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The Craft of the Wise:
Book of Shadows

An paranormal erotic romance short by

DEE CARNEY

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A Phaze Production
Phaze Books

6470A Glenway Avenue, #109
Cincinnati, OH 45211-5222

Phaze is an imprint of Mundania Press, LLC.

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Cover art © 2009 Stella Price
Edited by Stephanie Balistreri
eBook ISBN-13: 978-1-60659-128-4

First Edition – February, 2009
Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Chapter One

Ava Valentine cursed a stream of words that would have made the dead hunker down in their coffins. If she had to tell Paul just one more stupid time to push the lid down tight...

She tucked back a strand of hair and then threw her weight against the garbage can lid. From where she stood, she could see the scattering of debris strewn throughout the alley, probably left there by some animal looking for a free meal. No time to clean up now, though. She'd send Paul back out here to clean up as penance.

Just as she turned to go back inside, she spotted a puddle of purple liquid which must have come from the overturned can. Her heart stopped beating for a nanosecond. She looked sharply to her left and then spun to her right, almost expecting the powers-that-be to come swooping down to point out her transgressions right there and then.

Ava strode back to the garbage and pried open the lid. Spying paper towels covered in—she did not want to think about it—*stuff*, she pulled them out of the refuse. She squatted down and dabbed at the spill. Her panic began to subside as the soiled towels absorbed the liquid. Heaven forbid anyone accidentally come into contact with her latest concoction.

Not that any of this was *her* fault. If they would just teach her in a more proper and timelier fashion, she wouldn't have to experiment on her own. She was a freakin' princess, for cryin' out loud. Royalty by all counts. But *no*. She had to go through the same crappy process everyone else went through.

In any event, what harm could a little experimentation do?

She kept her spells strictly to mundane tasks such as making a vacuum cleaner operate on its own. Her cat, Karma, hadn't cared for the noisy machine when it angled towards him, but he didn't have a vote in the matter. The potion for making her fern

grow bigger was a mild success. The orange tint at the end of the leaves could easily be overlooked. If she could expand her spells into tackling the chores even more efficiently, no one would have to know she didn't do them.

And besides, who ever heard of royalty doing chores?

Ava sighed.

Stupid title. It meant nothing in the coven.

She discarded the sopping wet paper towels and wiped her hands on the back of her jeans. As she turned to leave, the odor of the trash wafted over her and her stomach rolled in retaliation. The wave of nausea reminded her, strangely enough, that she was going to be late for dinner. Again. Better stop groaning over how things were and focus on staying in Grand's good graces. Too easy to fall from that perch.

A soft noise on the wind caused her to stop long enough to turn back around and look down the alley. Nothing appeared out of place. But the noise. It was like a voice, a quiet whispered warning. Grand often taught that following a gut instinct would determine her success with the Craft. Right now, her gut made itself known in the form of an ominous sound. Maybe it was nothing, but then why did she have goose bumps running up and down both arms?

Seriously regretting she hadn't yet finished the lesson on *wordsmithing*, her mind tumbled a few words of protection she knew. As she picked up her backwards pace, she discarded each word as it came to her. Too simple. Too volatile. Too vague. Damn!

A bolt of pain scrambled from her hip and up her back. She reached for the doorknob she'd just run into and twisted it without turning around. She halted a moment before succumbing to running scared inside to the shelter of the house. Instead, she coerced a sense of calm to wash over herself.

There was nothing to fear out here. She was safe. This sudden grasp of panic didn't make sense and neither did her reaction.

Ava forced herself to turn back around. Move a few steps away from the safety of the door. Her heart hammered in her chest, but she would not be overcome by irrational fears. The

orange sun hung low in the sky. She had plenty of light to see by. Nightfall wouldn't be for hours yet.

Maybe the whisper wasn't a whisper. Probably just some cat, maybe the same one that had gotten into the trash. Her own meandering cat for all she knew. She hadn't been paying attention and the cat's warning hiss sounded like a whisper to her distracted mind. That made sense. The goose bumps could be explained away by a breeze that must have passed over at just the right time.

She exhaled slowly, steadied her breathing. Trembling fingers curled into a fist. Before she went back inside, she needed to settle her nerves.

Ava unclenched her hands and shook her head from side to side. She jiggled her shoulders and let the sensations pass over her arms and down her legs.

Loose. Had to loosen up.

She was a witch. One capable of defending herself, somewhat. She only had to concentrate on the right words, invoke the right feelings, and anything malevolent that crossed her path would be toast.

Nimble fingers tugged through her mop of curls and she smiled. The motion felt forced, but she'd be damned if she'd let some cat terrorize her. She propped her hands on her hips and took a few bold steps away from the door, stopping when she'd reached the garbage can again.

That's when she saw it.

The demon stood in the shadows, its intent red eyes focused on her. Curls of condensation rose into the air from its parted mouth. Between its lips, she could almost see, maybe just imagined, elongated canines. Charcoal colored skin reflected the waning sun and muscles bulged and rippled as it took a step forward.

Stunned, Ava remained frozen in place momentarily. Only the movement of its long tail as it whipped in front of its body jump-started her stalled mind.

Have to leave. Have to run. Now. Have to run. Now!

Her mind may have turned over the words again and again but her legs refused to obey. Wide-eyed, she stared into its mesmerizing glare as the demon stepped cautiously forward.

Think. Oh, for heaven's sake. Think! Put all of that training to some kind of use. Good Lord and Lady, do *something*!

An' it harm none, do what ye will. The rede had been driven home with every lesson. For as far back as she could remember, she'd kept the words as her driving motivator. But now, to defend herself, what was she supposed to do? Ava cursed herself again for being such a neophyte.

She released a stale breath and against her screaming instinct, shut her eyes. She had to focus, to concentrate. Even if she ran, the demon had the ability to move faster than she could. This was it. Ride or die. It shouldn't be here, not in her realm, but the fact that it stood there larger than life couldn't be good. Not for her.

Ava inhaled and then exhaled. Slowed her heartbeat. Calmed her nerves.

When she opened her eyes, the first thing that filled her vision was the sight of its snarl. The canines she thought she had only imagined glistened. It had come precariously close. Why hadn't it attacked yet?

The thought had barely formed when it lunged.

All conscious effort to protect herself fled as instincts and her training rushed back into her senses. She raised her arms, readying herself. Intuition took over and words she hadn't known she knew came to her.

Just the right spoken words and *voila*, the demon would be one crispy critter. A choice spell would yield a fireball of energy straight from her fingertips. She held her breath in anticipation as she pointed her hands in its general direction.

Nothing happened.

Figures. Just freakin' figures.

Her startled shriek cut off mid-sound when the demon's hand wrapped around her throat. Its face hovered so close she could smell the sulphurous odor that enveloped it like a cloud. The spilled garbage could have been a bed of roses compared to what wafted into her nose now. Her stomach rolled again even as darkness poured into the corners of her vision.

She couldn't die like this. She had to do something.

Ava flicked her fingers twice more, felt the energy spark uselessly from them. It hurt when she tried to breathe. Her lungs

screamed for air, but none would be coming from her trapped throat.

Her fingers trembled uncontrollably. Spells and words long since fled. Her eyelids fluttered closed as her struggles eased. Movement behind the demon caught her waning attention. She wanted to peer past it to see what was there. No part of her body would heed her commands.

The grip on her throat wrenched loose abruptly and she dropped to her knees. She inhaled with ragged breaths, grateful for the air she gulped.

Ava clamped her hands over her ears when the demon screamed. She didn't turn around to see what happened, but she knew she had to get up. Something had given her a few seconds of precious time and she had to get away. Get back to the safety of the house. To the safety of the coven.

She dropped onto her hands and half-crawled, half-dragged herself towards the door. Behind her, the demon screamed again before the sound cut off without warning.

A whimper escaped her burning throat. Whatever attacked the demon might come after her next. Would almost certainly come after her next. She was moving so slowly. Had to get inside.

"Princess?"

A pair of boots stepped into her vision and cut off her path of escape. Long legs encased in faded black denim bent into a crouch next to her. Through blurry eyes, she traced over the tucked in shirt that opened at the chest, revealing a hard set of pectorals. An outstretched hand reached for her and she whimpered again.

"Princess."

The word registered this time. He knew who she was. Well, not necessarily who she was, but certainly *what* she was. A good sign. There was something familiar about him, too. Maybe she'd seen him before. She couldn't quite place her finger on it.

That voice. Deep and rich. Almost as if he'd practiced reaching into the depths of his belly to bring forth the sound. Grave and raspy. A little guttural.

Sensual.

She would have laughed if she dared test her burning throat. If her mind could go to along those lines, she must be feeling safer. Stupid gut instinct. Couldn't help out when she was afraid for her life, but certainly reared its head to recognize when she was horny.

Ava looked past the hand she ignored and into the face of the man before her. She inhaled sharply as she gazed into his eyes. Pools of midnight stared back at her.

Horniness be damned, she scrambled further away from him, in the opposite direction of the door. To his credit, his only reaction was to maneuver himself so that he faced her once again. It didn't matter. Nothing good could come of a man whose eyes were as unnatural as his. On top of that, a tattoo crawled up his neck to decorate one jaw. The intricate lines didn't hide the scars that reached into the collar of his shirt where a green stone hung on a gold chain, however. Long black hair curled at the back of his neck. Almost everything about him screamed menace, but something in his expression eased her panic.

Despite the very rough exterior that proclaimed his take-no-shit demeanor, his softening voice combined with a hesitant display of brilliantly white teeth, calmed her. On closer inspection, the searing coldness of his eyes thawed into a soothing warmth. For a brief moment, she wondered what it would feel like to curl against him.

Then he changed position. Her gaze skimmed past the arm he'd hidden behind his back. From where she sat, she could see blood trickle to the ground in bright, round drops.

Despite herself, she dragged her stare back to his face. He'd killed the demon barehanded? That was unheard of. Impossible.

"Who—" She rubbed her neck. That freakin' hurt. Ava cleared her throat softly. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Who are you?"

"My name is Aaron Remington, Princess." His eyes also seemed to soften when he spoke to her. Maybe *unnatural* wasn't the right word to describe them. They were...intense.

With his unsoiled hand, he reached towards her. She stiffened when calloused fingers grazed her throat. They tightened against her skin for a moment causing her breath to

quicken. He opened his mouth to say something else, but the word cut off before he spoke. His eyes narrowed as he focused on something behind her. The rough fingers dropped away.

She turned her head before she could catch herself. It could have been a trap to distract her for all she knew. When the door creaked open, her suspicions fled.

Her arms raised, Grand stood in the opened doorway, feverishly muttering words under her breath. Dina and Paul were only a few steps behind her.

Ava swiveled back to face Aaron who stood with a grace that belied his size. He pulled himself to his full height. He backed away from her, but without a trace of fear, he faced the trio of witches who came to her aid.

Dina joined in the Grand's chant while Paul dropped beside Ava. "Are you all right?"

"Wait," she said. The sharp pain to her throat reminded her that she shouldn't be speaking above a whisper. Before she could react, Grand's hands flew open towards Aaron. He didn't bat an eye as the blue spark of energy raced towards him. Ava called, "Wait!"

She turned and saw the spark fall away in front of Aaron. Once again, she witnessed the control her grandmother possessed over her spells. Grand stepped past Ava and her gaze traced Aaron's face, who in return had dropped his stare. She turned back to Ava and her lips tightened into a thin line. "Did you summon him?"

She felt Paul rear back in surprise. That made two of them. Summon him? She, who couldn't even make a houseplant grow entirely green, magically summoned the man standing there?

The weight of her grandmother's stare weighed her down. She dropped her gaze and shrugged her shoulders. If she'd summoned him, it certainly hadn't been on purpose. But if she'd summoned him, oh thank goodness she had.

"A demon came after the princess, my lady." The rumble could have been called a whisper for anyone else. Aaron kept his gaze down.

Grand whirled back. "I did not speak to you, abomination!"

For heaven's sake! Abomination? Wasn't that somewhat harsh? He just saved her life. She would never disrespect her

grandmother, but this reaction from a woman who rarely raised her voice, was a little much. “Grand, he just saved me. Isn’t that a little, um, uncalled for?”

Dina crouched in front of Ava with a smirk on her lips. Her clear blue eyes echoed the coldness of her smile. There was no humor there. Only the ever-present derisiveness that defined their relationship. “You really don’t know, Ava?”

She forced away the curl of her upper lip and looked towards her grandmother. “Grand?”

“He is abomination. Werewolf.”

Chapter Two

Ava rose on shaky legs. She pushed away the hair that fell over her face as she digested the words.

Werewolf.

She sighed internally. Of course he was a werewolf.

She was a witch. Attacked by a demon. Saved by a werewolf.

Why not? Just another day in the city.

“Send him back, Ava,” Dina said. She waved her hand in a dismissive manner as she stood and turned towards the door.

They really kept forgetting who they were talking to. She didn’t know how to protect herself from an attack. Much less, summon a man. Much, *much* less send him back.

“Not yet, Princess. Please.” She looked at him after he interrupted her thoughts. “My kind has protected the witch for centuries. I may be of use to you.”

“You do keep forgetting yourself,” Grand replied.

“Your pardon, High Priestess.”

Even if the words were an apology, the intense gaze riveted on Ava harbored none. Her pulse quickened with each second that passed. Werewolf or whatever, her belly tightened in his presence.

She had to set aside this lust and think rationally. There were a lot of unanswered questions rolling through her mind. Why had the demon attacked? Why had it attacked physically instead of with magic? How had she managed to summon a werewolf and, more importantly, how was she going to send him back?

Based on the way her body responded to him, did she really want to send him back?

“He has a point, Grand,” she said with some hesitation. Dina’s stiffened back was a small measure of reward. Anything

that got her goat had to be good. “He did just save me from a demon.”

Paul pushed past her. Gravel crunched beneath his shoes as he walked to presumably where the demon’s body lay. She turned in time to see him nod at her grandmother. Paul, a powerful warlock in his own right and with his quiet manner, chanted over the demon. The body jumped and then began to shimmer. There would be nothing left of the remains by the time the spell worked to completion.

She turned back when she felt the heat of another person directly in front of her. Her grandmother narrowed her eyes and said, “How did you manage to summon him?”

Ava shook her head. “I really don’t know. One minute I was about to kiss my ass—butt, goodbye and the next, he’s standing there.”

“Hmm.” For a minute, she thought Grand would say no more. The older woman walked towards the house. Dina was quick to follow. Paul’s footsteps approached from behind. Before she stepped inside, Grand called out, “He’s your responsibility for now.”

Grand then swiveled and her gaze locked onto Aaron. “And she is yours.”

* * * *

Her neck prickled.

This was not going to work if they didn’t make some changes. “Are you going to just stare at me all the time or what?” “Princess?”

She shoved the pen and paper inside her personal Book of Shadows, snapped it shut, and leaned her back against the chair at the desk. They’d been sitting in her bedroom for just over an hour. She was supposed to be reading and memorizing while she sipped honeyed tea to soothe her throat.

Hmph. Had no idea what he was supposed to be doing besides looking tempting.

“Look, my name’s Ava. No one really cares if I am a princess or whatever. Just call me Ava, okay?”

“Ava.”

Never in her life did those two syllables sound the way he'd said them. It was like he was hungry and each letter was a full course meal. If he could do that with three letters, she couldn't imagine what he could do if she asked him to call her by her full name, Avalon.

She licked her lips and shoved away the thought. Never mind that he made her panties damp. He was supposed to be her bodyguard. Nothing more.

But, Goddess, she'd let him guard her body any day of the week he wanted.

Damn, how did those thoughts keep sneaking in like that? Then again, answering the question wasn't quite rocket science. Not an ounce of fat dared show on his long body. Each time he moved was like watching mercury. Liquid, lithe, and just a little bit dangerous.

Her fingers twitched with an urge to touch him but thinking about it too much held her at bay. If he kept watching her like that, though, she couldn't be held responsible for her actions. No woman with a beating pulse could.

"I can't concentrate when you keep staring at me like that," she said after a moment. That was the truth. Her mind kept drifting to these incredible visuals involving hot, sweaty bodies. "And I need to learn these spells."

"I didn't mean to distract you, Ava..."

Her eyes narrowed at his pause.

"What?" He looked like he had something else to say. Aaron shook his head, but she wouldn't be deterred. He *did* want to say something else. She could see it in his eyes. "What?"

"I'm attracted to you. Have been since the very first time I saw you." *Sweet, holy heaven on high.* Now *that* was something she hadn't been expecting. "It's why I keep staring at you. I'm sorry if I've interrupted your concentration. I'll do better with keeping reign on my thoughts," he finished.

Like that little confession wouldn't interrupt her concentration permanently. She cleared her throat.

"Oh, *that*," she said as if men announced their attraction to her on an hourly basis. "No biggie."

He turned to review the books on her shelves, but she didn't return to the book in front of her. All plans for memorizing spells

today had left the building. Instead, she visually traced the tattoo on his neck. Followed the curve to his Adam's apple. When it bobbed, she had to stifle a moan.

Look someplace else. Good idea. Was that a...oh, man. A dimple in his chin. When had she missed seeing the cleft?

"Now you are the one staring, Ava." He chuckled and turned back to face her.

"Right. Sorry." She looked away briefly, then caught his gaze. "Hell. What are we going to do about this?"

"About what?"

She dropped her gaze. "You know *what*. I have a feeling Grand won't approve if I give in to my baser desires."

He frowned, then nodded. "It wouldn't be the first time for a witch and a werewolf. It's not necessarily looked upon kindly, but not always denigrated either."

It wasn't like she was going to go running to Grand with the news. No one would have to know. Just a quick romp in the hay. They would both be better off for it. Get it out of the way. Then back to business as usual.

She snorted.

Whatever she had to tell herself.

"We'd just be letting off some steam, right?" she asked.

Aaron stood.

"Then back to employer-employee relationship afterwards, right?" she continued.

He gripped her wrists and pulled her to stand next to him. He brought his head down close to hers. He grumbled, "Just letting off some steam."

When his lips pressed against hers, Ava's world spun.

Aaron tasted earthy. Images of grassy plains and cool breezes wandered into her mind as she melted against him. His tongue slipped in to touch hers and the image of pure sunshine bombarded her.

He wrapped his arms around her back, pulled her tightly against him and it was just as she'd suspected. Nothing but hard lines from stem to stern.

She trailed her fingers over his chest, then down his abdomen. Pulled her mouth away from his long enough to find

the buckle to his belt. Frustrated, she fumbled a few times in her efforts to free him of his clothing.

Aaron grasped her chin and tilted her head towards him.

“Such green in your eyes that I’ve never witnessed before. I’m lost in them, Ava.”

Her breath caught in her throat at his words. At the depth of emotion in them. She gazed into his obsidian eyes for a moment before he dipped in for another heady kiss. Her fingers forgot their mission as he claimed her mouth with his.

Her nipples were hard peaks as they grazed against him. The ache in them rivaled the one between her thighs, both throbbing for his attention. She released a soft sound over the pounding of her heart and Aaron answered the call.

He pulled away with a groan. Her lips were swollen and her chest heaved with the effort of catching her breath. Ava clasped the bottom of her shirt, pulled it over her head and threw it against the wall where it slid to the floor.

Aaron’s hand slid down the gap in his shirt while buttons popped away under the force of his fingers. She followed the network of scars on his chest and released a shuddering breath. If anything, the chiseled lines crossing the six-pack perfection of his abs sent another wave of arousal through her.

She backed away, keeping her gaze trained on him as she headed towards her bed. One arm and then the other slid out from beneath her bra straps. She unhooked it in the back, her breasts freely bared before him.

He stepped towards her, unlooping his belt as he walked. When her breasts came into full view, he stopped moving to inhale sharply.

He looked at her with a stunned expression on his face and Ava wriggled out of her pants. Aaron groaned when she shimmed out of her panties next and lay on the bed. She ran her fingers over her breasts as he discarded his clothing, her body on fire as she waited for him. He dropped his pants.

Oh my...

He was lovely. And hard. And ready for her.

She had this burning hunger deep inside of her that she needed him to satisfy. Rational thought fluttered away while

churning need tightened its grasp on her. She needed him inside of her. Pained for him.

Aaron knelt next to her and his mouth grazed over her breast. A groan of frustration melted into a sigh of pleasure as his tongue laved over a nipple. He trailed wet kisses to her other breast and down her belly.

She parted her thighs in anticipation of him, the heady scent of her desire perfuming the air. He pulled away and sat back on his haunches. His sudden stillness sent a hasty tremor of embarrassment into her thundering heart. She started to close her legs, uncertain of what had just transpired.

“Don’t!” Aaron placed a hand on her thigh and moved it to its previous position. He swallowed hard as he looked down on her. His attention riveted on her sex, he traced her delicate folds. “So soft.”

His touch drove her to the brink of insane need. One long stroke after another. No single stroke touched her core to cool down the flame that burned there. When his finger dipped inside, greedy with need, her body clutched it. He pushed in another finger as her chest tightened with rising passion. The two digits withdrew for a moment, only to push back inside.

He groaned. “Tight. Wet for me, beautiful Ava, I need to taste you.”

She whimpered when he pulled out. His fingers didn’t bring her what she needed. She wanted more. So much more.

He captured her gaze briefly before placing his mouth over her moisture.

Ava tightened her thighs around his head and screamed as she went rigid with a sudden orgasm. Aaron splayed his hand against her abdomen and held her down, forcing her to ride out the pleasure of his lips and tongue. Her body came alive beneath him. She shuddered and moaned. Called out to him as he worked ravenously over her body. He held her in place even as another and then another climax overtook her.

By the time he crawled over her, her limbs were almost too heavy to move. She had no sense of how much time had passed. How long she trembled from his manipulations. Beneath hooded eyes, she watched him grasp his cock and guide it into her

waiting warmth. Ava could only moan as he pushed forward, stretching her until she was full.

Greedy for him, she took his face in her hands and pulled him to her. She wanted to taste his lips again. Feel his magnificent tongue in her mouth. The tangy taste of herself on him drove another surge of lust through her and she gave herself to him in that kiss. Felt a tidal wave of emotion pour through her and into him.

He all but devoured her mouth as his thrusts picked up speed. Her legs wrapped around his waist and her hands tightened on his shoulders. She plunged her tongue into his mouth and urged him on. He drank in her moans. The only sounds escaping into the air were their labored breaths.

She shuddered and rocked with him. Pulled him in. Grasped him with her need.

Never before had she needed to be taken like this. No matter how much of him she took though, her body craved more.

Another shudder overtook her and Aaron trembled with her. He pushed into her again and she tightened around him. Felt his every ridge and bump. He increased his pace and her cries of pleasure escaped.

“Oh God, Ava.” He pulled away to whisper her name over and over. The word never before sounded so sensual.

His head came down next to hers and warm gusts of breath tickled her cheek. The pulse at the base of his neck throbbed incessantly. Then when she was at the edge of a precipice, she felt him swell deep within her. The first jet of his cum propelled her over its edge.

She soared into the heavens with each pulse of his cock, crying out each time she felt his warm essence spill into her. By the time she floated back down onto her bed, their sweat slicked bodies barely moved. Only the heaving of their chests provided evidence that they had survived their mutual climax.

Aaron kissed her softly twice.

She looked into the intensity of his eyes and wondered for the first time, and maybe a little belatedly, if the attraction between them could have been the result of a spell. This feeling came too swiftly. It was something too instantaneous. Something, perhaps, unnatural.

Chapter Three

Ava turned her back to him as she replaced her discarded bra. A quick glance over her shoulder revealed that he pulled on his pants with the same shyness. What happened in the last couple of minutes? That ache, that burning need for him seemed to have just fizzled away.

She shook her head.

In a house full of witches, it wasn't impossible that she'd been the object of someone's malicious spell. Although, *malicious* might be too strong a word. She certainly enjoyed every second of the last half hour.

But why all of a sudden did neither of them want to look the other in the eye? Why were they dressing as if to hide wares that only a few minutes ago had been proudly displayed? It didn't make sense.

"We haven't discussed the demon yet," Aaron said. His low timber shook her from her thoughts. "If they are coming after you, it's something we shouldn't ignore."

Yeah. Don't ignore the demons. Ignore the big, pink elephant standing in the middle of the room right now, but heaven forbid, don't ignore the demons.

She tugged her shirt into place. "We should probably get Grand. Maybe even assemble the rest of the coven if that's what she wants."

When she turned around, he was tucking his shirt into his pants. One lone button had managed to survive his earlier assault, but it hung limply now. She smiled, the motion an instant reminder of her swollen lips. She ignored the pain and grinned broadly. "One look at the two of us and anyone will know what we've been up to, huh?"

Amusement played in his eyes, but it did not reach his mouth. "It's not that big a house and it has thin walls, Princess. They probably already know."

The gravity of his words sank into her stomach like a stone weight. She'd just had sex in her grandmother's house. Technically *her* house that her grandmother lived in, but still. At the end of the day, her grandmother probably heard her have sex. Like everything else, a few minutes ago that seemed inconsequential.

Ava groaned as heat raced over her face and down her neck. She groaned again. "I can't face her now. I just had sex with a werewolf." *One that Grand had called an abomination.* Another thought struck her. "You seem to know more about this than I do. You know I'm a princess—we'll get to how later—does that matter? You and me?"

"Depends on who you talk to. If I had thought it would have resulted in some sort of consequence for you, I do have enough self-control to have stopped myself from taking you." His words were clipped, his eyebrows furrowed.

Her lips tightened. Taking her? What the hell did that mean? And was he implying she didn't have enough self-control to stop them from doing the deed?

She groaned internally. Forget it. He could sound as annoyed as he wanted. He would get over it. And to hell with him if he didn't. If they were under the influence of a spell, the intimacy they shared had been artificial. Not subject to be repeated anyway.

There was no trace of her previous tenderness when she changed the subject. "Why do you think they would bother with me? I'm a novice witch. My title really means nothing until I've mastered most of the spells. Even then, I don't really get anything until I've taken over the leadership from Grand."

"It makes more sense to come after you now while you don't have a way to protect yourself. It's smart."

Ava led them downstairs as they talked in hushed tones. "But that demon didn't use magic. If he had, I don't think I would have stood a chance against him. Even summoning you was an accident through and through."

The muscle next to his tattoo worked furiously as he mulled it over. He seemed uncomfortable for a moment, but it passed so quickly, she wondered if she imagined it. After a minute ticked by, Aaron shook his head. "I don't have all of the answers. There could be any number of reasons for the way today has played out."

That might have been a reference to the demon or the sex. No way to tell. She'd have to sort it out later. If it even was worth sorting out. His hesitancy left her unsure.

Grand looked up from a scattering of mail on the table as they approached. In her eyes, Ava saw a mixture of anger and resentment. Maybe with a hint of disappointment added in for good measure. It would be a month of Sundays before she worked off the guilt she felt at that moment as she stood next to Aaron.

"Grand?" The word came out as a squeak. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Grand, we need to talk about the demon."

She pointed to a chair. "Have a seat, Ava."

Ava winced, as she obviously didn't extend the invitation to sit towards Aaron. No way would she chance looking at him to see how he'd taken it though. Like a penitent child, she pulled the chair away and sat as directed.

"I must say that I am impressed with how you handled yourself today, Ava," she said after taking a deep breath. "Not many people at your level could have summoned a werewolf for protection. That shows me you have some powerful instincts."

Stupid instincts were useless when she needed them to be useful.

"But your protection is coven business. We don't bring their," she pointed with her chin towards Aaron, "kind into our quarrels, any more. Even if a demon is involved."

Wait a minute. How did they go from discussing demons to discussing werewolves? Who, by the way, she hadn't known actually existed until a few hours ago.

Ava shook her head. "Grand..."

"Don't interrupt, young lady." She paused, took a deep breath. "Now that he's served his purpose—in more ways than one, I might add—it's time to send him back."

Heat colored Ava's cheeks again. Stupid thin walls.

What was done was done, though. No time to reflect on that part of it. Maybe Grand was right. Or was Aaron right? He stood there not saying a word in his own defense. Maybe he actually wanted to leave. Her heart tugged, a reminder of his touch inside of her. The emotions, the feeling they had shared, they were vivid. Almost alive. She had to know if they were the result of a spell. Had to know if there might be a trace of truth there. A hint of what could be.

She spoke softly. "Grand. What about the demons? If they are after me, maybe I need his help?"

Her face went rigid and devoid of emotion. The elderly woman did not suffer fools lightly. Even if the fool was her granddaughter. "And what makes you think demons are after you, child?"

Another flush of color spread down Ava's neck. Sweet heaven, she didn't know if the demons were after her. Not really. That lone demon could have just been in the right place at the right time. Cornered her because she was there. Nothing more complicated than that.

She glanced at Aaron who still contributed nothing to the conversation. Like her grandmother's, his face was impassive, difficult to read.

"I—" She didn't know what she was going to say. She never disobeyed her grandmother before. Always heeded her advice. Hell, the woman was rarely wrong. The romp in the hay had been nice. Gotten him out of her system. If he wasn't supposed to be here, which apparently he wasn't, Grand could always help her send him back from wherever she'd accidentally summoned him from.

Suddenly, Aaron snapped to attention, his entire body rigid. He turned towards the doorway, then looked back at Ava.

The echoing thud of something heavy as it struck the ground reverberated around the room. Everyone looked towards the ceiling that showered them with a thin cloud of powered debris.

With the surprising agility of an athlete, Grand pushed back from the table and bolted from the room, heading towards the stairs. Ava took off after her, only to be wrenched back by Aaron as she tried to shoot past him.

“Behind me, Princess.”

“My grandmother! We need to help her!”

He scowled down at her. “My duty is to you alone.”

She cried out as another thud boomed through the house. “Please, Aaron. My cousin, Dina, and her friend, Paul, are probably still here, too. If there’s something wrong, I need you to help my family, please!”

His gaze darted to the stairs as his face darkened. He jerked his head as if he wrestled with indecision. After what seemed an eternity, he grumbled down at her, “Stay behind me.”

That wasn’t much of a challenge. Aaron took to the stairs three at a time. By the time she reached the top step, she barely caught a glimpse of him as he rounded the corner. She ran towards him, fear gripping her throat.

The next sound to reach her ears was the low, snarling growl of a wolf. Her heart pounded from understanding.

Aaron.

She skidded to a stop next to his discarded pile of clothing.

Ahead of her, Grand worked her hands in the air, waving them fiercely towards a long-tailed demon blocking Dina and Paul’s retreat. White bolts of energy hissed into the air as she released them against its tense body.

Another demon shrieked beneath Aaron as he ripped at its bared throat. As quickly as it had begun, the shriek quieted into wet gurgles. Soon after, even the gurgling stopped. Mesmerized by the smell of scorched flesh, the sight of blood pooling on the floor and a wolf that stalked its fallen prey, Ava squelched a shudder.

Viscous red liquid dripped from Aaron’s muzzle as he swung his head towards her. When he started to growl, she froze in place. He crept forward, hackles raised, wildfire in his eyes.

“Ava.”

Grand’s whisper sounded half-strangled. She didn’t dare risk looking at her grandmother now. The black pits of Aaron’s narrowed eyes demanded all of her attention. A wave of nauseous fear laid claim to her as she bit back the scream threatening to erupt. Maybe he didn’t recognize her when in wolf form, but she would defend herself against him if she had to. Knew for certain Grand would.

She gulped down a bitter taste of bile and chanced a look towards the older woman—who wasn't looking at her.

Whoa.

Ava followed Aaron's focused glare and recognized something else.

The fact that neither the wolf nor her grandmother looked directly at her, but actually behind her, couldn't be good.

So not good at all.

Before she could turn all the way around to see what they saw, the hair on the back of her neck stood while goose bumps peppered her arms. From the periphery of her vision, something smooth and charcoal colored moved. At the same time, the long tail of a demon whipped in and out of her limited sightline.

For every time she ever screamed at a TV character who failed to run when confronted with a monster, sincerest apologies. Nothing short of a miracle would get her rooted feet to move at this moment.

This was *so* not good.

Breathe, Ava. The words are there. Just say them. Invoke the feelings. It's the basis of all of the training sessions endured for the last three years.

A sizzle enveloped both hands when she closed her eyes. It traveled up both arms, collided at her sternum. From there it reached out, poured into her legs and climbed to the apex of her head.

Now *this* felt like magic.

Her eyebrows furrowed together. Wait. This wasn't—how'd she—oh, Goddess!

Blackness covered her like a blanket.

* * * *

"Princess? Are you all right?"

That lovely, raspy, gravelly voice. Impossible to duplicate. So close to her ear. Warm breath caressed her cheek. Lovely.

She bolted upright, wrestled away from heavy arms that wrapped around her.

Holy shit. What had just happened?

The last thing she remembered was the warm fuzzy feeling like after drinking a mug of hot mulled cider on a cold winter's night. Free-falling tipsiness combined with familiar comfort. All of that right after she'd discovered the demon standing behind her.

"Easy, Princess," Aaron said.

He pulled her back into his embrace and she snuggled against him. Snagged a small piece of heaven against his bare skin. His earthy aroma sent a tingle down her spine. It felt so nice to be so close to him again. Like before. She could almost reach up and pull his face down to hers. Force away the awkwardness of the morning after and rediscover the scorching heat they'd once shared.

She'd do it now. Now, before, the rest of the room focused. Too late.

Grand's kind face, so full of worry, hovered into view, almost as closely as Aaron's was to her. Ava shoved his arms away again and struggled to a sitting position. Nothing like having her grandmother watch a man almost get felt up by her granddaughter to kill the mood.

With a wince at the red stain tracking down his neck, she rubbed her eyes. She did not want to think too hard about what he'd done. "What happened to me?"

Dina's long legs stepped into place next to her hunched grandmother. She dropped into a crouch and joined the informal huddle. Ava's stomach clenched. Nothing she'd have to contribute could be good.

"Demons. More than one of them." She cut her gaze to Aaron. "You had a handle on your end of the situation until the werewolf interrupted. Almost killed you."

She couldn't remember much about Dina being in the room. Although, that had been the reason for going up there in the first place. She could remember Grand disposing of a demon. Aaron as a wolf did, too. But that was about all she could remember. Why didn't she remember any of it?

One look at Grand provided all the confirmation she needed. Dina, for once in her miserable life, was telling the truth. She couldn't believe it. Didn't want to believe it. She looked up at Aaron. "Is that true?"

He could have buried her with the rage in his eyes even as his face remained impassive. Those eyes, though. His intense eyes hid nothing. “Which part?”

She couldn’t think. Not with everyone breathing down her neck like this. The question answered with a question left her more confused than before. Why didn’t she remember?

Ava rubbed a hand at the base of her neck where a dull ache started to drum.

“I have to—to think.” She sighed. Did she want to believe Aaron incapable of harming her because of their mutual attraction? Goddess above, she wanted to believe him, but he once again said nothing in his own defense. She had to talk to him. Find out from him what was going on in his mind. This next part would be hard but was something that had to be done. “And we should probably talk, Aaron.”

Grand settled a warm hand over her hand and squeezed. “Gut instinct, Ava. Never fails.”

So easily said. Nothing in her lessons ever mentioned what to do when a witch accidentally conjured a werewolf, got jiggy with him and then found out he might actually be trying to kill her. Oh, yeah. Don’t forget the part about wanting to get jiggy with him a second time in spite of it all.

Dina’s lip curled in disgust as she stood. Without a second glance back, she walked out of the room while Paul slunked out behind her.

Grand opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something more, then it snapped shut again. She wagged her fingers towards the tumult in the room, muttered a few words. Smoke hissed into the air and scattered demon remains gradually evaporated.

“Should all be gone in about an hour or so,” she mumbled almost under her breath. She stood but not before patting Ava once more on the shoulder. Within moments, Ava remained alone in the room with the man who said he was there to protect her.

“I’m confused,” she started slowly. “This whole scenario makes so little sense to me, even from the very beginning. I mean, I didn’t even know that werewolves existed until today.

And somehow, I managed to conjure one up in my time of need? Come on. Doesn't that sound a little farfetched to you?"

"Are you hungry?"

She blinked twice at him. "What?"

"I asked if you are hungry."

As if he'd addressed the question directly to it, her belly responded with a rude noise loud enough for both of them to hear. Sex, then food. Her mind had absolutely no say when it came to her priorities. None whatsoever.

Ava's hand flew up to her mouth.

Oh, Lord and Lady. She'd missed dinner with Grand. If the woman had been ticked about her breaking that cardinal rule, she must have been seething when she discovered her granddaughter missed out because she'd been too busy having multiple orgasms. Although, even old Grand had to admit that was a damned good reason for being absent.

She pried away the thought and nodded. "I could definitely eat something. I didn't realize how hungry I am until you mentioned it."

"We should eat," he said.

"Sure. We can talk while we eat. Meet me in my room while I scrounge something together." Like they'd eat just food if they went up there. Her self-preservation instinct sucked. She'd give in for sex in a heartbeat. Such a long time in between partners perhaps wasn't the best tactic in life.

"Scratch that. We can just grab something together in the kitchen. Maybe you should clean up first. Know where the bathroom is? Just pull out some towels or whatever you need from the closet."

He gave a curt nod as he shrugged on his threadbare cotton shirt. She was mesmerized by his rough masculinity. His rugged lines contrasted to the soft material he wore.

Aaron glanced up at her. Caught her wanton gaze. "Princess?"

The heat in his eyes reflected her own emotions. He looked down on her with such an appetite of need that she almost shrank from it.

Ava straightened her back, stood and turned away. As she left the room, she called over her shoulder, "I'll see you in a few minutes."

When he joined her several minutes later, she finished piling together the sandwiches in silence. He pulled open the fridge, grabbed two bottles of water and set them out on the table after cracking open the caps. With a final slap of bread over lunchmeat, Ava shrugged her shoulders at their meal. It would fill a hole if nothing else.

She pushed the plate towards him as he sat. She took a bite, chewed for a minute and then swallowed. "Now that we're fixing the hungry problem, care to pick up our conversation where we left off?"

Aaron finished most of his sandwich before he looked up at her. Not that it had taken long. The man ate like, well—like he had when positioned between her thighs. Ravenously.

"If your grandmother hadn't told you I was a werewolf, would you have known Ava?" he asked.

A chill ran down her spine. Now that he'd mentioned it, no, she had no reason to think anything was out of place with him. He looked as regular as she did. When she shook her head, he posed another question. "Why do you think your grandmother happened to know something like that?"

Because she was Grand. High Priestess of their coven. A formidable witch whose years of practicing the Craft honed her skills to a sharp point.

That didn't seem to be the right answer. She shrugged again.

"And how do you think I know you are a princess?"

That had been the million dollar question from the moment they met. He knew her. Had to have known, at least, about her. No one outside of the coven knew her honorific, she assumed.

The food she'd been chewing felt like a lump of hard plastic lodged in her throat. She tried to swallow it down, but it wouldn't budge. With a trembling hand, she reached for the bottle. Sipped a small amount of liquid only to end up hacking.

He waited until she quieted down.

"Our meeting was not coincidence, Princess. Werewolves have been watching over you almost your whole life. I was

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personally pledged to protect you a few years ago...at the request of your parents.”

Chapter Four

If he had just told her Grand was running around outside buck naked, pulling out her hair root by root while setting fire to the house and laughing with maniacal glee, she'd be less surprised than she was at this moment.

Her parents? When was the last time anyone had mentioned them to her? Grand rarely mentioned her daughter and the man she'd married. Not since they'd left the coven to be a "normal family" with Ava. Her late start into spell casting and all of the other witchy activities started when it did because only their deaths led her way back into the coven.

"How did you know my parents?" she asked softly.

She didn't believe him. Couldn't believe him. No matter what he said, what he told her, he wasn't allowed to bring her parents into this. It couldn't be.

"I didn't. Not really." His gaze dropped to the remains of her sandwich while he talked. "I met them maybe a year or two before their deaths. They wanted protection for their daughter in case of...I don't know what. Just in case."

She reached for his hand. Took it in hers. Waited until he brought his stare up to meet hers. "How long?"

Aaron's lips tightened as a pained look crossed his face. "I've been keeping track of you for three years. Today—afterwards...after the time in your bedroom—I know I crossed a line. I was sent here to protect you. Not make love to you."

So, that was the reason for his earlier reluctance. Her hand felt slick in his. Like it could slide out with even the slightest tug. "I never saw you. Never even sensed you, like I should have."

He pulled the gold chain from beneath his collar and held it out to her. "You wouldn't. Good old magic. We're tethered so that I can feel you. Help you with a moment's notice using this

stone. No matter how far apart we are physically, I am bound to you emotionally.” His gaze dropped back down. A flush spread over his neck, turned the tips of his ears bright pink. “I can feel almost every emotion you experience. I think if your grandmother had done the spell, it would have been more specific. But your parents, well the way it worked, I knew about your fears as well as everything else.”

Ava narrowed her eyes. Everything else? What did—oh, shit. She asked, “The highs as well as the lows, huh? Like, let’s say, if I’m feeling really good? Really, really good? Trembling, quivering, name screaming *good*?”

He had the decency to continue to blush. “I’m sure they didn’t expect it to happen that way. They left the coven, remember? They weren’t as powerful as your grandmother is now.”

She supposed it didn’t really matter. The only name she had the opportunity to scream in a very long time was his. “So, Grand knows who you are and why you’re here. Why would she make me think that I summoned you?”

He shrugged. “She may not know all of it. Maybe only pieced together some suspicions. As far as summoning, you *do* have that ability. Or at least, the potential. I don’t know how far your abilities extend. Today might have been a combination of both. Who knows?”

They sat in silence while another question gnawed at Ava. “If Grand knows, what about the rest of the coven? Anyone else knows, too, you think?”

“Dina knew,” he said.

She shook her head. “One of her gifts is communication with animals. No offense, but you kind of fit that bill. I’m not surprised that she knew. But I wonder if anyone else knows.”

“Only if your parents told them. Your grandmother is ticked off enough that they sought the werewolves. ‘Witches should look out for witches’ is what she seems to think. I don’t think she would have told anyone else. I’ve never had any contact with members of the coven. Hadn’t needed it.” He looked away thoughtfully and then back at her. “All of these demons. Out of the clear blue. It doesn’t make much sense why they’re coming after you like this. Do you have an explanation at all?”

“Whoa, wait a minute. What about what Dina said upstairs? Did you try to kill me?”

He chuckled. “If I wanted you dead, you’d be dead, Princess. Werewolves are not known for missing a kill. I told you why I’m here. It’s up to you to believe me or not. Either way, I made a pledge to your parents that I have no intention of breaking.”

Ava tightened her fingers around his, but this time was the first to drop her gaze. Her mind screamed at her to ask him. To find out. She had to know. “And what about...what happened, um, earlier. Is that part of the protection package or is there something a little more between us?”

He slipped his hand out of hers to capture her chin. She kept her eyes cast down as he pulled her face towards his. Warm breath caressed her face as their heads moved closer. “To quote your grandmother, what does your gut tell you, Ava?”

That was the problem. She kept losing control when he got close like this. Her mind shut down. Her stomach fluttered. Her libido picked up. Every time she stared into his eyes, passed her gaze over his cleft chin, reviewed his lean body, everything all but short-circuited.

They should really slow down. But damn, he brought out this aching need in her. Reminded her that she was a woman.

Who’d do just about anything to feel him inside of her again.

Her chair dragged across the floor, and alarmed, Ava flinched. She relaxed as she realized Aaron used his free hand to pull her closer to him. Positioned her so she sat trapped between him and her own chair.

She tried to gaze into his eyes but had to pull away after a moment. Hunger for something other than food framed the edges of his irises. She could get lost in that stare for years and never want to return.

“Ava?” His rumbling voice dropped to almost a low growl.

“Hmm?” She still couldn’t look at him. Something about his close proximity, the fiery scrutiny made her tremble.

His mouth pressed against her neck before he pulled away. “What...”

Soft lips brushed against her chin. “Does...”

She shifted and he peppered her jaw with soft caresses. “It...”

A whimper escaped her lips when his finger stroked across her cheek. He leaned in and she dragged her eyes shut.

“Say?”

His lips landed on her mouth and she moved her hands to capture his face. He breathed in her contented sigh as she melted against him. If either of them had any doubt what her gut instinct had to say about him, it shattered in the force of his kiss.

She didn’t know how long they were like that. She only knew the taste of him. The feel of him under her lips and her fingers. The earthy smell of him in the few moments she caught her breath.

She pulled his lip into her mouth and bit down softly, resulting in a low groan for him. He gently pulled away to exhale forcibly. “I know I started it, but Princess, if we don’t stop now...”

Ava unsuccessfully fought the urge to glance at the clock on the wall in an effort to figure out where the others might be at the moment. Was a quickie such a bad idea? Annoyed, she mentally shook her head but physically nodded at him. “You’re right, I guess.”

He gave her one more hard kiss. “Once under your grandmother’s roof was bad enough. A second time and she’ll have my balls. After you’re safe, I’ll take you back to my house where we can continue this properly, okay?”

“This isn’t Grand’s house.” Her lips curved into a slow smile. “It’s mine.”

The startled look on his face was priceless. She could almost see a new plan formulating in his mind.

Her voice dropped down to a husky whisper. “Are you sure you don’t want to change your mind?”

“Ava,” he insisted, his head shaking from side to side. “We have important issues to discuss. This demon situation to figure out.”

With her feet, she pushed her chair back away from him. Rose to her full height while undulating her body. She traced and tested the heaviness of her breasts, slid her hands lower to

outline her waist and hips. Brushed them lightly over the insides of her thighs.

“We do,” she agreed. “It’s just that I’m feeling so close to you now. Protected with you here. I wouldn’t mind showing my...um...appreciation.”

Aaron’s gaze followed the motion of her hands. She felt like a snake charmer; Aaron, her snake. He let out a strangled groan before glazed eyes focused again. “The demons, Ava.” He did nothing to disguise the sternness in his voice.

He was determined to keep his mind on one track. She was determined to feel him against her again.

She was also determined to win.

“Fine, Aaron. Lemme just grab something out of the pantry, okay? Follow me.” There would be enough privacy in there to at least get him hot and bothered. Maybe willing to follow her upstairs again.

She walked away, a smug contented smile on her lips in anticipation of his inevitable compliance. As she figured, Aaron’s chair scraped against the tiled floor.

He tracked her inside the small room overcrowded with baking supplies, dried pastas and sundry boxed items. Near one of the bottom shelves, she found the basket of items she sought. “Voila!” she said as she waved a wrapped package with a flourish.

He leaned against a shelf, his arms crossed. She shoved the basket back in place and then ripped into the wrapping. Without regard for him, she broke off a piece of the semi-sweet chocolate and placed it in her mouth.

Oh, Lord. It was orgasmic.

She spent way too much money on gourmet candy, but every once in a while, when her craving for sex hit astronomical peaks, she indulged in a small piece. The little piece of ecstasy brought her to heaven every single time. Just like now.

She moaned approval. Worth its weight in gold.

“Christ, don’t make that sound again.” Aaron sounded hoarse. Almost like it was an effort to speak.

She swirled the chocolate in her mouth, letting it start to dissolve, before a sigh escaped. “I can’t help it. This thing is better than sex.”

“I’ll have to test that theory for myself, thanks.”

He stepped closer and she raised the package to him. “Taste?”

Aaron kicked the door to the pantry and it slammed shut. He pulled her to him by her wrist, knocking the package to the ground in the process. He lowered his head to hers and searched her face. “Yeah. Lemme taste it.”

His mouth dropped onto hers.

Eu-fucking-reka.

Aaron’s tongue probed into her mouth and reluctantly, she opened up to him. She tried to swallow down the remaining chocolate, but he took it from her. Then gave it back again.

He dragged her closer, his growing erection pressed against her belly while they kissed. Too quickly, the chocolate melted away, leaving just the lingering taste in their mouths.

His agile hands dropped down to her pants, pushing them down in a swift motion. “Now let’s compare the chocolate to sex.”

He turned her around, pushed her forward until she bent at the waist. Cardboard boxes and cellophane packages ignored, Ava grasped the shelf in one hand and a support beam in the other. The sounds of rustling clothing sent a rush of heat through her.

Aaron’s cock probed her slick entrance and before she had a chance to mentally prepare, he sank into her depths.

Still sore from earlier, she moaned. If possible, he felt bigger and harder than he had before. Almost too much.

The thought barely flashed across her mind when he went rigid. His words were whispered against her ear, his pelvis still pressed against her cheeks. “Sssh. Dina is right outside that door.”

Ava heard it then. Faint footsteps on tile. The opening and closing of the refrigerator door. It was hard to tell what made her heart beat harder: the prospect of being caught while he remained buried deep inside her or the fact that he managed to remain aroused enough *to be* buried deep inside her.

His hushed voice tickled her ear again. “Not a sound. Can you do that?”

Feeling decidedly wicked, she nodded.

She almost groaned when his cock withdrew then pushed into her pussy again, but held the noise in check. She stretched around him. Took all of him in as he pushed forward inch by agonizingly slow inch.

She hissed her breath in when he pushed, forced her held breath out when he pulled. His pace increased and so did her breathing. She fought consciously to not make a sound despite the ripples of pleasure echoing over her.

Aaron's hands snaked under her shirt to grasp her swaying breasts. Thumbs flicked over her nipples, arousing them into hardened peaks. Roughly, he pulled down the cups of her bra, exposing her to the air while he continued to roll her nipples.

A lightning fast streak of pleasure and a building pressure was her first warning. She grabbed his arm, sank her fingers into his flesh to let him know. He adjusted his strokes, alternated between slow and long, shallow and fast.

Her head dropped onto an arm as she clenched her eyes shut. Almost there.

He pinched her nipples once more and Ava slid headlong into an orgasm. Her pussy pulsed around him, pulled him in. Behind her, Aaron panted, his sweat beginning to drop on her warm back. She arched her back to him, rolling her hips to match his rhythm.

He increased his pace, changed his angle and a second wave of heat seared through her. So close to the last one. She had to take him with her this time. Needed him with her.

She trailed her lips across his arm, nipping gently, encouraging him.

Harder. Faster.

His hand dropped between her thighs and found her hard clit. His sure hand stroked over her.

Teasing her. Exciting her.

Shattering her.

Ava's fingers tightened on him. On the shelf.

She sank fingernails into soft flesh. Broke fingernails against unyielding wood.

Aaron responded to the call of her pussy by thrusting deeply twice more. His body stiffened and then poured into her in urgent bursts, filling her completely.

The room slowly came back into focus. The musty aroma of cardboard. The ticking clock beyond the closed door. And who left the tin of flour not properly closed?

After they'd both caught their heaving breaths, Aaron slipped out of her and the feeling of loss was immediate. Thankfully, he kept his arms wrapped around torso.

"No," she grunted quietly against his arm. "Definitely not better than sex."

* * * *

She sat up groggily. Stifled a yawn. Ignored her screaming muscles and the soreness between her legs.

The soft glow of her desk lamp reflected on the hulking brute of a man sitting there.

"Can't sleep?" she asked after losing the battle to not yawn.

Grand hadn't even batted an eye when Ava announced Aaron would be staying the night. Ava prepared the excuse that it made sense with the dual demon attacks his presence might be needed. She hadn't even gotten to that part when her grandmother conceded. Ava had even steeled herself against the next question that should have been posed—what were to be his sleeping arrangements? Grand hadn't said anything about that either. The lack of argument left her a little shaken.

"I've been thinking about the demons. Why now? Tell me what's changed recently for you. There might be something there."

She shrugged, then wiped away sleepiness. "Nothing that I can think of. It's been the same old stuff for the past few years. Lessons, lessons and more lessons. Day in. Day out."

"Are you getting better? Picked up any special skills that surprised you or your grandmother?"

"Not that I noticed."

"What about your tools? Do you have them all yet?"

"No. I still need to get at least an athame, chalice, and cauldron. I have a personal Book of Shadows. The family Book of Shadows I kind of inherited from my grandmother. It was the one briefly used by my mother."

“That’s where your spells are recorded, right? The Book of Shadows?”

“Yeah,” she nodded towards the locked chest where she stored the one she sought. “The one in here is the family’s and is older than dirt. Been passed down for a very long time from what I understand.”

“Your grandmother is up. Heading this way.”

Werewolves really did have sensitive hearing. She hadn’t heard a thing. They both looked up when a soft knock sounded at the door.

She shrugged at Aaron’s amused expression and then called, “Come in.”

Grand walked in and for a moment, Ava saw herself in the older woman. Could see what she’d look like at her age. Regal and refined. Not a bad combination, either.

“I couldn’t sleep and heard your voices. It didn’t seem an inopportune time.”

Her face heated over. Those thin walls again. She’d have those suckers replaced one day.

Aaron cleared his throat. “We were just discussing why the demons are showing up.”

Grand took the chair opposite him. “I’ve been thinking about that too.” She settled against the chair and seemed to age within seconds. “I might have an explanation. But first, I should really start with an apology.”

Apology? In her twenty-six years, Ava had never heard Grand apologize. For anything. Ever. The woman was infallible. She knew all. Saw all. Did everything just short of perfect. On second thought, perhaps not perfect, but she managed a good job of appearing that way.

She looked at Ava. “I’ve been so angry with your mother that I’ve failed you, Ava. I should have explained a lot of things a long time ago to you. I’ve just been so mad at her. Taken too soon from me.”

“I’m angry at her for leaving us too, Grand.” She almost stood to pat her hand.

“Neither of us ever told you, Ava, that you’re very special. Now, don’t go getting a big head over it. I’ve downplayed your honorific for just that reason. But little girl, despite what you

think, it's more than just a title. It means you follow my path and will work towards eventually becoming the coven's High Priestess. But in your case..."

Her voice trailed off and her eyes dulled for a brief moment. The hesitation faltered.

"In your case, you are a daughter in a long line of High Priestesses. The thirteenth princess for this coven."

Whoa. Thirteen?

"So that number really does matter?" asked Aaron.

Ava couldn't speak. Just nodded at him. Thirteenth in a line of thirteen. Not only that, but the thirteenth *daughter*. She just hit the witch equivalent of winning the lotto.

"It's why her mother sought you out, Aaron. She knew Ava would need protection beyond what the coven could provide. She would need you and your kind to assist us." Tears sprang to Grand's eyes, but she wiped them away hastily. "I've failed Ava by not preparing her. We could have lost her today because of my stubbornness. I only started to suspect after the first demon attack. It wasn't until the second one that I became absolutely sure."

"I still don't understand. What's so special about now, Grand?"

"The Book of Shadows is about to be officially conferred to you. The thirteenth princess will gain the ability to use those spells more powerfully than any before or after her. You, Ava, are, so to speak, the demons' worst nightmare."

Chapter Five

Even with Aaron's reassuring breathing next to her, Ava slept fitfully the rest of the night. Sunlight peeked through the windows when she finally gave up and laid curled next to him, deep in thought.

This was not something she wanted for herself. Not something she would have ever asked for. She'd been given one of the greatest powers someone like her could ever have.

She'd be a target for the rest of her natural life, however long or short that might be.

Every moment she'd wasted in the past several years not attending to her studies. Every moment that should have been spent learning about the coven and its history. Every time she'd neglected a duty assigned to her on behalf of the coven. They all weighed down on her like a ton of bricks.

She couldn't blame Grand. She was as much at fault for her ignorance as her grandmother. She didn't take the coven seriously. It was just there. Like breathing. Never gave it a second thought because it surrounded everything she did in the world.

Now her life depended on it.

And she felt like a fool.

It was long past time to start behaving in a manner that would make her parents and grandmother proud. Herself proud. In a few hours, she'd ask Grand to assemble the coven and start prepping. She didn't want to drag them into her fight, but she needed everyone's help to prepare. A twist of fate had robbed her of essential years of training. She wouldn't allow that to be an excuse any longer.

Aaron's arm wrapped tighter around her waist. She smiled and looked down. Still sleeping like a baby.

She'd need him by her side, too. Not only as her lover but also as her protector. They'd been thrown together in an explosive situation, but she wanted time to get to know him better. See where their relationship might lead.

She drifted to sleep with thoughts of him on her mind.

* * * *

"This is not exactly coven business. And if it is, *he* does not belong here!" Dina slammed her fist against the wooden table more than once. The sound was punctuated as it bounced against the wood paneling.

Ava watched the others for their reaction. Some appeared apathetic, some nodded their agreement with Dina, and others still looked confused. None spoke up.

She'd never taken measure of the coven members before. They appeared a group of people who worked together to keep the balance of malevolent beings in check. Most were healers. Some were diviners. Grand and Dina, now Ava, were the fighters. They would lose this battle if they didn't balance those numbers among themselves.

Aaron stood by with his arms crossed, a scowl on his face. After Grand and Ava had secured the house by casting a spell of protection around it, he'd left for a few hours to get a change of clothing. When he returned, he'd announced that the members of his pack had been informed of the latest happenings. Unlike the coven members, the pack stood behind him in loyalty to the princess. He expected them to arrive shortly to review with Grand the best methods of defense.

Grand held up a hand to silence the mutters. Her voice remained level. "We have the ability through Ava to balance power permanently. This is most certainly coven business, as you put it, Dina. And Aaron," she nodded towards him, "has pledged himself and his pack in the protection of Ava. He has every right to be here. As my guest. Is that a problem for you, Dina?"

Ava thought for a brief second that Dina might actually have the nerve to voice dissent again. That woman walked on thin ice. She may have been next in line to follow Grand as High

Priestess until Ava could take reign, but she couldn't be so stupid as to outright go against her.

Dina opened her mouth. Shut it again. Opened it one more time only to shut it again. She glanced around the room, then raised her chin in the air. "High Priestess," she exhaled. "I was there when the demon attacked Ava upstairs. The werewolf did not appear to be protecting Ava then. No disrespect to you intended, but I am distrustful of him."

Ava shot out of her chair without thinking. It dropped to the floor with a crash loud enough to make several people jump. "Do you mean he wasn't protecting me when he ripped the demon's throat out?"

The rolling of her eyes was barely disguised. "No. I mean when the four of us were spell casting and the werewolf stood in between us and the demon. When you blacked out."

She exchanged a look with Aaron. Was that what happened? She still couldn't remember. Could only recall the surge of power that made her nerves crackle with life.

She had nothing to say to Dina with which to defend him. He couldn't very well save her in one moment and then hinder attempts at saving her in the next without providing some valid excuse.

He pushed himself away from the wall and unfolded his arms. "High Priestess, I know how it looked..." His eyebrows narrowed as his body went rigid.

"Demons are here!" he growled. Aaron held a hand out to her. "Ava, with me!"

She hesitated. It was impossible for demons to be here. The protection spell would hold out even the most formidable of demons for at least a day. They couldn't get in unless...

Oh, Goddess.

They couldn't get in unless someone invited them in.

The sounds of feet on floorboards drifted down. Aaron's warning could only be true. All heads swiveled in the direction of the stairs. If demons crawled through the upper layers of the house, they could be trapped in their current location.

Jenna, closest in age to Ava and one of the coven's most powerful diviners, ran to Ava. She nudged gently. "Go with him. He will protect you. I've seen it."

Grand watched the exchange even as Ava continued to hesitate. “Your life is the most important, Ava. Go!”

Grand, Jenna, the others...even Dina. She couldn't leave them behind. Not to save just herself.

“What are you waiting for, girl? Go!” Grand pushed the sleeves of her cowed robe up her forearms. She reached for the tattered black book in front of her. “Take this with you. You'll need it.”

Without thinking, she took it and pulled the book to her chest. She didn't want the Book of Shadows. She didn't want to leave.

“We're depending on you, Ava.” Jenna's pretty hazel eyes blazed with resolve. “Maybe all of humanity. You're our chance to keep them permanently safe. Go. Please.”

She squeezed her hand tightly and nodded. Before stepping away, she called to Jenna. “Everyone must get outside. Don't stay here.”

Taking Aaron's outstretched hand, she ran with him towards the door leading directly to the outside of the basement. Dina stood next to it, her hands outstretched and glowing red. She glowered as they ran towards her. Then stepped into their path.

“I can't let you leave with that book, Ava.”

She didn't understand at first. Only Aaron's deep growl prompted her to understand what Dina meant. What she intended to do.

Then she thought of the demons upstairs. The only means they could have gained entrance to the house. An invitation by someone within.

No.

Even with their constant bickering, they were cousins. Blood relatives. Dina succeeded Grand for temporary control of the coven. It didn't make sense.

Aaron shifted next to her. Almost placed himself in between the two women.

“Stay where you are werewolf. I don't have to destroy you, but I will.” Dina's voice echoed with a cold fervor. She kept her gaze on Ava. “Just give me the book and go. That's all I want.”

Ava shook her head. “I can't do that, Dina.”

The remaining coven members chanted a spell of protection at the other stairwell. She could hear Grand's voice leading them. They had no idea what transpired less than twenty-five feet away.

Aaron tensed, but Dina whirled in his direction.

"If you try to transform, werewolf, I will destroy you. Don't. Test. Me." She pointed one glowing hand at Ava. "There are demons upstairs and outside. If you just give me the book, they'll go away. I'll make certain of it. You will all walk out of here unharmed."

She couldn't be certain of that. A witch who would so brazenly betray her coven to demons couldn't be trusted. Even with their collective lives in the balance, Ava had to put to use what skills she possessed to get out of this mess.

With a deep breath, Ava closed her eyes. Drew forth the powers that had been transferred down to her through her twelve ancestors.

"Ava, don't."

She reached for the words, the spells she'd already learned. The new ones she spent a large portion of the night consuming. Invoked the feelings of power and protection she needed.

"Your last warning, Ava."

Ava opened her eyes in time to see the bolt of energy fire towards her like a rocket. Throwing her arm forward, she released her own spell already realizing that she was too late. Dina's spell would get to her first. But at least, she'd go down fighting.

With lightning speed, Aaron shoved her out of harm's way as he stepped into it. When the bolt struck his chest, his roar of pain reverberated against the walls. His body tensed and then slumped to the ground. A long shudder passed over him and he went still.

"No!" Ava screamed as her eyes welled with tears.

Dropping the book, she wheeled back to Dina to see that she'd been injured by the first spell. Without conscious effort this time, she threw her hands forward and released bolt after bolt of energy towards her cousin. Dina deflected most, even in a weakened state, while others seared through her clothing to

strike flesh. By the time the surge of Ava's anger had peaked, Dina lay curled on the ground. The fight gone from her eyes.

Behind her, the clatter of multiple footsteps on concrete hurried towards Ava. There were shouts of panic amidst muttered spells. The demons must have broken through on that side.

She fought down the sense of satisfaction at beating Dina that simultaneously rose with fear. Raking her trembling hands through her hair, she stared down at Aaron's unmoving body, unable to think of the right spell. One that could heal him right now. His skin already looked gray. She crouched next to him.

Thank the Lord and Lady, she could see the rise and fall of his chest. Labored breaths came fast and shallow, but they came.

She wiped away tears with the back of her hand and fought the panic that stretched through her, keeping her mind pinned. *What were the damned words?* She needed Grand. She'd know what to do.

The others fought their own battles though. The stench of sulphur clouded the air causing some of the witches to gag. Ava rose to her feet and stood over Aaron, determined to not leave his side.

She almost turned at the noise behind her, but kept her focus trained on the demons running the coven down. A gust of fresh air blew into the room, softening the sickening odor. The door behind her was open, but she remained focused. The coven members backed up to her, throwing their spells in relentless waves at the approaching demons. For as many demons that were brought down, another two seemed to take their place.

Horried, she recognized that the witches were losing.

She glanced down at Aaron's prone body one last time. His breathing had slowed leaving him with a serene appearance. If it weren't for the pool of blood that formed underneath him, he could have just been sleeping.

That's when she heard the low growls and snapping teeth behind her. She almost cried with relief when the horde of wolves poured through the open doorway and ran past her.

The demons never had a chance.

Chapter Six

Grand looked as weary as she felt. She'd never be able to repay her for the countless hours spent working on Aaron casting spell after spell to counteract whatever Dina had done to him. Her cousin had been more powerful than anyone guessed.

Ava wouldn't allow him to be moved from her room even when his pack wanted to bring him back with them. She would be forever grateful that they'd shown up when they did, but Aaron would not be moved from her sight.

Period.

Bowed over the bed, she ignored the aches of weary bones and muscles. Couldn't remember her last shower. The hunger pangs had stopped ages ago. Grand and the others had offered countless times to relieve her watch, but she refused them all. When Aaron woke up, her face, in all its grimy glory, was the first one she wanted him to see.

He almost sacrificed his life for hers. It was the least she could do. It made no difference that she loved him. The spark of love had yet to be fanned to full blown, but there was no doubt in her mind it existed. She'd tell him and he might not return her feelings, but with the precariousness of the demon situation, she couldn't let a day pass without him knowing.

For now, she drifted in and out of sleep. Heard Grand say something about "giving it time." Felt the occasional pat of a sympathetic hand on her back or shoulder.

Members of his pack took turns camping in the spare guest rooms. They spoke in low tones around her. Looked towards her almost reverently. She couldn't focus on them now. They seemed confident that Aaron would recover. She wished for the same sense of security.

Hours, maybe even a day, after the last spell had been cast over him by the coven, someone stroked her hair. Stroked again.

THE CRAFT OF THE WISE: BOOK OF SHADOWS

Groggy, Ava glanced up and immediately came face to face with Aaron's depthless, jet-black eyes.

Her heart pounded while she beamed at him. Relief, pride and love rose to a crescendo.

And then she began to weep.

* * * *

"So Dina managed to run off with the book after all," Ava finished for him. "It's my fault, but at that moment, I couldn't stay focused on her. Paul left with her, too. His betrayal surprises me the most. I could see Dina leaving like that, but not Paul."

"Oh, Princess. I'm sorry my men didn't come through for you. They—"

She waved her hand absently. "If your men hadn't arrived when they had, we wouldn't be having this conversation, love."

In retrospect, the scariest moment of the last week had been declaring her love to him after she'd finally regained control of her emotions. Aaron had to ask twice what she'd said in between the blubbering, but she finally managed to heave through her sniffling that she loved him. When he replied that he returned her feelings, she cried even harder.

"Besides, in their defense, they thought she was a part of the coven. They couldn't have known she worked with the demons." Bitterness burned her throat. "*We* didn't know."

She wouldn't let him out of bed. Not until Grand declared him one hundred percent healed. He'd been angry and relentless about leaving. After his first step resulted in his weakened legs collapsing under him, he gave in. Each day that passed proved how quickly werewolves could heal, however. Ava remained cautious, just in case.

He squeezed her hand now. "What next?"

She sighed. "I start collecting spells for a new Book of Shadows until the one from my ancestors can be recovered. I need to start collecting tools, building up my powers. We'll fight demons. Train the witches in the coven to do more than just protect. We'll need to defend." Her eyes glassed over. "It'll be a long road."

"My men will be at your disposal."

Ava chuckled. "I think one of your lieutenants, Vince I think his name is, has a crush on my friend, Jenna. It's cute the way they behave. Fighting like cats and dogs all the time. Love at first sight, no doubt. Everyone but them can see it for what it is. It lightens the mood. Gives us something else to focus on, which is good. In the end we'll need every available person to give it their all."

"My men have pledged their loyalty to you," he said.

"And you?" she asked softly. She couldn't get enough of hearing him say that he loved her. If he told her every second of every day, it would never be enough.

"I will always be at your side, my Princess."

A finger trailed over his bare chest. Traced one of his scars. Followed the line of his abdominal muscle. With a softer voice, she asked, "Why?"

"A pledge to your parents." He shrugged with one shoulder. Arrogant bastard.

"Is that the only reason?" Her hand slid a little lower to tease the curls of his lower abdomen.

"Jesus," he hissed.

"I'm just checking your progress." Ava slid a leg over his waist and pulled herself upright. Her heat grazed his growing hardness. Straddling him, she leaned forward until their lips almost touched. "Why will you be by my side?"

A wry but indulgent glint appeared in his eyes. Capturing her face in his hands, he pulled her closer. Just before his mouth slanted over hers, the words she loved to hear were whispered.

"Because I love you, my Princess. I love you."

So mote it be...

About the Author

Dee Carney is the author of several erotic romance novellas, including the Craft of the Wise series with Phaze Books. Visit www.DeeCarney.com for more information on her available titles.