. Her silence was unnerving, to say the least. He tore his attention from the road and glanced at her. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

She turned, her expression revealing the parade of questions no doubt marching through her mind. “You knew exactly how to kill Uncle Harold.”

His mouth twisted in a grimace. *Fuck, why didn’t I just keep my trap shut?* Hoping to steer her away from the loaded minefield their conversation was veering toward, he attempted to distract her with an undeniable fact. “Baby, he was already dead.”

“Fine, so you *re*-killed him. Whatever. What I want to know is where you got all this inside scoop on zombies, witchcraft and voodoo. Are you a witch too? Is that why the coven assigned you to me?”

He returned his focus to the windshield. “No. To both questions.”

“You’re keeping something from me and I don’t like it.”

Fear held his tongue hostage. In the back of his mind he'd always known the day would come when he'd have to explain to Jemma about who he was. *What* he was. But once she discovered the truth, their lives would be forever changed. A selfish part of him wanted to prolong the illusion of normalcy they'd built together. It was the only thing he had. The only thing that'd given him something to live for. "Sweetheart, you've processed an awful lot of craziness today. How about if we just take the rest one step at a time?"

"So you *are* hiding something from me."

He stifled a groan. What karmic debt was he paying that life saddled him with *two* temperamental witches? Fortunately, the avenue of moss-draped oaks that marked the entrance to the Beaumont coven house popped into view. "We're here. We'll finish this conversation later, all right?"

He turned onto the graveled lane, his fists tightening on the steering wheel as he imagined the tongue-lashing Clarissa had in store for him. The twin flames flickering within the gas lanterns that flanked the opened gates instantly flared in recognition of their arrival. No backing out now.

His Pathfinder cleared the bend in the drive, and the coven house was revealed in all its antebellum glory. He rounded the horseshoe drive and stopped in front of the massive columned porch. A full spread of desserts and lemonade had been set out near the doors, presided over by a lush arrangement of lilies. Peach Templeton was making her way through a plateful of cookies while she rocked in her customary spot. She straightened her spectacles and treated him and Jemma to a good inspection when they abandoned the vehicle and approached the porch steps.

"Ms. Peach, you're looking lovely as always."

Grunting, the elderly woman finished munching her iced oatmeal cookie, the crumbs sprinkling the front of her violet pantsuit. "Boy, your eyesight must be failing worse than mine. I've shrank another inch and if my boobs sag any farther I'll never see my bellybutton again." Her squinty gaze shifted to Jemma. "You Rose's offspring?"

Looking slightly bemused, Jemma nodded. "So I've been told."

"You've got the same nose." That declaration made, Peach bit into her next cookie and resumed her rocking.

A creak sounded on the floorboard beside Griffin, and he glanced over to find Clarissa eyeing him coolly. Garbed in skintight black leather pants and a tank top sporting a neon purple pentagram that clashed violently with Clarissa's waist-length red tresses, the coven's mistress struck an intimidating pose. Undoubtedly she'd planned it that way.

Clarissa moved her attention to Jemma. The iciness in her blue irises melted a fraction and the rigid line of her lips softened. "Welcome home, Jemma." She stepped forward and extended her hand. "I'm Clarissa Miles."

After an awkward hesitation, Jemma accepted the handshake. The second Clarissa lowered her arm. Jemma's chin adopted a stubborn slant. "I think you and I need to get something clear."

Apparently picking up on the strong waves of tension radiating from Jemma, Clarissa arched her eyebrows. "Okay."

"You had Griff before me—I can respect that. And I'm sorry if you feel like I'm poaching on your territory, but the fact is I'm not giving him up without a battle. So bring it on."

Ah shit. This time Griffin gave his groan full reign.

Peach lowered her cookie. "Gloria, get your ass out here. We're gonna see us a catfight."

The furious slap of what sounded like flip-flops preceded Gloria Jones's appearance in the mansion's doorway. Panting heavily, Gloria eagerly ping-ponged her gaze between Clarissa and Jemma. "I'm putting my money on the new girl."

Peach snorted. "Are you forgetting the way our Clarissa took down Amber Piedmont?"

Gloria's mouth popped into a big O. "Do I still have time to change my bet?"

A long-suffering sigh floated from Clarissa. "Accidentally turn a debutante into a pig and no one lets you forget it." Pinching the bridge of her nose, she squinted at Gloria and Peach. "Sorry to disappoint you two bloodthirsty hags, but there will be no catfight."

"You're as much fun as a hangnail." Pouting, Peach crammed the remainder of her cookie in her mouth.

Rather than returning her focus to Jemma, Clarissa glared at Griffin. "Couldn't keep your dick in your pants, could you? I hope it was worth it, because we're all probably going to die due to your lapse in judgment."

Griffin blinked, speech momentarily failing him. He'd expected Clarissa's anger, but not this deluge of irrational outrage.

An irritated noise sprang from the back of Jemma's throat. "You're being just a tad overdramatic, don't you think? It isn't like Griff and I having sex opened the portals of death or something."

Clarissa's lips pinched tight. "Actually, it did."

He stared at the shock freezing Jemma's features and figured his face must be wearing an identical expression.

Oblivious, or more likely unconcerned with the bombshell she'd just dropped, Clarissa continued ranting. "The only way you were able to stay hidden from Nettie all these years was because your magic was locked away. But then *Free Willy* over there sticks his dick where it doesn't belong, and suddenly your energy signal is shooting through the universe. There might as well have been a flashing marquee over Griffin's house saying *Here I am, zombies—come suck my brains out.*"

He mentally tracked back to the mysterious shaking of the kitchen counter, right when Jemma was com—

Oh fuck.

Jemma shook her head before rubbing her temples. “Wait a sec. Griff isn’t the first man I’ve ever had sex with. Why the hell wasn’t my energy triggered long before now?”

A premonition of doom barreled down on him like a Mack truck. He swung his gaze in Clarissa’s direction, his tongue fumbling to form the words that’d hopefully stall the revelation looming on the horizon. Shit, why didn’t he come clean with Jemma when he had the chance?

The words finally found their exit, but Clarissa beat him to the delivery. “Because Griffin isn’t just any man. He’s your familiar.”

Chapter Four

Jemma blinked at Clarissa, trying to make sense of the word. “My *what*?”

“Your familiar.” Clarissa frowned. “Why do you look like this is news to you?”

“Uh, because it is.” Jemma glanced toward Griff and noticed his deer-in-headlights expression.

“I don’t understand.” Clarissa plunked her hands on her hips. “You said you knew that I had Griffin before you did.”

“Well, I only assumed you guys had sex. Griff mentioned your relationship was complicated.” She shrugged. “Sex is often complicated.”

From the way Clarissa gaped at her, she wondered if a foot had suddenly sprouted from the top of her head. She resisted the urge to check and see.

“Griffin was my familiar before I gifted him to you. *That* was our relationship. Good goddess, we most certainly did not have sex.” Clarissa’s tone implied that the mere idea was sacrilegious.

Relief swept through Jemma, until she remembered Griff’s big, fat, honkin’ secret. She peered up at him, unable to mask the hurt ballooning inside her. “This is what you were keeping from me earlier, isn’t it?”

He opened his mouth and quickly snapped it shut again, his jaw working. Frustrated by his unwillingness to communicate, she started toward the porch steps. Griff caught her arm, stalling her retreat.

“I thought you’d be weirded out by it, Jemma. Especially after...well, you know.” The rawness of his voice matched the agony in his eyes.

“Why would I be weirded out?”

Peach chortled, drawing everyone’s attention. “Hello. He’s a cat. Sort of weird.”

A series of choking coughs seized Jemma. Once she got them under control, she stared at Griff. “A *cat*?” Finally the light bulb clicked on in her brain. “Oh my God, you’re *that* kind of familiar. Like the talking cat on *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch*.”

“Actually, Salem the cat wasn’t a true familiar,” Peach piped up. “And he’s way funnier than our Griffin.”

Jemma swayed, the world tilting at a crazy angle around her. “I had sex with a cat.” Worse than that, it was the best sex of her life. *I’m going to spend years in therapy for this.*

Griff’s arms suddenly encircled her, pressing her against the solid, steadying presence of his chest. “Let’s get you inside so you can sit down.” Not giving her the opportunity to argue, he herded her inside

the mansion. They crossed the marbled entry, and he led her into a small parlor outfitted with a high-backed ruby-red velvet sofa and matching wingchairs. He settled her in one of the chairs and hunkered in front of her, his worried gaze sweeping her face. “You’re right, I should have told you. I’m sorry.”

She rolled her lips tight, not quite ready to let him off the hook. “Is there anything else you’re not telling me? You’re not having a tawdry affair with your neighbor’s Persian, are you?”

He tunneled his fingers through his hair, leaving the strands in disarray. “This is why I didn’t want to tell you. I knew it’d be too much for you to take.”

“It wouldn’t be if I’d had some warning. Did you ever consider that, you blockhead?”

Griff hung his head, looking miserable.

Clarissa entered the room, bearing a glass of lemonade. She passed it to Jemma. “Here, you could probably use this.”

Grateful for anything that’d distract her from the fact that her life had turned several shades of crazy, Jemma sipped the tart beverage and watched while Clarissa gathered her hair into a ponytail. Clarissa caught her eye and smiled. “How about an official tour of the house before dinner?”

The mention of food made her queasy but she nodded anyway. She stood, the ice cubes in the glass clinking. For the next twenty minutes Clarissa played gracious hostess, taking her from room to room. But as beautiful as the décor was, Jemma couldn’t get over the feeling that she was trapped in a surreal nightmare that she had no prayer of waking from. Griff seemed well attuned to her uneasy thoughts because he stayed close to her side during the entire tour, his quiet strength a steady buffer against her escalating anxiety.

They ascended the grand staircase to the mansion’s second level and Clarissa halted, her hand curving around one of the pineapple-shaped newels topping the banister. Compassion softened her features. “I know you must be frightened coming here, but please know you’ll be protected from Nettie and her zombies. Beyond the safety your coven sisters provide, I also sent for an additional guard this morning. Logan should be arriving any second.”

Griff gave a strangled choke, his aura of soothing comfort dissolving in a flash. “You’re assigning Logan Scott to Jemma?” Incredulous fury sliced like a hot blade through his tone.

Clarissa’s eyes turned frosty. “Yes. Do you have a problem with it?”

“You know damn well that I do.”

“Tough shit.” Turning her back on Griff, Clarissa continued strolling down the hallway, her posture regal. “Come on, Jemma. I’ll show you to your room. Since Fiona, Jade and Constance are in New Orleans, you’ll be the only coven sister occupying this part of the mansion for the next week. You’ll have plenty of privacy.”

Unsure what to make of the pair’s odd exchange, Jemma hurried after Clarissa. She caught up with her outside one of the many bedrooms making up the east wing.

“This was Lillian’s bedroom. I figured it would be appropriate that you should have it.” Clarissa swung open the door and stepped inside.

Jemma followed after her and gasped at her first glimpse of the sumptuous room. The space made her bedroom back home look like a closet for a mouse. Pivoting, she gaped at the enormous armoire situated in front of the nearest toile-patterned wall. Shuffling another half turn, she noticed a huge canopy bed in the same matching cherry wood as the armoire. Panels of sapphire blue silk cascaded from the bed’s intricately carved posts and pooled onto the floor. An adjacent chaise lounge offered the perfect spot to curl up for a good read or nap.

“This room is a decorator’s wet dream.”

“I’m glad you like it.” Chuckling, Clarissa pointed to the armoire. “I made sure to stock it with hangers but if you need more just let me know.”

Jemma grimaced. “That won’t be necessary. What I’m wearing is all I have with me.” Despite Griff’s assurances that no dead relatives would be staked out at her house waiting to pounce, she’d opted not to risk any of her body parts for some fresh clothes.

“Not a problem. I’ll work on getting a new wardrobe put together for you,” Clarissa said, stepping toward the doorway.

Griffin blocked her path. “We need to talk.”

Clarissa’s gaze flicked in Jemma’s direction. “Later. Help her settle in.”

His jaw locked tight, Griffin stepped aside, allowing Clarissa to exit. Taking in his stiff posture and the way he was grinding his molars, Jemma deduced that he was still ticked about the upcoming arrival of Logan Scott. Crossing to the chaise, she slumped between a pair of plump pillows. “Who is Logan?”

Griff scowled. “Clarissa’s pet.”

Okay, either that was code for down-and-dirty-fuck-buddy or Logan Scott was another familiar. “Is he a cat too?”

A fresh set of thunderclouds darkened Griff’s face. “No. Wolf.” He spit the last word between his teeth like it was the filthiest of oaths.

She gaped at him. “As in *werewolf*?”

He gave a curt nod and her head spun. With everything thrown at her today, she probably shouldn’t be shocked to discover werewolves existed. Crap, at this rate she half-expected Frankenstein and Dracula to be joining them for tea and finger sandwiches.

“You don’t like Logan.” Which was odd. Griff got along with pretty much everyone.

“That’s putting it mildly.”

“Why?”

“He’s an asshole.”

She rolled her eyes. “Can you be more specific?”

“He’s a *huge* asshole.”

Okay, clearly she wouldn’t get anything more definitive from him. “Is it normal for a werewolf to be a familiar? I thought they were all supposed to be like you—a cat.”

“Familiars can take any shape. Cats are the most popular, but occasionally you’ll get the odd wolf, bear, raven and such. Your former guardian, George McStravick, was a beaver.”

Griff’s casual announcement nearly made her fall off the chaise. “Mr. McStravick was my familiar? And a *beaver*?” Come to think of it, she did recall him having some seriously bucked teeth. George had been her parent’s next-door neighbor, right up until he died of a heart attack ten—

She stared at Griff, the puzzle pieces starting to click together. “You were sent to me as his replacement.”

He nodded. “Normally a witch chooses her own familiar, but since you had no knowledge of the ritual, one needed to be assigned to you. So just like George was gifted to you from your mother’s best friend, I was gifted to you from Clarissa.”

“She didn’t mind giving you away to me?”

A humorless laugh huffed from Griff. “She was probably ecstatic about it.” He gave a sardonic twist of his lips. “In case you didn’t notice, Clarissa and I often don’t see eye to eye.”

His admission prompted her thoughts to shift to the tense scene on the porch, when Clarissa berated Griff for not keeping his cock in his pants. “Did you know that sleeping with me would unlock my magic? Is that why you didn’t make a move on me before last night?”

He appeared dumbstruck by her question. “No, not at all. Jesus, do you honestly think I would have risked your life just to get some sex if I’d known?”

Just to get some sex? Her stomach cramped at the almost off-hand way he’d said those words, as if he considered the incredible night they’d shared to be less memorable than watching paint dry.

“I never attempted to make love to you because it’s forbidden, Jemma. Familiars can’t have sex with their witches. It’s written in our contracts.”

His announcement managed to shake her from her glum musings. “You guys have contracts? You’re kidding me.”

“It’s a necessary evil. A long time ago a familiar attempted to steal his witch’s powers after gaining her love and trust. The contracts were devised as a safeguard to protect against something like that happening again.”

“You and I don’t have a contract.”

His shoulders hitched in a half-shrug. “Our situation is unusual. And technically Clarissa is still my main boss. Her contract holds precedence.”

She leaned back on the chaise and folded her arms. “Hmm, I never thought of it in terms of either of us being your boss. Does this mean if I tell you to do something, you have to do it?”

“Depends on what you want.”

She ran her fingers over the smooth fabric of the chaise, recalling how the rippling contours of Griff’s abdomen had a similar silky texture. Much like his cock. She licked her lips. Cat or not, Griff definitely was the proud owner of a body that begged to be touched. Maybe this whole boss thing had its advantages. “What if I want you to strip for me?”

He blinked. Twice. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“Jemma—”

“Or maybe I want you to crawl over here and give me a bath...” she tiptoed her fingers along the front of the T-shirt he’d loaned her and grazed her suddenly stiff nipples, “...with your tongue.”

Griff shuddered so hard he nearly toppled over. She bit her bottom lip, hiding her grin of victory. If he thought all they had between them was some meaningless sex he could easily forget, she’d happily prove him wrong.

A deep, masculine chuckle floated into the room. Whipping her head around, Jemma stared at the man standing in the doorway. She took in his snug, faded jeans and black T-shirt. *I’m the guy your mama warned you about* was emblazoned dead center on his chest, the convenient disclaimer drawing attention to his sculpted pecs and the barbed-wire tattoo encircling his upper arm. Add all that to the rumpled midnight-black hair and neatly trimmed goatee, and her suspicions were sealed that he routinely had women dropping their panties every time he crooked a finger.

Lowering his mirrored Ray-Bans, the stranger revealed eyes in an unusual shade of amber. A predatory smile stretched his full lips. “Now that’s an offer too good to pass up, sugar.”

Chapter Five

If Logan Scott continued visually undressing Jemma, Griffin was going to ram his fist down the son of a bitch's throat. Barely restraining his snarl, he stomped to the chaise and tugged Jemma close. "The offer isn't open to you, dickhead."

Logan sauntered into the room, his annoying-as-shit smirk widening. "Pity, because you're not the only one with an oral fixation, Catman."

Griffin's hand clenched in anticipation of punching through the cartilage of Logan's nose. As if she'd foreseen the knockdown-dragout on the brink of eruption, Clarissa strode through the doorway and glanced at Logan. "I thought I heard your bike outside."

Logan's gaze drifted down Clarissa's length. He made no bones over the fact he was visually devouring the curve of her thigh like it was a tasty T-bone. "Decided the hog needed some fresh air."

Jemma scooted forward on the chaise. "What do you ride? My dad has a vintage Indian that's practically a member of our family."

Logan chuckled. "A man after my own heart. Mine's a Harley Fat Boy. Nothin' like 3000 rpms of horsepower between your legs." He winked. "Just say the word and I'll give you a ride like you've never experienced, sugar."

A low growl rumbled from Griffin. Jemma frowned at him. Hell, whatever it took to get her to stop smiling at Logan. Didn't take much to encourage the bastard.

Clarissa issued a silent warning with her eyes. "Why don't we all go downstairs? Gloria's got just about everything set for supper on the veranda." Clearly expecting her suggestion to be obeyed, she exited into the hall. After pinning Logan with an I'll-kick-your-ass-later glare, Griffin stood and offered Jemma his arm.

Downstairs, they piled around the large folding table that'd been set up for the occasion. Griffin noticed the bemusement stamped on Jemma's face as she took in the array of food. He squeezed her hand beneath the table. "You okay?"

"I have zombies after me and Clarissa's throwing a smorgasbord. Don't you find that a little...weird?"

"It's a southern thing. You'll get used to it. Now how about a biscuit?" He reached for the platter holding the bread assortment just as a flea-bitten bloodhound came hurtling out of nowhere. The mutt

knocked into the table, sending food flying. Paying no heed to the shouts and curses aimed at him, the dog chomped onto a piece of fried chicken and dashed off.

Clarissa scrambled for the wobbling pitcher of lemonade and swore a blue streak when it toppled, spilling the beverage all over. “Damn it, Peach, how many times do I have to tell you to quit feeding that mutt? He’s never going to leave with all the free handouts you keep sneaking him.”

“But I like Floyd. He reminds me of my poor departed Linus.”

Griffin caught Jemma’s questioning look and leaned close to her ear. “*Mr.* Peach.”

Jemma nodded. “Ah.”

Still grumbling, Clarissa tried mopping up the mess with her napkin. Giving up, she wadded the soaked paper in her hand and scraped back her chair. “I’m going to have to replace the lemonade.”

“Make mine a brewski, shug.” Logan cupped his hand toward his mouth in the universal symbol for tipping back a cold one.

Shooting her pet a hard glare, Clarissa stalked into the mansion.

“So, Jemma...” The way her name rolled off Logan’s honeyed tongue made Griffin’s hackles rise. “Clarissa mentioned you had one hell of a scare this mornin’.”

Jemma dropped her uneaten biscuit onto her plate, leaving Griffin with the strong temptation to chop Logan’s balls off for bringing up the damn zombie attack. Apparently realizing his stupid blunder, Logan leaned sideways and patted Jemma’s knee. Griffin stared at the offensive hand, imagining each of Logan’s fingers broken and bloodied.

“Don’t you worry on it any, darlin’. I’m here now and completely at your service.”

Griffin tugged on Jemma’s seat, forcing Logan’s hand to fall. “The only one who’ll be servicing Jemma is me.”

Logan’s eyebrows lifted, indicating he’d gotten the double meaning loud and clear. Clarissa trotted back out onto the porch, her fight-busting radar obviously getting a workout. She plunked the container of lemonade on the table before passing Logan his beer. He looked at the label and grimaced. “Nonalcoholic?”

Clarissa’s smile was syrupy. “You weren’t specific, *shug*.”

Logan twisted the cap off the beer bottle, the resulting pop and fizz from the escaping air muffling his grumble.

“Everyone keeps promising me that I’m safe here. But frankly, I don’t feel safe anywhere.” Anxiety trembling in Jemma’s voice, she inched her plate away. “I don’t want to spend the rest of eternity hiding out from a ghost and her zombies. I have a life and family waiting for me back home that I can’t just abandon.”

Helplessness seized Griffin. It killed him that he couldn't give her the peace and security she'd known before her world came tumbling down—all because of him. If he could go back in time and not give in to his overwhelming passion for her...

Ah Christ, would he be able to control himself? He'd wanted Jemma with an almost painful intensity from the first moment he'd set eyes on her all those years ago. Every day since then had been both heaven and hell. He'd basked in their friendship, savored every innocent touch, all the while aching for so much more.

Clarissa cleared her throat, breaking him from his private turmoil. "What if there's a way to send Bloody Nettie and her zombies to a permanent afterlife?"

Jemma straightened in her seat. "Is there?"

"Possibly."

Griffin frowned. "You've never mentioned this before."

"Because I don't have anything concrete. This is merely a suspicion I've been mulling over." Clarissa eyed Jemma. "I don't want to raise your hopes without proof to back me up."

"I don't care. Hope is better than spending the rest of my days in hiding."

Clarissa nodded before waving her hands in animated exuberance. "The key has always been in your blood. If you possess the power to break Rose's spell, you have the power to annihilate Nettie."

Jemma gulped loud enough for the entire table to hear it. "But I don't know the first thing about magic. Crap, I didn't even know I was a witch ten hours ago."

"We'll strengthen your magic," Clarissa said, her eyes sparkling with unrestrained excitement.

"How?"

Clarissa leaned back, her smile smug. "Sex."

"What?" Jemma's eyes practically grew larger than her dinner plate.

"It's your trigger. Sex. With a familiar. That's what will power up your magic, I know it."

Jemma gave her head a fierce shake. "Let me get this straight. Thirty minutes ago you were throwing a hissy about Griff and I sleeping together. Now you're encouraging it?"

"The circumstances are unique, but...yes." Clarissa's tone held a hesitancy that prompted the fine hairs on the back of Griffin's neck to stand on end. He was well acquainted with the sensation. Usually it proceeded the exact moment when the shit hit the fan.

"Along with Logan."

Chapter Six

Griff paced in front of the bookcases lining the nearest wall of the mansion's library, his furious strides practically burning a path in the Oriental rug. Wishing he'd park himself in one spot, Jemma massaged her aching neck muscles.

As if reading her thoughts, Griff halted in front of Clarissa, his big body primed for confrontation. "I'm not sharing Jemma with that damn wolf," he said between his clenched teeth for the thousandth time.

Clarissa arched her eyebrows, apparently unfazed by Griff's uncharacteristic display of temper. "It's not your decision to make."

Griff spun to face Jemma. "Do *you* want to do this?" Despite the ferocity of his scowl, she detected a hint of worry lurking in his eyes. That tiny spark of uncertainty threatened to do her in. If they didn't have a captive audience, she'd take him into her arms and show him firsthand that he was the only lover she desired. Instead, she'd have to settle for reassuring him with her words.

"Of course not. I've never made a habit of sleeping with total strangers. I'm sure not starting now." She rubbed her forehead wearily before glancing at Clarissa. "I don't understand why we have to involve Logan in this anyway. Griff managed to fry the locks off my magical energy the first time. Surely he's all I need to get the job done."

"Possibly, if given enough time. But we don't have that luxury. Logan's added energy is precisely the catalyst you need." Clarissa brushed by Griff and gently squeezed Jemma's arm. "Believe me, I wish I didn't have to ask this of you." She ducked her head closer, a devilish twinkle in her irises. "But in the scheme of things, is having a pair of sexy men dedicated to bringing you to the heights of pleasure really such a hardship?"

A low, smoky laugh floated from the vicinity of the hall. Jemma pivoted to discover Logan leaning in an indolent slouch against the doorframe. His mouth curled in a grin that was...well...wolfish. "Damn, shug, didn't know you swung that way."

Clarissa tensed, her hand falling away. "I thought I told you to wait outside."

"What, and miss all these interestin' revelations?" Logan strode into the room, the loose, easy roll of his hips conveying a lazy, predatory grace. "Besides, I'd like the opportunity to talk to Jemma alone."

Griffin growled. "Over my dead body."

"Can't say I don't relish the sound of that." Logan ran his tongue over the wickedly sharp points of his incisors.

“Would you two stop it?” Impatience whipped through Clarissa’s demand. She glanced at Jemma. “Are you okay with Logan’s request?”

Griff bristled. “No, she’s—” He froze in place when Clarissa snapped her fingers.

Clarissa returned her attention to Jemma. “Are you?”

Ignoring the question, Jemma frowned at Griff, who remained locked in suspended animation. “Um, is he all right?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll release Griffin in a minute. I just didn’t want him influencing your decision.”

Sliding her bemused stare from Griff, Jemma peered at Logan. Though he offered her a reassuring smile, she couldn’t help feeling like an unwary lamb who’d wandered into the wolf’s den. She sucked in a deep breath and pushed aside her fanciful misgivings. “I’ll speak to Logan, but it doesn’t mean I’ve changed my mind about having sex with him.”

Clarissa inclined her head. “Why don’t you both go into the parlor? I’ll make sure no one bothers you.”

She couldn’t help wondering if Clarissa intended to guarantee that by performing her wham-bam-frozen-man routine on everyone. Hugging her chest, she shuffled from the room. Feeling slightly guilty that she might have insulted Logan with her adamancy about not sleeping with him, she cleared her throat. “I didn’t mean anything personal by what I said earlier.”

A boyish grin flashed across Logan’s face, drawing attention to his dark good looks. “Don’t worry on it, darlin’. Though I have to say, convincing a woman to share her bed with me isn’t usually such a problem.”

She wasn’t surprised. There was no denying that Logan Scott was sex personified. Just looking at him made her think of sweaty bodies tangled on top of satin sheets. Resisting the urge to scrub her palms across her suddenly flushed face, she led the way into the parlor.

Struggling against a wave of self-consciousness, she settled on one of the wingchairs. “If you’re hoping to talk me into agreeing to Clarissa’s plan, you’re wasting your time. I’m just not wired for threesomes.” God, she couldn’t even say the word without her cheeks blazing. How in the world could anyone think she’d actually be able to engage in one?

No sooner did she have that thought and an intriguing visual popped into her mind. Her, sandwiched between Griff and Logan, their strong hands caressing her everywhere and their cocks buried in her pussy and ass as they drove her insane with pleasure.

A breathless moan escaped her. Worried that Logan might have heard the sound, she jerked her gaze in his direction. His face remained in profile and he appeared oblivious of her silent mortification. Grateful for dodging that bullet, she exhaled in relief and fidgeted with one of the decorative grommets on the wingchair’s arm.

Logan settled on the couch across from her and stretched out his long legs, stacking the heel of one motorcycle boot atop the scuffed toe of the other. “So I take it you’ve never been with more than one man at a time.” He stroked his goatee. “How about another woman?”

“What fantasy land are you living in?”

His eyes twinkled. “Just checkin’.”

She relaxed her shoulders and tried for an air of sophistication. “Have you ever participated in a ménage a trois?”

“Yep. Once with another guy and twice with two women.”

Her expression must have betrayed her because Logan laughed. She bit her lip before caving to a self-deprecating chuckle. “Okay, you’re clearly the more adventurous of the two of us.”

“Is that what’s concerning you? Trying something new?”

She gaped at him. “Uh, taking up knitting is trying something new.”

“You know what I mean. Some folks get a little skittish when it comes to stepping out of their comfort zone.”

“That’s an interesting way to put it, but I suppose you’re right.” She’d never considered herself the type of person who preferred to play things safe. But now that she thought about it, the riskiest thing she’d ever tried was seducing Griff. And considering the zombie uprising that’d been triggered as a result, maybe she’d be wise to stop while she was ahead.

“Sugar, you’re thinkin’ too much.”

Snapping from her musings, she blinked at Logan. He pushed from the couch and strode toward her, his boot heels thudding on the hardwood floor. “The way I see it, there’s only one way we’re gonna ease past your comfort zone.”

He stopped directly in front of her. Trying her damndest not to ogle the prominent bulge behind the fly of his jeans, she lifted her focus upward and locked gazes with Logan. “And that would be?”

Dropping to a crouch, he tucked a lock of her hair away from her eye and leaned forward until his breath feathered her mouth. “Me kissin’ you.”

“I don’t think—”

Logan’s lips brushed hers in a teasing caress, stalling her protest. His hand cupped her cheek before gliding to the nape of her neck. She shivered at the rough scrape of his calloused palm along her skin. He pulled back just enough to reveal the desire swirling amongst the gold flecks in his irises. “Don’t think. Just feel.”

Considering her brain pretty much short-circuited the moment their mouths touched, thinking was no longer an option. With a sexy low growl, he nibbled the seam of her bottom lip before licking the sting away. She gasped and he used the opportunity to his full advantage, his tongue thrusting past the barrier of her lips.

He kissed with a self-assured languidness that made her flesh break out in goose bumps. Though he didn't touch her anywhere but her mouth and neck, his presence infiltrated every cell in her body. A riot of exhilarating and frightening sensations raced through her. Suddenly conscious of how she was betraying Griff, she jerked out of Logan's embrace. "I'm sorry. I—I can't do this."

A shadow of disappointment clouded Logan's expression before instantly dissipating. "It's okay, sugar." He hefted to his feet and extended his hand. "How about we see if Clarissa has released your hissin' cat?"

She allowed Logan to tug her from the seat. Despite her best intentions, her scrutiny drifted to his straining erection. *I must be the world's biggest idiot for turning that down.*

One minute Griffin was laying it into Logan, the next he was staring at empty space. Snarling beneath his breath, he whipped his head around and scowled at Clarissa. "Damn it, I hate it when you do that."

"If you weren't such a bullhead, I wouldn't be forced to."

Ignoring Clarissa's calm pronouncement, he stormed toward the doorway. She hurried in front of him, blocking his exit with a sharp jab of her fingernail in the center of his chest. "Do *not* make me whammy you again."

"How long has she been alone with Logan?"

An exasperated sigh floated from Clarissa. "Oh for goddess's sake. They're just down the hall. What do you think Logan is going to do to her?"

He didn't even want to consider the possibilities. Fortunately, the sound of approaching voices lowered his spiking blood pressure. As soon as Jemma popped into view, he knocked Clarissa's hand aside and stalked into the hall.

Jemma stopped talking the second she spotted him. "Griff, you're unfrozen."

Before he could respond, she rushed forward and slung her arms around him. Her exuberance caught him off guard, but it was the kiss she planted on him that really knocked him back a step. Literally. Steadying himself—and Jemma—he cupped her hips. Apparently taking that as an invitation to turn up the heat, she glided her tongue over his and crushed her breasts against his chest. There was no mistaking the hard nubs of her nipples poking into him. Aroused as he was, he couldn't shake the feeling that there was something going on here that he was missing.

Pulling back, he gave Jemma a questioning look. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Jemma glanced in Logan's direction and a blush bloomed on her cheeks.

He opened his mouth, fully intending to blast Logan for whatever the hell he'd done to upset Jemma, but shouts and the scurrying click of nails on the foyer's marble floor captured his attention instead. They all turned as Floyd came galloping down the corridor, Gloria hot on his heels. Ms. Peach trailed behind in a more sedate, shuffling pace.

“Damn it, Peach,” Clarissa bellowed.

“What? I’m not that mutt’s keeper.”

Floyd spotted them and skidded to a stop. Wagging his tail, he lowered his head and dropped something from his mouth. The object rolled several times before coming to a standstill near Clarissa’s foot. As if they’d choreographed the motion, he, Jemma, Clarissa and Logan bent forward to inspect Floyd’s prize.

Jemma was the first to speak. “Uh, call me crazy, but that looks like a toe.”

“No, I’m sure it’s just a rock.” Clarissa scooped up the object for a closer look. It shifted in her palm, displaying a neatly trimmed—if not graying—nail. She shrieked and flung her arm, sending the toe flying. It smacked into Gloria’s forehead.

“What the—?” Gloria peered down. A nanosecond later, her shriek joined Clarissa’s.

“For the love of Elvis. You people act like you’ve never seen a severed toe before.” Grumbling, Ms. Peach stooped and grabbed the appendage from the floor. She placed it on the nearby demilune table like the toe was a macabre knickknack.

Griffin frowned and strode to the table. He eyed the shriveled appendage, apprehension crawling along his spine as he took in the amount of decomposition that’d settled into the rotted flesh. There was only one reasonable explanation for what he was looking at.

Bloody Nettie had dispatched her next errand boy.

Chapter Seven

“Are you freakin’ kidding me?” Her heart pounding out of control, Jemma chased after Griffin as he stalked toward the mansion’s entry. “How did Nettie find me so fast?” She was beginning to feel like a damn walking zombie GPS unit.

Griff pivoted, his expression fierce. “It doesn’t matter. There’s no way in hell that zombie is getting within breathing space of you.”

God, she hoped not. She already knew from personal experience that zombie breath wasn’t exactly minty fresh. “How can you guarantee that? You saw how determined Uncle Harold was to chew my face off—and he used to *adore* me. I doubt whatever is out there will have the same warm fuzzies where I’m concerned.”

Clarissa hurried toward them, her ponytail bobbing. “I sent Logan out back. Hopefully he can flush the zombie into the open.”

“Good thinking. I’ll take the front section of the property.” Griff started to shoulder past Clarissa, but she grabbed his elbow.

“I need you to stay in the house with Jemma. Logan can manage one zombie on his own.”

Griff ground his teeth. “And if there’s more than one?”

Clarissa’s gaze veered toward Jemma before quickly bouncing away. “Then we’ll really need you here, won’t we?”

That statement seemed to get through to Griff because he slumped against the wall, his fists clenching. A heavy, frustrated exhale gusted from his chest. “Yes. Of course.”

Her expression frazzled, Clarissa swiveled in Ms. Peach’s direction. “Grab Linus’s old Smith and Wesson from the den. Hopefully it’s still loaded. Gloria, you and I will make a run for the toolshed.”

Recalling Uncle Harold’s demise courtesy of the spade, Jemma shuddered. She’d never be able to look at garden tools the same way. Rubbing her arms briskly, she stepped out of Clarissa and Gloria’s path as they rushed toward the front door. Griff’s palm slid around her waist. Small as the gesture was, it still managed to calm her nerves. She leaned into him, drawing comfort from the strength and security that Griff seemed to constantly exude. “I feel like I should be doing something. I’m the reason the damn zombie is out there.”

Griff spun her so that she faced him. His hands bracketed her cheekbones, forcing her to look at him. “None of this is your fault.”

“But—”

“Jemma, I mean it. Let the rest of us deal with this.” Closing his eyes, he leaned forward and rested his forehead against hers. “If anything happened to you...”

She traced the shadow of day-old beard gracing his strong jaw. “Fine. I’ll stay here and be a bump on the log then.”

“Thank you.”

They stood there for several minutes just holding each other. A loud *ka-boom* thundered outside, shattering the moment and making her jerk in surprise. “What the hell was that?”

Another boom rang out, its noisy rebound echoing through the foyer. “Ms. Peach must have found the shotgun. And the zombie.” Galvanized into action, Griffin barreled through the front doorway. Jemma rushed after him and nearly plowed into the back of Griff as he slammed to a stop. Grasping a fistful of his T-shirt, she caught a flash of movement in her peripheral vision and swung her head in time to see Ms. Peach lining up the sight on an ancient-looking shotgun. Following the direction of the muzzle’s end target, she spotted a female zombie shambling through the thick bank of rhododendrons flanking the drive. One of the shrub’s spindly arms snagged the hem of the corpse’s tattered lace dress, halting her advance.

“Got ya now, you ugly bitch.” Cackling, Ms. Peach fired off another round. The bullet winged the dead woman’s bouffant hairdo, parting it down the middle. Releasing a bloodcurdling scream, the corpse ripped at her snared skirt, tearing the mildewed fabric from her waist. Left only in a girdle and support hose, the zombie lurched forward.

Ms. Peach pulled the trigger again and cursed. “I’m out of ammo.”

Tugging from Jemma’s hold, Griff leapt from the porch. Displaying mind-boggling speed, he hurtled over the hedge of boxwoods before charging at the oncoming dead woman and tackling her to the ground. A dark, bulky shape disengaged from one of the overgrown cypresses. Another zombie—this one male and built like a damn sumo wrestler. The corpse pounced on top of Griff. Terror welling in her throat, Jemma scrambled down the stairway the same instant Clarissa and Gloria came running from the opposite end of the drive. Tossing her shovel aside, Clarissa dove for Jemma and yanked her back.

“Let me go.” Panic clawing like a wild beast within her, Jemma struggled to escape Clarissa’s surprisingly tenacious hold. “We have to help Griff.”

“Logan’s already on it.”

Jemma didn’t know what to make of Clarissa’s statement until she spotted the enormous black wolf bounding through the trees. His ferocious howl renting the air, Logan’s lupine form lunged at the zombie pinned on top of Griff. Snapping teeth and skeletal fingers fought to sink into fur and living flesh. Somehow Logan rolled the male zombie off Griff. Freed of the corpse’s burdensome weight, Griffin snapped the female’s neck before rushing to Logan’s aid. Five more zombies shuffled from the concealment of the dense shrubbery.

“Ah shit.” Grunting, Ms. Peach hobbled down the steps and straightened her spectacles. “We’re gonna need more shovels.”

Jemma stared at the gang of zombies, her heart banging. “We’ll never be able to stop them.”

“No. You will not,” a rattling voice whispered into Jemma’s ear.

She whipped around, almost tripping on her own feet. Other than Clarissa, Gloria and Peach, no one else stood nearby. Certainly no one who might have produced the mocking whisper. Just as she was about to chalk the phantom voice to nothing more than a trick of the wind, a creepy-crawly sensation slithered along the back of her neck. She slowly turned her head toward the porch. A ghostly figure stood at the farthest corner. Despite the growing breeze, neither the woman’s black cloak nor the ratty coils of her auburn hair so much as flickered out of place.

Jemma stumbled backward into Clarissa.

“What...?” Clarissa’s voice trailed off. Jemma glanced over her shoulder to find Clarissa staring at their semi-transparent visitor.

“It’s Nettie, isn’t it?” Not waiting for a response, Jemma shifted her attention to the zombies in the distance. Each corpse had frozen to a standstill, their vacant gazes trained on the spectral vision on the porch. She shivered.

Another whisper unfurled in the wind. “Return home, my pets. You have done well.”

One by one, the zombies slunk into the shadowy woods. Jemma swung back toward the porch and frowned at the now-empty corner. “Nettie’s gone.”

“Of course she is.” Clarissa’s tone held a weary edge. “She accomplished what she wanted.”

Jemma swiveled and blinked at her. “Other than sic a couple of her *pets* on Griff, she didn’t do anything.”

An almost imperceptible twitch fluttered at the corner of Clarissa’s eye. “Nettie’s aim was intimidation. Obviously.”

Clarissa’s declaration was a little too forced to Jemma’s way of thinking. She opened her mouth to demand further explanation from the coven mistress but became distracted by the loud groan Ms. Peach uttered when the elderly woman stooped and grabbed the discarded shovel.

“Nothing like a little zombie dismemberment to brighten a gal’s day.” Straightening, Ms. Peach tucked her shirt into the waistband of her polyester slacks and set off across the lawn. Jemma jogged after her but hung back as Logan trotted in their direction. He made a hacking noise similar to a cat hawking up a fur ball before shaking his shaggy black head. Up close, he looked even bigger and more menacing. She swallowed and tamped down the urge to duck behind Ms. Peach. Yeah, that’d be real brave, using a defenseless little old lady to protect her from the big bad wolf. “Uh...nice doggie?”

She couldn’t say for certain, but she swore Logan’s eyebrows arched. Wait a minute, did wolves even *have* eyebrows? Before she could fully ponder that mystery of life, Logan stretched onto his hind legs and

instantly morphed from canine into man. Talk about a truly awe-inspiring spectacle. Particularly since Logan just so happened to be buck naked.

A female would have to be blind not to be left gaping at the outrageous display of man candy. Fortunately she'd been gifted with 20/20 vision.

Clarissa joined them, her cheeks wearing an identical shade of red as the rhododendron blooms in the distance. "For goddess's sake, Logan, how many times do I have to ask you not to shift like that out in the open?" Clearing her throat, she averted her gaze. "You know how it embarrasses Peach."

Jemma glanced sideways and spied the older woman vigorously cleaning her spectacles. Stuffing her hankie back in her pocket, Ms. Peach returned to ogling Logan's dangly man bits. Oh yeah, clearly the woman was mortified.

Logan gave his chiseled abdomen a lazy scratch. "Sorry, shug. I'll try to remember to keep the public nudity to a minimum."

"You said that *last* time."

Flashing his incisors in a grin, Logan ambled toward the mansion. Jemma noticed she wasn't the only one who turned to gawk at the man's flexing butt. Grumbling beneath her breath, Clarissa grabbed the shovel from Ms. Peach and stalked to the portly zombie. Her face an emotionless mask, she pitched the tool's blade through the corpse's neck.

Stomach lurching, Jemma covered her mouth. Griffin released his grip on the now-motionless dead man and surged to his feet before striding to Jemma and enfolding her in his arms. Though she felt like a huge ninny, she pressed her cheek into the cotton of his shirt, her shaky exhale stirring the fabric. "Is it wrong that I can't help feeling bad for him? He did just try to bite your face off."

Griff's fingers continued soothing along her scalp. "No. It's not his fault an evil ghost decided to play puppeteer with his body."

She watched as Clarissa finished off the female zombie. The dispassionate way the coven's mistress handled the grizzly business of zombie dismemberment was a little disturbing. She could never lop off someone's head—dead or not—without getting totally squicked out.

"Who wants to help me dispose of the bodies?" Clarissa flicked her ponytail over her shoulder and stared pointedly at Griff.

He sighed and gave Jemma a lingering squeeze before crossing the lawn. When he crouched down and reached for the head sitting nearby, she figured it'd be a good time to return to the mansion. Hugging her chest, she hurried toward the porch. The bouquet of lilies situated between the two rockers smelled inordinately pungent, reminding her of funeral homes and death. Nauseated all over again, she rushed inside the foyer and sucked in a deep breath. A new stench hit her and she scrunched her nose. "Ugh. What is that? Wet dog?"

She turned toward the stairway and froze at the sight of Logan standing there. His lips curving in a half grin, he knotted the white towel that was slung low on his hips. “Don’t look at me, sugar.”

The click of nails preceded Floyd’s appearance in the entry. Slimy pond water dribbled from the hound’s mangy coat.

Logan chuckled. “I do believe we’ve found our culprit.”

Floyd plopped down in the middle of the marble floor and rested his muzzle on top of his paws with a chuffing snort. Jemma eyed him skeptically. “Clarissa’s going to be pissed.”

“Clarissa’s always pissed. It’s her emotion du jour.” Logan leaned against the newel post, his towel dipping lower. A single bead of sweat slid down his sternum and meandered toward his abdomen.

Jemma fidgeted with the frayed hem of Griff’s T-shirt and pretended giant clothespins were affixed to her eyelids, preventing her focus from traveling south of Logan’s bellybutton. It didn’t help matters that she’d just been treated to a grand viewing of the impressive cock now modestly concealed beneath the towel. Nothing would shake *that* image from her brain.

She cleared her throat. “I’ve noticed Clarissa tends to be cranky with Griff but seems to get along fine with you.” She paused, suddenly recalling the half dozen times she’d spied Clarissa glaring at Logan in the past hour. “Well...mostly.”

“You caught us on a good day. Aquarius must be in the twelfth house, or some such shit.” Logan gave a crooked smile that managed to be both sexy and endearing.

Vastly discomfited by the flush of heat pooling at the apex of her thighs, she tucked her hands in the rear pockets of her jeans and casually peeked down the front of her shirt. Oh thank God. Her nipples were behaving for once.

“If you want to know the truth, your cat used to be Clarissa’s favored pet.”

Logan’s unexpected admission—along with the faint note of bitterness in his tone—had her jerking her focus back to the werewolf. Tiny lines of tension bracketed his mouth, ruining his otherwise bland expression. Was he jealous of the relationship Griff and Clarissa once shared?

Come to think of it, the bristling hostility between Logan and Griff definitely seemed to fester from a sense of competitiveness. She’d just assumed it was the standard my-dick-is-bigger-than-yours bullshit. “What happened?”

Logan gave his well-defined belly a lazy swipe. “Catman grew a backbone. Clarissa didn’t like that.”

She wasn’t surprised. The coven’s mistress gave off a strong vibe of authority. It probably chapped her panties to have one of her familiars rebel against her.

“You’re the cause of his transformation, you know. Being assigned to you obviously undomesticated our cat.” Logan rubbed against the newel post, using it as an impromptu backscratcher. He caught her frown and arched his eyebrows. “What, don’t believe me?”

“No, I was just wondering how in the world your towel hasn’t fallen off with all that wiggling around.” She caught the humor dancing in his eyes and coughed. “Sorry, whatever’s in my mind tends to flow freely from my mouth unfiltered. It’s like the damn Niagara Falls in there.”

Logan flashed a grin. “Nothin’ wrong with that, darlin’. I’ve been known to speak my piece freely m’self.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that too.” She eyed him, her thoughts returning to the volatile nature of his and Griff’s interactions with each other. “Griff thinks you’re an asshole.” Good God, she really did need a muzzle for her mouth.

Rather than look offended, Logan hooted in laughter. “Well shit. I’m kinda disappointed he didn’t call me worse.”

She sighed. “I just don’t get why you guys can’t get along. It’s not healthy constantly going at each other the way you guys do.” It was beyond her how Clarissa could think Griff and Logan might stop sniping at each other long enough to...

Nibbling on her thumbnail, she met Logan’s intense stare. It seemed to peer straight into her head, rifling through her innermost thoughts. Oh Jesus, she hoped not. Because that last thought was pretty damn racy.

“Sugar, I’ll be the first to admit that Catman and I aren’t exactly best buds. But I’m willin’ to bet we can lay our differences aside and do what’s necessary for the greater cause of mankind.”

She didn’t need to read between the lines to know she was the greater cause and doing *her* was the necessity. It would have been easy to be infuriated, even convince herself she was only a commanded duty, except for the way Logan was looking at her. The fire in his eyes and the way he licked his lips didn’t suggest obligation. They hinted at hunger.

And she was the Happy Meal.

Chapter Eight

Griffin hoisted the female corpse from the wheelbarrow he'd carted across the lawn, guilt a heavy weight on his shoulders courtesy of the untraditional second burial he was about to treat the woman to. Still, the rose garden wasn't the most terrible place to rest your bones. Certainly beat whatever dark hellhole Nettie had planned for her pets.

Clarissa stepped away from the grave they'd dug, giving him plenty of room to toss the corpse into the six-foot hole. Wincing, he offered a silent apology for the rough handling. He felt the heat of Clarissa's stare lasering into his forehead.

"You need to stop whatever this thing is between you and Jemma."

He'd wondered how long it'd take her to spit out the objections he'd seen looming on the horizon. She hadn't exactly hidden the censure in her eyes when he'd held Jemma earlier. "Isn't that counterproductive? I thought you wanted me to have sex with her."

"Yes. *Sex*. Not a relationship." Clarissa swiped a hand across her face, leaving a smudge of dirt on her cheek. "You know damn well the white-picket-fence delusion you're erecting in your head is out of the question."

He clenched his jaw. "You have no idea what I'm thinking."

"Yes, I do. Hence the reason we're having this conversation." She pointed the shovel's handle at him. "The path you're heading down leads to nothing but trouble. I worry as it is what punishment the guild is going to slap you with."

A current of dread zipped down his spine at the mention of the witches' guild. "You've spoken with them?"

"Briefly. Domino and Willa will be stopping by tomorrow afternoon for a formal hearing."

Jesus. That didn't bode well.

Clarissa stroked his shoulder, the gesture stunning him. He couldn't remember the last time she'd offered him any show of comfort, much less touched him. In the early years—before she'd sent him to Jemma—there'd been traces of affection. A genuine smile. A word of praise. He used to hoard each dangled carrot in the storage box of his memory, until the day came when forgetting Clarissa's occasional rewards was less painful than noticing their absence.

"If you do your part to convince Jemma to accept Logan, there's a good chance the guild might go easier on you."

Anger eroded any lingering sentimentality he might have harbored over Clarissa's uncharacteristic display of emotion. Shit, how stupid of him to think she was capable of feeling anything inside that cold heart of hers. He took a jerking step backward, causing her hand to fall. "I won't use Jemma as a means to cover my ass."

Clarissa's chest expanded with a deep sigh. "You wouldn't be using her. In fact, you might be saving Jemma's life." She spoke with calm reason, knowing full well she was sinking an invisible knife in his chest. He hated her for being a master manipulator. He hated her even more for possibly being right, for knowing he'd do anything to protect Jemma. Even if it meant sharing Jemma with Logan—the last person on earth he wanted touching her.

Still, he wouldn't coerce Jemma into doing something she had no desire to participate in. Not even for Clarissa. Certainly not for himself. "You heard her. She's uncomfortable with the idea."

"Because of you."

He gaped at Clarissa and earned her humorless laugh in return. She sank the shovel into the ground and paced in front of the grave, her boots imprinting the freshly turned soil. "Jemma sees how much you're against it—for goddess's sake, all you've done is rant and rail over the suggestion. Of course she's going to be uncomfortable. She doesn't want to upset you."

Could Clarissa be right? Deep down, did Jemma actually *want* to have sex with Logan? The possibility sat like a boulder in the pit of his gut.

Clarissa's knowing gaze seared into him, leaving him vulnerable and exposed. "She's seen you wearing that very expression. Tell me that doesn't affect her."

"What the hell do you want me to do? I can't change the way I feel."

"No. But you can lie. You can do whatever it takes to ease Jemma's conscience over doing this. And you *will* do it. Unless you'd rather start digging another grave for Jemma." She wrenched the shovel from the dirt and thrust it toward him. "The choice is yours."

Sequestered in her room, Jemma stared at the small numeric buttons on her cell phone for at least ten minutes before she found the fortitude to hit the preprogrammed speed dial for her parents' house. She'd already left a message at Nixon Investments, letting them know she'd run into a family emergency—ironically, not a fib—and needed to take an extended leave of absence. That call was a cakewalk compared to the one facing her.

Her dad picked up on the second ring. "Pumpkin, perfect timing. You can help settle the debate."

A hot wash of tears stung her eyes. The very real possibility of never seeing her father again or hearing his familiar baritone left a gaping hole in her heart. "Let me guess. You and mom are knocking heads over Scrabble?" It was a regular occurrence in the Finnegan household. A weekend wouldn't be

complete without at least a half dozen alternating phone calls from her parents trying to win her tie-breaking vote.

“Your mother insists that *frak* is a legitimate word.”

“Sorry, but I’m siding with her this time.”

“Damn, you’re sure?”

In the background, Jemma could hear a whoop of glee, and she rushed to get the difficult stuff out of the way before her mom started in on her victory dance. “Dad, listen. I’m going to be out of town for a while. Do you think you could stop by my place and pick up my mail? Maybe water my plants while you’re at it?” Not that she really cared about any of that crap. In the event of a possible zombie apocalypse, dead houseplants were kind of irrelevant. Still, she needed to convince her parents that everything was hunky-dory so they didn’t flip out and decide to jump on the next plane to Savannah.

“What’s going on, Jemma Sue?”

Oh shit, her dad had called her by her full name. Not good. He only did that when he was either suspicious or worried. She sucked in a deep breath and quickly fabricated a white lie guaranteed to ease her father’s mind. “Griff surprised me with an impromptu trip.”

“Guess that explains the voicemail I picked up from him earlier.” A chuckle floated through the line. “He better be taking you to someplace nice to make up for me having to find a replacement manager on such short notice.”

After a long pause she realized her dad wasn’t merely speaking rhetorically. He expected to know where they were going. “Oh he is. We’re going to...” Panicked, she racked her brain for a good touristy location. Her gaze fell on the porcelain French poodle figurine sitting on the dresser. “Paris!” She winced at her over-the-top exuberance, praying her dad wouldn’t notice.

“About damn time the two of you came to your senses. Are you getting hitched over there? Mind you, your mother will be furious if she’s deprived the chance of buying a new dress.”

Jemma distinctly heard her mom’s ecstatic, “*What?*” and began making crackling noises in the phone’s receiver. “Reception going...*crkk*...wonky. Call ya...*crcrkk*...later.” She stabbed the End button with her finger and groaned. “Great, now Griff will have to make an honest woman out of me and marry my ass.”

Again, that was assuming they would survive Nettie and her flesh-craving pets. She started to slump on the bed but remembered her grubby clothes, which in turn made her remember she’d forgotten to apply any deodorant that morning. She cautiously peeled back the neckline of her T-shirt and sniffed. “Oh man, and here I was giving Uncle Harold a hard time for his not-so-fresh-from-the-grave stench.”

She raced to the connecting bathroom, her fingers crossed that Clarissa had stocked it with the essentials. What she discovered in the spa-like room was a fantasy come true—a floor-to-ceiling glass-

enclosed steam shower unit that boasted an enormous rainfall showerhead and twenty—holy hell, *twenty*—side jets. Nearly orgasming at the sight, she hurriedly stripped and cranked on the controls.

Roughly twenty minutes later, her muscles the consistency of Jell-O, she staggered back into the bedroom. She finished wrapping the towel around her torso and swiveled in the direction of the bed. A startled yelp hiccupped from her when she spotted Griff parked on the mattress. Her hand flew to her clavicle. “You really know how to give a gal a heart attack.”

“Sorry. Should I have knocked first?”

Griff’s soulful eyes brimmed with enough worry she decided to let him off the hook. “Don’t sweat it. If all of today’s zombie excitement didn’t manage to scare me to death, nothing will.” She padded to the bed and settled beside him, tucking the towel securely beneath her butt. “So how did the grave-digging party go?”

A nerve ticced in Griff’s jaw. She patted his cheek. “That good, huh?”

“Clarissa and I shared a few tense moments, but the corpses are the only ones buried six feet under. All in all, a good sign.” He captured her hand and pressed a soft kiss to the center of her palm.

Remembering the unpleasant task he’d recently been engaged in, she cleared her throat. “Um, at the risk of spoiling this incredibly sweet moment, you did wash your hands, right?”

“Yes. And what’s this sweet stuff? I was going for sexy.” The tip of his tongue traced her heart line before he nipped the fleshy juncture between her thumb and index finger. Awareness tingled through her synapses, prodding her steam-relaxed body to suddenly return to life. She shifted restlessly, trying not to moan at the surge of arousal that moistened her sex. Griff seemed to notice her discomfort and grinned impishly. “Which reminds me...Clarissa sent me up here bearing gifts.”

She tugged her hand free and clasped it to its mate in wistful supplication. “Please, please say it’s a change of clothes. I really don’t want to resort to wearing this towel the entire time I’m here.”

“Afraid not.” He dropped his scrutiny to her *décolleté*. “And in my opinion, you look delectable just the way you are.” He followed up his statement by lowering his head and licking the water droplets beading on her collarbone. “Vanilla?”

It took a moment for her fuzzy brain to register that he was referring to the body spray she’d doused herself with. “Mm-hmm. It kind of makes me want pie.”

His tongue slid toward the valley between her breasts. He nipped her lightly before giving a low growl. “I’d rather eat you.”

Her breath hitched. Thank God she appeared to not be the only one who suffered raging horniness after escaping death. She dove for his zipper, but he strategically blocked her move by stuffing one of the sequined boudoir pillows in his lap. “I haven’t given you your gifts yet.”

The only *gift* she gave a rat’s ass about was the one swelling behind the fly of Griff’s jeans. “Later.” She lunged for the pillow.

“No. Now.” His laugh caressing her ear, he rolled onto his side and reached beneath the silk spread before sitting up again.

She gaped at the two items clutched in his fist. “Um...that’s a vibrator.”

He ran the pad of his thumb along the purple shaft of the jelly-like apparatus and flicked the bow tied just beneath the plump head. “Very observant of you, Jem.”

She glanced at the other object—a tube of lubricant—before blinking at him. “Why the *hell* would Clarissa buy me a vibrator?”

“She didn’t buy it for you. She conjured it.”

“Like from thin air?” She couldn’t shake the visual of a rubber cock materializing from the ether and thinking to the ground, where it kind of just bounced around on its fake ball sac. *Crazy*. She pressed her fingers into her temple in an attempt to get her brain back on track. “Anyway, I still don’t understand why Clarissa would—” A possibility slammed into her consciousness and she bolted upright. “Oh my God. It’s supposed to be a substitute for *you*, isn’t it?”

He choked on a stunted cough. “What?”

“Clarissa changed her mind about her insane plan of me sleeping with you and Logan and that—” she pointed a stiff finger at the vibrator, “—is her warped idea of a consolation prize.”

Shoulders shaking with restrained laughter, Griff rolled his lips so tight they almost appeared white. She snatched the sequined pillow and smacked him in the head. “I’m happy you find this hysterical, jackass.”

“Jemma...” Griff dropped the vibrator into his lap and wiped his watering eyes. “Where do you come up with these kooky theories?”

She started to shove from the bed, but he snagged her by the waist and hauled her against him. He nibbled the lobe of her ear and she made a halfhearted attempt to swat him away. Sliding lower, he nuzzled her neck. “You’re one of a kind, you know that? And I fucking adore that about you.”

Okay, maybe he wasn’t a *total* jackass. “Hmm, what else do you adore about me?”

He chuckled. “The fact you’re immodest enough to dig for compliments?”

She pinched his thigh. “That just lost you the few meager points you managed to score, Trudeau.”

“Ah, sweetheart, you’re killing me here.” His hands roved to her breasts and squeezed them through the towel.

She was killing *him*? Between his devious massaging and the vibrator poking her in the butt, it was a miracle she could formulate a coherent thought.

He traced the sensitive hollow behind her ear with his tongue. “You’re so goddamn sexy you make my knees shake.”

“I can *so* relate to that condition.” Moaning, she flopped her head back against his shoulder.

One hand abandoned her breast and followed the arch of her throat. His finger tapped her mouth, and she reflexively parted her lips. Needing no further invitation, his thumb brushed the sensitive inner tissue of her lower lip. “Baby, I was waxing poetic over your adorable qualities. Remember?”

“Oh, that’s right.” She scraped her teeth across his nail and earned his sharp, husky exhale. “Continue.”

“You let me win at Monopoly.”

“Not really. I just suck at that game.”

“Okay.” He paused for a millisecond, presumably to ponder further. “Your Miss Piggy impersonation is a dead ringer for the real thing.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Oh man, you really had to dig for that one didn’t you?”

Rumbling laughter floated down on her. “Fine, do you want me to point out that you have the endearing habit of bawling every time that ASPCA commercial comes on?”

She sniffled. “I can’t help it. Those sad little kitties get me every time.”

“I know, baby. You’re just a softie.” He tipped her chin up and kissed her brow. His knuckles brushed her cheek. “The truth is you’ve brought me sunshine every damn day of my life, Jemma. If I can give you half the same bliss...” The hand cupping her breast dipped lower and insinuated beyond the fold of the towel. He stroked over her navel before gliding across her mound. His fingers skimmed over her labia. She squirmed and he pressed against her inner thigh, encouraging her to straddle his legs. With a firm tug, he disposed of the towel.

Cool air wafted over her damp skin, raising goose bumps and her pebbled nipples. He plucked at one of the tightened buds the same moment his forefinger teased over her clit. She jerked at the contact, the sensations almost too exquisite to bear.

“And I especially love this...” Arousal roughening his voice to sandpaper, he slid through her slick juices. “How wet and ultrasensitive you are. I bet you could come even if I barely touch you.” Testing his hypothesis, he lifted his finger and just grazed the hood of her clit.

She swiveled her hips in a frantic plea, the feather-light contact both frustrating and thrilling. “Griff, *please*.”

“Please what?” His tone held a sexy, teasing edge. “Buzz your pretty little clit with the vibrator until your pussy is soaking and you’re dying to come? Is that what you want?”

Hearing his naughty question almost hurtled her over the stratosphere into orgasm. She didn’t know what turned her on more. Griff talking dirty or the idea of him actually carrying through with his suggestion. “Y—you want to do that to me?”

“More than you could imagine, baby.”

She bit her lip. “I’ve never done anything like that before.”

“Not even alone?”

“I don’t own a vibrator, if that answers your question.”

Griff shifted, coaxing her legs to fall between his. He scooted backward, causing the mattress to dip and creak. She glanced over her shoulder. Apparently attuned to her hesitancy, he patted the bedspread, his eyes dancing with carnal wickedness. “C’mere.”

Her heart racing from nervous excitement, she scooped onto her rear and arranged the towel to safeguard the beautiful silk coverlet from any messy happenstances. She wiggled onto the plush terrycloth and attempted to adopt a pose that fell somewhere between virginal-maiden and do-me-like-a-shameless-slut. Griff’s scorching stare bolstered her confidence, and she floated her fingertips over her breasts, stoking her arousal. And Griff’s, if the dilating of his pupils was any indication. He groped blindly for the vibrator.

“Wait.” She played with her taut nipples and watched his nostrils flare. “Take your clothes off first.”

He didn’t balk at the command. If anything, he broke every land record stripping off his T-shirt, jeans and boxer briefs. His thick shaft jutted toward his muscled abdomen, the head engorged and rosy. She hummed in happy contentment. “Stan really is the most scrumptious cock ever.”

The appendage in question lengthened even more, and he groaned before dropping onto his elbows and claiming her lips in a ravenous kiss. His tongue swept inside her mouth, stealing what little was left of her sanity. Everything else faded into nothingness. Clarissa. Nettie and the zombies. Gone. Her entire world crystallized into the man looming above her. She clutched his arms, her fingers sinking into the tensile strength of his biceps before wandering toward his chest. Encountering the firmness of his pecs, she changed course and headed due south. Apparently clued in to her intention, Griff broke the kiss and inched backward, angling his cock out of reach. He nipped her bottom lip in warning. “No way, sweetheart. Right now it’s all about you.”

She pressed the back of her hand against her forehead and heaved a dramatic sigh. “Only for you will I sacrifice myself to the battery-operated wiliness of Vinnie the vibrator.”

“You really have a thing for naming dicks, don’t you?”

Her laugh was cut short by the sudden pulsing of the vibe on her inner thigh. Griff leisurely stroked the device along her skin, painting condensed figure eights closer and closer to the end destination. She spread her legs and strained her hips upward in desperate enticement.

He didn’t take the bait. Instead, the vibrator swirled in a wide arc, sweeping lightly over the crease where her thigh and groin intersected. Resting the vibe’s head against her pubic bone, Griff leaned down and sucked on the aching nub cresting her breast. The scorching heat of his mouth combined with the luscious friction from his tongue was too much, yet not enough. Her back arched and he scored his teeth on her flesh before releasing her nipple with a wet, juicy *pop*.

He locked stares with her, his eyes positively glowing, and shifted the vibe's position, ensuring its steady pulses thrummed against her clit. A strangled cry shot from her. Griff's free hand smoothed over her belly. "Feel good, baby?"

Speech was difficult. It became downright impossible when he twisted the base of the vibrator, increasing its power and speed. Her fingers dug into the silk coverlet. Griff immediately eased off. "Too much?"

"L—little bit."

The vibe returned, its oscillations a soft, teasing hum this time. Its jellied tip kissed over her slick flesh. Biting her lip, she moved her hips in tempo with the delicious friction. Griff's focus drifted from her mouth and tracked the length of her quivering body. By the time he zeroed in on her pussy, a fine sheen of sweat covered his golden skin and his chest rose and fell with erratic, ragged breaths. Precome glistened on the head of his cock. Recalling his rich, salty taste, she groaned. The buzzing phallus slipped lower and nudged into her slit, stretching her open. She instinctively closed her thighs against the intrusion.

"Jem, I need you to take it. Please. For me?"

She relaxed her muscles and the vibrator eased farther inside her. The sensations were far more concentrated and intense than she was used to, but soon she was writhing in unabashed ecstasy as Griff shuttled the vibrator in and out. She clamped her fingers around the hand he had pressed against the mattress. "I need you inside me. *Now*."

Griff glanced at her, revealing a face tightened with lust. Rather than removing the vibrator and replacing it with his cock, he ducked and kissed the curve of her jaw. He worked his way north, the stubble on his chin scruffing her skin. His hot breath fanned her ear. "How about having us both together?"

His question left her stunned, until she realized he was referring to the vibrator...not Logan. But the taboo image was now imprinted in her mind. Nothing short of a lobotomy would shake it loose.

Griff licked the pulse point fluttering out of control in her neck. "You're excited. Does that mean yes?"

She squirmed, which only managed to lodge the vibe deeper. A whimper escaped her and Griff shifted onto his side. "Roll over."

The true scope of his plan finally penetrated her consciousness. "Y—you want—"

"Your ass." Griff's eyes blazed with unleashed fire. "Have you ever accepted a man back there before?"

She shook her head, and Griff abandoned the base of the vibrator. He cupped her cheek, his touch cherishing and gentle. "I want to be the first to take you there. *Bad*. But if you're not comfortable with it..."

There'd been past lovers who'd begged for the same privilege, but she'd never managed to relax enough to allow it. Plus she'd wanted to save that special and most intimate of acts to share with a trusted partner. There was no one on this earth she trusted more than Griff. Twining her fingers through the sweat-

dampened hair plastering the nape of his neck, she kissed him deeply. Their tongues tangled and danced before she broke away and wiggled onto her stomach. She heard Griff's hard swallow and a second later felt his fingertips tracing her spine.

"I don't deserve you. Or this." His rapid exhalations peppered her flesh as his lips followed the path of his hand. "Does it make me a selfish bastard that I'm going to take it anyway?"

"No. I want you to."

The bed creaked softly as Griff straddled her legs. She tensed slightly in expectation, only to arch her back in wanton appeal when he kissed the hollow near her tailbone. He chuckled before sliding his mouth lower. Surely he wouldn't—

His fingers coaxed her butt cheeks apart and his tongue coasted over her hidden rosebud.

"Aaahhh..." She jerked at the foreign and incredibly naughty sensation, causing the vibrator to dislodge. Griff reinserted it, his tongue never losing its wicked rhythm. The noises pouring from her throat were downright embarrassing, but she couldn't do a damn thing about it. Just when she swore her esophagus would be scratched raw from the excessive moaning, Griff let up. She quickly discovered the reprieve was to be short lived. A click sounded, followed by a cold squirt of lube dribbling into her crack. The tip of one of Griff's fingers pressed into her puckered opening, working with the silky lubricant. Applying more pressure, he sank deeper, up to his middle knuckle. She sucked in a breath.

"Everything okay?"

Gulping, she nodded. Griff added another finger. He scissored the two digits and massaged the swell of her buttocks with his other hand. His deft stroking—both inside and out—brought her to a place she'd never known existed, one filled with forbidden needs and divine pleasures. A greedy murmur spilled from between her lips, and Griff slid his fingers free. He patted her ass. "Lift your hips."

She did as directed and he wedged the large bolster pillow beneath her, positioning it so it both supported her weight and kept the vibrator securely anchored in her pussy. A moment later she detected the slick, succulent sound of him lubing his cock. She desperately wished she could see that sexy and decadent sight but knew she'd only end up with a wrenched neck if she attempted to score a peek. Griff's thighs butted up against her haunches and the thick head of his cock prodded her opening. His thumbs spread her further, assisting access. Up to a point. He notched just to the band of tight, protesting muscle when the burn erupted.

Holy hell, it hurt like a *mother*.

"Try not to clench."

Easy for him to say. He didn't have a five-pound kielbasa attempting to force its way up his rear loading dock. "I don't know if I can—" The remainder of her protest trickled into a gasp when Griff reached under her and strummed her clit. She bucked, inadvertently aiding his entry.

“Good girl.” Griff thrust deeper, popping past the barrier. He stopped, his hoarse groan filling the air and the hand on her hip tensing. “*Fuck*. You’re pulsing all around me.”

The overwhelming feeling of fullness had her perched on the precipice, but it was his observation that sent her soaring over the edge. “Griff!”

“I’ve got you.” Sinking forward, he slid an arm around her waist, snuggling her close as she shuddered and came.

And came.

And came.

Just when she thought the orgasm would finally peter off, Griff started moving again. The double penetration of his fat cock and the throbbing vibe swept her into an endless spiral of dark pleasure.

Griff’s sweat-drenched chest teased her back as he pumped in slow, shallow strokes. Sexy purrs continuously rumbled from his throat.

Wait a minute. *Purrs*? Oh jeez, why hadn’t she gotten the connection before? And how much of a freakin’ weirdo did it make her that his cat noises still turned her on like nobody’s business? He rotated his hips and she stopped thinking about anything else as the motion drew another orgasm from her.

“That’s it, baby. Keep milking us both.”

There he went with the *us* again—almost as if he wanted to implant the idea that the vibrator was a real cock rather than lifeless rubber. Rather than weird her out, Griff’s fantasy-building ignited every last one of her fuses. Behind her closed eyelids she indulged in the sinful image of Logan grinding into her from below while Griff fucked her ass. She cried out, her body quaking under the fierce tempest of the biggest orgasm of her life. Dimly, she heard Griff’s strangled shout. He swelled inside her, his seed jetting deep.

Once the waves ebbed to ripples and Griff’s shaft began to soften, he extracted the vibrator and eased out of her. He gently cleaned her up with the edge of the towel before rolling onto his side and hugging her against him. The tender kisses he sprinkled across her shoulder blade filled her with a warm glow.

And incredible shame. She just came like crazy to the fantasy of Griff and Logan fucking her—the man she loved and the enemy he hated.

There wasn’t enough therapy in the world to cure her guilt.

Chapter Nine

Griffin didn't know how long he snoozed, but he awoke to the best sensation ever—Jemma cuddled in his arms, all warm and snuggly. Her dusky eyelashes fluttered and she murmured something that sounded suspiciously like *Oh, Kermie*. Choking back a laugh, he pressed a kiss to her forehead. She sighed in her sleep, and he smoothed a finger along the blonde strand curled across her cheek. The emotions she whipped up inside him were fierce and frightening. What good could come of wanting someone who could never be his?

As if she'd been waiting for the precise moment that disheartening thought sprang into his mind, Clarissa's nagging mental energy rapped impatiently against his consciousness. Unfortunately, their physical proximity made tuning out his killjoy boss impossible. Gritting his teeth, he untangled his limbs from Jemma's and yanked on his jeans. He journeyed into the hall and stalked toward the stairway just as the grandfather clock in the foyer started chiming. The twelfth gong tolled ominously the exact moment his bare foot hit the bottom stair. Midnight. The witching hour. How fucking appropriate.

Clarissa's psychic summons led him to the library. She was parked behind the mahogany desk situated in front of the large, shuttered windows. Without looking up from the book spread in front of her, she flicked a hand in the direction of the adjacent seating, where Logan already sat sprawled in one of the armchairs. Responding to the werewolf's smirk with a low growl, he towed the twin armchair a good three feet away from Logan and sank into the seat. He waited for Clarissa to lift her attention from the leather-bound tome, his impatience spiking. His temper reached its breaking point when he detected Logan's unsubtle snuffing noises. He knew damn well what the fucking pervert was sniffing at, and he refused to rise to the bait.

Finally Clarissa deigned to tear her rapt scrutiny from the book. "I trust you've taken the first step of planting the seed with Jemma?"

A lecherous chuckle rumbled from Logan, making Griffin long to punch him in the nose—and throttle Clarissa for her unfortunate choice of words. "Yes."

"How did it go?"

He clenched the striped twill covering the chair's armrests. "Fine."

"Did she enjoy it?" Ignoring his glare, Clarissa rested her elbows on the desk and steepled her fingers. "I'm not asking because I'm nosy. If this plan didn't work, we'll have to figure out another."

He mentally tracked back to the litany of feminine cries that had tumbled from Jemma as he and the vibrator fucked her in tandem. She'd loved the hell out of it. So much so, he hadn't been able to resist merging into her thoughts—something he never did outside the occasions when he'd sensed her distress. Guilt had immediately smacked him for invading her privacy and he'd quickly shut the link. But not before he'd glimpsed the vision that'd thrown her into that last doozy of an orgasm.

The damning part that left him shaken was how he'd responded to Jemma's fantasy. Even while he'd been torn apart by Logan's phantom participation in their lovemaking, he'd also been turned on to the point of nuclear orgasm witnessing Jemma's intense pleasure as she'd visualized the illicit act.

Clarissa cleared her throat, and he noticed she was eyeing him, her blunt, crimson-painted nails drumming the desktop.

"No, she enjoyed it." Understatement of the year. He expected to hear a lewd snicker from Logan. When not even a peep came from the werewolf, he turned his head to see what act of God—or Clarissa—had managed to muzzle Logan. The man didn't seem to be under the influence of a spell or anything else. Instead, his consuming focus appeared to be riveted on Clarissa. No doubt he was distracted by his own raunchy fantasies regarding the coven's mistress. Griffin grimaced. Jesus, there was a mental link he was thankful he didn't share. Peeking into the degenerate state of Logan Scott's mind would be akin to being locked in a room with a floor-to-ceiling stack of *Penthouse* and *Hustlers*. Sure, it'd be entertaining at first, until the insanity and blindness set in.

For her part, Clarissa was either oblivious to or ignoring Logan's penetrating stare. She sprang from her seat and crossed to the bookcases. "Fantastic. That means I can concentrate my energy on finding the spell that'll help Jemma defeat Antoinette."

A hot wash of anxiety churned in the pit of Griffin's stomach. "You better know what the fuck you're doing."

Clarissa tugged another book from the shelf and pivoted. He knew from her expression that he'd overstepped his bounds. Too damn bad. When it came to Jemma, he had no problem getting in Clarissa's face.

Her lips pinching into a hard line, she returned to her chair. "I'll let that slide only because of the amount of stress we've all endured today."

He watched her rifle through the index of what appeared to be an ancient grimoire. Shit, she was really going old school. The majority of spells in that text probably predated the dark ages.

Her finger scrolled down the page before tapping to a stop. "Ah-hah. Here's something that sounds promising." She twitched her nose in that way that always reminded him of Samantha from *Bewitched*. "I wonder how difficult it is to find a wishbone from a pterodactyl wing these days?"

Logan grunted. "Check eBay."

Sighing, Clarissa slammed the book shut and returned to the bank of shelves. Griffin's attention fell on the large leather tome still sitting on the desk. He'd been too preoccupied before to notice the symbols sketched across the top of the sepia-toned pages. A chill skipped down his spine as he took in the coiled serpents. He shot to his feet, his gaze darting between the book and Clarissa. "You want Jemma to dabble in Nettie's voodoo? Are you out of your goddamn mind?"

Clarissa swiveled, her frown evident until she glanced toward the book resting on her desk. The color washed from her cheeks and she rushed forward. Griffin was faster. Swiping the book, he held it out of reach, fury bubbling inside him. "I won't let you do this."

"Don't be an idiot. I have no intention of having Jemma perform voodoo of any kind."

He shook the book in her face. "Then what the fuck is this for?"

"Research." A spastic twitch danced at the corner of her eye.

"You're lying."

"Damn it, Griffin. I demand you hand that over. *Now.*"

Resisting her command resulted in a searing burn inside his innards—an unpleasant side effect to disobeying his witch. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he focused on the page Clarissa had been perusing. What he saw left him baffled. "Why the hell would you need to break an enchantment spell?"

Rather than answer, Clarissa snapped her fingers, her expression mulish. "Logan, fetch me that book."

Logan stretched to his feet, his mouth curving in a slow grin. No doubt the son of a bitch was in seventh heaven over the prospect of kicking ass *and* scoring brownie points with Clarissa. "Sorry, Catman, but the boss's wish is my command." Not looking the least apologetic, he charged at Griffin with a gleeful howl.

"Awaken, precious girl."

An icy finger traveled the slope of Jemma's shoulder, making her shiver. She tried to roll away from the offensive sensation but found herself rising to her knees instead. The room was dark except for a shimmering dust mote that hovered several feet above the bed. Fascinated, she stretched her arm toward the phosphorescent swirl. It danced out of reach, the sparkles glowing brighter, twirling in a hypnotic pattern. She stared at the flickering lights, her heart beating in cadence with their strobing display.

Follow...

The urge to obey the lights consuming her, she swung her legs over the side of the mattress. Her toes sank into the plush carpet.

Follow...

"Yes." She staggered forward and the door yawned open, allowing the string of lights to dart into the hallway unhindered. As if guided by an invisible magnet, she hurried after the departing beacon. On silent feet, she glided down the stairway. Outside, the humid night clung to her bare skin. Cicadas filled the air

with a buzzing symphony, but it was the low, hypnotic beat of drums that lured her deeper into the shadows shrouding the side of the mansion. Each rhythmic pulse echoed within the deepest reaches of her soul.

Bruumm...bruumm...

Up ahead, the twinkling lights skipped between the marble obelisks marking the entrance to one of the enclosed garden rooms. Refusing to be left behind, she stumbled after the glowing dots. She entered the garden and the tribal drumming swelled to a crescendo. Candlelight flickered from the sconces in the stone walls, illuminating the assortment of skull rattles and glass vials adorning the built-in benches. The strange compulsion that drew her to the mysterious lights now tugged her toward the odd paraphernalia. She battled against the desire to uncup the nearest bottle and taste its sweet amber essence. The fact that she even knew what the vial contained sent fear tripping through her veins.

Run. This time the inner voice was hers, but her feet refused the order.

Something hissed to the right of her, the stench of sulfur and death strong. “You cannot run from your destiny.”

Cold fingers clutched Jemma’s chin. No amount of ignoring a nightmare would make it go away, particularly when that nightmare refused to slink back into the evil abyss it climbed from. The ghostly grip on her demanded obedience, and she turned toward the presence beside her. If she’d possessed control over her body, she would have recoiled at the soulless grey eyes peering back at her. As it was she didn’t even flinch when the oily black snake coiled around Nettie’s torso snapped open its jaws, revealing needle-sharp fangs. Antoinette stroked the asp’s head and spoke to it in some strange, foreign tongue. Whatever she said must have soothed the snake because the serpent immediately shut its mouth and relaxed its striking pose.

“The juju fascinates you.” Nettie directed Jemma’s attention once more to the vials and skulls. “I sensed your potential from the first moment I saw you. Let me teach you its way.”

She stared into the sparkling depths of the amber bottle. Its contents seemed almost alive, bursting with vitality and something infinitely evil. Locked within the prison of her body, she shuddered. *It isn’t my way.*

“But it could be. You and I could have everything—the entire world could be ours.” Her voice a seductive whisper, Nettie picked up the vial and twirled it between her translucent fingertips. “I offer you a choice. Take one sip and rule at my side for eternity.”

Or?

“Die. Either way, I will win.”

The vial beckoned, but giving in would be wrong. She couldn’t be party to a zombie uprising.

“You foolish child.” Nettie spat the words, drawing another angry hiss from the snake. “I offer you everything that those other witches will not. You think they will protect you? Provide you loving sanctuary within their house of lies? I am the only family you can trust.”

Family? She wasn’t one of Nettie’s zombie pets.

As if they'd been waiting for their cue, a pair of corpses shambled into the garden, their glassy eyes pinned on Nettie.

A low laugh that resembled the rattle of bones shook from Antoinette. "The coven has kept you in the dark, I see." Her crimson lips pulling into a chilling smile, she caressed Jemma's cheek. "I told you they are not to be trusted, my dearest granddaughter."

She peered into the twisted, fathomless depths of Nettie's eyes, the ugly truth unfurling within her consciousness like the withered petals of a rose. The deadly prick of its poisoned thorn finally broke the spell of her paralysis, and she screamed in denial.

Chapter Ten

Griffin was in the middle of throwing a chair at Logan when Jemma's mournful scream exploded in his head. He let the chair thunk to the ground and barreled from the library. His feet barely touching the stair treads, he thundered onto the second floor. He registered Clarissa and Logan's pounding footsteps behind him but quickly tuned them out as he concentrated on reaching Jemma.

He crashed into her room, his heart somersaulting when he noticed her empty bed. "Where?" He scrabbled to reconnect the psychic link with Jemma but kept slamming into what surmounted to a brick wall. "Something's blocking her."

"Nettie." Clarissa streaked back into the hallway. Griffin overtook her on the stairs and beat her through the front door. He sniffed the air. His human senses were a pale substitute for those he possessed in his alter-ego form, but unlike Logan, he couldn't transform without his witch's agreement. Given his lack of control over his shifting, Clarissa's spoken permission was a necessary—if not pain-in-the-ass—safeguard. Clarissa stumbled out onto the porch. Knowing he had precious seconds to locate Jemma, he rucked his jeans over his hips. "Say it."

"Logan can—"

"Fucking *say* it." Baring his teeth, he kicked his pants aside.

Irritation pinched the corners of Clarissa's mouth but she nodded. "*Familia tacchi.*"

The shift started in his bones and sinew. Dropping onto his haunches, he elongated his spine and flattened his palms against the porch's pine floorboards. Tufts of orange fur sprouted from his skin, and his hands and feet retracted into paws. His vision sharpened, the velvet darkness no longer an obstacle. Transformation complete, he released a primal roar and leapt down the steps. Claws digging into the parched turf, he ate up the ground in long, bounding strides, the thrill of the hunt a liquid fire in his lungs. Death's stench rode the wind and burned the insides of his nostrils.

He galloped over the river-rock tiles leading to the enclosed celestial garden. His acute hearing picked up the muffled sounds of a struggle, and he hurtled across the final fifty yards. Primed for attack, he vaulted through the archway. Two zombies had a naked Jemma cornered on one of the stone benches. She was trying to fend them off by lobbing various voodoo artifacts at their heads. Though her aim was on the money—a shard of glass protruded from the bald corpse's noggin—the zombies weren't deterred by her improvised firepower. Bloody Nettie watched the scene from the opposite corner, cackling in demented delight.

He snarled another ear-splitting roar and catapulted over the bronze sundial blocking his path. Gardenias and night-blooming jasmine fell victim to his ferocious sprint. He sprang at the bald zombie, his jaws sinking into the corpse's hindquarters. The dead man's outraged squeal bounced off the fieldstone. A second later its body accepted the same fate when Griffin sent the zombie flying on a collision course with the adjacent wall. The remaining corpse dove on top of Griffin. While he twisted and bucked, struggling to get the creature off his back, Clarissa and Logan raced into view.

Clarissa hurled one of Rose's antique salt shakers at the ground beneath Nettie. The crystal container shattered, sending salt spraying into the air. Nettie screeched in raging fury before her astral body disintegrated. Not for good, unfortunately, but the salt bought them some time. At least as far as vengeful ghost voodoo queens went. The zombie riding him like a goddamn bronco was another matter. Kicking and snarling, he tried to throw the creature off, but it dug its bony fingers into his thick ruff and tweaked his tail.

Oh yeah, they always went for the goddamn tail. Motherfucker.

From the corner of his eye he spotted Clarissa jogging toward him, the base of the heavy sundial clenched in both her hands. She took swing. A crunch sounded and the zombie thunked to the ground, its face at an opposing angle to its front end. Freed of the dead man's burdensome weight, Griffin swung in Jemma's direction. She shrieked and flattened herself against the wall. He was baffled by her reaction—until he remembered he was still in form. His alter ego had a tendency to make even the most badass of men piss their pants, much less a tiny wisp of woman like Jemma. Growling at his own stupidity, he shifted into his human body. Thankfully he didn't need Clarissa's verbal permission for that part of the transformation.

Her fingers slowly loosening their white-knuckled grip on the fieldstone, Jemma gaped at him. "Griff?"

"Baby, are you okay?" He reached for her but she slapped his hand. Hard. Wincing, he rubbed at the sting. "What the hell was that for?"

"For not telling me you're a freakin' Bengal tiger."

He frowned. "I told you I was a cat."

"Exactly. A *cat*." She tossed up her arms. "The word implies something cuddly and domestic, not an animal that snacks on antelopes."

He dug into the aching muscles of his neck. "I was planning to ease you into the tiger part. I figured discovering I'm a cat would be plenty enough to digest."

Jemma's scowl vanished. "Okay, you might have a point." She lowered her right foot from the bench, and Griffin rushed to help her down. Her stare traveled from his groin to hers before shooting toward Clarissa and Logan. Yelping, she scrabbled to cover her exposed parts. Griffin hurried to block her from the others' view, but Clarissa beat him to the punch by conjuring a pair of robes for him and Jemma.

“Thanks.” Blushing furiously, Jemma jammed her arms into the kimono-like sleeves and cinched the sash tight. “It must be handy being able to snap your fingers and have stuff magically appear.”

“My conjuring abilities are limited to certain materials, but yes, it’s definitely one of the perks to being a witch.”

Griffin shrugged into his own robe before hugging Jemma to his chest. A fierce tremble ran through him. He’d come so close to losing her. Again. “Jem, you just took at least a year off my life. How the hell did you end up out here anyway?”

“You’ve got eight more lives, right? So cut me some slack.” Sniffling, she wiped her cheek on the lapel of his robe. “And I honestly don’t know what happened. One minute I was asleep in bed and the next thing I knew some weird lights led me here.”

“Nettie entranced you.” Clarissa disregarded the irate look he sent her and calmly strode away. She returned a few seconds later with the shovel they’d used to dig the graves in the rose garden and went to work on the corpses.

“*That’s* why you needed the fucking voodoo book.” Shoving away from Jemma, he stalked toward Clarissa. A warning growl issued from Logan, but Griffin wouldn’t be deterred from his outrage. “Goddamn it, you knew this would happen, didn’t you?”

Clarissa’s posture became more rigid than the fieldstone wall behind her. “For goddess’s sake, I’m not psychic. I didn’t *know* anything. The book was merely a precaution.”

“You’re full of shit.”

The nearby candlelight revealed the sizzle of fire in Clarissa’s eyes. She released the shovel and it clattered to the stone pavers. “Griffin—”

“No, he’s right. But according to Nettie, you’re all liars.” Shoving at her trailing sleeves, Jemma stepped forward. Her hurt, accusing stare sliced between him, Clarissa and Logan. “Why didn’t you tell me I’m her granddaughter?”

It took Griffin several seconds to realize she was referring to Nettie. “What the hell are you talking about? You’re not—”

“Yes, she is.” Clarissa followed up her bombshell announcement with a resigned sigh.

Feeling like he’d been poleaxed, Griffin staggered backward. “*What?*”

Clarissa rubbed her forehead, her shoulders slumping. “Lillian was...involved...with Philippe Delacroix, Antoinette’s eldest son. She never wanted Rose to know he’d fathered Jemma, so she swore her coven sisters to secrecy.”

Griffin’s fists clenched. “Obviously they didn’t do a damn good job of keeping the secret if Nettie knows who Jemma is.”

A snort bulleted from Logan. “A secret in a house full of women? It’s a miracle the story didn’t end up on the front page of the *National Enquirer*.” He rubbed his goatee. “Come to think of it, was that rag even around back then? Might explain the lapse.”

Clarissa speared the werewolf with one of her patented ball-shriveling glares. “You are really not helping here.” She shifted her gaze back to Griffin. “I suspect before this afternoon, Nettie didn’t know for certain that Jemma’s her granddaughter. More than likely that’s the real reason she showed up earlier, to get close enough to check out Jemma. It’s likely the zombie attack on you and Logan was merely a decoy.”

Logan grunted. “Sure felt realistic. That big dead fucker who got the drop on Catman? Pretty damn certain he was looking to neuter me.” Grimacing, he cupped his balls.

“Nettie asked me to join her zombie uprising.” Jemma’s pronouncement managed to draw everyone’s attention away from Logan’s groin. She swallowed under the heat of their stares and fidgeted with her sash. “I said no, of course, but she tried to convince me to drink some weird liquid. It’s over there on the...” Her voice trailed off while they all gazed at the bench she was pointing at. Blinking, she stepped closer to the wall, her scrutiny darting between each of the equally vacant benches. “Where did everything go?”

“Back with Nettie, undoubtedly.” Clarissa waved a hand, apparently unconcerned with the logistics. “I’m willing to bet the liquid was a soul catcher. Thank the goddess you didn’t drink it.”

Her eyes widening, Jemma rubbed her arms. “Do I even want to know what a soul catcher is?”

“No. You don’t.” Clarissa nudged the zombie’s head aside with the toe of her combat boot before joining Jemma. “You must resist Nettie at all costs. If you don’t...”

“I know. Zombie uprising. Trust me, I’ve been paying attention.”

The brief flicker of sadness that washed over Clarissa’s face while Jemma had her head lowered sent a twinge of apprehension shooting through Griffin. Clarissa was hiding something. And he had a sick feeling in the pit of his gut that whatever it was boded nothing but trouble for Jemma.

Chapter Eleven

Jemma awoke to a killer headache and a taunting beam of sunlight that seemed bound and determined to strike her blind. Groaning, she flung an arm across her head and rolled over. Well, the good news was Clarissa's enchantment spell breaker apparently worked—she hadn't indulged in any more naked trips to the garden—but the downside was a killer hangover-like side effect.

She groped around with her free hand, fully expecting to encounter Griff's solid warmth. Instead she bumped into a stack of clothing. Lowering her arm, she blinked at the small mountain of shorts, capri pants and tops. There were also several flirty little sundresses and a whole collection of lingerie. She fingered the gossamer-fine texture of the peach silk bra resting on top of the pile. "Clarissa's certainly been a busy little conjurer."

Thrilled at the opportunity to wear something other than her jeans and Griff's old T-shirt, she jumped out of bed. Her aching head immediately protested. Wincing, she massaged her temples until the evil gremlin pick-axing her skull let up. She shimmied into the bra and panties, keeping her motions to a minimum to avoid another explosion inside her head. Once she was decently attired in tan shorts and a navy tank top, she ventured downstairs. The rich aroma of coffee and bacon drifted down the hall. Her stomach didn't know whether to rejoice or revolt. Thankfully it compromised with a loud growl.

"Sounds like someone needs to be fed."

She gave a startled jerk and whipped around in Logan's direction. Pain erupted behind her eyeballs. "Damn it, why do I keep doing that?" Croaking, she clamped her palms on either side of her skull.

"Mistress Clarissa's spell breakers are a bitch. Come on, sugar, we'll get ya fixed up." Slinging an arm around her waist, he escorted her to the kitchen. Gloria glanced up from the enormous bowl she was cracking eggs into, and Logan jutted his chin toward Jemma. "Think you can concoct one of your potions for our girl here?"

Jemma held up a hand when Gloria bustled toward the enormous stainless-steel fridge. "Please don't. You're busy enough."

A *pfft* noise blew between the spacious gap in Gloria's front teeth. "This is nothing. Breakfast is usually twice this work when Jade's home. She may be a tiny squirt, but she eats like a damn hippo with tapeworms."

Jemma's stomach made another rebellious roll at that unappetizing visual. Logan—apparently taking pity on her—squeezed her shoulder and led her to the enormous white-washed pine farm table situated

beneath a chandelier that was fashioned to resemble a giant broomstick. He caught her gaping at the light fixture and chuckled. “Your grandma Rose had an interestin’ sense of humor.”

She perched on one of the ladder-backed chairs and traced the intricate cutwork design on the placemat with her fingernail. “I wish I’d known her.” Strangely enough, she meant it. Despite being clueless of the woman’s existence before yesterday—*Dear God, had it only been a day?*—she couldn’t help wondering what it would have been like being raised in such an eccentric household.

The thought immediately stoked an ember of guilt. Her parents had given her a perfect childhood. One filled with love and laughter and the kind of memories she’d cherish always. She wouldn’t give them up for anything.

Only she might have to. The realization constricted her throat and made her chest tighten. She choked on a sob.

“Ah, sugar, no.” Logan dropped onto the seat beside hers and brushed her tears away with his thumb. “My heart can’t take a woman cryin’.”

She sucked in a snuffle that was far from dainty. Unfortunately she wasn’t one of those women who managed to cry prettily without smudging their eye makeup or looking like a swollen-faced Pillsbury Doughgirl by the time she was finished. “S-sorry. I just hate that I didn’t get to see my parents before I left. Knowing that it might have been the last...” Her voice wobbled and a fresh crop of tears threatened to burst free of their dam.

“Shhh. You’ll see them again. Just think of the happy tears you’ll share then.” Logan tucked her hair away from her face, his golden eyes soft and compelling. Holding her gaze, he leaned forward and kissed her tenderly. Unlike their kiss in the parlor, this one promised nothing but comfort. Her breath escaped in a long shudder, and Logan caressed her nape before breaking the kiss. He coaxed her to rest her head beneath the crook of his chin, and her cheek pillowed against the solidness of his collarbone. The shrill grind of a blender dragged her focus back toward the activity commencing in the kitchen, and she noticed Griff standing in the entry, his unblinking stare riveted on her and Logan, his entire body rigid.

The guilt she’d felt moments ago over her disloyal thoughts in regards to her family were nothing compared to the knife that twisted in her chest as she took in Griff’s expression. Her belly doing a flip-flop, she jerked out of Logan’s embrace. The pickax in her skull morphed into a jackhammer and she yelped.

“Easy there, sugar.”

Trying not to feel self-conscious about Logan’s hand massaging the base of her neck, she watched Griff’s speedy advance. Concern had wiped all traces of wounded disbelief from his features. “What’s wrong?”

“She’s sufferin’ a nasty bit of spell-breaker blues.”

Griff dropped onto one knee and tipped her face upward. He mumbled a curse, and she wondered just how awful she looked. On a scale of one to ten, she probably scored a twenty.

“Gloria’s gettin’ her fixed up. Our girl will be right as rain before we know it.”

Griff’s attention swerved to Logan. He didn’t say anything, but she suspected the tension bordering his mouth had something to do with Logan calling her *our* girl. “Good. Make sure she drinks all of it.” He started to shove to his feet, and she grabbed his hand.

Battling against the queasiness and anxiety making her miserable, she twined her fingers with Griff’s. “Please stay.” She knew she sounded desperate and needy, but the idea of him walking away right now was unbearable.

He hunkered back down and cupped her cheek. “I can’t. Clarissa is in the library with the guild leader. She’s requested a word with me.”

“Guild?”

His smile slipped into place, a reassuring sight. “I’ll tell you all about them when I’m done. Or if you’re really impatient to hear more about the pains-in-the-asses, I’m sure Logan would be willing to fill you in.” He kissed her—not quite as platonically as Logan—and stood. She watched him stride from the room before slumping against the edge of the table.

Catching Logan’s all-too-knowing stare, she sighed. “Okay, so tell me about the guild.”

Logan eased back in his seat and draped his arm along the table. “They’re the governing body of the National Alliance of Witches. Or as I fondly refer to them from time to time—the hairy wart on the ass of humanity.”

Despite realizing she’d pay dearly for it, she laughed, and promptly groaned at the accompanying power drills commencing a demolition inside her head. Slamming her eyes shut, she dug her knuckles into the ridge of her brow. She detected the sound of Logan’s chair scraping against the floor, but she didn’t dare risk the wrath of the spell-breaker blues to check on what he was doing.

“Why don’t you rest your head on the table here while I see if Gloria’s got your potion ready?”

Slurring an incoherent reply, she took Logan up on his suggestion and whimpered in relief when the agony lessened. She could still hear the staccato beat of her temples pounding, but that was a minor unpleasantness she’d gladly endure compared to earlier. A cool breeze ruffled across her skin and she shivered.

“Jemma…”

That was quick. Setting her teeth against the inevitable pain, she pried one eye open. The blurry outline of a man’s face hovered above the table. Yelping, she snapped her head up, paying little mind to the resulting brain spasm. Who the hell cared about that when a freakin’ floating head was staring at her?

“We don’t have much time. Already I hear her coming.”

She gaped into the washed-out blue eyes watching her so somberly. “Who?” A part of her couldn’t believe she was engaging in conversation with a bodiless apparition. Then again, this was probably all just

a delusion. No doubt she'd succumbed to a brain aneurism and was currently drooling all over herself in a fetal position.

"That isn't important." The face drifted close enough she could see the faint outline of the numerals 3 and 7 branded into the man's forehead. "There is a way to defeat her and save us all."

She frowned. "Are you talking about Nettie?"

"Yes. The answer rests beneath the horned goat. I can't tell you more or she will know and stop you." A look of overwhelming terror flashed across the disembodied face. "She comes now. *Gorasola*. Say it twice as she rises."

Oh good Lord. Could he be more cryptic? "I don't understand—"

The face shimmered and defragmented like a plasma screen with horrible picture distortion before completely vanishing. Mystified, she stared at the empty window of space until the thud of approaching boots captured her attention. Logan frowned at her over the heavy vapor cloud of steam rising from the mug he carried. "Sugar, you look like you've seen a ghost."

She gulped. "I think I just did."

Chapter Twelve

Domino Blanchard had gone all out in ensuring she'd dressed the part of reigning matron of the witches' alliance. Garbed in a sleek black silk pantsuit that made her skin glow like fine porcelain, she exuded an air of ageless, regal authority. Ensconced in the armchair beside her, mousy little Willa Jameson—Domino's personal secretary—studiously tapped away on her laptop, logging the proceedings for posterity.

"You're certain that the spell breaker took affect?" Domino threw the question to Clarissa. "There are no lingering threads linking Jemma to Antoinette?"

Clarissa dragged her nails through her hair before scowling and dropping her hands. "All links are broken. I made sure of it."

"That may very well be." Domino sipped at her coffee. Wrinkling her nose as if the beverage offended her, she relegated the cup to the corner of the desk.

Clarissa's mouth rolled in a tight line. Griffin silently applauded her willpower. Bad enough Domino had taken over Clarissa's prized desk. She'd doubled the slight by setting the hot mug on its surface without a coaster, something that undoubtedly had Clarissa grinding her teeth behind those clenched lips.

Domino tucked a lock of her chin-length platinum hair behind her ear. "However, we both know that no magic in existence is going to untangle blood ties."

Anger spiked through Griffin. "Jemma had no contact with Nettie before yesterday. Whatever blood exists between them is diluted to the point of irrelevance."

Domino's assessing gaze swept him. He held steady, refusing to cower in the face of it. She clucked her tongue. "You truly are blinded by your feelings for your charge if you believe that, something else we must speak of following this business of Jemma."

"Hell, why wait?" Frustrated by the paces she'd put him through for the past half hour, he threw his arms out. "Why not get down to the dirty and tell me what punishment you have in store for me?"

"Griffin."

He met Clarissa's gaze and was surprised at the soft entreaty in her eyes. It provided a marked contrast to the sharp note of warning that'd underscored her tone. He gave an imperceptible shake of his head that he knew only she would pick up on. She closed her eyes, a weary sigh leaking free.

He returned his attention to Domino. "Go ahead. Lay it on me."

One of the matron's perfectly groomed brows arched. "Spoken like someone who has no fears of the answer he might receive."

"Should I be?"

"You disobeyed a sacred law and as a result set in motion a zombie apocalypse. What do you think?" Domino smoothed the sleeve of her jacket and crossed one knee over the other, adopting the pose of a woman confident of her power. "You're being sent back to Familia Tacchi 'Loa. For good."

An awful coldness crawled inside his belly. The tinny echo of Clarissa's furious rebuttal came at him as if from a distance, and he shook his head again, desperately trying to navigate his way back to a place that made sense. A place that wasn't suddenly painted every nightmarish shade of hell.

Banishment. They couldn't do this to him. To Jemma.

Jumping from her seat, Clarissa stormed around the desk, and Domino calmly waved a hand, efficiently erecting an invisible barrier that bumped Clarissa back several steps. Clarissa retaliated by pointing a finger at the spring mechanism at the base of the leather chair Domino occupied. The seat collapsed, thunking a red-faced and cursing Domino unceremoniously to the floor.

Willa scooted her oversized tortoise-frame eyeglasses farther up the bridge of her nose and coughed timidly. "Ladies, all this excess energy is causing my hard drive to go haywire."

Apparently the threat of melted electronics was the key way to stop a pair of feuding witches. While Clarissa awarded Willa a sheepish look, Domino cranked the chair back to a reasonable height. The matron swiveled to face Griffin and regarded him coolly. "All things considered, the punishment is more than fair. Familia Tacchi 'Loa is your birth place. Your family is there—you won't exactly be lonely."

No, his family was *here*. With Jemma. He'd left that other realm permanently behind when Clarissa called upon him to be her familiar. There was nothing left for him in Familia Tacchi 'Loa. Not anymore.

"I need him here." Her chin squaring in stubbornness, Clarissa planted her hands on her hips. "If there's any chance of Jemma becoming strong enough to stop Nettie, it lies with Griffin and Logan."

"*If*. You're making a lot of suppositions on an untested theory." Domino steepled her fingers on her chest. "Furthermore, if you're wrong, you may be playing right into Antoinette's plans. The longer Jemma is alive, the more opportunity Antoinette has to raise her army."

The numb disbelief that'd seized Griffin turned into explosive outrage as Domino's meaning crystallized. "The longer Jemma is *alive*?" He shifted his focus to Clarissa. Her ashen pallor confirmed his worst suspicions. Rage roared inside him like a wounded beast. "You were planning on killing her?"

Domino grimaced. "That sounds so...unsavory. Of course we have no desire to harm Jemma. But it's one life versus many. I'm sure Jemma would see the logic in that."

She would. But he couldn't. He couldn't see beyond the hell of living in a world where there was no Jemma. Whether on Earth or Familia Tacchi 'Loa, it didn't matter. She was his life. His everything. He would kill Domino before allowing her to lay a finger on Jemma.

Clarissa must have detected the murder in his eyes because she cleared her throat loudly. “You admit that you don’t relish the idea of disposing of Jemma. All the more reason to give my plan a chance.” Though she directed the statement to Domino, Clarissa kept her stare glued on him. Maybe she was concerned he’d leap across the desk and rip Domino’s throat open. Not that the possibility didn’t hold some appeal. “As far as your worries about my theory not holding merit? Tell me why else Nettie would try to persuade Jemma to join her unholy crusade if not because she thirsts for the power she senses in her granddaughter? You and I know it isn’t anything to do with some misguided notion of love on Nettie’s part.”

Domino traced a finger over the dimple in her chin, her expression considering. “True enough.”

A smile of pure triumph curved Clarissa’s mouth. “Then allow me some time to put the plan in motion.”

The leather chair’s casters provided a constant soundtrack of clicks while Domino rocked in place. “Fine, I’ll give you until Wednesday.”

Clarissa’s smile cracked. “But that leaves only two days!”

“Yes. Plenty of time.” Domino’s tone brooked no further argument. Her hawk-eyed stare jumped to Griffin. “I’m granting you those two days to fulfill your part in the proceedings, but when—or rather *if*—Jemma succeeds, you will be dispatched back to Familia Tacchi ’Loa. Do you understand?”

An argumentative retort broke from Clarissa, but Domino ignored her and stood. “That concludes this meeting. Willa, are you coming?”

Typing frantically on her laptop, the younger woman shot Domino a harried look. Seconds later, a jingle that announced the shutdown of the computer’s software floated from the speakers, and Willa slammed the lid shut before trotting out the door after her boss. Clarissa plopped onto the edge of her desk and buried her face in her hands.

Seeing her in such an uncharacteristic state of despair didn’t sit well on him. Where was the tough-as-nails woman who refused to kowtow to anyone? He strode to Clarissa and grabbed her arms. “Damn it, don’t you give up on her!”

Clarissa peered up at him, her red-rimmed eyes bleak. “Two days. I don’t know—”

“It’ll work.” It had to. The alternative was *not* going to fucking happen.

Chapter Thirteen

Jemma took one look at Griff's ferocious expression as he stalked into the kitchen with Clarissa and deduced that whatever went down in the library hadn't been pleasant. "What happened?"

Griff met her at the large marble-topped work island where Gloria was busy dishing up slices of egg and spinach strata. Rather than answer, he smoothed her hair back from her face. "Did Gloria's potion help?"

"Yep. I'm feeling much better. But I had to deal with a real bad case of the hiccups at first." Something Logan had teased her about. She'd of course been forced to retaliate by socking him in the arm a few times. After laughing like a demented fool, he'd escaped to God knows where. She hadn't seen him for the past fifteen minutes—the chickenshit.

She poked a finger in Griff's chest. "I want to know what happened in your meeting. Did the guild give you any crap about you and me?"

Griff's gaze traveled over her head to Clarissa. "Yes, but it's nothing for you to worry about."

She highly doubted that. Still, it'd probably be better to grill him later, when she could get him alone and he wouldn't have to worry about censoring himself in front of the others. Accepting one of the plates Gloria thrust at her, she backtracked to the dining nook. Clarissa joined her, settling into the seat across the way. Recalling the small mountain of clothes sitting on her bed upstairs, she sent the coven mistress a grateful smile. "Thank you for whipping up all that stuff for me. I certainly wasn't expecting a whole wardrobe."

Clarissa shrugged. "I couldn't sleep. There's no better cure for insomnia than conjuring."

Logan came sauntering into the nook and swiped a piece of bacon from Jemma's plate. Sidestepping her swatting hand, he leaned his hip against the table and waggled his eyebrows. "Conjuring? Damn, shug, you know I'm more than willin' to tucker you out whenever you need it."

Clarissa's eyes narrowed. "How do you manage to twist perfectly innocent conversation into sleazy sexual innuendo?"

"It's a gift, darlin'."

Spreading a napkin in her lap, Clarissa slid Jemma a sympathetic look. "Hopefully he behaved earlier—at least as much as he's capable of doing."

"For the most part." She caught Logan's feigned expression of wounded affront as he thumped his free hand against his chest and sighed. "Okay, other than making fun of me for the nonstop hiccup, I guess

you were bearable. And you scored a few points for not treating me like a nutso when I told you about the floating head.” She dashed pepper onto her strata and popped a forkful of the fluffy egg casserole into her mouth. Halfway through chewing she noticed it’d gotten inordinately quiet in the room. She glanced across the table.

Clarissa was gaping at her. “Floating head?”

“I...uh...” Jeez, talk about awkward. How did she explain having a conversation with a disembodied head without sounding like she’d been sampling a few too many magic ’shrooms?

Clarissa leaned forward, her expression excited. “Did this head by any chance have a number branded on it?”

Jemma’s fork clattered onto her plate. “How did you know that?”

“I received a similar visitation a few years ago. Before the spirit disappeared, it revealed that it was one of Nettie’s captured souls. Apparently the numbers are a method of cataloging.”

Horror and disgust ricocheted through Jemma. “Oh my God! That’s...that’s...”

“Disturbing?” Clarissa offered with a nod. “I know.”

Though a part of her knew she’d regret asking, the need to understand the dark weirdness she’d been pulled into outweighed her desire for ignorance. “How exactly does one go about capturing a soul?”

“Do you remember the bottle Nettie tried to get you to drink from last night?”

Recalling the amber vial brimming with such evil, sparkling effervescence, she shuddered. “You called it a soul catcher. If...if I drank from it, I would have ended up like one of those floating heads?” The look in Clarissa’s eyes was all the answer Jemma needed. She gulped, her heart thudding at the realization of how close she’d come to succumbing to the soul catcher’s hypnotic allure. Sweet Jesus, what twisted evil resided within Nettie that she would condemn people to such an existence? Then again, should it surprise her? The woman hung out with zombies, for God’s sake.

“Did the entity speak to you?”

The sound of approaching footsteps momentarily distracted her from Clarissa’s question. She waited until Griff and Ms. Peach both took their seats before answering. “Yes, but most of the conversation didn’t make much sense. There was something about a horned goat and gorgonzola. Wait, that’s not right.” She plopped her chin in her hand, racking her brain for the strange word the spirit had given. “Garambola? Nope, that’s not it either.”

“What in the devil are you talking about?”

She met Griff’s confused gaze and quickly filled him in on her little chitchat with the floating head. His excitement matched Clarissa’s when she recounted the quizzical clues the entity had given. She certainly didn’t understand why anyone would be thrilled over a goat and a word that may or may not have to do with stinky cheese.

Griff ignored his plate of food while he stared at Clarissa. “I wonder if the horned goat could be referring to the statue that was left at Whispering Oaks?”

Clarissa tapped her fork against her bottom lip. “I was thinking the same thing.”

Frustrated at her complete cluelessness, Jemma cleared her throat, managing to snag Griff’s attention. “Okay, I give. What is a whispering oak?”

“It’s the plantation Nettie owned. The historical society took it over several years ago but gave up on the idea of restoring it after the fifth electrical fire.”

“Fifth?”

The corners of Griff’s mouth tugged upward in a mockery of a smile. “You have to give the historical society an A for effort. Unfortunately that’s still no match against a ghost who’s determined to keep them out.”

“Apparently.” Jemma shuttled her gaze between Griff and Clarissa. “You really think the answer to destroying Nettie might be under that statue?” An ember of hope sparked to life, despite knowing it was probably too good to be true.

“There’s only one way to find out.” Clarissa shoved away her untouched plate, her face set with determination. “Who feels up for a road trip?”

Thirty minutes later, Jemma started wondering just how insane she was for agreeing to take an afternoon joyride to a haunted plantation belonging to the deranged ghost voodoo queen who was jonesing for her blood. Judging from the rigid set of Griff’s jaw, he wasn’t too thrilled with the decision either.

His hot glare lifted to the rearview mirror for the hundredth time. “I still say Jemma should have stayed back at the coven house with either me or Logan. We could be sending her right into a trap.”

The backseat creaked as Clarissa shifted restlessly between Ms. Peach and Gloria. “Or maybe that’s precisely what Nettie wanted and expected us to do—separate. There’s more safety in numbers. You know that.”

Griff’s fists clenched around the steering wheel. Obviously his realizing the possibility didn’t necessarily equate with him going along with Clarissa’s plan like a good little boy scout. The fact that Griff was worried only skyrocketed Jemma’s concerns and added to the goose bumps taking over her skin. It didn’t help that the air blowing from the dashboard vent kept blasting her like an arctic front.

Trying to be as unobtrusive as possible, she rubbed her arms. “Uh, neither of you are suggesting that Nettie sent that spirit to me, right?” Though now that she thought about it, what better way to set her up for a fall?

Griff relaxed his grip on the wheel and sent her a reassuring look. “More than likely she didn’t. But it’s still a good idea to be on our toes.”

They turned onto a narrow road that was bordered on either side by massive oaks dripping with stringy moss. The surrounding landscape held a wild, untamed quality, as if the land had decided to revoke any claim to civilization. After bumping along for approximately another half mile, they arrived in front of the dilapidated ruins of a plantation house. Large portions of the roof and exterior frame were charred and blackened, which explained the distinctive scent of smoky charcoal drifting through the vent.

Griff killed the engine and climbed from the SUV. Shaking off the creepy-crawly sensation skittering down her neck, Jemma clicked her seat belt free and shrugged off the restraint. She joined the others outside just as Logan roared up on his motorcycle.

Clarissa rolled her eyes. “There goes any hope of not waking the dead.”

Looking every inch his bad-boy self, Logan stored his helmet and dismounted the bike. “So where’s this infamous statue?”

“Back by the slave cabins.” Clarissa pointed to an area in the distance. “They’re roughly five hundred yards beyond that copse of snake grass.”

“Knew I should have brought my damn hikin’ boots.” Grunting, Logan started toward the overgrown path.

While the others trekked after Logan, Jemma stayed behind with Griff as he grabbed a shovel and the shotgun from the rear hatch of the Pathfinder. Her attention kept returning to the plantation house. Something about it fascinated and repelled her. She could almost feel the hot stares of unseen eyes, hear the seductive echo of a faint whisper in her eardrum. Licking her lips, she took a step forward. A palm clamped around her forearm and she yelped. Jerking her gaze upward, she peered into Griff’s worried eyes.

“Jem, the statue is this way.”

“Um, right. Guess I sort of zoned out for a second there.”

After sending the house an apprehensive look, Griff tugged her toward the path. She tried to ignore the shotgun strapped to his shoulder. Better not to think about the possibility of them needing it.

They walked for what seemed like an eternity, the relentless pounding of the sun and attacks from bloodthirsty mosquitoes adding a special kind of hell to the adventure. By the time they reached the slave cabins, Jemma figured she must resemble a sweaty, welt-covered lobster. Shoving a straggly clump of damp hair off her face, she scanned the lineup of moldering shacks. She shivered, an overwhelming sadness plowing into her at the atrocious inhumanities the slaves must have endured.

Griff rubbed her neck, bringing her back to the present. “The statue isn’t much farther.” He led her a few more yards beyond the cabins, where Logan was hacking his way through the towering stands of bamboo. She hadn’t seen him with the machete earlier—he must have had it strapped to his leg or something. Good thing the weapon hadn’t come undone during the ride over. Talk about that puppy leaving one hell of a nick.

Logan stopped suddenly and let out a triumphant howl. Apparently that was werewolf for “Found it” because everyone scrambled into the center of the vegetation he’d cleared. Griff grabbed her hand and led her into the fray. Sure enough, a weathered stone statue of a goat sat nestled in a hidden cubbyhole surrounded on three sides by a thick curtain of bamboo. As far as goat depictions went, it wasn’t your typical bearded barnyard friend. Yes, the beard was there, but that was pretty much where the similarity ended. The face more resembled a frightening nightmare, with sharp fangs and slitted eyes. And then there were the extremely long and pointy horns that were topped with cobra coils.

Jemma shuddered. “Oh man, that’s just plain freaky.”

Clarissa took the shovel from Griff. “Could you help Logan move the statue?”

“What do I look like, a goddamn wimp?” After flexing his impressive biceps, Logan squatted behind the goat and grabbed it by the horns. He strained to lift the statue, but it didn’t budge. Making a sound like he was dangerously close to busting a nut—or the vein popping out in his forehead—he attempted the maneuver again. And again. On the third try Logan threw in a handful of colorful swear words for good measure.

“Oh for goddess’s sake.” Sighing, Clarissa jutted her chin at Griff. “Would you put *Mr. Universe* out of his misery before I’m forced to call the paramedics?”

Looking none too pleased, Logan relinquished one of the horns to Griff. After several more minutes of huffing and puffing and the occasional F bomb, it became clear that the statue was going nowhere.

Clarissa tapped her bottom lip. “Nettie must have secured it with a locking spell to stave off looters.”

Logan swatted a fat mosquito that was feasting on his cheek before baring his teeth. “Might have been nice mentionin’ that sooner.”

Shrugging, Clarissa approached the statue. “We’ll just have to work around it.” Planting the heel of her boot on the shovel for leverage, she sank the blade into the ground, loosening up the dirt. After several minutes spent wrestling with the bamboo’s invasive roots, she allowed Griff to take over the chore. Dropping the shotgun, he worked like a madman and quickly tore up a five-foot-deep-square perimeter around the statue.

Hope withering inside her, Jemma peered down into the massive hole. Unless the answer to defeating Nettie happened to be a bunch of hard-packed clay and wiggling earthworms, the spirit that’d spoken to her had been blowing smoke up her ass. “So much for that.”

“It’s okay. This doesn’t change anything.” Clarissa’s tone rang with a false perkiness that a deaf person would be able to pick up on. “We’ll just go back to plan A.”

Plan A? Oh yeah, having sex with Griff and Logan and maybe—*maybe*—unlocking the dormant mother lode of magic that might or might not be buried inside her.

Sweet Jesus, they were all doomed.

Logan suddenly lifted his head and cocked it to the side. “Does anyone else hear that?”

All conversation ceased as they listened for whatever had captured Logan's interest. Jemma strained to detect anything beyond the pair of annoying mosquitoes buzzing near her face. Finally she heard it. The unmistakable gunning of a—

"Motherfucker." Logan shot to his feet.

They all pivoted when the sound grew louder. Jemma didn't know whether to be terrified or bemused by the weird spectacle racing toward them. Logan, however, had no problem determining the proper emotion for the occasion. Blistering fury. His ferocious howl renting the air, he leapt effortlessly over the hole Griff had dug. Judging from the werewolf's expression, he looked ready to commit murder. Or in the case of the zombie whooping it up on Logan's motorcycle—dismemberment. The corpse veered off path, and the Harley's front tire clipped the corner of a boulder, sending the bike in an airborne collision course with the slave shacks.

The motorcycle crashed through the wall of the nearest cabin, and Logan staggered, almost falling to his knees. An anguished wail ripped from his throat, competing with the screech and splinter of flying metal and wood. Shaken from their stupor, Griff and Clarissa each grabbed one of Jemma's arms just as four zombies shambled from the concealment of the tall snake grass.

"Son of a bitch." Growling low in his throat, Griff checked the safety on the shotgun. "Ready or not, we've got to make a run for it."

Jemma swallowed the panic congealing in her windpipe. "I'm good with that plan."

"Then let's do it." Clarissa squeezed Jemma's elbow before shooting a glance over her shoulder. "Peach, Gloria...time to haul ass."

The other two women shuffled close behind them. Some of Jemma's anxiety ebbed. Nothing like a wall of witches to give one a false sense of security.

"Go!"

Heeding Clarissa's shout, they beelined for the open path. The two corpses on the right sprang forward. Logan snapped out of his period of mourning and dove at the pair of dead men, knocking them to the ground. From the sound of the scuffle going on, he was really enjoying taking his rage out on the zombies.

The two corpses left standing hurtled across the field. Unprepared for their speed, Jemma yelped. Behind her, Ms. Peach grunted. "What the hell have they been drinking? Zombie Powerade?"

Griff broke from their quintet and charged toward the oncoming zombies. The shotgun boomed, nailing one of the corpses.

"They're on Nettie's home turf. Her powers are magnified." Clutching Jemma's wrist in a death grip, Clarissa zigzagged them through the obstacle course of snake grass and bamboo. Trying not to trip over the damn vegetation was a challenge in itself. Trying not to jump every time the shotgun roared? Impossible. They rounded an enormous clump of grass and a female zombie pounced at them. Bellowing a warrior's

cry, Clarissa pummeled the corpse with a fierce kick in the thigh. The dead woman went flying. Sparing the bewildered corpse the barest glance, Jemma stumbled after Clarissa.

The next several minutes were an insane blur. It seemed the closer they got to the plantation house—to possible escape—more zombies showed up. Seriously, it was like the field was a damn zombie incubator or something. A corpse sporting a buzz cut and overalls—who the hell got buried in overalls?—lunged on top of Clarissa. Dead farm boy might have been scrawnier than a scarecrow, but he still managed to pin the coven mistress beneath him. Despite Clarissa's frantic screams to make a run for it, Jemma kicked at the zombie. With Ms. Peach and Gloria's help, she managed to antagonize the creature enough that he rolled off Clarissa. She scrambled to her feet and grabbed Jemma's arm again. "Come on!"

Not about to dally in a field full of dead hicks ramped up on zombie Powerade, Jemma raced along the path. Heart lodged in her throat, she scanned for a glimpse of Griffin. The shotgun's thundering rebound had long since fallen silent, its ammunition a puny deterrent against the multiplying corpses. If one of these dead bastards got to Griff...

A familiar head of sable hair bobbed past a thicket of bamboo, and her breath gusted free in a relieved rush. Now if they all could just reach the Pathfinder without ending up the main entree in a zombie buffet. She spotted Griff's vehicle in the distance. Miraculously they had a straight shot to it. Her lungs burning, she ran toward the only beacon of escape.

Thirty yards.

Twenty.

Fifteen.

Slam. A fierce gust of air bulldozed into her. Her legs jolted, lost footing, forcing her butt to smack into the gravel. Dazed and winded, she spat out a straggly lank of hair that'd swept inside her mouth.

"Welcome home, dearest Jemma."

She'd recognize that low, taunting whisper anywhere. Shivering, she lifted her gaze to the apparition hovering in front of her. Nettie extended an arm, her black, talon-like nails coaxing her to rise.

The flared, grass-stained leg of Clarissa's jeans entered the perimeter of Jemma's vision. "Why don't you return to the hell you crawled from, you nasty bitch."

Her eyes flashing with ugly menace, Nettie turned toward Clarissa. A silvery arc of light shot from Nettie's fingertips. Clarissa dropped to her knees and clawed at her throat, a rasping choke gurgling from her.

"Stop it!" Jemma attempted to shove onto her feet, but her useless limbs kept slip-sliding in the gravel. The pounding approach of footsteps had her tensing, until she heard the distinct click of the shotgun chambering a magazine.

An evil smirk twisted Nettie's mouth. "You think that will stop me?"

“As a matter of fact, I do.” Griff’s calm pronouncement preceded a thundering boom from the shotgun. Rock salt showered the air. Nettie’s banshee wail cut off in mid-shriek as she disintegrated.

Blinking, Jemma peered up at Griff. “Okay, what’s the deal with the salt?”

“Ghosts don’t like it.”

Ask a dumb question...

Shaking her head, she allowed Griff to hoist her up. Behind him, she spied Logan hoofing it down the trail. At least a dozen zombies were in hot pursuit. She gulped. “Uh, guys, I think we better get our asses in the car.”

No one needed to be told twice. They all piled in, and Griff slammed the key in the ignition just as Logan dove into the backseat. Throwing the gears into reverse, Griff floored it on the gas. Loose gravel showered beneath the tires, pinging against the undercarriage.

Through the windshield, Jemma watched the continual flow of zombies pouring from the distant field. She swallowed. Hard.

We are so fucked.

Chapter Fourteen

Griffin knocked before entering Jemma's bedroom. He spotted her standing in front of the tall picture window. Something outside must have held her rapt attention, because she didn't even glance in his direction when he sidled up next to her.

"What is she doing?"

He peered out the window and noticed Clarissa walking the perimeter of the property, waving her arms in dramatic swoops and flourishes. "She's calling on the guardians of the four corners to help defend her wards."

Jemma shifted her head and blinked at him. "Four corners? Wards? I think I'm going to need a glossary to understand all this magic stuff."

"The four corners are what most people know as north, east, south and west. Elementals, or guardians, have assigned watchtowers in those quadrants."

"Elementals?" Frown lines crinkled between Jemma's brows. "Are they anything like the elements?"

He tweaked her nose. "Who says you need a witch's dictionary?"

"You're kidding, I got it right?" Her eyes widened. "So are these elementals actual creatures?"

"In a sense. It's more accurate to think of them as manifestations of the elements they govern." He pointed to a red-tailed hawk gliding above the oaks. "To the casual observer, they'd think that's merely an ordinary hawk. But it's Akasha, one of the guardians of air."

"You mean these elementals are just hanging around us, out in the open?"

He chuckled. "Some, yes. The leprechauns tend to be more reclusive and cranky. And don't even get me started about the dragons."

Jemma's mouth fell open. Her focus returned to the window, and she shook her head. "Okay, you'd think none of this would shock me anymore."

"Cut yourself some slack, Jem. Most would be suffering a mental breakdown with everything that's been thrown at you the past twenty-eight hours."

She offered him a peculiar look before crossing to the chaise lounge and plunking onto its cushion. Staring at the floor, she picked at a loose thread dangling from the hem of her shorts.

Her sudden quiet moodiness worried him. "What's wrong?"

Lifting her gaze, she gaped at him. "Uh, where should I start?"

He joined her on the chaise and clasped her fidgeting hand. “Something besides the zombies is bugging you.”

Her contemplation returned to the Berber carpeting. The faintest tremor ran through the delicate fingers pressed against his palm. “I’m scared, Griff. Scared that...” Her throat worked with a difficult swallow.

“Baby, talk to me.”

She looked up, revealing eyes clouded with doubt and fear. “What if Nettie gets to me?”

He didn’t realize his hand vised hers painfully tight until her wince clued him in. Releasing his grip, he cupped her cheek. “Never. The wards will help keep her and the zombies out.” He deliberately omitted the part about the shield also keeping *them* locked within the protective barrier. The only thing that’d break the wards now was one of them crossing the shield, thereby rendering it useless—hence the wards being the last line of defense. She already felt imprisoned by her nightmarish circumstances. He didn’t relish having to confirm how literal her notion had just become.

“I’m not talking about that.”

Her statement left him baffled. “Then what do you mean?”

She gnawed her bottom lip between her teeth for several seconds before answering. “When we were standing in front of the plantation house a weird sensation came over me—similar to the one I experienced last night in the garden. Griff, I wanted to go inside Nettie’s house. More than anything.”

Uneasiness washed over him at her admission. “But you didn’t.”

“Yeah, but only because you stopped me. What if you hadn’t been there?”

“You would have stopped yourself.” He injected his voice with a certainty he desperately wanted to possess.

Skepticism clouded Jemma’s expression. “We don’t know that. Obviously there’s still something tying me to Nettie despite Clarissa’s spell breaker. Maybe because Nettie’s my grandmother. Who knows, maybe our blood—”

“No.” He grasped Jemma by the upper arms, unwilling to let her venture down that dark, twisted path. He’d refused to humor Domino’s theory of genetic linkage, and he sure as hell wouldn’t give credence to Jemma’s. “Whatever is going on has been fabricated by Nettie. She’s a master manipulator. Jesus, her zombies are living proof of what she’s capable of.”

“Then does it really matter if it’s coming from my blood or not?” She extricated herself from his hold and squeezed his kneecap with a trembling grip. “Clarissa’s wards won’t keep Nettie from stealing into my mind again, right? And if she figures out a way to stay a permanent guest inside my head, we’re doomed, one way or another.”

Helplessness threatened to crush him as he took in the myriad doubts lurking in Jemma’s eyes. “You can fight her, baby. Deep down, you’re stronger than Nettie.”

Smiling tremulously, she twined their fingers together. “You’ve always believed in me, no matter what. That’s one of the things I’ve always loved about you.” Tears collected on her dusky lashes. Before they could spill he whisked them away with his thumb.

“I—I want you to promise me something.”

“Anything.” He leaned forward and kissed her tenderly.

Their lips parted and she stared at him, a glint of determination replacing the shadows in her irises. “If you see me slipping toward the dark side, kill me.”

Beaming him with a two by four would have a less devastating effect than her request. He dropped her hand. “Are you out of your fucking mind? How could you even *think*...?” *Jesus*. He lurched to his feet, the blood pounding in his eardrums.

“I’d rather die than be responsible for a zombie apocalypse.”

He whirled on her. “Well neither are gonna happen. *Got it?*”

“Griff, please listen—”

He shoved his shaking index finger in her face. “There is no goddamn way I’m going along with your ridiculous proposition, understand? No. God. Damn. Way.”

“You’re being unreasonable.”

“Fuck yeah I am. Know why? Because your idea is asinine.” He knew he was bellowing, but nothing short of a spontaneous case of laryngitis would convince him to rein in his vehement outrage.

She tossed up her arms. “Maybe, but it’s the only one I have. So deal with it.” Shooting him a mulish look, she stalked to the bathroom and slammed the door on him.

Fury and frustration duking it out inside him, he glared at the offensive door. He was half tempted to kick it in. And what, continue this pointless argument? Growling, he stomped from the room.

Downstairs, he grabbed a beer from the fridge. Nearly snapping the bottle’s neck, he wrenched off the cap. He managed to slam three quarters of the beverage before Clarissa strode into the kitchen thirty seconds later. After draining the remainder of the bottle he reached for another.

Clarissa cocked one tawny eyebrow. “Impressive for someone who doesn’t even like beer.”

“Mood I’m in, I could guzzle monkey piss and not give a rat’s ass.” Actually, the swill in his mouth wasn’t that far off the mark. Grimacing, he lowered the bottle and inspected the label. “Why do people drink this shit?”

“Hmm, perhaps to dull whatever crappiness has thrown them in a foul mood?”

Catching the prodding speculation in her eyes, he thunked the bottle on the center island. “Probably. Too bad it doesn’t work.”

Clarissa tucked her hands in the front pockets of her jeans. “So what’s going on?”

He debated not telling her, but what was the point? She'd ferret the information out anyway if she decided to poke around in his brain with a truth-gathering spell. "Jemma wants me to kill her if she goes down the dark side."

Her chest expanded with a deep sigh. "I was afraid this might happen."

"Well it's *not* going to happen." Baring his teeth, he pushed away from the counter. "I don't care what it takes—there is no way in hell Jemma is sacrificing herself."

Logan tromped into the kitchen, his mug devoid of its usual obnoxious grin. Apparently he was still mourning the demise of his motorcycle. Without granting Clarissa or Griffin even a cursory glance, he grabbed a beer and slugged it down, the sound of his chugging swallows breaking the silence.

A fine prickling on the nape of his neck apprised Griffin of Clarissa's insistent gaze. He swiveled. Her pointed scrutiny shifted between him and Logan, her expression a dead giveaway to the course of her thoughts.

Ah hell, he had said he didn't care what it took. Should have known that would come back and bite him in the ass.

Logan lowered his beer and granted them both a wary glance. "What the fuck did I do now?"

Her attention returning to Griffin, Clarissa nodded twice in Logan's direction. "Ask him."

Griffin glowered. "Why? You already demanded it of us."

Her lips thinned, sure sign that she wasn't exactly pleased with how he'd phrased his words. "Consider it a symbolic gesture of goodwill."

"Are you out of your fu—?" He nipped off the remainder of the oath when she wagged her finger in warning of an oncoming whammy. Gritting his teeth, he pivoted toward Logan. "Will you help me seduce Jemma?"

Logan stared at him for a long moment before a flicker of devilment danced in his eyes. "Shit, Catman. You lost that feline charm already?"

Somehow he found the willpower to resist rearranging Logan's face. Christ, this was a damn disaster in the making. "I was referring to me and you together." Catching the beginning stages of the werewolf's trademark smirk, Griffin practically growled his clarification. "Me, *Jemma* and you." If there was any justice in the world, he'd be stricken with amnesia in the next two seconds. Otherwise going through the rest of life with the horrific mental image of him and Logan...

Shaking off a massive shudder, Griffin paced in front of the center island. "Look, I know we have our issues, but I'm willing to put them aside for Jemma's sake."

Logan settled his bottle on the counter and scrubbed a hand over his goatee. "Funny, I said the same thing to Jemma."

The admission managed to ease some of the tension in Griffin's shoulders. "Good. I'm glad we at least see eye to eye on this." Strangely enough, the prospect of sharing Jemma with Logan didn't immediately foster ideas of trashing the kitchen with the werewolf's lifeless body.

But the night was still young.

Chapter Fifteen

Why couldn't Griff understand where she was coming from? He'd damn well ask the same thing from her if he were in her position.

Muttering beneath her breath, Jemma scruffed a towel through the damp ends of her hair with stiff, jerky motions. Suddenly conscious of the torture she was inflicting on her scalp, she sighed and draped the towel on the hook near the shower. After changing into a cheery pink sundress that did nothing to brighten her mood, she slumped into the small rattan chair situated in front of the vanity. She couldn't find the energy or the desire to rifle through the array of cosmetics neatly stacked on the etched glass tray. And really, why bother with makeup? It's not like the zombies no doubt lurking in the woods cared if she had bags under her eyes.

She listlessly reached for a rhinestone-studded clip in the shape of a large butterfly and used it to anchor her hair in a loose chignon. Recalling the anger and hint of betrayal in Griff's expression when he'd laid into her, she flinched. "Damn it, he has no right to make me feel like I'm giving up."

So why do I feel like I am? She bit the inside of her cheek, refusing to give the annoying inner voice further attention. Besides, any rational person would devise a backup plan. It didn't mean she was ready to chuck it all and drink poisoned Kool-Aid or something. If Griff didn't see the logic in that, well, he truly was a bonehead.

After slipping on a pair of sandals, she trudged downstairs. The house seemed unusually quiet. Curious where everyone could be, she headed down the hallway. She spotted Logan parked outside the library, his shirtless bod blocking the closed door. He grinned, his gaze journeying over her in a lazy crawl. "I have this sudden hankerin' for cotton candy."

She grimaced. "This is why I seldom wear pink. I look ridiculous, don't I?"

"No, sugar, you look good enough to eat." He followed up his provocative statement by licking his lips with a tad too much gusto.

She shivered, suddenly feeling an uncomfortable kinship with Little Red Riding Hood. *All the better to eat you with.* Good Lord, she'd never look at that fairy tale the same way again. Clearing her throat, she indicated the door. "So what's going on in there?"

Logan propped his elbow against the frame, giving her a close-up view of his barbed-wire tat. Now that she thought about it, the symbolism seemed appropriate. Tangling with the lusty werewolf was bound

to leave a few scratches. “Just Clarissa taking care of some coven business. Nothing for you to worry your pretty little head over, darlin’.”

She narrowed her eyes. “That managed to be both evasive *and* sexist.”

“Damn, and here I wasn’t even tryin’.” He chuckled. Taking advantage of his momentary distraction, she reached around him for the doorknob. He scooted sideways, forcing her hand to smack into his abdomen instead. His bare, firm-as-marble abdomen. Her fingertips brushed the warm hollow of skin resting just above the low rise of his button fly. Sucking in a sharp breath, she yanked her arm away and shuffled back several steps.

Logan’s irises shimmered with amusement and heat. “Don’t stop now. Things were just getting interesting.”

“I, uh, just have to go and...um...yeah.” She spun and stumbled in the direction of the kitchen before she did something really stupid, like follow the silky trail of hair disappearing beneath the waistband of Logan’s jeans. With her tongue. That thought sent her tripping through the entry of the kitchen. She jerked to a halt when she spotted Griff in front of the stove, stirring the contents of a large stockpot. He was notably shirtless too, which put the mouthwatering expanse of his back on dazzling display. She stared at the muscles shifting beneath all that golden, velvety skin, her suspicions bubbling. It was too damn weird and convenient that both Logan and Griff were standing around half naked all of a sudden. Unless some devious shirt monster was making its rounds in the neighborhood, there was definitely something afoot.

And where was everyone else, anyway? She craned her neck, scoping the dining alcove for signs of Ms. Peach or Gloria.

“Hey, baby. You’re just in time for a taste test.”

She whipped her head around at Griff’s zippy tone. Now she *knew* something was up. Griff didn’t do chipper, particularly not thirty minutes after snarling at her like a pissed-off Tony the Tiger. “What the hell is going on?”

Griff tried for a guileless look. Oh yeah, he didn’t do innocent well either. “I’m getting lunch ready.”

“Without your shirt on?”

“It’s hot in here.”

Well...that was certainly true. Even without Griff’s muscle-icious torso making her girl parts all warm and tingly, there was no denying the temperature in the kitchen hovered between muggy and melt-your-panties-off miserable.

Griff dug a spoon out of the drawer and ladled some of the sauce he’d been stirring. “Tell me if this needs anything.”

Her intuition warning her to be on the lookout for any sneakiness, she hesitantly crossed to the industrial-sized, stainless-steel stove. She tried to wrestle the spoon from Griff, but he insisted on feeding her the concoction himself. Almost from the instant the tapestry of flavors met her tongue, a seductive

ripple of heat unfurled inside her, tightening her nipples beneath the sundress's snug, smocked bodice. Griff's thumb traced the outline of her lower lip. Holding her gaze, he lifted his finger and slowly licked it clean. If the humidity didn't melt the crotch of her panties, Griff demonstrating his perfect oral skills sure as hell would.

"What do you think? A pinch more salt and pepper?"

She stared into Griff's dark-as-sin pupils. Clearly he was waiting for her to answer, but damn if she could concentrate on anything beyond the flush of arousal making her dizzy with hunger. Only it wasn't food she was lusting for at the moment. Knees wobbling, she clutched the counter. "W—what's in that sauce?"

"Butter, egg, milk. The usual Béchamel ingredients."

Sure, and a liberal dash of horny goat weed and Viagra thrown in for good measure. She had no idea why Griff was trying to get her juiced up for sex. He knew damn well that all he had to do was breathe and she'd gladly tackle him to the floor and ride him until they were both properly yippee-ki-yayed out. Which left only one possibility.

He was about to spring some hellaciously scary sexual request on her. If a midget and a monkey strolled in right now, she was so out of th—

"Looks like the party is revving into high gear." Logan ambled into the kitchen, his expression wicked and wolfish.

Her focus shifted between the two gorgeous specimens of male flesh on decadent display, and the puzzle pieces began locking together. *Oh, sweet Jesus.* Her heart frantically tap dancing, she snatched the embroidered dishtowel resting on the counter and blotted her perspiring forehead. Either the heat and the sauce were getting to her, or Griff and Logan. More than likely, all four.

She shot Griff an accusing glare. "Now I get it. You think the three of us having sex will fix everything, and I won't have to worry about Nettie luring me to the dark side. Did it even occur to you to give *me* a say in this decision?"

Griff thunked the spoon on the stovetop before giving her his full attention. "Christ, do you honestly think you wouldn't get a say? Damn it, you know I'd never force you into doing anything you don't want."

She plunked one hand on her hip and waved the other hand at the stockpot. "But you weren't averse to a little cheating, courtesy of your pasta à la sex sauce."

"I just wanted you to feel more comfortable. Relaxed."

"Turned on," she added, arching a brow.

A guilty flush spread from Griff's jaw to his cheeks. Chuffing a laugh, Logan joined them at the stove. "Catman had good intentions, sugar. The potion in the sauce is designed to loosen inhibitions and supersensitize erogenous zones you didn't even know you had." He flicked a glance in Griff's direction. "Maybe you better give her a demonstration."

She snorted. "Trust me, he already did."

Logan's mouth curled in wicked devilment. "You only got a small taste of the potion's capabilities. To truly appreciate its gift to the fullest, you need to ingest it in a more...intimate manner." Before she knew what he was up to, Logan unlaced the ties securing the sundress to her shoulders and pushed the bodice down, exposing her breasts. Gasping, she shot him a startled look. He awarded her a crooked smile. "Don't worry, you're gonna enjoy this."

Something warm and sticky stroked her nipples. She jumped at the unexpected sensation, her gaze shooting to Griff's sauce-coated fingers as they painted her areolas with the creamy substance. He lowered his head and followed the path of his fingers with his tongue, sparking a new conflagration of fire inside her. She shivered and Griff peered up at her, his eyes blazing. Curving an arm around her waist, he stood and claimed her mouth in a hot, devouring kiss. He tasted of Béchamel and exotic spice. Of magic and sex. She wrapped her fingers in his hair, tugging him closer, ravenous for more. Their tongues rasped in a mating dance and she wiggled against him, her nipples aching for the sumptuous devotion of Griff's mouth.

Logan's knuckles skated the length of her spine. "Noticing the effects yet?" She mewled a response and he chuckled. "Excellent." He worked the dress over her hips and the garment floated to her feet. His feather-light touch skimmed above the elastic of her bikini, teasing the dimples near her tailbone. She arched against Logan's hand, her knees turning to jelly when he palmed her ass and gave it a good squeeze. He snuggled close behind her, so close she easily detected the hard ridge of his erection suggestively rubbing into her. "I've got something for ya, darlin'."

Oh yeah. No mistaking *that*.

Griff's mouth trailed to the crook of her neck, and something soft and silky caressed her cheek. She reached for the fabric, but Logan swept it behind her head.

"Not yet. First I want something in return."

She licked her lips, a hot liquid rush of excitement pulsing low in her belly. "What?"

"A taste." Logan's teeth scraped her earlobe, making her breath stutter. He moved lower and tongued the pulse point beneath her ear. "Same as you gave Catman."

A whimper escaped her and Logan tilted her head, his fingers tunneling in her hair as his lips glided along hers. Sucking her tongue into his mouth, he gave her a sneak peek at the devastation he could wreak on her body. If she let him. The question was, would she?

As if they'd intuited her hesitation, Logan and Griff straightened, almost in unison. Griff's hand slid up along her rib cage and cupped her breast, its fullness overflowing his palm. "It's okay, baby. Please let us give you your fantasy."

My fantasy? Before she could ponder that completely, Logan slipped the fabric back over her face. He folded it over her eyes, and she panicked at the sudden sense of vulnerability that washed over her.

“Shhh, the blindfold’s only for a second.” Logan kissed her lightly before securing the fabric with a firm knot.

“Then why put it on me?” The tremor in her voice ruined the defiant vibe she’d been shooting for.

“You’ll see in a moment. But right now, we want you to concentrate on your raunchiest fantasy. Think you can do that for us?”

“But—”

Someone nipped her ear and she yelped. She lashed out toward the culprit but encountered nothing but empty space. “When I find out which one of you did that, you are so getting a nipple twister.”

“You mean like this?” A thumb and forefinger tweaked her right nipple. Though Logan had asked the question, she couldn’t say for certain that his fingers were the ones doing the plucking. The fact that she didn’t know added a naughty, forbidden thrill to the experience. Her breath quickened.

“I think you’re starting to enjoy our little game, sugar. Are you concentrating like I told you to?”

A palm splayed on her mound. Broad, blunt fingers made slow circles over the silk covering her clit, and she gasped. The positioning of the hands were at odd angles from each other, leaving her to assume that both Logan and Griff were touching her. But who was where?

“You haven’t answered my question.”

It took a few seconds to even remember what Logan had asked. “I can barely recall my own name at this point, much less concentrate on a fantasy.”

“Guess we’ll have to give you some inspiration.” In perfect synchronization, a pair of tongues replaced both hands. Her knees buckled. Hands steadied her at her hips and beneath her armpits. Soft whiskers brushed the side of her breast before the mouth returned to feast on the tightened bud. *There goes one mystery solved.* No mistaking Logan’s goatee. Griff slid her panties down her legs and burrowed his tongue into her slit, lapping up her juices before flickering back toward her clit. Groaning, she undulated against him.

The mouth at her breast eased off. “That’s it, sugar. Ride Catman’s tongue. You gonna do that for me when I’m eating your sweet pussy?”

She whimpered, her mind instantly conjuring a vivid tableau. The fantasy wasn’t exactly new, only this time it featured an additional player. “Oh God.” She shuddered, nearly on the cusp of orgasm. Aggravatingly enough, Griff’s licking stopped and a disbelieving grunt fell from Logan. The blindfold was suddenly loosened and whipped off. She blinked, dazzled by the unexpected flood of fluorescent light.

Wait...fluorescent light? The kitchen didn’t have—

Her eyes widening, she gaped at her surroundings. Where the stainless-steel stove and work island used to be, there was now a checkout line and a cash register. Holy shit, she was standing in the middle of Finnegan Hardware. She whirled, almost falling over in shock when she spotted Griff and Logan standing there in nothing but matching tool belts.

“*This* is your fantasy?”

She blinked at Griff’s incredulous expression. It took a moment for his words to sink in. Once they did, she took another look around and her mouth dropped. “Oh wow, it *is* my fantasy.” She inched forward and ran an experimental hand over the cash register. Bemused, she punched the Cash Out button. The drawer popped open with a ding and she jumped back. “How?”

“Clarissa put a summoning spell on the blindfold. It read your fantasy and gave it to you. Power tools and all.” Logan grinned and patted his leather tool belt. Her mouth went dry when she noticed the staggering state of his arousal.

“How long have you had this fantasy?”

She shifted her gaze from Logan’s cock to Griff’s face. He was staring at her, disbelief stamped all over his features. Ah damn. Obviously he recognized where they were. Crap, she was so busted. No way around it. “Eight years, give or take.” Jeez, did that ever sound pathetic. “Look, can you blame me? Every time I go in there and see you in that tool belt, I just want you to...” She blushed, unable to say it.

“Drill you?” Logan offered with a waggle of his brows.

She sighed and tweaked the bridge of her nose. “This is more embarrassing than the time I walked around all day with my skirt tucked in my pantyhose.”

Snapping out of his stupor, Griff strode forward and swept her into his arms. Before she could even blink, he sat her on the checkout counter and kissed the daylight out of her. She twined her arms around his shoulders, luxuriating in the delicious glide of his chest rubbing against her breasts. She tried to wrap her legs around his waist but discovered the tool belt was in the way. “Hmm, we have a little glitch in my fantasy.”

With an expert tug that came from years of practice, Griff released the belt. It clunked to the cement floor and she tucked her thighs around his hips. Giving a rumble of satisfaction, he nibbled on her mouth. “You’ve wanted this—me—all that time?”

“Duh, like you didn’t know.”

He leaned back, his eyes reflecting some unknown emotion. His fingertips traced her lips with a slow reverence. “I didn’t. I thought I was the only one torturing myself.”

“Speakin’ of torture, how do you get this damn thing off?” Fumbling with his tool belt, Logan sidled to the counter.

She glanced at Griff and he grunted. “Baby, these hands aren’t getting within a one-foot radius of that dick.”

Rolling her eyes, she reached for the metal clasp on the tool belt. She spied the grin sliding across Logan’s face and mentally groaned at her culpability. “Crafty bastard. You totally just played me.”

“Sugar, you wound me.”

“Not yet. But keep it up.”

“Don’t think that’ll be a problem.” Logan gave his shaft an indulgent stroke. An illicit thrill raced through her at the sight. Almost unconscious of what she was doing, she slipped her fingers around Griff’s cock and mimicked Logan’s motion. A strangled noise came from the back of Griff’s throat, and he white-knuckled the counter.

His smile stretching wider, Logan fisted his cock tighter, not the least bit shy about jacking himself in front of an audience. “You’ve got him by the balls, darlin’. Well, not literally. Though you might try—”

“Shut the fuck up before she kills me.” Half growling, half groaning, Griff rested his forehead against hers. “Baby, we’re supposed to be giving *you* a fantasy.”

“You are.”

His soft laugh feathered against her lips. “Giving me a hand job at the register while that damn werewolf watches is your fantasy?”

“Actually...” She gnawed on her bottom lip. “Usually I’m blowing you.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“What? You asked.” Now that the cat was out of the bag—so to speak—she was almost delirious with the need to taste Griff. She pushed against his chest and started to wiggle down from the checkout stand. Logan’s palm curved around her hip, stalling her.

“Got a better idea. Why don’t you lay back on the counter?” Logan gave her an encouraging squeeze. Sliding him an uncertain look, she stretched out on her side. Griff’s delectable cock bobbed near her face, and she licked her lips in anticipation.

Griff’s agonized moan floated overhead. “I’m never going to survive this.”

She grazed the silky-steel length of his shaft with her fingertips. “Close your eyes and picture my cousin Jimmy naked.” Visualizing that hairy spectacle would keep anyone from popping too soon. She took Griff into her mouth. Her tongue swirled over the taut, glistening head of his cock, the divine flavor of him making her greedy for more.

Something wet and rasping traveled the inner slope of her thigh. Logan’s tongue. Oh God, *that’s* why he’d wanted her to stay on the counter. So he could—

She gasped around Griff’s turgid flesh as Logan drew a lazy figure eight on her slit with his tongue. Her hips bucked.

“Mm, Catman, easy to see why you’re so territorial about this sweet pussy.” Spreading her legs wider, Logan suckled on her clit. Ignoring the desperate noises purling from her throat, he insinuated a finger inside her and rubbed unerringly over her G spot. The desperate noises turned to frantic pleas. Logan eased back and blew a stream of air across her throbbing flesh, making her arch. “What do you say, sugar? Should we offer Catman another taste? Wouldn’t want him to accuse me of being selfish and hogging your orgasm all to m’self.”

Griff practically wrenched himself from her mouth as he dove for the V of her thighs. Like a man possessed, he devoured her clit while Logan's finger pumped inside her. Their sensual onslaught tripped her over the edge and she cried out, her body shaking from the intensity of the climax crashing over her. The aftermath left her dazed and not entirely sure if she'd just died from orgasm overload. Head spinning, she stared at the fluorescent tube lights spitting and flickering like crazy above her. Fingers brushed the hair away from her forehead, and the hazy outline of Griff's face swam into focus. "Jem, did you see that? You almost smoked the lights."

She blinked at the unrestrained excitement in his voice. "I did?"

"Yes, baby. Clarissa was right." He scooped her into his arms, his smile so beautiful it almost made her cry. His lips met hers in a tender kiss before he pulled back and caressed her cheek. "This is proof we can unlock your magic. If you let us." Griff's free hand drifted down her collarbone and lower. His thumb played over her nipple, and the tingles started all over again. Logan cupped her other breast, and she met his hot gaze, her pulse dancing a Rumba.

She licked her lips, and he leaned in to kiss her. Like Griff, she could taste herself on his tongue. "*Oh God.*"

Logan growled against her mouth. "Please let there be a supply of lube somewhere in this fantasy."

"Beneath the register."

Both Logan and Griff gaped at her.

"What?" She wrinkled her nose. "Being prepared is sexy."

Logan shot her a grin before leaping around the corner of the counter. He gave a triumphant howl and held up a tube of K-Y Jelly like it was the most exciting discovery since King Tut's tomb. His eyes dark and filled with a purposeful gleam, he joined Griff in front of her and flicked the cap open on the lube. She bit her lip, uncertainty duking it out with the surge of raw desire pumping through her bloodstream. This was a huge step beyond Griff and the vibrator. Adding Logan to the equation would complicate things, regardless of their motives for including him.

"Remember what I said about thinking too much, sugar?"

She stared up at Logan and became lost in those amber irises. "I—I need to just feel—" She broke off on a gasp when Logan's hand slipped between her legs and grazed over her sex. His skilled fingers circled her clit and she whimpered. Okay, he definitely had a point. Her thighs parted slightly and Griff's hand caressed over her mound, inches away from where Logan was working his magic. She shivered beneath the intensity of both their gazes.

Logan's fingers trailed lower, dipping inside her pussy, leaving her clit in Griff's more-than-capable hands. Being on the receiving end of all their lavish attention managed to shove her worries to the distant reaches of her mind. Lust, pure and potent, took center stage. Flattening her palms on the counter, she arched her back, moving in concert with Griff and Logan's fingers. A sound between a hiss and a growl

came from Griff, and she looked up to find him watching her with what could only be described as a primal, gonna-fuck-you-till-you-scream stare. Moisture flooded her pussy at the predatory promise in his expression. Something cool and slippery traversed along the sensitive tissue of her perineum. A silky trail of lubricant—courtesy of the tube of K-Y Logan was squeezing.

Griff leaned forward and kissed her, sucking her tongue into his mouth the exact moment Logan's thumb slicked inside her ass. Her moan fell victim to the hot, velvety recesses of Griff's mouth.

"You're so warm and tight, sugar. Maybe too tight. How 'bout you give me a hand here, Catman?"

The last thing she expected was the sudden inclusion of Griff's forefinger right beside Logan's. *Oh God.* A forbidden thrill coursed through her and she shuddered. Abandoning her mouth, Griff journeyed down to her breast and lapped at her nipple. She didn't have to worry about her lips being lonely for long. Logan offered her a lush kiss, full of wet, teasing tongue play. By the time he pulled his head back, she was breathless and desperate to be filled with something more substantial than the sets of fingers readying her. As if reading her mind, Logan reached for the lube again and squirted a healthy portion into his palm.

Griff gave her nipple a lingering lick before he scooted up to nuzzle her neck, distracting her from the intriguing sight of Logan slathering up his cock. "Baby, I can't go along with your fantasy exactly the way that you want it. There's no way I can watch him bury his cock in your pussy and not want to rip his face off."

"Um...okay." She was more than a little baffled why he thought she had a specific order of who should be where, but all that became insignificant when he nudged the head of his cock against her slit. He braced her thigh with his hand and glided deeper. She was so wet and slick he easily lodged to the hilt on one smooth thrust. "*Griff.*"

"I've got you." He hooked her legs around his waist and lifted her, easily supporting her weight. She heard movement behind her and realized Logan was taking her place on the edge of the counter.

Holy hell, we're really going to do this. Despite all the foreplay leading up to this moment, the realization of what they were about to do still stunned her a little bit. Nervous excitement making her dizzy, she clung to Griff. Logan gripped her waist, guiding her toward him. His shaft prodded between the cheeks of her ass, glazing her puckered opening with the lubricant he'd generously applied. He easily slipped inside the first half inch, but the angle of penetration hindered his efforts.

"Sugar, how about straddling my legs? It'll make things easier."

She released her hold on Griff's waist and Logan helped her onto his lap, draping her thighs over his. The position plunged her straight onto his cock, and she gasped at the suddenness of the deep, double penetration. Griff and Logan groaned in unison. Pinned between them, she wiggled, trying to adjust to the fullness. The movement created a delicious friction that sent pleasure spiraling in dense waves. Her shuddering moan joined Griff's and Logan's. She was surrounded by a solid wall of muscle and heat, her senses swimming in a heady sea of sex and male musk. Logan's palms coasted over her hips and inner

thighs, creating a path of fire across her skin. She trembled, each nerve in her body exquisitely alive. They moved inside her, their cocks like twin instruments of pleasure designed perfectly for her. For this. Slick, succulent sounds of their lovemaking provided an erotic soundtrack, fueled further by Logan's wickedly raunchy commentary.

"Your ass was made for riding cock, sugar. Feels good, don't it? Bet your pussy is sopping wet, soakin' Catman like you wouldn't believe." His chuckle brushed her ear when she whimpered. "Yeah, I imagine it is. Look at him, darlin'. How he's struggling for control, praying he won't blow too soon."

She stared at Griff, mesmerized by the tortured bliss tightening his features.

"Tell her, Catman. Tell her how that snug pussy feels like fucking wet silk."

Griff's eyelids fell to half mast and his jaw clenched, not quite defeating his broken groan. His stroke faltered for a second before he thrust deeper. "Jesus. Yes, the wettest silk." He kissed her, his mouth sliding to her collarbone. "You feel amazing, baby."

With that declaration made, they set about driving her out of her ever-lovin' mind. Two sets of mouths and hands skated across her skin, pushing her higher and higher toward the ultimate peak. Between Griff worshipping her breasts while Logan bit the nape of her neck and rubbed her clit, she was strung tight, on the verge of snapping. "I—I can't take it. Please..."

"You ready, sugar?" Logan's growl rumbled near her ear, the pad of his thumb rolling in tight little circles. "Your clit's so swollen, it's about ready to burst. Take us with you. Milk the come right out of us."

Griff clutched her hips, leveraging himself for maximum thrust power. His entire body glimmered with sweat, and his eyes glowed with an intensity that locked her into his gaze. Logan's words were pure aphrodisiac, but if anyone possessed the ability to mentally will her into combustible orgasm, it was Griff.

Everything exploded at once. Their orgasms. Her body. The light fixtures hanging above them. She screamed, and incandescent pink sparkles showered from her pores, dancing and twirling around them. Yeah, she should probably be freaked out about that. But weathering through the most earth-shattering climax of her life took up pretty much all her energy. Literally. By the time the last current ebbed through her body she felt utterly drained. She slumped against Logan's damp chest, surprised when she didn't melt to the floor in a puddle of goo.

For several minutes the only sound was the raggedness of their breathing. Logan was the first to speak. "Damn, any more fantasies we can help you with?"

"I'm not sure I could live through another." She gave a weak giggle. "Plus I'm not sure how we'd all fit on the riding lawnmower."

Jemma remained in a drowsy state while Griffin gently refastened the ties on her sundress. He scooped her into his arms, and she murmured in contentment before letting out a loud snore.

A chuckle came from Logan. "Poor thing's tuckered out."

Griffin smoothed a lock of Jemma's hair behind her ear and glanced at Logan. "Getting your magic amped to full blast tends to do that."

Logan fastened the fly of his jeans and sat on one of the dining room chairs to tug on his boots. "I'd like to think we might have been a bit of the cause too."

Despite the fact his muscles were starting to protest at Jemma's deadweight, Griffin didn't budge from where he stood. He wasn't going anywhere until he got this difficult subject out of the way. "I appreciate the part you played in restoring Jemma's magic—"

"But three's a crowd," Logan broke in, nodding. "No problem, Catman. Contrary to popular belief, coming between two lovebirds isn't my chosen kink." He let slip an unrestrained grin. "Except in the literal sense."

Griffin grimaced, both at the image fostered by Logan's quip and the fact that the werewolf had misunderstood the direction of the conversation. Which would make spitting out the remainder of it awkward. "I want you to watch over Jemma after I'm gone."

Logan jerked his head up, his expression suitably stunned. "Care to run that by me again?"

Griffin gritted his teeth. "Look, I know it makes no sense—hell, *I* can't even figure it out—but Jemma seems to like you. And despite what a world-class asshole you tend to be, I know you'll protect her."

His eyes gleaming with consideration, Logan leaned back in his chair. "Isn't that supposed to be your job?"

Not anymore. The thought sent a sharp pain stabbing through his heart and turned his gut into a pit of emptiness. "They're sending me back when this is all done with." He easily read the unspoken question in Logan's gaze. "I broke the number-one rule, and now they're going to make an example of me."

A low whistle came from Logan. "Pretty stiff punishment." His attention fell to Jemma's sleeping form. "Does she know?"

"No, and I don't want her to. She has enough to deal with right now."

Logan scratched the back of his neck. "Still think you should tell her. Women can be mighty bitchy about being left in the dark about shit like this."

The last thing he wanted to do was dwell on the indisputable truth in that statement. "Are you going to fucking do what I asked or not?"

Logan held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Don't get your whiskers in a twist. Of course I'll do it."

"Good." After biting out his terse reply, he stalked from the kitchen.

Upstairs, he settled Jemma into the massive canopy bed and started to pull the coverlet around her. Her eyelashes fluttered before she cracked a huge yawn, making him smile. "Morning, baby."

She blinked, her eyes widening. "*Morning?* How long have I been out?" She started to tussle with the coverlet and he laughed. Shifting her focus to the approaching dusk outside the window, then to the clock

on the nightstand, she groaned and relinquished her battle with the bedcovers. “I can’t believe I fell for that.”

“Couldn’t resist.” He brushed their noses together before sitting back on the mattress. “Why don’t you try to get some more rest? I think you need it after earlier.”

A hint of worry crept into her expression. “Sh—should we talk about that? I feel kind of weird about what happened.”

He groaned at his lack of foresight. “Damn, I’m sorry, baby. I should have prepared you for what to expect when your magic broke through its seal. I know it probably scared you, but I promise there’s nothing—”

“Uh, Griff? I wasn’t referring to the light show.” She twined their fingers together, her thumb brushing his palm. “I’m talking about you, me and Logan. Having sex.”

The distracting circles she was sketching into his palm made it difficult to concentrate. “I don’t understand. You enjoyed it, didn’t you?”

Her cheeks flamed a bright, scarlet hue. “Okay, I’m not going to lie. I did. Obviously.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

She leaned up on her elbows and gaped at him. “You’re being unreasonably...reasonable.”

He stroked the side of her face. “I was able to give you your fantasy. That’s all that matters.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re referring to something other than you, me, and some hot tool-belt sex?” Frown lines marred her forehead. “Did you think Logan was a part of my fantasy?”

It would have been easier not to come clean. Cowardly, but easier. “Jemma, I saw what you were imagining yesterday when I was buried inside you.” Despite the guilt of his admission, arousal flared to life at the memory of the tantalizing imagery that’d played out in her mind while her ass hugged tight around his cock.

He suddenly became aware of the thick silence that’d descended and he glanced at Jemma. Her face was a frozen mask of disbelief. Renewed guilt gnawed at him. “It was wrong of me to peek at your innermost thoughts. I’ve never done it before and I swear to you it’ll never happen again.”

“You can *do* that?”

“Yes, because of the assigned guardianship. But because of the intimate nature of it, I’ve only used the link in extreme cases.”

“Like Uncle Harold’s zombie attack?”

He nodded. Jemma sat up, and he scooted sideways to give her more room. He detected the sound of her hard swallow and tipped her chin up, revealing the shame etched in her features. “Baby, what’s wrong?”

“I wish you hadn’t seen it. The fantasy, I mean. I know it’s silly, considering we acted it out in living color.”

Shit, now he really felt like a sneaky bastard. “Jem, if I could take back what I did, I would. Please believe me.”

“I do. And I’m not mad at you. I—I just don’t want you to think that I’ve been secretly lusting after Logan. That fantasy isn’t what I really want.” She traced the line of his jaw, her eyes shimmering with moisture. “It’s you. It’s *always* been you.”

His chest tightened, filling with an almost painful overflow of emotions. He ached to pour out the feelings he’d been forced to padlock away all these years, but they remained hostage to the contract forbidding his verbal confession of love. He burned, shaking with the injustice of it.

“Griff, what’s—?”

He stopped her flow of words with his mouth and tongue, his fingers tangling in her hair. If he couldn’t tell Jemma, he’d show her. His body was the one thing the contract couldn’t control, and by God, he’d use it to his advantage. He nibbled and sucked his way down the arch of her neck, the sound of her breathless moans setting his blood on fire. Undoing the laces on her dress, he kissed her shoulder, following its slope with his tongue.

She sighed and reached for the neckline of her dress, helping him ease it down her torso. He kissed and suckled her breasts, drawing her nipples to stiff, hardened peaks. She tugged frantically at the waist of his jeans, and he stood just long enough to free them of their clothing before returning to his devotion of her body.

Licking over the soft swell of her belly, he ventured lower and nuzzled the downy curls covering her mound. He glanced up, ensured their gazes were locked, and licked her slowly from her clit down to her slit and back up again. He kept up his leisurely pace until she was shivering and gasping, her eyes beseeching him to take her over the edge.

And he did.

Throwing his teasing out the door, he gorged on her, his mouth and jaw voracious participants in the feast. Her sweet honey was delectable. The tiger inside him wanted to wallow in her juices, imprint his flesh with the essence of her scent so the entire world would know he belonged to her. She screamed his name as she came, her clit pulsing beneath the flattened tip of his tongue.

He reared up, settled on his haunches and thrust Jemma onto his waiting cock all in one fluid motion. She cried out, the silky warmth of her pussy rippling around him as she continued to come. He struggled to resist the lure of his own orgasm, determined to give Jemma everything that he was—heart, body and soul. Dropping onto his elbows, he took her mouth in a deep, drugging kiss. Her fingernails scored his back, and he relished the light sting.

“Yes, baby. Mark me as yours.” He shifted his hips, angling for the sweet spot that’d take her to heaven. Her litany of cries filled his ears, along with the four words guaranteed to rob him of his last thread of control.

“Griff, I love you.” Her teary eyes reflecting her declaration in watery excess, Jemma broke on a wrenching cry, her inner walls milking him with strong contractions. He shuddered, unable to hold back any longer, and pumped his seed deep inside her. An agonized roar ripped from his throat, but not the words he longed to return.

Chapter Sixteen

Going downstairs after she'd probably blasted everyone's eardrums with her rapturous scream was more than a tad embarrassing. Of course, considering what went down in the kitchen, did it really matter? By now, everyone knew she wasn't exactly mute during sex. Only with Griff, it went miles beyond sex. A more appropriate term would be out-of-body nuclear experience.

Her body heated all over again at the remembrance of their lovemaking. It'd been a perfect union of two souls. The only dark spot was Griff hadn't said he loved her. She knew he did. There was no mistaking it in the way he touched her, and she could see it in the depths of his eyes every time he looked at her. Still, it didn't quite extinguish the tiny ache of disappointment that sat like a stone in her heart.

"Ready?"

She glanced at Griff as he buttoned his shirt. The cornflower blue of the tailored shirt really popped against his golden skin and sun-kissed hair. He was so breathtakingly gorgeous she could actually feel her knees liquefying. The fact that he could have any woman he wanted wasn't lost on her.

The stone in her heart doubled in size. Maybe she was just imagining something that wasn't there in his touch. In his eyes. Sure, there was no mistaking their sexual chemistry, but maybe what she mistook for love was only Griff's natural protectiveness. And wouldn't that just make her a pathetic loser?

Before Griff could offer his arm, she escaped into the hall and sucked in a deep breath. *Stop feeling sorry for yourself.* And really, considering she needed to figure out how to take down a ghost and stop a zombie uprising, she didn't have time to puzzle out her mixed-up love life.

Downstairs, she followed the low buzz of voices to the parlor. Logan and Clarissa immediately stopped their conversation the instant she walked into the room. She cocked an eyebrow. "Talking about me?"

A flush crawled along Clarissa's neck. "No, not at—"

"Yep," Logan butted in.

Clarissa's glare threatened to incinerate. "You're about as subtle as a flying mallet."

"Maggot? Now is that any name to be calling me, shug?"

"I said *mallet*. Not—" Clarissa broke off with a growl when Logan flashed his incisors in a grin. "You are living proof that a witch should never pick her familiar when she's doped up on pain medication for a bad wisdom tooth."

Logan clucked his tongue. "Shit, I forgot all about that. How's that tooth treating you these days anyway?"

"I had it extracted years ago." Clarissa's narrowed eyes suggested that she wished the same could be said about Logan. She swiveled her focus to Jemma, her glower dissipating. "Actually, we were discussing how you got your magic fired up."

Which no doubt explained the vivid blush suddenly cresting Clarissa's high cheekbones. Considering it'd been Logan doing the recounting, he'd probably been more than generous with the details. "Do you really think that's all there is to it? That I can just snap my fingers and wham-blamo, Nettie's defeated?"

"No, I doubt it'll be that simple or easy. But at least now we have a fighting chance of stopping her." Clarissa settled in one of the ruby-red armchairs and swung one leg over the other. "I was thinking after dinner we could get started on your training. There are several exercises designed to hone your magic."

"Really?" She gave Clarissa a cautious look, praying that the exercise part didn't entail breaking a sweat on some magical elliptical trainer from hell. Because that would really suck.

Griff strode into the room, cutting the conversation short and distracting her with his luscious, woodsy smell. Ms. Peach came toddling in right behind him, a scowl on her face. "I'm giving that scatterbrained Gloria a piece of my mind. She left two burners unattended on the stove. It's a damn miracle the place didn't catch on fire."

Clarissa wagged a finger. "There will be no bickering tonight, only celebration."

"No bickering?" Ms. Peach tossed up her hands. "We might as well keep our dang mouths shut the entire night."

"Fabulous idea." Nodding exuberantly, Clarissa abandoned the chair and ushered everyone into the hallway.

During the walk to the kitchen, Griff stayed glued to Jemma's side. As if submitting to some compulsion to constantly touch her, he stroked her arm, his fingertips grazing her skin. She glanced up and caught him watching her. The electrical sizzle that passed between them couldn't be her imagination. No way. They'd crossed a major threshold in their relationship tonight, one that went far beyond friendship, or even the boundaries of a witch and her familiar.

She almost tripped over her own feet when the last part of that thought sank into her consciousness.

A witch and her familiar.

Other than the time she'd teased Griff about being his boss, she'd never taken the notion too seriously. To her, Griff would always be the man she loved, not her whiskered sidekick. Frankly, she didn't give a flying monkey about the role assigned to him. But that didn't mean others were in agreement with her line of thinking, which probably explained Griff's reticence.

Deliberately slowing her pace to keep the others out of earshot, she frowned up at Griff. "What exactly happened in your meeting with the guild leader earlier?"

Wariness briefly stole across Griff's face before he managed to snuff it. He opened his mouth—no doubt to utter a big, fat lie—and she squeezed his wrist in warning. “Save it. I can already guess what went down. The guild can threaten us all they want, it's not going to stop me from loving you. And once this ghost and zombie business is put to the grave, I'll have a talk with the guild myself.”

“Jemma, it won't make any difference. The contract—”

“Fuck the contract. If nothing else, this entire experience has taught me that life is too short and precious not to go after the one person in this world who makes me happy and complete. If those assholes in the guild don't like it, too damn bad.”

Leaving Griff standing there in mute bemusement, she marched into the kitchen. Beneath the glow of candlelight, the dining table practically groaned under the weight of countless platters of food. She sent Clarissa a wry look. “Jeez, you weren't kidding about the celebration.”

Clarissa patted the chair at the head of the table. “And as our honored guest, you get the best seat in the house.”

Nothing like putting the pressure on. If her magic proved to be merely a pretty light show, all this royal treatment would be for nothing. Choking down that bitter reality pill, she settled in the proffered seat. Griff took the chair to her right while Logan grabbed the one to her left. Suddenly recounting the amazing sexcapade they'd enacted no more than twenty feet away from where they sat, a wave of self-consciousness swamped her.

“What's the matter, sugar? Your cheeks are all flushed.”

She peeked at Logan. Noticing his wicked grin, she pretended sudden interest in her cutlery.

Ms. Peach shuffled into the nook, hot on Gloria's heels. “Where the devil were you?”

Clarissa gave an exasperated sigh. “Would you stop badgering Gloria and come eat?”

Grumbling beneath her breath, the elderly woman settled across from Clarissa and snapped her napkin open. Her smile painfully tight, Clarissa nodded toward Gloria. “You really outdid yourself. Everything looks fantastic.”

That was putting it lightly. Jemma stared at the succulent standing rib roast holding center court on the table, her mouth watering. “How in the world did you have time to fix all of this?” It was particularly a mystery considering the only thing cooking in the kitchen an hour ago had been Griff's sex sauce.

Gloria shrugged. “It helps having a magic oven.”

Jemma's attention veered to the stainless-steel appliance. “I don't suppose they sell those at Home Depot?”

Tittering in amusement, Gloria circled the table, ladling out portions of a thick, cream-based soup. Jemma leaned forward for a closer inspection, the sweet and savory aroma flirting with her senses. “Is this crab bisque?”

Gloria lowered the crock to a waiting hot pad. “Griffin insisted it be on the menu.”

“He did?” She swung her focus to Griff, her heart swelling with the knowledge that he not only knew what her favorite dish was, but made sure she was treated to it. Feeling a little sappy that the gesture managed to bring tears to her eyes, she cleared her throat. “You did request the calorie-free version, right?” Hey, a gal could dream.

For the next ten minutes or so, the sound of busy utensils competed with the occasional hum of conversation. Eventually the surrounding voices became blurry and faint, a muffled soundtrack as Jemma struggled to stay awake long enough to cut a bite-sized portion of the rib roast. Her forearm weak and heavy, she attempted to slice through the slab of meat resting on her plate but the knife kept slipping. She struggled to contain a yawn. Maybe she should have taken Griff’s suggestion and snuck in a nap before coming downstairs. She lifted her head, the motion an extreme effort, and noticed that everyone else seemed to be suffering even worse states of drowsiness.

All except for Gloria, who was staring at her with an eerie intensity. The cook lifted from her seat, her flip-flops oddly silent during her approach. As Gloria neared, her eyes grew darker, revealing pinpoints of brilliant light swirling in her pupils.

Jemma’s befuddled mind tried to piece together where she’d seen those lights before. Suddenly it came to her. They were the same ones that’d led her to Nettie. *Oh shit*. She fumbled for the knife on her plate, her sluggish limbs refusing to cooperate. Finally she got a grip on the utensil and swiped a clumsy jab at Gloria.

Effortlessly knocking the potential weapon aside, Gloria offered a chilling smile. “Now, now. That’s a fine way to treat the woman who’s taking you to your destiny.”

Chapter Seventeen

Something was terribly wrong. He just couldn't focus his thoughts enough to figure out exactly what. Prying his eyes open, Griffin peered around the table. Food. Mountains of it. He could still detect the lingering taste of crushed rosemary from some phantom meal. No, *recent*. For God's sake, why wouldn't his damn brain function properly? Uttering a growl that sounded strangely garbled, he tore his scrutiny from the barely touched feast and glanced toward the unconscious diner across the way.

Logan. Griffin frowned, trying to make sense of why the werewolf would be sacked out at the table, his face buried in a plate of uneaten roast pork. A moan came from the vicinity of the floor, and he spotted Clarissa struggling to push onto her elbows.

Disjointed images flashed through his mind, all of them circling back to one in particular. Bowls of crab bisque. Jemma's fav—

Some of his brain fog cleared and the dim echo of a warning signal buzzed through the haze. He wrenched his head in the direction of Jemma's chair, the mental alarm shrilling louder at the sight of her empty seat.

Another groan floated from Clarissa. "Gloria...took..."

It all came rushing back. The sudden lethargy that'd crashed over him. The distant sounds of a struggle, right before he'd blacked out.

"Have to...stop...her." Clarissa pushed up another inch before her limbs gave out, sprawling her back onto the floor.

Battling against the heavy tide of fatigue dulling his reflexes, Griffin clawed at the arms of his chair, attempting to leverage himself off the seat. Whatever spell or potion Gloria had slipped into their food refused to loosen its grip. Clenching his teeth in a grimace of determination, he mentally visualized himself yanking free of the invisible shackles pinning him in place. The mind trick wasn't easy, and it seemed hours passed before he felt the first restraint weaken and finally snap. After that initial crack, the others broke with little resistance.

His mobility restored, he surged to his feet and raced toward the doorway. He slammed into an energy field that made him yelp and fall backward. Gloria had erected a reverse ward, imprisoning them inside the kitchen. Her abilities didn't allow for such magic. Nettie must have somehow transferred her power to Gloria.

Clarissa was his only hope of destroying the ward. He rushed back to her side and tugged her into a sitting position. Her eyelids drooped and he shook her forcefully. "Damn it, stay with me."

"Have to make...spell...breaker." Her head bobbing, Clarissa slumped against his side. There was no way in hell she'd stay conscious long enough to do it, which meant it'd be up to him.

He didn't know the first thing about spell breakers. "*Son of a bitch.*"

Gloria's Volkswagen Rabbit careened around a hairpin turn, nearly toppling Jemma into the lap of the male zombie sitting to the right of her on the backseat. An ominous sound rumbled from the creature's throat, but fortunately it appeared the corpse had forgotten to put his dentures in. Unless he planned to gum her death, she was safe for the moment.

Her useless limbs flopping, she wiggled onto her side of the car and stared at the back of Gloria's headrest. "Please don't do this. You can fight Nettie's ghostie mind control."

Gloria's eerily glowing eyes met Jemma's in the rearview mirror. "Why would I want to do that? She's offering us the one true way."

Frustration welled inside her chest. "Her way is death for us all."

"Yep, it's perfect." Gloria's attention returned to the road. "Life is so messy and complicated. In fact, before mistress Nettie summoned me into the woods tonight, I was tearing my hair out, stressing over which cake I should enter in the Kitchen Witches' bake-off."

"Kitchen Witches?" She had no idea what that was, but if it'd made Gloria tear her hair out, it must be important.

"I've been trying to get into their club for years. Obviously those old biddies don't understand much less appreciate nouveau cuisine. Mistress Nettie helped me see the truth about those jealous bitches." The lights dancing in Gloria's eyes flickered for a moment before shining brighter. "Mistress Nettie just wants me to be happy. She's the only one who does, you know."

Was that how Nettie had managed to worm her way inside Gloria's mind? By convincing Gloria she cared about her? Jesus. Griff was right. Nettie *was* a master manipulator.

"Nettie doesn't give a rat's ass about you. Not like Clarissa and Ms. Peach do."

"They don't care about me. Not like Mistress Nettie does." The conviction in Gloria's tone clashed with the creepy flatness of her expression. "As far as Clarissa and Peach are concerned, I'm just the hired help. Someone to cook their meals and boss around."

"No, you're wrong. They love you." Jemma wracked her brain, desperately fishing for something that might break through Gloria's trance. "And remember all the compliments they gave you at dinner tonight? They meant every single one of them. They appreciate you, Gloria. More than you realize."

"All I remember is Peach crabbing at me."

Shit. This wasn't going well. "I'm sure it was only because she was worried about you."

“I could drop dead and she wouldn’t shed a tear.”

The irony of that statement wasn’t exactly lost on her. “Gloria, if you don’t start fighting Nettie’s mind control, we’re *all* going to drop dead.”

“I know. It’s the one true way.”

Ah crap. They were back to that again.

Gloria took another sharp turn, smacking Jemma into the armrest. The corpse uttered a string of monosyllabic grunts, and Gloria snorted. “My driving ain’t gonna kill ya, moron. You’re already dead.”

Holy crap. Gloria knew how to speak *zombie* now? Before Jemma could ponder that further, Gloria accelerated, sending the vehicle speeding through a vaporous mist. The Volkswagen’s headlights washed over a cluster of shadows moving up ahead. Pressing her cheek against the windowpane, Jemma stared at the assembly of corpses shambling along the side of the road. She managed to count at least twenty zombies before the car zipped past, leaving the creatures to eat their trail of exhaust. Oh man, she had a bad feeling those corpses weren’t on a pilgrimage to a Grateful Dead concert.

They traveled a short distance farther before Gloria veered off the main street and onto a narrow, one-lane road. The night suddenly seemed denser, more oppressive. Even the moonlight seemed diluted and murky compared to five seconds ago. They drove a few more minutes before she spotted a vine-infested gate topping a small rise. Gloria stomped on the brake, pitching Jemma and her zombie warden into the backs of the driver and passenger seats. While the corpse jabbered his annoyance, Gloria climbed from the vehicle. Tugging open the rear door, she yanked Jemma from the seat. Her limbs uncooperative, Jemma tumbled onto a patch of heat-scorched turf.

“Yo, Bubba, get your boney dead ass over here and help me get her up the hill.”

The lurching, uneven tread of footsteps crunching through the dried grass announced the zombie’s approach. An instant later, Jemma’s arms were practically wrenched from their sockets when Gloria and Bubba hauled her onto her feet and began trudging toward the gate. As they got closer, Jemma could make out the filigreed sign with the word *Cemetery* topping the center posts.

Oh shit. Nothing like walking into the middle of what amounted to a huge zombie manufacturing facility. Panic sluicing through her veins, she tried to slow their advance by dragging her sandals along the ground. Hell, just because she had no control over her body didn’t mean she couldn’t make it work for her somehow. Unfortunately she didn’t count on Gloria catching onto her scheme. Slinging an arm around Jemma’s waist so her feet no longer hampered their progress, Gloria snapped at Bubba to pick up his pace. They reached the gate and it automatically opened with a screechy whine that sounded like it came straight from a horror flick.

A field of headstones stretched before them, the majority of markers half-buried by overgrown thickets of grass. Jemma tried not to think about the countless graves they were stepping over as they made their way to an ornate marker resting in front of a gnarled oak tree. A breeze rustled the air, making the

Spanish moss curtaining the tree flutter and dance. Gloria and Bubba halted, their expressions taking on an enraptured intensity that made Jemma's skin break out in goose bumps. The sensation doubled when a ghostly whisper brushed against her ear.

“Welcome to the uprising, precious Jemma.”

Chapter Eighteen

Griffin uncapped the cobalt vial he'd fetched from Gloria's magical cache of potions and poured its contents into the waiting goblet. He stirred the liquid until the mixture bubbled and fizzed, hoping like hell he'd gotten Clarissa's slurred instructions right. Otherwise there was a good chance he was about to poison his boss. Chanting the incantation she'd provided, he carried the foaming brew to the table. He tipped Clarissa's chin up, supporting her lolling head with one hand while he pinched her mouth open with his fingers, forcing the spell breaker past her lips. A massive shudder shook her and she sputtered once before hiccupping a nebula of black sparkles.

She scrambled to her feet, apparently cured. "Take care of Logan and Peach while I deconstruct the ward."

Leaving her to work her magic, Griffin turned his focus to doling out the remainder of the spell breaker. By the time Logan and Ms. Peach regained consciousness, Clarissa had weakened the ward but not eliminated it, despite cursing and throwing whammies like a madwoman. She swayed in exhaustion, rivers of sweat plastering her hair to her face.

Griffin read the helpless anguish in her eyes and joined her side. "You can do it."

She gave an anemic laugh. "I appreciate the cheerleading, but it's not enough. My battery is drained. I don't think there's anything left—" She broke off with a grunt when Logan whirled her into his arms. With zero preamble, the werewolf tugged Clarissa close and slammed his mouth against hers, corking her startled gasp. His tongue disappeared beyond the barrier of her lips and suddenly she lit up like a sea of sparklers at a Fourth of July parade. A snow cloud of lavender shimmers swirling around them, Logan reluctantly released Clarissa and stepped back. She wobbled precariously for a moment, her dazed focus locked on Logan. "Th—that was..." She licked her lips and ran shaky fingers through a damp lock of hair. "Thank you."

For once the werewolf didn't offer a smartass comment and instead sat silently at the table while Clarissa busted through the ward's last fortification. With that obstacle defeated, Griffin dashed toward the mansion's front entrance. Clarissa caught up with him outside. "Is the shotgun and bag of rock salt still in your car?" He nodded and she grabbed his arm. "Then let's go."

They raced to the Pathfinder, and he cranked on the engine just as Logan and Ms. Peach yanked open the rear passenger doors. Griffin glanced over his shoulder and met Logan's gaze as the werewolf settled in place. A rare instance of shared purpose passed between them, and Griffin nodded before shifting out of

park. He sped toward the road and experienced a momentary twinge of panic when he realized he had no idea which direction to go. “Damn it, I’m getting nothing from Jemma. Nettie must be blocking her again.” At least he prayed that was the reason for Jemma’s blank signal. Because the alternative...

He banished the specter of fear to the back of his mind, refusing to allow it to blanket his determination with a dark cloud. Clarissa rolled down her window. “I could try invoking Akasha for assistance.”

“An eye in the sky?” Logan echoed. “Not a bad idea.”

Ms. Peach popped her head between the driver and passenger seats. “Or you could just follow those zombies.”

Griffin stared at the horde of corpses crossing the driveway. “I’m going with that plan.” His heart thumping, he floored it.

Jemma shivered as Nettie materialized in front of her. An unholy glee shone in the ghost’s eyes, making her resemble a demented child anticipating a treasure trove of ghoulish presents Death was bringing her for Christmas.

“Can you feel it, Jemma? The beginning of the end?” Nettie sucked in a breath and flung her head back. “Death’s sweet perfume is rich in the air.”

That, unfortunately, was all too true. And it sure as hell didn’t smell sweet to Jemma’s thinking. She fought the urge to retch, her nose filling with the putrid stench of decay.

“This night was always meant to be. Rose Beaumont never understood the path of fate. Her shortsightedness convinced her she built a failsafe with her containment spell, never realizing her daughter would ultimately conceive the perfect weapon to destroy it.” Floating closer, Nettie stroked Jemma’s cheek, her touch like a stinging trail of ice. “I shall have to remember to thank her for such a wonderful gift, once I raise her corpse and condemn her soul to my collection.”

A mix of horror and helplessness swelled within Jemma. She struggled to pull free of Gloria and Bubba’s grip, angry tears welling in her eyes. “I won’t let you get away with this.”

“But you will. You cannot stop me, my precious, but you can join me. My offer still stands. I will give you the world.”

“I don’t want the twisted world you believe in, you sick bitch.”

Nettie’s features contorted in ugly fury, and she swung her hand at Jemma. Pain erupted in Jemma’s abdomen. She screamed, almost blacking out from the agony of it. The sensation receded as fast as it’d ripped through her and she gasped, her eyes watering in relief.

“Do not test me, you ungrateful child. Next time I will not be so gentle.”

Oh sweet Jesus. She’d never survive a next time.

Nettie grasped Jemma's chin, forcing her head up. A savage storm of bitterness raged in Nettie's eyes. "I was wrong about you. You are just like the others. A spineless follower of the old order. I am ashamed that you carry even an ounce of my blood."

"Trust me, it makes two of us." Another conflagration of fire burst inside Jemma with enough force to fling her from Gloria's and Bubba's hold. She landed on her back, the breath knocked from her lungs. Clearly, antagonizing a homicidal ghost was dangerous to her health. She blinked at the haze of red bleeding over the moon. *Oh man, that can't be a good sign.* The sudden blaring of a car horn broke her from her gloomy musings and she jerked. The fact that her body managed even that tiny involuntary action sent a thrill coursing through her. Maybe it meant that Nettie's hold on her was beginning to weaken, which meant maybe she'd have a fighting chance of fending off the ghost and her zombie henchmen.

"What the hell are they doing here?" Nettie's outraged demand cut through the night, prompting Jemma to raise her head enough to witness her grandmother confronting Gloria. "Did I not order you to kill them?"

Them? Was Nettie referring to Griff and the others? Jemma inched her head up another fraction, torn between the temptation to try to roll onto her side and the fear of taking her gaze off Nettie.

"Y-yes, mistress. I fed them the potion just as you asked."

"*Idiot.* The potion was only meant for Jemma." Her face a mask of fury, Nettie advanced on Gloria. "But then I think you knew that and meant to deceive me."

"No, mis—" Gloria broke off with a gasp and doubled over, clutching her belly. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she crumpled to the ground.

"Jemma!" Griff's ferocious roar practically shook the ground. Momentarily tossing her caution to the wayside, Jemma shoved onto her elbow and glanced in the direction of the cemetery's entrance. The sight that met her sent her heart plummeting to her knees. At least eighty zombies stood between her and Griff. Even with the distance separating them, she could easily detect the determined set of his broad shoulders. Oh God. He was certifiably insane if he thought—

Releasing another thunderous roar, he leapt into the fray.

"*Griff.*" Half sobbing, half screaming, she tried to shove up from the grass. A ghostly cackle sounded behind her, moments before skeletal fingers dug into her ankles and dragged her across the ground. She clawed at the earth, trying to halt the zombie's progress with anything she could grab on to, but only managed to scratch her arms on the razor-sharp blades of grass. When they reached Nettie, another corpse stepped forward and fisted a handful of Jemma's hair, jerking her to her feet. Her tear ducts swimming, she watched Nettie approach the grave.

"I have waited an eternity for Death to rule the day. As I will it, so mote it be." Nettie grabbed Jemma's hand, her talon-like nails slicing the flesh of her palm. A drop of blood seeped from the wound

and plopped onto the scorched turf covering the grave. The greedy earth sucked in the droplet with an audible gurgle.

Okay, *that* definitely wasn't normal.

The oppressive night suddenly filled with a strange expectancy. Seconds later, with no breeze in sight, the Spanish moss draping the oak began swinging and twisting wildly. A loud groan that seemed to belch from the very bowels of Hell rumbled from the ground, right before the grave beneath Jemma's feet exploded in a massive geyser of dirt. The impact sent her stumbling backward. Swiping her dirt-clotted hair from her eyes, she gaped as one by one the surrounding graves began performing their own volcano trick.

Oh yeah, we're most definitely fucked.

Chapter Nineteen

Griffin's only thought was Jemma as he fought his way through a swarm of zombies intent on relieving him of a limb or two. He'd been terrified when he saw her lying there motionless. The realization that she wasn't dead didn't slow the frantic drumming of his pulse. No chance of that happening until he held her safe in his arms. In his peripheral vision, he spotted Logan battling a throng of corpses on the far side of the cemetery. He had no idea where Clarissa and Ms. Peach were, but the occasional boom from the shotgun verified they were busy firing their way toward the epicenter of the zombie outbreak.

Fingernails raked Griffin's neck. He crunched his fist into the skull of the corpse busy trying to steal a chunk out of him, all the while trying to fend off a dead gal wearing what looked like a poufy metallic prom dress. She tore his shirt, shredding it at the collar, and sank her teeth into the meat of his shoulder. He shoved her off him and head-butted another zombie that'd jumped into the fracas. These dead bastards might think he was the featured course in an all-you-can-eat buffet, but that didn't mean he was going down without a fight. Two more corpses came barreling at him and he ducked. The pair collided with each other, and he dove between the legs of the dead prom queen. She went tumbling with a shriek, and he wormed his way toward a break in the action.

The grave to his immediate right suddenly exploded like it'd been hit with a grenade. A second later, the neighboring grave did the same. Followed by another. And another.

Oh fuck. Nettie must have unlocked the final door. Which meant—

The bottom of his stomach dropped out. *Jemma*. An anguished roar ripping from his chest, he leapt over the nearby grave. Someone, or *something*, grabbed his leg. He thudded onto his face, splinters of pain radiating through his kneecaps. Growling, he kicked at the corpse attempting to drag him down into the grave, nailing the creature in the forehead. It released him but one of its comrades dove on top of Griffin. Just when he thought the zombie would successfully smother him into the ground, gunfire blasted overhead. The corpse rolled off him, and he glanced up at Clarissa. She extended an arm toward him, and he gripped her hand just as another zombie tackled her from the side. Logan's outraged bellow whipped through the air, and he hurtled himself at the attacking zombie. Griffin scrambled to assist, and a mass of the creatures piled on top of them.

Suddenly he knew what it felt like to be the unlucky player running defense in a game of zombie football.

Even in her worst nightmares, Jemma would never have been able to conjure the hellish scene unfolding around her. Graves were blowing up left and right. It was as if she was in the middle of a freakin' war zone instead of a cemetery. She couldn't see Griff or the others anywhere. Sick dread burned in her stomach at the realization that they must be buried somewhere in the insane zombie mosh pit near the front gate. A quick look over her shoulder confirmed that Gloria was still passed out cold.

She was completely on her own here.

An evil chuckle came from Nettie. "Your services are no longer required, precious. Bubba, you may enjoy your dinner now."

Jemma whirled around in time to catch the corpse popping in his dentures. *Oh shit.* He lunged at her and she stumbled backward, right into the zombie who'd pulled her to her feet earlier. Bubba's drooling mouth lowered and she screamed, shoving at him. His entire body quaked and the blood she'd smeared on his neck bubbled before seeping into his rotting flesh. An instant later, he blackened like a crispy critter and burst into a shower of dust.

What the hell? She brushed the ash particles from her face, trying not to be squicked out at having zombie dust caked in her eyelashes. She stared at the gash in her palm, Clarissa's words echoing in her head. *The key has always been in your blood.*

Holy crimoly. She spun and swiped her hand across the torso of the other zombie. After jerking around like a marionette on invisible strings, the corpse crumbled into ash. Turning, she met Nettie's fulminous glare and smiled. "Well isn't this an interesting discovery?"

Her mouth slashing into a furious line, Nettie shot an arc of snapping energy from her fingertips. The strike electrified Jemma. Crying out, she staggered to her knees. Another sizzling bolt of agony hit her, and she toppled face-first into the mound of raised earth at the foot of the opened grave. An arctic breeze ruffled through her hair and she flinched, steeling herself for Nettie's next blow. Instead, she was treated to a scornful laugh.

"This is most entertaining. Perhaps I shall prolong your life just for the thrill of watching you suffer. And I will find countless ways to make you suffer, my precious."

Groaning, Jemma pushed onto her elbows. Her vision blurred and she blinked, trying to focus. A withered husk of a hand popped from the ground in front of her, inches from her face. She yelped and scrambled backward. As she did, her attention fell on the ornate headstone teetering on the other side of the hole. The grave's mass upheaval must have dislodged the stone, revealing the chiseled image of a horned goat on the lower portion of the marker.

Oh my God. She scooted forward for a closer look and almost conked heads with the shriveled corpse that suddenly rose from the grave. A moldy cloak shrouded the dead woman, allowing only a few straggly wisps of auburn hair to show. Despite the fact the woman's features were all but concealed, she knew it was Nettie's corpse. Duh, who else would be lying in her—?

A dizzying rush of déjà vu shivered through Jemma's bones. *The answer rests beneath the horned goat.* "Holy shit. *You're* the answer."

Boney fingers sinking into the loose clods of dirt, the corpse continued climbing from the hole. Jemma gulped and cautiously wiggled backward. Okay, so the floating head that'd visited her in the kitchen hadn't been blowing smoke up her ass. But what exactly was she supposed to do now?

Say it twice as she rises. "Ah hell. Here goes nothing." Ignoring the pain shooting through her body, Jemma struggled to her knees. "Gorgonzola, gorgonzola."

Nothing. "This is what I get for listening to a disembodied head."

The corpse swung a leg over the edge of the grave and crawled forward just as Nettie cackled and threw another thunderbolt of searing agony at Jemma's midsection. White-hot fire engulfed her insides, and she fell onto her hands, the coppery tang of blood pooling on her tongue. Just when she decided death would be a merciful welcome, the odd word she'd been searching for flashed through her mind. "Gorasola."

Nettie's maniacal laughter fizzled to a halt. Jemma raised her head and took in her grandmother's frozen look of shock. A shadow of fear slipped over Nettie's face, only to be replaced a second later by frantic desperation. She threw her arm toward Jemma, a red, glowing ball of energy shooting from her fingertips.

"Gorasola."

The fireball dissolved in midair, and Nettie's spirit form shuddered violently before catapulting into the body of her corpse. An awful scream tearing from her, she lunged on top of Jemma, pinning her down by the wrists. "You stupid little bitch. I'm going to enjoy killing you even more for this."

"Not half as much as I will you."

Nettie's grip tightened. "Lesson number one, my precious. You cannot kill a ghost."

"No, but I can kill a zombie."

For a long, tense moment she and Nettie locked stares. She knew the exact moment her threat fully registered with her grandmother. Fear snuffing out the malice flashing in Nettie's eyes, she glanced down at the blood trickling from Jemma's wound, mere inches from where her own wrinkled fingers rested. Her gaunt, hollowed face took on the look of a woman bent on one goal—survival. She slackened her grip a fraction, sliding her hand away from the approaching dribble of blood as if it were toxic.

It was all the opportunity Jemma needed. Crashing her forehead into Nettie's, she knocked the corpse off her torso. Before Nettie could strike back, Jemma twisted her bloodied hand free and slammed it over Nettie's mouth. "I hope you choke on that all the way to Hell."

Nettie started thrashing, her skin taking on the appearance and texture of charcoal. One fierce, muffled squeal of rage escaped her before she burst into a cloud of dust. Jemma slumped forward, drained. A chorus

of whispers floated above her, and she dragged her head upward. Dozens of glowing figures were clustered in front of her. She recognized one of the beaming faces as belonging to the floating head from the kitchen.

“You did it, Jemma. We’re all free of her now.” He and his fellow souls waved in farewell before dissolving into the thick black mist gathering in the cemetery.

No, not mist. A giant dust cloud. Lifting to her feet, Jemma gaped at the sight commencing around her. Zombies were dissipating into the dust—some scattering into the wind, others funneling into the blown-out graves. The upturned soil showered back into the waiting holes, followed by grass and weeds.

In less time than it took for her to fully pivot, the cemetery had returned to its former state of untouched creepiness. She spotted Griffin and the others rising from where the zombies had pinned them to the ground. Her throat thickened with tears. “Griff.” Though her voice came out the barest rasp, he spun in her direction. Cursing the battered and bruised muscles that slowed her progress, she limped forward. He broke into a run, easily sweeping her into his arms before she’d managed even three steps. His big hands cradled her head to his chest, his heart pounding beneath her cheek.

“I thought I’d lost you.” Emotion roughened Griff’s voice. He tipped her face up, and she saw the tears glimmering in his eyes.

She trailed her fingertips over his stubbled jaw. “Like you could get rid of me that easy.”

Leaking a ragged exhale, he pressed his lips to the crown of her head. She wrapped her arms around his waist, hugging him tight. There were so many thoughts tumbling around in her mind, but she settled on the only one that mattered. “I love you, Griff.”

“I love you too, baby.”

They both seemed to stop breathing at exactly the same moment. Joy overflowing her heart, she looked up at Griff. Her smile faltered at his expression. Rather than the love and tenderness she’d expected, dark misery clouded his face.

She swallowed hard. “You don’t look very happy about it.”

He finally returned her smile, but it was filled with sadness. “I’ve waited my whole life to be able to speak those words.” His palm traced the curve of her cheek. “The fact that I can means that the contract has been dissolved.”

It took a moment to figure out what he was talking about. “Wait, does this mean—?” She broke off when a strange luminescence glinted across Griff’s skin.

He must have read her confusion because he brushed her hair aside and kissed her. Tenderness. Love. *Now* it was there. In Technicolor detail. So why the hell was she scared?

“I’ll love you, Jemma...” The odd distortion flickered across Griff again, and she reflexively clutched him tighter. Was it her imagination, or did he feel less...there? She jerked her attention upward in time to catch the resignation in his eyes.

“Always.” The word whispered from his mouth before he faded into the darkness.

Chapter Twenty

Griff was gone. The crushing pain of it sat like a pyramid of bricks on her heart. Nightmares—sleeping and awake—tormented her. When the harsh rays of morning light came she crawled into the shower and curled against the tiled wall in a fetal position, the stinging spray pounding her unmercifully. The water didn't fill the emptiness in her soul and the tears returned, intensifying the misery trapped inside her. She hugged her knees to her chest, a sob racking her body. A slow, welcome tide of rage began to drown the pain.

By the time the water grew cold and her skin clammy, a renewed sense of determination had steeled her spine. Dialing off the jets, she yanked a towel from the hook and ruthlessly scrubbed herself dry. She dressed in khaki pants and a blue cotton top, silently acknowledging how the color matched her mood. Slicking her hair into a wet ponytail, she went downstairs.

Everyone was congregated in the kitchen. She felt the weight of their sympathetic gazes but refused to hide the swollen redness of her eyes. It wasn't her problem if they were uncomfortable with witnessing her agony. She took a deep breath and walked to the center island, stopping in front of Clarissa. "I want to meet with the guild. Can you make it happen?"

"It won't do any—"

"Can you make it happen?" She bit the words through clenched teeth.

Clarissa remained silent for a long moment before nodding.

"Good. Tell them it'll be today."

"That isn't much notice."

Jemma squared her jaw. "I stopped a zombie apocalypse for those assholes. They can squeeze me in their damn schedule."

"I'll contact them right now." Clarissa started to brush by Jemma but she hesitated. After an uncertain pause, her fingertips settled on Jemma's forearm. "I'm sorry. For everything."

She looked into Clarissa's eyes and saw a reflection of her own heartache. Struggling to hold the surge of bleak emotions at bay, she broke away from the coven mistress and returned to the hallway. The walls felt too close, too confining, adding to the vise-like pressure within her chest. She blindly staggered outside to the front porch. Sunlight and fresh air greeted her, along with the jubilant chatter of birds in the distance. Life was all around her. A bold declaration that Death hadn't won this round.

So why did she still feel dead inside? Her legs rubbery, she sat on the top step and peered sightlessly out at the driveway. Griff's Pathfinder was parked beneath the shade of the large oak near the toolshed. The vehicle was covered in road dust. Probably a little residual zombie dust too. She'd have to wash it. Griff was always so particular about keeping the SUV spotless, even if he wasn't so diligent when it came to housekeeping.

A fresh tear snuck past her lashes, and she swiped it away before dropping her hand to the edge of the step. Something wet and scratchy passed over her fingers and she jumped. She stared down into Floyd's big, droopy eyes. The dog whined and licked her again before insinuating his nose beneath her hand.

"Looks like old Floyd there can't handle seeing a pretty lady crying either."

She gave in to the hound's nudging and scratched behind his floppy ear. Grunting in contentment, Floyd hung his head over the step. She glanced over her shoulder at Logan. "Pretty? Me and Floyd probably look like twins right now with the amount of crying I've been doing the past ten hours."

"It's okay, sugar. You're allowed to cry. Although Catman wouldn't like seeing you in this state."

She knuckled her nose. "I know. He always hated seeing me cry too. Probably because I always look all icky when I do."

Logan chuckled. "Somehow I don't think that's the reason." He joined her and Floyd on the step. The mutt took that as a sign that he needed another hand scratching him on the rump. Pretty soon the rhythmic thumping of his tail provided a backbeat to the chirping birds. Logan cleared his throat. "It's not going to be easy convincing the guild to reverse Catman's sentence. Just thought you should know that going in."

She jutted her chin forward. "I'll do whatever it takes to bring him back."

Logan's mouth slid into a grin. "Damn, kind of wish I could be a fly on the wall during this showdown." He gave Floyd a final pat before hefting to his feet. "Why don't you come inside? Gloria's got a big spread planned for brunch."

Floyd cocked his head up with an excited *woof*. Logan wagged a finger at the dog. "The invitation was for the lady."

Jemma shook her head. "Thank you, but food and I aren't exactly on good speaking terms right now."

"Gloria's going to be devastated. You know she still feels guilty about what happened, for fallin' so easily under Nettie's mind control. This is her way of trying to make up for it."

"Yeah, I noticed that." Almost from the time they'd gotten home last night, the cook had been trying to ply her with biscuits and cookies. A side of ham. Whatever happened to be close at hand. She sighed and sent Logan a resigned look. "I'll be in shortly."

Giving a nod of acknowledgment, he left her with Floyd. She ran her fingers through the scruff of fur along the dog's neck, her attention returning to the Pathfinder across the way. "I'm bringing him back to me, Floyd. No matter what it takes."

Chapter Twenty-One

The stately Italianate manor housing the southern headquarters for the National Alliance of Witches wasn't as big and imposing as Jemma had thought it would be. For starters, it was half the size of the Beaumont coven house. Still, the building that sat nestled in the heart of one of Savannah's historic squares held a quaint charm. If not for the imposing mission facing her, she would have enjoyed just hanging out in the tropical oasis of the front courtyard.

"Ready?"

She met Clarissa's worried look. "Absolutely." Hopefully the conviction she'd injected in the word would transfer to her jittery nerves. Smoothing the hem of her top, she followed Clarissa past the arched entryway. They entered a spacious front vestibule. An enormous palm-shaped ceiling fan briskly stirred the air overhead, providing a cool, pleasant contrast to the mugginess outside. A young woman sporting a brunette bob and tortoise-frame glasses sat at a small desk situated in front of another doorway. She glanced up from her computer when they approached.

Clarissa brushed aside her bangs before flicking her gaze toward the closed door. "I trust they're waiting for us in there, Willa?"

"Yes. And be warned. Domino is in a regular snit today."

Clarissa's eyebrows arched. "What's new about that?"

Jemma couldn't say for certain, but she swore a faint smile shadowed Willa's mouth. The younger woman reached for the phone sitting at the corner of her desk. "I'll let them know you're here."

Clarissa leaned over and coaxed the phone back into its cradle. "Why spoil the fun of a grand entrance?"

Willa's eyes sparkled in conspiratorial glee behind her glasses. "Be my guest."

Cupping Jemma's elbow, Clarissa shoved the door open. The eight individuals clustered around a boardroom table swung their focus toward the doorway, and Jemma dug deep for the self-assurance necessary to bend these people to her will.

A statuesque woman with frosty blonde highlights that matched her demeanor lifted from her seat at the head of the table. "Ms. Miles, Ms. Beaumont, how kind of you to notify us of your arrival."

There was no mistaking the reprimand in the woman's voice. Jemma stepped forward, her spine straightening. "It's *Finnegan*."

The Nordic ice queen blinked, obviously taken aback. Jemma wasn't sure if the woman's discomposure stemmed from being corrected in front of her colleagues. Frankly, she didn't give a rat's ass. Before this meeting concluded, she planned on making everyone in this room regret ever *hearing* her name, much less getting it wrong.

The blonde woman transferred her attention to Clarissa, giving Jemma a deliberate brush-off. "I had Willa research the term Gorasola. Turns out it's the name of one of Antoinette's demon familiars. Specifically, the one she would summon to collect souls for her. Only this time, it seems the demon imprisoned Nettie's soul back into her corpse."

Clarissa grunted. "Guess Nettie pissed off her familiar one too many times."

The elderly gentleman sitting across from the blonde fiddled with his handlebar mustache. "Ms. Finnegan's genetic link with Antoinette must have given her the ability to command the demon. Perhaps it would be in our best interest to further examine Jemma's latent abilities."

Suddenly feeling an uncomfortable kinship with lab rats, Jemma stacked her arms over her chest. "I'm going to get right to the point. If you want a chance in hell of poking and prodding at me, it's going to cost you."

The blonde woman cocked an eyebrow. "Your price?"

"Griff. You're going to return him to me. *Now*."

An uncomfortable silence descended on the room. Jemma stared down each guild member until they one by one dropped their gazes to the floor. All except for the ice queen. Probably nothing short of spontaneous blindness would make that chick back down from a challenge against her superiority.

"Ms. *Finnegan*, I understand why you're upset, and I sympathize with your predicament. But rules are implemented for a reason." Mimicking Jemma's posture, the woman leaned her hip against the table edge. "Griffin Trudeau broke the most sacred rule of all and as such, lit the fuse to what could have been the end of every living person on this planet. His punishment is fair and reasonable. Believe me, we could have come down far harder on him."

"In what twisted world is banishment *reasonable*?"

Impatience washed over the other woman's features. "Let's please not get emotional about this."

The frustration and fury bottled within Jemma popped its cork. Literally. White sparks shot from her skin, and suddenly the ice queen went flying across the table and collided with a potted palm. Everyone gasped. Screeching in outrage, the woman untangled herself from the houseplant and whisked her hair out of her narrowed eyes. "Your request is denied."

Her heart plummeting, Jemma returned the mixture of furious and wary stares shooting in her direction. "I—I have no idea how I did that. Honestly. And I certainly didn't do it on purpose."

The woman yanked her fitted jacket back in place. "This meeting is finished."

“No, it isn’t. Please, you have to bring Griff back.” Her voice cracking, she sent a pleading look to the other members. The cowards refused to even acknowledge her.

Clarissa’s hand tucked over Jemma’s limp one. “Sometimes you can’t win a battle on the first maneuver.”

“But—”

“Tomorrow.” Clarissa gave an encouraging squeeze. “We’ll come back then.”

Swallowing past a thick lump of misery, Jemma allowed Clarissa to tug her through the doorway. They were halfway to the exit when a soft cough sounded behind them. Jemma turned and met Willa’s tentative smile.

“Just so you know, I’m rooting for you.”

Good. Because she’d need all the help she could get.

Rather than immediately returning to the coven house, Clarissa drove a few miles north to one of the larger parks that seemed to make up just about every square within the city. She shut off the engine of her sporty red convertible. Jemma made no move to unclick her seat belt. “I’m not exactly up for sightseeing.”

“I know. But I think you should come with me anyway.”

Sighing, Jemma released her belt and climbed from the car. Her steps sluggish, she followed Clarissa to a vacant bench near the giant fountain in the middle of the park. Clarissa sat, her expression clearly implying that she expected Jemma to do the same. She’d left her will to fight back at the alliance headquarters, so she sank next to Clarissa with barely a grumble.

“I used to come here when I was a little girl. It was my favorite escape.”

She was in no mood for small talk, but she gave in anyway. “Your parents brought you here?”

“No. I came here to get away from them.” Apparently tuning in to Jemma’s silent curiosity, Clarissa turned her head, squinting against the glare of the sun. “They didn’t abuse me, if that’s what you’re wondering. They were pretty much too wrapped up in abusing each other for that.”

“I can’t even imagine living like that.”

A brief pang of some dark emotion flickered in Clarissa’s eyes before disappearing. “You’re close with your family. Griff used to tell me about the fun adventures all of you shared together.” A sad, wistful smile fluttered across Clarissa’s lips. “I used to think his motive for telling me those things was to punish me for being such a bitch at times. Now I know it was how he kept you close to him when duty called him here.”

She didn’t know what to say in the face of Clarissa’s painful yet heartfelt confession. Words didn’t somehow seem adequate.

Clarissa rubbed her palm along the worn knee of her jeans. “I’ve made a habit of living my life from the sidelines. Keeping everyone at a safe distance. It’s easier that way. But I know it hurt Griffin. More than anything, I regret not being able to change that.”

“Griff wouldn’t hold it against you.” Just thinking about the capacity of his forgiveness brought the ache rushing back. She blinked, desperately trying to defeat the deluge of tears.

“This is where I called him to me.”

The announcement managed to edge Jemma past the danger zone and she sniffled. A smile of fond remembrance lit Clarissa’s face. “I was so excited. My first familiar. I of course didn’t have a damn idea what I was doing, or what to truly expect, but he came tumbling out of those rhododendrons over there. Buck naked. Good thing it was two o’clock in the morning and no one was around.”

Some of the misery lifted from Jemma’s heart and she chuckled along with Clarissa. They sat there, oblivious of the tourists coming and going, of time passing, and simply shared their favorite memories of Griff, each in their own way keeping him close.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Five weeks. Each passing day made her die a little more inside. Still, she pulled her outfit for the day from the armoire and inspected it for wrinkles. A no-nonsense black suit. If that didn't show the guild she meant business, nothing would. Securing her hair into a sleek chignon, she ventured downstairs. Logan met her in the entry, and she tossed him a frown. "I thought Clarissa was taking me today."

He curled his palm around her elbow. "Sugar, we need to talk."

"We don't have time. I have to get there before Domino takes her lunch break." She swiveled toward the door. "Yesterday that sneaky bitch escaped through the back entrance."

"The guild is going on recess."

She rolled her eyes. "Aren't they a little old for the monkey bars?"

Logan's mouth twitched. "Not that kind of recess. They're all taking vacation for the next month and a half."

She stared at him, a cramp seizing her chest. "What?"

He rubbed a hand over his goatee. "Shit, I didn't want to be the one to tell you."

"They're leaving because of me, aren't they?"

"Yes and no. They always take a recess. But usually not until winter."

Six weeks. She'd never be able to last. Her knees wobbled and Logan caught her against him. His gentle strokes soothing over her scalp, he murmured soft platitudes as her tears soaked his T-shirt. She appreciated his kindness, but it was Griff she longed for. Needed. A strong desire to surround herself with memories of her love swelled within her until she thought her heart would burst. Wiping her eyes, she scooted out of Logan's arms. "I'm going home." A tiny bit of the agony dissolved at her decision.

Logan didn't exactly look happy with her statement though. "Sugar, you shouldn't be alone right now."

"I won't be. My family is there." Just not Griff.

"I still don't think it's a good idea. How am I supposed to watch over you if you're in North Carolina?"

Oh yes. Griff's backup plan. As if anyone could keep her out of trouble the way he could. "North Carolina isn't exactly on the other side of the world. I fully expect you to come visit me in a couple weeks, after I've gotten settled back in."

“Can you at least wait until Clarissa comes back from town? In fact, why don’t I go call her right now and hurry her ass up?”

“Fine.” The minute Logan disappeared down the hall she dug in her purse for the keys to the Pathfinder. Feeling like a huge coward, she dashed out the door. She couldn’t handle goodbyes. Not anymore.

She arrived in the outskirts of Ashville by four o’clock. Downtown was still bustling with activity. Another layer of the heaviness lifted from her heart when she spotted Finnegan’s Hardware. She parked the SUV and was almost to the store’s front entrance when she remembered that half her family would be inside. Well, at least her dad and her cousins Jimmy, Drew and Marshall. Despite wanting to see them all—desperately—going in there with red-rimmed, swollen eyes wasn’t the best course of action. One look at her and her pops would be bawling, which would only lead to her own cry-a-thon. She returned to the car and pointed it in the direction of Griff’s house.

Less than twenty minutes later she pulled into the drive. A surreal sensation washed over her. Five weeks ago she’d arrived here with the intention of seducing Griff, never realizing the dramatic shift her life was about to undertake. Pulling the key from the ignition, she climbed from the Pathfinder. Inside the house, bittersweet memories leapt out at her. The granite island, where she and Griff first made love and he triggered her magic. The stovetop, where he’d prepared countless meals for them. She wandered into the master bedroom, nearly crunching a shard of mirror. They’d rushed from the house without cleaning up the mess from zombie Harold.

She backtracked to the kitchen and grabbed a broom from the pantry. Five minutes later the broken mirror pieces were discarded, and she crawled into the bed without removing her suit. The sheets carried Griff’s woodsy scent, and she buried her nose in his pillow, hugging it tight. Sleep came swift and sweet, blessedly free of nightmares.

The next morning brought reality crashing back. It started with the ringing of her cell phone on the bedside table. Groaning, she grabbed the irritating device and glanced at the caller ID. Her mom. “Oh crap. Busted.” Why else would she be calling at seven a.m. on the dot?

Biting the bullet, she punched the Talk button. “Hi, Mom.”

“Jemma Sue Finnegan, is that all you have to say? *Hi, Mom?*”

“Um...yeah?”

“Louise Grossfeld saw you outside the store yesterday, right before you scurried inside Griffin’s car and sped off.”

Times like this, it really sucked living in a town full of busybodies. “I’m sorry. I just wasn’t ready to see any of you guys yet.” Dead silence met her admission, and she bit the inside of her cheek. “I didn’t

mean that how it sounded. I've missed everyone. A lot." Her voice broke and she closed her eyes, the phone pressing into her cheek.

"Honey, what is it?"

Her mom's soft entreaty was Jemma's undoing. Like a flood bursting through its dam, everything came tumbling out. By the time she'd spilled most of the story, she'd returned to a sobbing wreck. She was also more than a little surprised—but extremely grateful—that her mom took everything like a champ. Hell, it had to be more than a little weird to hear your daughter was the descendant of a psycho voodoo queen and in love with a tiger. Yeah, the tiger part alone would have made anyone else search the Yellow Pages for the nearest loony bin. But not Hannah Finnegan.

"I'm coming over there."

Jemma sat up in the bed and blotted her tear-streaked face with the sheet. "No, I haven't had a chance to clean up Griff's place yet. Don't—" She sighed in defeat when she heard her mom yell to her pops to throw something on other than his ratty tighty whities.

"We'll be over within the hour, honey," her mom promised before hanging up.

Whipping the sheets aside, Jemma pushed from the mattress. The room suddenly went cockeyed and her stomach rebelled. *Oh no*. She lurched to the bathroom, reaching the toilet just in time. After sending what little contents she had in her belly down the john, she slumped against the vanity with a moan. She was tempted to phone her mom back and tell her to stay put. Not that her mom would let an upset stomach get in the way of her motherly duties. She'd probably only lug along a gallon of chicken noodle soup.

Jemma clamped a hand over her mouth. Ugh. Why did she have to go and think about food?

Forty-five minutes later, she was showered and re-suited and feeling significantly better. She even managed to wolf down a couple slices of toast before the doorbell rang. Her mom and dad practically tackled her when she opened the front door. Exchanging hugs and teary kisses, they herded her into the living room. While she filled her dad in on everything, her mom brought in two sacks of groceries and set about fixing breakfast. Jemma smiled tremulously, her world shifting one more inch toward normal. But the void of Griff's absence remained.

"You should have told us the truth, Jemma Sue."

She bit her lip at the note of censure in her dad's tone. "I didn't like lying. About any of it. But I know you guys. I couldn't risk Nettie using you to get to me."

"All right. But that doesn't explain you keeping us in the dark for the past five weeks."

She couldn't bring herself to tell her dad about the nightmares, the constant fear of never seeing Griff again. He probably could guess the hell she'd been going through. She didn't need to color a picture for him. Her mom trotted to the couch carrying two plates loaded down with supersized omelets. Jemma took one whiff of the eggs and her stomach pitched. She squeaked an *excuse me* and bolted for the bathroom. As

she was hugging the toilet and wishing for a quick death, her second reality check of the day crashed into her conscience. She did a quick mental calculation between heaving up her guts.

Oh. Shit.

Reasonably assured her stomach had decided to behave, she abandoned the toilet and fetched the spare toothbrush from the medicine cabinet. She swung the mirrored door shut and caught her reflection. Other than the dark circles under her eyes and her puffy skin, she looked the same. Could it be? But how? She'd been on the pill. Okay, technically she hadn't taken it since the night she first seduced Griff, but weren't they supposed to stay in your system for a while? Then again, maybe the whole magic thing tampered with the pills effectiveness somehow. Not to mention Clarissa's spell breaker...

She rubbed her hands over her face, her head spinning. "Okay, there's one fact I know for certain." Her damn period was almost three weeks late. She just hadn't realized it until now. After brushing her teeth, she returned to the living room. Her parents looked worried but thankfully not suspicious of why she'd just spent ten minutes in the bathroom barfing a lung up. "If you guys don't mind, I'd like to lie down. I made the mistake of eating at that truck stop outside of Raleigh, and I'm pretty sure I got a touch of food poisoning." *Hey, good improv.*

Once she'd scooted her parents out the door and their taillights disappeared from view, she raced to the kitchen counter and scooped up Griff's key ring. She hopped in the Pathfinder and drove twenty miles out of her way to the drugstore. No way in hell would she buy a home pregnancy test from the local pharmacy. Shit, Mrs. Pendleton would leak the news and have the baby's name and gender decided before Jemma made it back to Griff's with the damn test.

She scoured the shelves of the feminine-product isle, her hands shaking. Clueless which brand was better, she bought one of each. Nervous anticipation made her a basket case during the trip back to the house. Ten minutes later—squatting over a ridiculously tiny piece of plastic—her nerves still hadn't settled.

Time became a torment as she paced in front of the bathroom vanity.

What would she do if that plus mark turned pink? "Wait, it's supposed to turn pink, right?" She double-checked the box before resuming her hand-wringing. Was she cut out to be a single mother? Did they have books out there on raising Bengal-tiger quasi-man babies? *Aaaagghhh.*

The alarm she'd set on her cell phone buzzed and she jumped. She approached the stick resting on a wad of toilet paper with the same caution a swat team would handle a ticking bomb. A bright pink plus sign stared back at her. Her hand automatically dropped to her belly.

A baby. She was having a baby.

Griff's baby.

Tears gathered in her eyes, this time brought on by joy. While death had tried to vanquish them, they'd created life. Together. Now she'd have another part of Griff to love and cherish. For always.

Chapter Twenty-Three

She spent the next three days browsing the internet for cool baby things. Yeah, it was probably premature ordering the Barbie glam vacation house, but it was twenty-five percent off, for crying out loud. You can't beat deals like that. Logging off the computer in the study, she ventured into the kitchen and tossed a package of popcorn into the microwave. While she watched the bag unfold and expand inside the nuke box, she rubbed her stomach through Griff's old work shirt and chatted to the baby. She knew it was just fanciful thinking that the tiny glob of cells growing in there could hear her much less understand anything she was saying, but the act brought her comfort.

The microwave dinged and she yanked out the popcorn. After drizzling on extra butter—hey, she was feeding two now—she curled up on the couch and popped on the television. Her cell phone rang and she rolled her eyes. No doubt it was her mom. The woman had gotten into the habit of calling every other hour since finding out about the baby. Although she couldn't really complain. Her mom was the one who'd given her the heads up about the Barbie vacation house. She muted the TV and held the phone to her ear. "Let me guess, they're having a bulk sale on onesies at Carters."

"I have no damn idea, sugar."

She almost dropped the phone at Logan's ironic baritone.

"You still there, Jemma?"

"Errr, yeah. I just wasn't expecting..." She nibbled her thumbnail, suddenly ashamed at the way she'd up and ditched him and the others in Savannah. "I—I'm sorry for how I behaved last Friday. I should have said goodbye." No matter how much it hurt.

"It's okay. Now get over to this door and let me in."

Her mouth dropping, she swung her gaze in the direction of the entryway. The position of the couch made it impossible to see the windows flanking the doorway, but she craned her neck anyway. "You're outside. *Right now?*"

"Yep. And there's a raccoon in a spruce giving me the crazy eye. Get your ass over here."

"That's Barney. He's not rabid. Just missing an eye."

"Oh, that explains everything. Get. Your. Ass—"

"Okay. Sheesh." She hung up the cell and dropped it on the coffee table. As stated, Logan was waiting on the porch, focus glued to the spruce. "I don't get it. You're a wolf. You took down zombies. Yet one-eyed Barney makes you nervous?"

"Have you seen the needles that come with rabies shots?" Shuddering, he hustled her inside the foyer.

"Um, I hate to sound rude, but what are you doing here?"

He shrugged. "You told me to visit."

"In a couple of weeks. After I settled in. I clearly remember mentioning that part."

"Following direction isn't my strong suit." His grin was unrepentant.

She snorted. "No kidding."

"So are you going to invite me in?" Rather than waiting for her permission, he stepped around her and whistled. "Nice digs. Catman's got good taste." His swiveled and gave her a wink. "In more ways than one."

"Are you flirting with me?"

"Do I look like the type of guy who'd flirt with a pregnant woman?"

"Yes, you—" She broke off with a blink. "Wait a second. How did you know?"

He wagged his brows. What the hell kind of answer was that?

"Why don't you throw another bag of popcorn in for me while I grab my stuff?"

"Your nose is better than Floyd's at sniffing out food. And what's this about your *stuff*?"

"Didn't think you'd want me traipsing around here in my skivvies or worse. Or did you?" He gave another of those lecherous eyebrow wiggles he seemed so proficient at.

"I'm beginning to empathize with Clarissa."

His full belly laugh echoing in the entry, Logan moseyed through the doorway. She made a scratching sound on the wood paneling and he jumped, shooting a leery stare in Barney's direction. Snickering, she crossed into the kitchen and chucked another bag of popcorn in the microwave. She rubbed her belly again. "So what do you think, Little G? Should we let him camp here for a bit? I know it's just been you and me lately, but your daddy...well, he's got these strange ideas about us needing protection. And you can't beat having a werewolf for a guard. Even if he does have a raccoon phobia."

The cycle finished on the microwave and she grabbed the popcorn, trying not to burn her fingers on the escaping steam. She heard Logan's boots approaching on the floor planks. "Okay, if I'm being totally honest, your company won't be entirely awful. As long as you keep your hands to yourself."

"Baby, no way in hell that's happening."

Her stomach flipping, she spun. The bag plummeted from her hands, spilling popcorn everywhere. "Griff."

Chapter Twenty-Four

There was no more beautiful sight than the woman standing before him. Going along with Logan's ridiculous prank of having him wait out in the car had just about killed him. He'd needed Jemma in his arms. *Now*. Not waiting another second, he hoofed it across the floor, the scattered popcorn crunching beneath his feet. He swept her into his arms, his mouth devouring hers. She finally broke from her spell of shock and flung her arms around his neck. He swallowed her soft sob.

The reality of Jemma was a million times sweeter than the memories that'd sustained him for the past five weeks. He rained kisses all over her face, his hands touching every part of her he could reach. She was everything he'd clung to, everything that'd kept him alive. Sane. He nuzzled the crook of her neck, drunk on her scent. It was sharper than usual, spiked with an intoxicating...

He jerked his head up and stared at her before lowering his focus to her stomach. A warm glow of joy bursting in his chest, he traced the soft curve of her belly. "You're...pregnant?"

She gaped at him. "How did—?" Her eyes narrowed. "That dang Mrs. Pendleton."

"No, those dang pheromones. I can smell all that loving nurture your body's providing our little baby boy."

"Uh, *boy*?" She nibbled her bottom lip. "Looks like Barbie's vacation home will have to become GI Joe's super plush yet totally macho command center."

He laughed and hugged her close before kissing the tip of her nose. "Baby, I've missed you more than you could possibly imagine."

She stroked his jaw. "No, I can imagine. These past five weeks have been hell. I was beginning to lose hope that the guild would return you to me."

"We have Logan to thank for that." He chuckled at her look of disbelief. "I know. Pretty much my same reaction."

"*How*?"

"Apparently he was making Domino nervous with the way he was suddenly sniffing around her daughter, Marabella. He made Domino an offer she couldn't refuse—Marabella's prized virginity intact in exchange for my freedom."

"Wow. Talk about playing hardball."

"Yep. Marabella isn't too happy to be on the losing side of the equation. Word has it she had a hankering for some legendary werewolf lovin'."

“Let me guess. That came straight from the wolf’s mouth.” She shook her head with a grin. “His ego truly knows no bounds. Still, I suppose I owe him everything for bringing you back to me.”

He growled. “You are not repeating that to him. Understood? I don’t want him thinking he can weasel *payback* from you.”

Her lips brushed his, her tongue teasing along the rim. “Mm, not a chance. There’s only room in my bed for Stan. And maybe a tool belt.”

A groan escaped him. “Baby, what am I going to do with you?”

“Love me?”

“Always.” He sealed the promise with a hungry kiss.

She pulled back, her expression devilish. “Speaking of tool belts...”

“Sorry, no can do. It’s in my locker at the store.”

“No problem.” She wagged her fingers and his clothes disappeared, leaving him wearing only his tool belt. “I’ve been practicing.”

Her mischievous giggle proved his downfall. Tipping her into his arms, he strode to the bedroom. “Baby, remember that tongue bath you were begging me for?”

Desire flushed her cheeks pink. “I think I’m going to like having a tiger in my bed.”

He kicked the bedroom door shut with a *meowww* that earned her laugh. Then he went about showing her firsthand just how right she was.

Epilogue

Seven had never been Clarissa Miles' lucky number. For that reason alone, she stared at the return address on the snowy white envelope resting in her hand with a mounting sense of dread. Seventy-seven west Seventh Street. How fucking ironic could life get?

She got her answer five seconds later when Logan sauntered into the library. Great, another complication she couldn't deal with right now. "I'm busy. You'll have to come back later."

"Don't worry. This won't take long."

She tracked his approach with wary expectancy. "Logan, I mean it."

"So do I." His mouth slammed over hers, stealing her breath. The same electric sizzle she'd experienced in the kitchen all those nights ago returned with blazing intensity. Her nipples tightened and she clawed at the arms of her chair to keep from touching him. Because if she gave in to that longing...

She shivered, a strange bereft void spreading inside her when he ended the kiss. He licked his lips and she followed the motion of his tongue. Sweet goddess, what he did to her. She crossed her legs, struggling to regain her composure. "Don't ever do that again."

"Why? You want it. I want it."

"You're wrong."

He leaned closer, his warm, minty breath fanning her mouth. "We've been sniffing at each other going on seven years now, shug. Foreplay only lasts so long before you gotta give in and scratch that itch."

She swallowed with some difficulty before arching her eyebrows in haughty dismissal. His smile cocky, Logan pivoted and strode from the room. Her body trembling, she slumped deeper into her seat. The envelope caught her eye. Blowing out a heavy exhale, she ripped open the flap and extracted the single sheet of paper tucked inside.

Your seven years is almost up. Collection is expected in full.

Two sentences. That's all it took to sum up the price tag on her life.

Yeah. Fucking ironic.

About the Author

At the ripe age of seven, Jodi Redford penned her first epic, complete with stick figure illustrations. Sadly, her drawing skills haven't improved much, but her love of fantasy worlds never went away. These days she writes about fairies, ghosts and other supernatural creatures, only with considerably more heat.

She has won numerous contests, including The Golden Pen and Launching a Star.

When not writing or working the day job, she enjoys gardening and way too many reality television shows.

Currently residing in Michigan with her husband and overgrown lapdog, she is a member of RWA national and Greater Detroit Romance Writers of America.

She loves to hear from readers. You can email her at jodiredford@jodiredford.com and visit her online at www.jodiredford.com.

Look for these titles by Jodi Redford

Now Available:

Lover Enslaved
Taking Liberty
Light My Fire

Coming Soon:

Vanessa Unveiled

Double the firepower, triple the heat...

Light My Fire

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Aiden Fortune's orders are clear: Find the woman, claim her as a sexual sacrifice—and share her with his horndog twin brother. Distasteful as it is, the Drakoni council insists the ancient custom be honored. Or Aiden will be banished.

One glance at Dana Cooper, and Aiden is thrown into the dragon version of a tailspin. Claim her? Hell, yes, he'll claim her. Problem is, she has no idea her father signed away her destiny at birth.

Dana has dated enough whack-a-doodles to fill an insane asylum. Two gorgeous men claiming to be dragons? Par for the course. Until they give her a tantalizing glimpse of their inner beasts, which makes her think she's the one headed for a padded cell—for actually considering their offer of the hottest sex of her life, for life.

Her resistance melts away under the onslaught of two men who pack enough heat to set off smoke alarms in a six-block radius. Especially when she realizes she's falling for Aiden. But with a town full of dragon hunters and an enemy lurking in the shadows, surviving a week of Aiden and Jace's double-teaming will be the least of her problems...

Warning: Contains two smokin' hot dragons and their not-so-unwilling sacrifice. A few wardrobe malfunctions and inappropriate use of paintbrushes. You might want to have your local fire department on speed dial.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Light My Fire:

Aiden sank behind her onto the sleeping bag, the nylon material whispering a sensuous sigh. His radiant heat reached her before his skin did. Pressing his chest against her back, he branded her with all that toasty warmth, coaxing a purr of pleasure from deep in her throat. His fingers wrapped in her hair—not exactly gentle but also not rough to the point of pain—and tipped her head back. She caught the briefest flash of fire in his irises before his mouth claimed hers in a hot, possessive kiss.

She'd sensed the beast lurking within Aiden, but he'd always kept it in check. This time the dragon would not be denied and made its presence known. She felt its dominance, its mastery, in the hands holding her hostage. In the tongue plundering her mouth. And she loved it.

Dear God, how she loved it.

Writhing against Aiden, she bit at his bottom lip, a strange desperation clawing at her to please both man and beast. He groaned, and giddy triumph raced through her. Their tongues rasped together, a marked contrast to the soft flicker Jace was employing on her nipple. Friction taunted every pleasure point in her

body. Even Aiden's thigh and the crotch of her jeans did their part to add to the torment, forcing her damp panties to ride against her clit, making her squirm.

Emboldened by the fever lust rocketing through her veins, she groped around blindly until she encountered their rock-hard erections. She stroked the velvet-sheathed steel of the twin shafts, earning a guttural groan from Aiden and Jace. Her fingertips swirled over the silky heads of their cocks and encountered the pre-come weeping from both slits. Taking advantage of the natural lubricant, she slicked up and down their lengths, pumping faster. Almost in unison, they clamped onto her wrists, halting her. She groaned in frustration.

"Patience, baby." Ducking his head, Jace traced the bow of her mouth with his tongue. "I want to watch my brother sink balls-deep into your sweet pussy while you suck me."

Aiden's harsh inhale ruffled her hair and she felt the rapid thud of his heartbeat against her shoulder blade. Both were strong indications that he not only liked Jace's suggestion, he was fully on board with making it happen. But was she?

Her clit throbbed in anticipation. *Guess that answers that question.* Reluctantly, she released their cocks. "I—" She struggled to moisten her suddenly dry mouth. "I want that too."

Jace's eyes darkened and Aiden's heartbeat pounded faster against her skin. She reached for the button on her jeans but Jace brushed her clumsy fingers aside. His tongue parted her lips, delving inside while he freed the button and eased her jeans down her hips. She scooted onto her rump so he could remove her tennis shoes and pull her pants the rest of the way off. Aiden leaned over her. Feathering a lock of her hair aside, he kissed her with exquisite tenderness as Jace slowly dragged her panties down her legs. Jace's finger dipped inside her and she gasped, arching her back.

"So wet and tight. You are one lucky bastard, bro." Jace crooked his finger, hitting her G spot while his thumb brushed over her swollen clit. A strangled cry lodged in her throat and she clutched frantically at Aiden's bulging biceps. Lifting his head, Aiden revealed a face flushed dark with determination and passion. A muscle twitching in his jaw, he glanced at Jace. Without verbalizing a single word, Jace ducked beneath the edge of the sleeping bag and picked up a small foil packet. He flipped it toward Aiden.

She stared at the condom wrapper before glaring at Jace. "Presumptuous much?"

He hitched his shoulder with a chuckle. "More like hopeful." Grasping her hands, he helped her up, not quite distracting her from the sound of foil ripping behind her. She imagined Aiden smoothing the condom over his cock. Imagined that thick cock sliding deep inside her pulsing core. Her breath quickened.

Jace sat back on his haunches and stroked his erection, reminding her that he was the proud owner of a very nice package of his own. She licked her lips.

"Sweetness, you giving me a preview of what you can do with that tongue?"

She gave a coquettish bat of her lashes. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

“Fuck yeah.” He leaned forward and nibbled her bottom lip. She paid him back by capturing his tongue and sucking it between her teeth, providing a mock demonstration of what she had in store for him. A drawn-out moan that was too sexy for words shuddered from Jace. They broke the kiss and he stared at her. “*Damn.*”

Poking a finger in the center of one of Jace’s sculpted pecs, she scooted him backwards. “I need a little working room here, fella.”

He happily complied and she dropped onto all fours. For a moment she suffered a bout of self-consciousness about giving Aiden a bird’s-eye view of her generously proportioned butt. *Oh, hell with it.* Pushing her female insecurities aside, she contemplated the gorgeous cock bobbing in front of her face. Using only the tip of her tongue, she traced the prominent vein running along the underside of his shaft. Aiden had seemed to really like it when she did that to him, so odds were good that Jace would too. Reaching the mushroom-shaped cap, she delicately licked the glistening drop pearling from the slit. Jace’s abdomen quivered and tensed.

Oh yeah, he most definitely liked it.

She took Jace all the way into her mouth, the fat knob of his dick hitting the back of her throat just as Aiden eased two fingers into her. The sensation was so unexpected and breathtakingly good that she inhaled hard and almost choked on Jace.

“You okay, sweetness?”

She barely registered Jace’s concerned tone. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the fingers stretching her open, making her ready. Wet, succulent noises came from her pussy, verifying that she was more than ready for everything Aiden had to give her. She pushed backward, mindlessly riding his hand, wishing it was the thickness of his cock filling her instead. Sliding her mouth off Jace, she sent Aiden a desperate stare over her shoulder. “Please. I—I need you to—” She swallowed, trying to focus, trying to shove the words past her lips. “To take me. Now.”

Aiden’s eyes glowed with an intense blue fire. Growling, he fisted his cock and rubbed its latex-sheathed head against her slit. He skimmed along her labia and prodded her sensitized clit. Her entire body jolted at the contact. “*Ooh.*”

Jace cupped her jaw, bringing her attention back to his waiting erection. Disoriented, she bobbed at him and missed. Steadying her, he guided his shaft past her lips. He tasted wonderful, musky with a slight salty tang from the pre-come flowing freely, but all she could think of was Aiden and his wicked taunting.

Panting, desperate and needy for the first thrust she knew was coming, she waited.

And waited.

Impatient, she reached for Aiden. His fingers cuffed her wrists, holding her immobilized. The sense of powerlessness sent a shock of excitement careening through her. Aiden nudged at her opening again, this

time with obvious intent. The delirious grunts coming from her throat probably should have embarrassed the hell out of her. Thank God she was too blindsided by lust to care.

Aiden's furnace-like heat blanketed her back, his tongue tracing each vertebrae of her upper spine as his cock teased her slippery folds. His lips reached her shoulder and his teeth grazed her skin. A love bite to mark his territory? He released one hand and briefly danced his fingers across her clit before he eased inside her in agonizingly slow increments. She bucked wildly and he canted his hips back, denying her silent plea. The bastard was bound and determined to drive her insane.

In sharp contrast to Aiden's leisurely conquering of her body, Jace's movements sped up, the silky gland of his cock tunneling toward the back of her throat. On his retreat, she lightly scraped her teeth over the plump head.

A hiss broke from Jace. "*Fuck*. Sweetness, you're killing me."

She hummed around Jace and he jerked in response. He tightened his hold on her hair, his grip sending a tiny sting through her scalp before his fingers flexed and relaxed. Aiden chose that moment to thrust the final few inches of his shaft into her, filling her completely on one languorous glide.

Oh God.

Good girl, bad boys. Going off-path was never this much fun.

The Better to Eat You With

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Urban Fairytales, Book 2

Yvonne Rousel is having trouble keeping up a brave face. Ezekiel Crawford and Daniel Hunter are her best friends—and she’s about to lose one of them to another woman.

Thanks to a pact between the human residents of Monroeville and the local werewolf pack—brides for protection—Ezekiel has won the right to choose a mate. Yvonne’s doing her best to be happy for him, but fear persists that his marriage could signal the beginning of the end of their charmed friendship. Because once Ezekiel’s preoccupied with his new bride, how long will it be before Daniel, too, drifts away?

Ezekiel and Daniel have no intention of letting their happy threesome come to an unhappy end. Their plan is a little unconventional, a tad kinky, and destined to be a whole lot of fun. Now all they have to do is convince their good-girl girlfriend to take a walk on the big, bad side. And stay one step ahead of a jealous lawman...

Warning: It's not your grandmother's fairytale...unless she likes big bad wolves, hot three ways and double penetration.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Better to Eat You With:

A sweeter challenge had never been laid down before him. Daniel felt as if he’d been waiting for this moment for what felt like a lifetime, and he planned to enjoy every single second of it. With his gaze firmly centered on her, Daniel walked around her until he was standing behind her.

When he was in position, he glanced over at his friend, who was watching them with a predatory look in his yellow eyes. It was a feeling Daniel could attest to. The hunger he felt for Yvonne was like none he’d ever experienced before, and he couldn’t wait a second more to have her in his arms.

Gripping the bottom of her shirt in his hands, Daniel slowly began to edge it up her supple thighs. Even though he needed her more than he needed his next breath, he wanted to make sure she had plenty of time to call a halt to things if she so desired. “Raise both hands.”

She turned her head to stare wild-eyed at him. “What?”

“You heard me,” he said, this time in a firmer voice. “Raise your hands.”

Still watching him, she did as he requested. “Good girl.” Acting swiftly, Daniel pulled her shirt up and off with one sure move.

“Daniel,” she gasped as she quickly covered her bare breasts.

“What?” he asked calmly, amused by her outrage. “What did you think I was going to do, ask you to do the hokey-pokey?”

“No, but you could have given me some warning.”

“Like what, raise your hands?”

“You...” Yvonne paused in mid-rant to shake her head and smile, “...are such a brat.”

“And you are the sexiest woman I’ve ever seen.” Daniel ran his gaze over her back, smiling at the dragon tattoo on her right shoulder blade, then groaned when his gaze landed on the sight of her full, mouthwatering bottom, framed ever so nicely by a pair of pale yellow bikini panties. “Speaking of sexy.” He reached out and lightly ran his hand over her firm cheek, giving it a little squeeze for extra measure. “Nice ass.”

“Thanks,” she said, her voice filled with humor.

“No, no. Thank you.” Reluctantly, Daniel removed his hand and walked around Yvonne until he was standing at Ezekiel’s side, facing her. “Take your hands down.”

Watching them, Yvonne slowly lowered her hands to her side, bringing her large, full breasts into view. Her dark brown nipples beaded under their stare, making his mouth water and cock ache to delve deep within her. He watched her hungrily as she stood proudly before them, dressed only in bikini-cut panties. The golden color of the underwear made her dark skin appear even more decadent.

“Damn.” The word slipped out before he could stop it, spilling into the silent room like a dirty secret. It wasn’t what he meant to say. Daniel prided himself on his silver tongue, but right now he couldn’t come up with a better compliment if he tried. She was truly breathtaking.

“Flatterer.” Yvonne let out a soft, husky laugh that had his cock shooting past semi-straight to sledgehammer hard. God, he loved her laugh. There was something about the sexy, throaty sound that made him want to drop to his knees before her and delve his tongue deep within her pussy. Daniel knew if the mere resonance of her laughter had this sort of effect on him, then the sound of her coming undone was going to be the death of him. “Are you two still here with me?”

“Oh yeah.” Daniel glanced over his shoulder at his silent friend, who was staring hypnotically at Yvonne. “Ezekiel? Still here?”

“Yes,” he answered without taking his gaze off Yvonne. “I can smell your sweet heat from here.”

“You can?” she asked.

“I can always smell when you’re aroused.”

Interesting. Daniel turned his attention back to Yvonne, who now had her hands covering her cheeks.

“How embarrassing.”

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” Daniel said, trying to reassure her. In fact he found himself jealous for the first time of his friend’s supernatural abilities. The idea of being able to tell whenever his woman was aroused appealed to him on so many levels. “Nothing at all.”

“That’s what you think. If you only knew how often—”

“I know,” Ezekiel interrupted her huskily. “I’ve always known.”

“You mean…” Her eyes widened to comic proportions. “Oh my God.”

“Known what?” Daniel was beginning to feel out of the loop here.

“That Yvonne gets turned on when the two of us sit close to her on the couch, especially when we’re watching horror movies, and she gets to jump and grab hold of us.”

“Kill me now.”

“Is this true, baby? Do you enjoy being sandwiched between us?”

Yvonne sighed and dropped her hands back to her side. “What do you think?”

“I think I can’t wait until I give you what you really want. A true sandwich with me and Ezekiel.”

Daniel grabbed her and pulled her close to him. Moving swiftly, he tangled his hand in her hair and tightened his grip on her twisted braids. “With one of us in your pussy and the other in your ass.”

“God yes.”

It was all he needed to hear. Bending forward, Daniel covered his mouth with hers, pressing his tongue between the soft swell of her parted lips. If there was a single moment he longed for more than any other, it was this. His first taste of Yvonne.

Sweet. It was the only word he could use to describe her perfect taste. Their tongues slipped and slid against one another, intertwining as he drank in every drop. Then before he forgot himself and took her against the wall like the horny, rutting fool he was fast turning into, Daniel broke away from her too-tempting mouth and released her. After taking in a much-needed deep breath, he looked to his friend. “Ezekiel. Want to do the honors?”

“Hell yeah,” his friend said. The other man stared hungrily at her mouth for a split second before dropping to his knees before her. Looking up at her, he grabbed hold of the sides of her panties and slowly pulled them down her supple thighs to the floor.

“Ohhh.”

Like before, words escaped Daniel at the sight of her newly exposed flesh. With the exception of a neatly trimmed rectangular strip of hair, her pussy was bare.

Ezekiel, on the other hand, had no problem expressing himself. “Fuck, baby, your pussy is so pretty.”

“Thank you.” She laughed hesitantly. “I think.”

“No thanks needed.” Ezekiel moved in closer to her cunt and breathed in her sweet aroma. “Do you know how hard it’s been sitting next to you all these months, knowing you wanted us but being unable to do anything about it?”

“Probably about as hard as it was for me to sit between the two of you and not take what I wanted.”

“Take it now, Yvonne,” Daniel encouraged. “Whatever you want is yours for the asking.”

Yvonne raised her gaze to meet his and smiled in her slow, seductive way. “What I need most is for you two to touch me. Please don’t make me beg.”

Love can be a force of nature.

Serengeti Lightning

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Serengeti Shifters, Book 3

Mara Leonard is through hitting the snooze button on her biological clock. The Three Rocks Pride schoolteacher is ready to get serious about starting a family, and she needs a serious man to make that happen.

Regrettably, that means crossing less-than-serious Michael Minor off her list of potential mates. Michael is impulsive and passionate, but his spontaneity leaks into shapeshifting whenever his emotions run high—a tendency he should have outgrown long ago. As a sex buddy, he's delicious. Daddy material? Disqualified.

Michael is blindsided by Mara's rejection. Nine years separate them, and his genetic malady means no one in the pride treats him as an adult. But if she thinks he'll simply slink away to lick his wounds while she steps into the arms of another man, she has seriously underestimated him.

The tricky part will be convincing his over-analytical lover that he's more than a disposable sex toy. That real bravery means tearing up her damn checklist and following her heart. And doing it without letting their explosive sexual chemistry expose the Pride's secrets to the outside world.

Warning: This book features break-up sex, make-up sex, a lioness who's a cougar and a hot young lion who's grown up in all the right ways. Note: All electrical shocks are purely metaphorical.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Serengeti Lightning:

He'd wanted tonight to be perfect. This date was his chance to prove he deserved her, to show they were more than just hot sex. He knew she didn't think he was steady enough to be her mate, but he'd hoped to prove her wrong tonight.

Instead, all he'd proven was that he hadn't changed at all.

His sister, Ava, would remind him it wasn't his fault. He couldn't help it. The pride doctor said Michael was missing a neural inhibitor that drew the line between animal and man.

The science was small comfort. He would never be worthy of the woman curled against his side. How long could he expect her to stay with someone who could never give her the stability she craved? One more month? Two? Then who would she run to?

Michael forced the thought of the man who would take his place out of his head. Jealousy was savage—more likely than any other emotion to bring on a shift. He needed to get her back to the ranch, back onto pride lands, where a loss of control wouldn't expose them all.

He started to set her away from him, preparing to load her into the front seat, but her scent curled around him. Michael froze in place, his hands tight on her. He barely managed to keep his claws from snapping out.

Intermingled with the sweet twist of jasmine was the sinuous spice of lust. He could taste her desire on the air. While he'd been contemplating his sabotage of their relationship, Mara had apparently been thinking more much luscious thoughts. *Naughty girl.*

"Michael?" She spoke softly, a whisper on the warm spring breeze, but he felt that sigh of sound like a fist around his cock.

She slipped between him and the SUV, rubbing her body against his front every inch of the way.

Over the last few months, they'd learned one another's wants and needs. At first, they'd both assumed they would eventually grow tired of each other, but familiarity had only intensified each experience. They'd learned to play to their personal vices. He knew exactly how to touch her to get her wet in a heartbeat. And she knew he went hard at just the idea of pinning her to things—walls, doors, slippery shower tiles. He couldn't seem to get enough of crowding her against firm surfaces until she had no choice but to yield her softness to him.

Michael leaned into her, looming over her and pressing her back against the door until he heard the telltale catch in her breath. She loved this too. Mara may be dominant, but she almost never wanted to be on top. She wanted the man who would push her until she gave in, trusting her pleasure to his strength. She wanted *him*.

Now if only he could convince her their compatibility didn't end at the bedroom door.

Heavy-lidded eyes beckoned him. "Your wildness makes me feel wild," she purred.

Michael hesitated. Mara was never reckless. She reasoned things out and made the good decision, every time. So there was absolutely no explanation for her current behavior.

He had calmed. He was ready to take her home. All she had to do was hop in the car and drive back to the safety of the ranch. So why was she inciting him?

She urged him forward and he followed her lead. He bore her back against the metal wall of the SUV until the vehicle rocked slightly. She seemed to bask in the warmth of his body, drawing him tighter against her, if that was even possible. A small, sinful curve of a smile flashed out around her mouth.

Was she thinking what he was thinking? If he took her here, against the Cherokee, would they tip it? He knew he shouldn't want to try, but was captivated by the image teasing his thoughts. When she bit her lip, he wanted to bite it for her then suck that plump curve into his mouth.

"We should go." His voice was as rough as the gravel beneath their feet, but he kept his hands gentle as they stroked down her sides, over the flare of her hips, pausing above the hem of her skirt.

They *should* go. He should back away. He could yank up that little skirt, wrap those long legs around his hips and fuck her senseless just as soon as they were back on pride land. A fucking parking lot, no

matter how late it was, no matter how deep the shadows, was no place for this kind of game. He gripped her hips, fully intending to step away, but Mara—never, ever reckless Mara—forced his hand.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pushed up onto her toes and captured his mouth in a ravenous, open-mouthed kiss. She begged him with her mouth, drawing him into her madness with each longing pull of her lips and strong sweep of her tongue. Or was it his madness she was surrendering to? Right now, he didn't know or care. Her willing heat fried his last working brain cells and he fell into instinct and need.

Michael took command of the kiss. He sucked that luscious lip and gently scraped his teeth across it. His hands fisted in her skirt, jerking the stretchy fabric up, and Mara sighed into his mouth. God, he loved the noises she made, the little murmurs and sighs, not quite caught in her throat. She was musical in her passion, an instrument his fingers loved to pluck and strum.

The skin of her thighs was satin beneath his fingers. He wrapped his hands around the backs of her thighs. His fingertips brushed against her heat and he hissed out a curse.

She wasn't wearing panties. And she was dripping already. His slightest touch called forth another rush of moisture. Her need hit his nostrils, fogging his already blurry thoughts.

With one swift pull, he lifted her. Her legs wrapped snugly around his hips. He notched his denim-covered erection against her pussy, but he didn't push like he wanted to, concerned about the rough fabric against her sensitive flesh. He shouldn't have worried. Mara ground herself on him, tearing her lips away from his to gasp out his name.

"Easy," he murmured into the hair at her temple, barely recognizing his own voice. He slid his hand between them and slicked a finger through her folds. The touch was designed to be more soothing than arousing. He wanted to wind her up a little tighter before he let her take off.

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