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THE CRAFT OF THE WISE

Rule of Three

Dee Carney

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The Craft of the Wise 3:
Rule of Three

A paranormal erotic romance short by

DEE CARNEY

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Chapter One

Liana Everton volleyed her gaze from Ava to Aaron, knowing in the pit of her stomach that she was losing the argument. Careful to keep herself from seeking help from the high priestess of the witch's coven, she tried another tactic.

"We've already established that we must go on the offense. We've said it more than once, yet we sit here waiting for the demons to swoop down on us and at the most, hope for the best." She tried to keep her voice neutral and disguise her mounting frustration.

Ava shook her head. "To send witches and werewolves to the demon realm is begging suicide, Liana."

"With all due respect, princess, locating the ebony athame was sheer luck. We still need to find the other very specific magical tools with which to fortify you. And finding them guarantees us *nothing*. Without the Book of Shadows, we..." She exhaled forcefully. "We need the book. It's in the demon realm. It's as simple as go there and get it."

The silence in the room gave her the moment she needed to reflect on what she was doing. Liana Everton, coward extraordinaire, felt compelled to risk her life to help the others. In truth, she'd love nothing better than to curl up on her couch with a good paperback where other women risked their fool necks. Until a few weeks ago, when all hell had broken loose within the coven, the most reckless thing she'd ever done was jaywalk. There was also that time she'd driven eight miles over the speed limit instead of her normal three, but that had been when she'd discovered a bee trapped inside of the car with her.

If Ava's cousin Dina hadn't stolen the book, the world wouldn't be facing the threat of being overrun by demons. But Dina wanted the same power the book would eventually convey to Ava. Never mind she betrayed witchdom by joining forces

with their natural enemies. Nevermind she forced a renewed alliance between witches and werewolves because of her greed.

She glanced to her right.

True, they now had another magical tool which would help them all in their fight thanks to their coven's diviner, Jenna, and her red-haired warrior mate, Vince. Those two had only recently stopped arguing with each other to discover a deep-seated love that would not be shaken. Even if Liana wasn't the second most powerful witch in the room, she would not have wanted Jenna to leave his side. Ava was too new at practicing the Craft and Mayda, as the current high priestess, was too—Goddess forbid her ever hear the words—*old* for a mission like this. Besides, the two Valentine women were the most valuable to the coven. To the future of man, really.

Being a damned good witch, but having a yellow streak that ran clear down her back sucked because that left *her* to find the stolen Book of Shadows. No choice for it. She didn't like it one bit, but she'd manage. Somehow.

"Aaron, my brother and I could accompany the witch. A small group might be able to pull this off," a soft-spoken voice said from behind her.

Her pulse picked up a notch as if a direct injection of adrenaline had been pumped into her system. She didn't need to turn around to recognize who spoke. Ronan fueled her heartbeat into pounding faster every single time.

Since his voice came from the left, the presence sidling up to her right probably meant his twin, Jarod. The staccato tempo her heart picked up confirmed it.

Aaron, alpha to the wolves, shook his head. "I'm sorry but our charge is to the princess. I can't afford to spare men for a side mission."

He inclined his head toward Ava. Liana could see her lips move, but from the distance would be hard pressed to hear what was exchanged. Aaron's eyes softened as he listened. As Ava's protector and mate, his love for her could not be doubted.

He gave a curt nod to Ava and turned back to Liana. "Very well. But I am not comfortable sending two men with you. One brother should be sufficient to guard a single witch."

The brief moment of elation for Liana gave way to dread. Choosing which twin wouldn't be left to her, would it? That was like choosing between heady white chocolate and silky milk chocolate, choosing between a crisp, crunchy apple or a juicy, succulent orange, choosing between slow, savory sex...and rough, sweaty sex. An almost impossible decision, in other words.

"Aaron?" Jenna stretched forward until the alpha could see her unobstructed. She held up a single Tarot card toward him. "Their paths are intertwined. Liana would fare better with both brothers, I would think."

Interesting that the coven's diviner chose to contradict the alpha leader. Jarod shifted and she felt rather than saw Ronan move, as if in response to the conversation surrounding them. Ronan seemed to tense, but then relaxed his pose after Jenna's announcement.

"Christ," muttered Aaron. "Am I still in charge of my men?" His dark eyes stared into Liana's. "Can you be done within a few days?"

"Yes." She nodded hesitantly. "I think so."

"Jarod? Ronan? Whether you've found it or not, you are to return within three days. That's the best I can do. I still think that's way too long without both of you here, but it seems I am outnumbered in my opinion by the witches in the room. Godspeed."

"Blessed be," Ava said softly next to him.

* * * *

Her skin felt like it was on fire. The burn traveled over her extremities and enveloped her torso. Without looking down, she knew there was no danger of actual flames, but Goddess, the urge to stop, drop and roll consumed her.

Beside Liana, Jarod clenched and unclenched his fists. "Remind me to never do this again. I had no idea it would hurt so much."

His brother rolled his shoulders. "In three days or less, we'll do it again to go home."

"I think it's because of where we are," Liana countered. "We're not meant to be here."

"No shit."

Despite his choice of phrasing, Ronan's tone was solemn, without the slightest bit of sarcasm. He seemed as awestruck as she by their surroundings. The smell of sulphur wafted in between breezes that hinted of the sweet, cloying smell of burning wood. The craggy landscape exuded dullness. No bright colors could be found anywhere. The most vibrant color was an awful shade of gray she'd once seen on a rotten piece of meat.

"We'd better find shelter until we know what we're doing next."

Liana searched the landscape and shook her head. "I'd like someplace enclosed for spell casting, but that's probably not possible is it?"

The exchanged glance between brothers was not lost on her.

"We'll do our best." Ronan's fingers grazed along her forearm, sending a tingling cool streak where she once felt heat. He continued to walk away as if the fleeting touch had been accidental.

Another feather light touch trailed over her lower back, causing her to straighten. Jarod stood off to her side, gesturing for her to proceed before him. Perfect teeth gleamed disarmingly at her and almost made her question whether she'd felt his hand only a moment before. "Your wish is our desire."

She could still feel it—them. Both places the brothers touched crackled with life. Her imagination just wasn't that vivid. They *had* touched her. She'd bet money on it.

Maybe coming here with them both wasn't such a good idea if they would both be making moves on her. Then again, what red-blooded woman wouldn't kill to have a pair of identical hunks of men hitting on her?

She'd self-combust, dying a horrible death of mortification if they weren't hitting on her and it was all in her imagination.

No. No thinking like that. They *were* hitting on her. Back at the house, both Ronan and Jarod found reasons to separate her from the others. Strike up conversations about nothing. They individually laughed at her inane attempts at humor. Offered comfort when she'd needed it. Yes...they both wanted her.

Her steps slowed as she came to another realization.

If she sorted through the worry about being in the demon realm, pushed through the rising panic and fought back the weight of responsibility, Liana knew without doubt that she wanted them too. The ultimate question was which one?

Chapter Two

Jarod stood at the entrance. “This is probably the best we’re going to find for now. It should serve us adequately, right?”

She peered into the cavern etched several feet into the rock face. It wouldn’t give the Hyatt a run for its money, but with little other options ahead of them, it would have to do. She ducked inside, reaching out to the wall for support.

Liana almost immediately pulled her hand away and wiped it over her pants. If she looked at the slimy moisture that transferred from the walls too closely, she might hurl. Or cry. Or something else equally humiliating in front of the warriors.

“It’ll do, I guess.” The tremor in her voice did little to mask her trepidation.

It really did have to do. She was tired and hungry and just wanted to sit down. Damn them, the men looked as if they could go on for another week or five before they needed to stop for rest.

Dropping to her knees, she gave the walls one last skeptical glance. The stench of this place rose from her clothes, weaved through her hair and filled her nose. She shook her head and tried once again to clear it.

“Are you all right?” Ronan crouched next to her and held out a canteen.

“Yeah. This place creeps me out.” Grateful, she took the canteen from him. She twisted open the cap and gulped down the soothing liquid. The water sloshed down her throat and reminded her of how thirsty she’d become.

From the entrance where he stood guard, Jarod called back, “You just need to focus on something else.”

“You’re right. I really should try to locate the book. Only...” She bit down on her lip.

“Only?”

"I think I might have been a little too eager to get started. There's a possibility that Dina will be able to detect my magic if I cast a spell. I hadn't thought that far ahead."

Ronan glanced up and another indecipherable look was exchanged with Jarod. She narrowed her eyes at their silent communication. Ronan turned to pierce her with his gaze and then shrugged. "We're here now. Might as well see what happens if you do."

If only she felt as confident. They could not possibly understand what could happen if Dina and her horde discovered them. Liana said, "You do realize that we're in the *demon realm*? They catch a whiff of us and we are toast. Sorry fellas, but I just don't think three of us will be able to give much of a fight to the hundreds, maybe thousands, of demons here."

With a grim smile, Jarod said, "What makes you think they don't already know we're here? Don't you think it's been just a little too quiet?"

A chill traveled over her spine at his words. She really hadn't thought this through well at all. Her mind stalled at the possibility that they were on a mission destined to fail before it even started. "But—but..."

"Just try. We'll cross each bridge as we come to it."

The way Ronan reached to her and squeezed her hand in his sent another thrill across her spine, but this one warmed her through her toes. She wanted to believe him. Having the werewolves as her protectors should have provided all the comfort in the world. There were only two of them, though. Even at her magical best, how could three people who didn't belong in this place hope to make it out alive?

"I can't believe I volunteered us for this. It's one thing to endanger myself, but I involved others." She shook her head as her stomach clenched. "I'm so sorry."

Ronan caught her chin in his hand and tilted her face up to his. "Li, our pack is born and bred for this. And as for you, while there's breath in the body of me or my brother, no harm will *ever* come to you. Got that?"

His hazelnut-colored eyes were direct and commanding. They hinted at fierceness and truth. That she could trust them and him.

She nodded, expecting the subject to be dropped. When his thumb brushed across her cheek instead, her heart skidded to an abrupt stop. After it started to beat again, she stared into his handsome face, mesmerized by the draw of his mouth. His lips parted and he leaned closer. The warmth of his breath landed gently upon her.

Oh, Goddess.

From the entrance, she heard Jarod let out a soft whistle. Then, he spoke in his usual quiet, thoughtful manner. “Brother. Now is not the time.”

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she heard what he said. Heard the gentle warning to Ronan. But when he leaned away and dropped his hand from her face, she could have cursed a blue streak. Of course, this wasn’t the time, but Jarod could have waited to interrupt after their lips met. Just one little kiss. Was it so much to ask?

Liana cleared her throat. “I should—I should get started. The sooner we find the book, the sooner we can get back home.” *And then, perhaps, find the right time.*

Ronan nodded. For a brief moment, his attention dropped to her lips. He looked at them as if tempted to throw caution to the winds and dive in for a taste. “Do you need our help?”

“Um, no, thanks.” She shook her head slowly. Criminy. So focused on the way he looked at her, she didn’t understand the question at first. A quick mental rewind and replay forced her to focus.

He dipped his chin. “Good. Jarod and I will keep an eye out for uninvited guests. Call if you need anything.”

“Thanks.”

Fighting weariness, she stood after he left to join his brother. The burning sensation from crossing realms was gone, but her body protested movement of any sort. She was so tired. She needed some rest. Rest on a nice soft bed. Oh yeah. She’d kill for that now.

With a quick glance toward the entrance, she met Ronan’s eyes. In the waning light of the evening, their luminescence shone and highlighted some deep, brooding emotion in them. What was it? Something like...desire?

A blush crept over her cheeks and she dropped her gaze. A nice soft bed and a hunky, naked werewolf in it. She'd kill a horde of demons for *that*.

With a snort to herself, she shook loose the thought. *Focus, woman.*

In quick motions that were as familiar to her as breathing, she cast a small circle around herself. After a brief invocation of the Lord and Lady, she strengthened the circle by asking for their protection. After another quick glance at the brothers, she closed her eyes.

She spoke softly. Her words echoed in the small cave, resulting in a magnification that strengthened the spell. Arms raised, she called on the power of the universe, took it into herself. She waited patiently as it poured into her, filling her being until the tingling of magical power reverberated from her head down through her toes.

Opening her eyes, she mentally directed the crackling white energy to her open palm. Heat, warm and protective, slid over her until it met in the center of her hand. Repeating the phrase of power, she waited until the energy and spell concentrated to its most potent form. There was a loud crack that startled her. She furrowed her eyebrows. This never happened before.

No...This wasn't supposed to happen.

Liana's eyes rolled back and the earth fell out from under her.

* * * *

The scar that split his eyebrow gave him away as soon as she opened her eyes. She liked it on Jarod. He was the silent brooding type, and the particular arch the scar created made him seem as if he remained in perpetual thought.

"What happened?" she asked. Although he held her in his arms, she realized she was partially stretched out on the cold ground.

"You tell me, witch. You scared the hell out of us when you dropped like a stone." He called over his shoulder. "She's awake."

Her head throbbed. Good Lady, it hurt. What happened? One minute, she was absorbing some of the power of the universe and then in the next, she was out like a light.

Then, a flash of memory startled her. This happened when Ava cast a spell with Aaron. When Jenna cast a spell around Vince too. Both witches passed out or something like it when the men who would become their mates had been around.

The blood drained from her face.

Both Ronan and Jarod had been standing a few feet away when she tried to cast a spell. What exactly did *that* mean?

“You’re sure you’re all right?” Jarod kept his hand on her shoulder, his body wedged tight against hers.

She reviewed herself for any injuries. When she found none, she sighed. As much as she enjoyed the feel of his hard lines—maybe enjoyed just a tad bit too much—she needed to get up. Her hand itched like crazy, which meant the spell had worked, despite the interruption. She held open her palm to show him. “See the arrow there? It points the way to the book. We need to go. I’m fine, really.”

“Christ,” he muttered. He pulled her hand closer. “That’s freaky. You see that?”

Ronan dropped into a crouch next to her. She hadn’t heard his approach. His eyebrows arched as he looked at her hand too. “Does it hurt, Li?”

“Not at all.” She wiggled her fingers to emphasize the point.

“How does it work?”

“Like a compass. We just have to follow the direction it points to. Simple magic, really.”

Jarod traced the black, shimmering line with a finger. Ronan moved in closer when it shifted under the movement.

Watching them, a whisper of a smile formed on Liana’s lips. If the two men could detach her hand and walk away with it to observe it under closer study, they would be as happy as pigs in mud. They were utterly fascinated by the magic she weaved. Later, she would have to figure out why she reacted to the spell the way she had, but right now, they had other things to focus on.

“C’m on, guys. It won’t last forever,” she said. “We really need to move.”

Ronan flashed a smile that could thaw ice, then nodded. He stood and walked to the cavern entrance. His brother squeezed her shoulder. When Jarod assisted her to standing, he held her hand just a little longer than necessary. She cocked her eyebrow at him when he didn't drop it, only to receive a cool look in return. His thumb stroked her palm in an erotic gesture. The soft touch sent a bolt of electricity straight to her heart. Just as her pulse picked up its beat, he stroked once more and let go.

Heavens above. She really needed to redouble her attention now.

She opened her palm, ignoring the streaks of sizzling heat where Jarod touched her. The arrow pointed toward a line of shadows that covered the horizon. Liana took a deep breath, swallowed and followed. The werewolves remained at her back, only a few feet behind.

After about an hour of dragging her feet through the dry, dusty silt, she vowed to pick up a gym membership when they got out of this mess. Being considered a bit Rubenesque never before bothered her. But then, her most strenuous activity involved running from sale to sale at the mall. Now, sweat poured from her brow, flattening the blonde curls around her forehead against her overheated skin.

Ronan kept a steady pace, his breathing even and unlabored. One hand rested on the blade at his side, while he walked with an easy grace.

"Where's Jarod?" Liana turned to find him, but Ronan's hand shot out to grasp her elbow before she completed the move.

He growled softly before speaking in a low voice. "Don't. Don't look for him."

She'd wondered why Ronan had moved to her side. Perhaps a bit of conceit convinced her that he wanted to be closer to her. In retrospect, the obvious struck like lightning.

He moved closer for her protection.

"What's wrong?" She tried to appear casual, but an underlying tremor reflected in her words.

"We're being followed."

She knew it. She knew it. *She knew it.*

Casting the spell had been a colossally bad idea. They were like a band of peacocks trying to hide themselves in a black and

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white field. When she cast the spell, they might as well have spread their tail feathers for the world to see.

Chapter Three

Keeping her eyes trained ahead took all of her focus. She hissed, “So what do we do?”

“Nothing. We walk. Just follow the direction of the arrow.”

She almost stopped short. That’s it? Walk? Something in the demon realm was following them and her fierce werewolf warrior protector wanted to continue their stroll like it was Sunday afternoon in the park?

He gave her a sideways glance and his mouth twitched with amusement. “You seem, uh, perplexed by my instructions.”

“Yeah. Just a little.” Every urge in her body wanted her to look around. To find Jarod. To see if she could spot their follower.

Ronan sighed dramatically. He threw his head back, clutching his chest with a fist. “Sarcasm from such a pretty mouth is like a shot to my heart.”

Liana rolled her eyes, but found herself smiling anyway. The smile slid away when she noticed the way Ronan rolled his head over his shoulders, as if working out the kinks. His eyes hardened during the movement, no doubt taking in their surroundings in a single visual sweep. He kept his right hand near his blade through it all.

“Ronan?” she asked in a whisper. “Should I be scared?”

He stopped walking, and spun her to face him. She raised her eyes to meet his, to stare into the depths of his being. In a move so similar to his brother’s, she thought for an instant she relived the same moment, Ronan stroked his thumb across her cheek. “No. We will protect you, *always*, Liana.”

With a quick incline of his head, he stepped away. After a moment’s hesitation, she followed.

The two brothers were so similar and yet so different. Looking beyond their mesmerizing chocolate-colored eyes and

dark hair gelled within an inch of its life, the tall, lanky bodies and chiseled lines, the werewolves still called to her. Ronan, quick to smile, was younger, but the leader. Jarod kept his thoughts to himself, always pensive. One promised a good time, the other a stimulating conversation. Both suggested in spoken and unspoken languages of *more*.

The minutes passed as they continued their trek. When Ronan did nothing which hinted at increasing danger, she relaxed a little. She couldn't help being concerned for Jarod, but she had to trust the brothers knew what they were doing. He'd said they were born and bred for this. The reassurances from both that they would protect her strengthened her resolve. Besides, she was a witch. A formidable one in her own right. If something came after them, she wouldn't be helpless. Terrified, yes, but not helpless.

Glancing at her hand, she verified their heading. Already the black arrow was fading from sight. In a few more hours, it would be gone and she would have to recast the spell.

"Run."

Shaken from her thoughts, Liana looked up. "What?"

Ronan grabbed her hand, picking up the pace. "Run!"

They were in another realm. Inevitably surrounded by demons. She didn't know where they would be running to, but if a werewolf said to run, she was going to run, damn it. The only problem was she wasn't a runner. Bless him, Ronan kept her pace.

At the same moment she heard more feet pounding next to theirs, the arrow in her hand began to tingle with an intensity that was both new and unexpected.

Ronan called out, "How many?"

"About a dozen now," Jarod said.

She couldn't reflect on where he'd come from. Out of breath, she could only point at the structure coming into view ahead of them. Bulky and lacking elegance, it typified everything else they'd seen of this place. If she had to guess, Liana figured it to be some sort of fortress. Another quick glance at the arrow showed it to be where they needed to go.

If Ronan hadn't been pulling her along, she would have stopped when she looked up again. Squinting, she peered at what

she thought she'd seen. The building seemed to be moving. Not the building itself, but the walls. They were fluid, in motion.

Goose bumps broke out over her flesh.

The walls weren't moving. The demons crawling over them were.

"Oh shit," Ronan muttered. He slowed to the stop she desperately craved.

Panting, she followed the werewolves' lead. They backed into each other until they formed a sort of circle. Jarod held his curved blade in hand, his attention focused on the creatures creeping up from behind. Ronan faced forward where the demons crawling over the walls began to drop to the ground, one by one.

She had to end this. Even under better circumstances, they couldn't hope to survive these odds. This was not their moment to fight. They would have it. Just not now.

"We're leaving guys. Now."

Later on, she would realize the spell she cast at that moment was the fastest she'd ever worked in her life.

* * * *

Debriefing Aaron and Ava was their first priority. At least now they knew where the Book of Shadows was being kept. They only had to figure out how to get it. Thankfully, that was a decision for the couple and Ava's grandmother, the coven's high priestess, to make.

Once informing them of what had happened was done, Liana's next priority demanded that she take a shower and crawl into bed, where perhaps she would spend the next several weeks recuperating.

When her head hit the pillow, she groaned loud enough for someone in the next neighborhood over to hear. Even her eyelashes hurt. If anyone managed to pry her out of bed in the morning, it would be under threat of violence. Nothing on earth could feel as good as laying there did. Her eyelids fluttered closed with that thought on her mind. A lazy, contented smile still curved her lips.

The massaging hand on her ankle startled her awake.

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Yanking her leg out of the way, she hissed, "Goddess!"

"I'm sorry, Li. Didn't mean to startle you."

"Ronan?" This made the third time in under a week that her heart officially stopped. She clutched her heaving chest weakly.

What time was it?

"I wanted to make certain you were okay."

She located the clock and grimaced at the digital display. At least he'd allowed her a few hours of rest before scaring the tar out of her.

"I'm fine. At least, I was," she muttered. Shaking off grumpiness, she exhaled loudly. "Are you okay?"

"We're fine."

"J-Jarod?"

If she wasn't awake before, the knowledge that both brothers stood in her bedroom jolted the sleep away. She reached for the lamp, but a soft grunt made her pause.

"You might be more comfortable in the dark."

She squinted into the shadows where Jarod stood. "More comfortable for what?"

"Us."

The rapid-fire thumping of her heart reassured her that it didn't stop this time. She had no idea what he intended his answer to mean, but the soft suggestive way he said it left little to the imagination. But...

Nah.

It couldn't be that.

"Ronan, I'm not certain about...I don't think...I-I..."

The bed dipped under the weight of one of the men. A slow, sensual massage of her ankle resumed.

"Ronan?"

"Shhh, little witch."

"Jarod," she breathed.

The hand on her ankle danced over her flesh with masterful skill. When another hand massaged over her other ankle, she fell back against the pillow. The bed dipped as the other man joined them.

Damn her faulty heart, it began to skip beats as the men worked in sync over her lower legs. She tried to relax through it, but the word 'us' kept echoing in her mind. What did that mean?

That they thought she was easy. That's what.

"Stop," she cried.

As if she flipped a switch, the massage on both legs stopped abruptly. Liana drew her knees to her chest, regretting her decision to leave the lamp off. She would have to settle for the men hearing the ire in her voice rather than seeing it on her face. Then again, with their heightened senses, perhaps they could see her just fine. She said, "I don't know what it is you think you're doing."

"Only what you would allow from us."

Frowning, she said, "So, if I said you're allowed to do nothing, you'd leave?"

Jarod replied, "If that's what you wanted."

She wasn't so certain how much she believed that. This kind of stuff didn't happen. Not to her. "Do you always share women?"

"No," Ronan said. "We don't share as a rule. But, we are bound to share our mate."

Whoa. "Ex-excuse me?" she choked out.

"If you would have us," Jarod amended.

"Fellas..." The words to adequately describe her shock, horror and hell, smugness, left her.

Mate?

"Don't decide now, Li. Please."

Mate?

Try though she might, she couldn't find the energy either to be angry or upset. All she could feel was flattered. All this time, she'd been agonizing over how to choose one brother over the other. For nothing, it seemed.

Mate.

"Would it be okay if we stayed the night?" Ronan asked. He quickly added, "Above the covers, even."

She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment before answering. If they didn't mind hearing her saw logs, why should she care? She was confident in their intentions. Hers were eerily similar.

Goddess, what a decision to make. If she acquiesced, it might hint that she was considering them both.

Then again...

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She was.

Liana sighed. She was too tired to wrestle with a decision about the future now. “I’m going to sleep guys and I’m too tired to care if you stay or go. If you stay, it doesn’t have to be above the covers, but the first person to hog them gets kicked out.”

She settled into the bed, closing her eyes. True to her word, sleep claimed her before the two men could completely climb in.

Chapter Four

In the haziness of sleep, she realized warm bodies pressed in on her from both sides. Both of them were long, lean and—Good Lord and Lady—naked!

Wait a minute.

“What the...”

“Good morning, little witch. Rested now?” Her shock over her discovery died away as she stared into Jarod’s sleepy morning eyes. His mouth was curved into a sexy grin making her again recognize the extent to which he was sinfully good looking.

“Hey,” she whispered. Thank the heavens she slept on her stomach. She looked down at the cleavage almost spilling out. “Care to explain?”

“You mumbled something about being hot last night.” Ronan’s raspy voice sent a tingle down her length. His warm lips swept over her shoulder. “Comfortable now?”

She’d really have to look into the price of a pacemaker. Blood roared in her ears, her pulse throbbed mercilessly. She could scarcely breathe. And he wanted to know if she was comfortable?

“How’d you manage to take off my clothes without waking me up?”

He dropped another kiss on her shoulder. “With a little skill.”

Nimble fingers traveled over her other shoulder, then learned the curve of her back. She didn’t want to arch into the touch; she was supposed to be indignant. But heavens, at that moment, she could have purred. Like his brother, Jarod definitely had skill.

“How about it? Every morning,” he mumbled against her neck. “Every morning could be just like this when you woke

up.” His teeth nipped a sweet spot; thrill morphed into a shiver. “We would pleasure you until you begged us to stop.”

“Until you screamed our names.” Ronan attacked from the other side. “We would make you come from the touch of our hands...”

“From the strokes of our tongues...”

“On your breasts...”

“Between your thighs...”

“Until you begged, Li. Until you begged us to stop.”

What a way to wake up.

Goddess.

Words caught in her throat. What woman with a pulse could turn this down? Still, what did it say about her? What would others say? It was too damned early in the morning to think.

When she tried to speak, her voice wavered. “Both of you?”

“Both of us, little witch.” The sheet dragged down her back, over her buttocks. The cool room air tickled her skin. “Let us show you this one time.”

“No promises,” Ronan said.

“No regrets,” Jarod finished.

The half-whimper, half-moan she made seemed enough to encourage them to explore. She closed her eyes and lost herself to the feel of lips traveling over her shoulders. Hands kneading her sides. The occasional flick of a tongue trailing over her curves. Fingers tracing over her ass.

Someone found her mouth, branding a molten kiss there. Her hair was tossed over her shoulders, making room for teeth to bite. Hot breath to tease.

Shocked, wanton, she gave in. Begged with soft sighs. Her fingers curled into the bed sheets, pulled at them with desperation. Between her thighs ached with need. Screamed impatience.

They touched, learned her. Found the ticklish spots. Lingered on the sweet ones.

By the time gentle hands turned her, she was weightless. Floating on a cloud of pleasure with no intention of coming down.

Liana heard a sharp inhale and her eyes flew open. With a flush of embarrassment, she crossed her arms over her breasts.

Pulled her legs together. If only at that moment she could flatten her stomach and hide the imperfections of her roundness.

"I need to lose a little weight," she mumbled.

"Christ, no." Ronan brought his darkened eyes up to meet hers. He entwined his fingers in hers, tugging insistently until she could no longer cover herself.

"Women these days are too obsessed with being thin," Jarod said. The moment her hands left her body, he stroked over her. "Women are meant to be soft. Curvaceous."

Ronan's eyes softened as he gazed down on her. "This... *you*, are..."

"Fucking beautiful." Jarod's words came out on a hushed breath.

Her eyes misted and she had to look away. Both men watched her with something like awe in their expressions. Their raw hunger seemed barely contained. They honestly and truly desired her.

Ronan pushed her hands above her head, capturing them both with his. The firm grip encircled her wrists, pinning her in place beneath him.

"Look at me."

A single tear escaped as she faced him. His eyebrows knotted together before he dipped his head, pressing his mouth to hers. He probed her mouth with his tongue, teasing her until she opened to him fully. He devoured her then, insatiable.

She arched her back, moaning into him. Jarod's mouth found her neck, peppering burning kisses over her. He draped an arm across her waist, holding her down as he pulled on her breast.

Then he was moving down. Over her stomach. Further down.

Moans melted into gasps of pleasure against Ronan's mouth. He held her wrists with one hand, the other searching. Finding. Kneading.

She had the vague thought that she would die. Just explode from the exhaustive bliss of it. Identical men. Identical desires. Hers until she couldn't stand it anymore.

Warm breath blew on the slick moisture between her thighs. When Jarod closed his mouth over her pussy, every nerve ending

seemed to start and end there. Her hips bucked under him, her muscles tensing in sweet agony. He licked over her. Long, broad strokes that sent tremor after tremor racing over her legs and trapped arms. With a tight grasp, he held her down. Forced her to live through the torment.

Ronan released her mouth, allowing her to cry out. Each gasp, each little scream a result of Jarod working over her.

Slices of pain topped her breasts. Delicious aches from Ronan's pinching and pulling. His teeth scraped over the tips. The pink areolas darkened as he rolled and manipulated.

Then Jarod was at her mouth. His tongue battled with hers. The tang of her own moisture flooded her senses. The heady scent mixed with him, with the lingering spiciness of his faded cologne.

Between her legs, pleasure exploded again. This time, from short flicks of Ronan's tongue as he excited her clit. He moved lower until he could push inside of her, until he found the center of her moisture. Each short thrust pushed her higher, closer to the edge.

He clamped down on her clit, again and in a sweep of emotion so ecstatic, so agonizing, she arched against him. Against his brother.

And she screamed.

They eased her down gently. Delicate nibbles. Gentle swipes of their tongues. Brief caresses from their fingertips. Throughout, she trembled. Her racing heart slowed. Her breath came in hitching gasps until it too, eventually settled.

Goddess.

Every morning, they promised.

She was certain she would never survive it.

* * * *

The smile that split her face would be a dead give away. Liana tried to force it away. Tried to focus on fixing the three of them breakfast while they waited for the others to awaken. If she glanced at Jarod, heat flared in his eyes. If she caught Ronan's stare, he gave her a salacious grin. Either way, she blushed from head to toe.

Ava once complained that the house had thin walls. Not that there could be, but if anyone had the slightest doubt about what transpired during the early morning hours, between her blush and her smile, the jig would be up.

Lying in bed, still aglow, she thought they would want more. When they both left the bed sporting raging erections that made her eyes widen, she was confused. They'd been selfless, something she expected, but not always received from a lover. To have been satisfied by them both and for them to go no further, baffled her. Maybe disappointed her too.

The men clothed in silence, behaving as if nothing unusual had recently transpired. She followed their lead by saying nothing. Jarod glanced at her then. The look on her face must have given her away.

He sat down on the bed to clasp her hand in his. "We're not going anywhere, little witch," he said. "That was for you. Should you decide to accept us both, we want you to be very certain first. It's not something that just any woman can do. Okay?"

Looking into those rich eyes, she nodded. Then, with a start, realized she also relaxed. As much as she enjoyed their attention, the idea of *two* of them haunted her.

Still...

Now, as she flipped the eggs sizzling in the pan, she had to wipe away another smile.

Chapter Five

She sat next to Ava as they waited for Mayda to arrive. Werewolves lined the walls, most of them tense, with a ready hand not far away from their signature curved blades. The first time the two groups had come together, they'd fought demons. Despite the spell of protection cast on the house, both sides remained prepared for more inevitable encounters.

"So," Ava said by way of a conversation starter, her voice low. She leaned conspiratorially next to Liana. "You were up early this morning."

Even if her back hadn't stiffened, she couldn't hide the red heat flooding her face. "I'm an early riser," Liana replied, doing her level best to keep her tone neutral.

The droll look Ava flashed her implied a lot. "Liana Everton, you know exactly what I mean. The room you're staying in shares a wall with mine, remember?"

Crap.

The next time the world was about to end and only a coven of witches with their werewolf protectors could save it, she would be certain not to camp out at headquarters. There was nothing wrong with her quiet, albeit small apartment an hour away.

"Aaron told me what happens with twins. What's expected. Is it true?"

Double crap.

"Aaron knows?" As soon as she voiced the question, she mentally answered herself and slumped in her chair. Of course, Aaron knew. He was the pack's alpha as well as Ava's mate. If she'd been in the room and heard them, with his heightened hearing, he would have heard too. Besides, there was a possibility Ronan and Jarod *had* to tell him of their intentions. Who knew what the pack's rules required?

Ava touched Liana's arm. "Listen, honey, I just want your happiness. I'm being horribly nosey because it's so unusual. Truthfully, I don't care who makes you happy, so long as you are. You know...The whole rule of three thing?"

Yeah, she knew all about the tenet of witchcraft. Whatever energy she put out into the universe, good or bad, came back to her threefold.

She sighed. "I haven't...at least, not all the way. They want me to be sure."

"How do you feel about it?" Ava's brown eyes searched hers.

"I don't know."

"Whatever you do, don't *think* about it. Trust your heart. It knows what to do, I promise."

She realized Ava's attention wavered at the end of the statement. Following the direction of her gaze, she saw Aaron had walked into the room. Somehow, Liana had the feeling even if he wasn't a six-foot-four brute of a man, Ava would have found him in a crowded mall with a single glance. She wondered briefly if she had that look in her eyes when the twins entered a room.

Or if they looked at her like that when she did.

After a small pat to her arm, Ava stood and walked to the head of the table. Mayda arrived a moment later, and everyone took their seats.

"We have a decision to make," Mayda announced. She swept the room with her gaze, almost measuring each person as she looked at him or her directly. "We know where the Book of Shadows is now."

"Assuming they haven't moved it," Aaron interrupted.

She frowned. "I don't think they would move it. Face it, it's pretty well protected, a) in the demon realm, and b) in a demon fortress. Only the foolhardy would go after it."

"Then call me a fool." Vince, the pack's lieutenant, grinned.

Try as she might, Liana couldn't get into the conversation that ensued. All she could focus on were the two spiked-hair men camped out on opposite ends of the room. No matter at what interval, the one she peered at seemed to know when she would chance a peek at him. Their eyes would meet and she'd receive a

covert and knowing smile or wink in return. It was almost as if they were already in tune. As if they knew her thoughts.

At one point, her body betrayed her with a sudden flash of memory of how the two men felt touching her. She gave up *all* hopes of focusing on coven business at that point.

She chewed a thumbnail, glancing at Ava and Aaron, before looking at both Jenna and Vince. The couples seemed drawn together from the very start. The same as it had been with her and the twins. Almost attached at the hip from the beginning.

Could she do it? Could she defy tradition and involve herself willingly with both brothers?

Goddess above...why not?

She smiled broadly, willing the meeting to be over so that she could go to them. Let them know what she decided.

Excited, when her hands began to tingle, she almost ignored it.

“And...” Mayda stopped speaking mid-sentence. Her mouth firmed into a thin line. She stood at the same time Liana recognized the charge in the air for what it was.

Liana’s chair toppled over when she jumped to her feet. “Protect Ava!”

Aaron rose swiftly, pulling his blade out of its sheath as he stood next to her. Two additional werewolves moved in closer to them. Men standing guard at the two exits to the room shifted. In wolf form, they sniffed the air, as if trying to gauge the threat level.

Liana stood immobile, trying to ascertain what needed to be done next. There was magic in the air. Strong magic.

Stronger than hers without a doubt.

They had to protect the coven’s princess. Ava held the key to banishing demons from this realm permanently. As the thirteenth princess in a long line of High Priestesses, she alone had the capability.

Where was the threat though? Ava’s cousin, Dina, would be behind any attempts on Ava’s life or disruptions to the coven. But where was she? The magic had to be hers. Liana had never felt magic as potent as this in her life.

Another thought struck her.

The tools! Where were the tools?

Ava's collection of magical tools would be of utmost importance to Dina, too. So far, she had a powerful black athame, her grandmother's chalice and she wore a familial pentacle on a chain around her neck. The coven worked on weaving her cord. Of course, Dina still possessed the Book of Shadows.

Liana headed to the stairwell. She called to Ava, "Where is the athame? And the chalice?"

"My room. Spellbound."

She nodded to herself. That was good. Protected by magic, the tools would be a little more difficult to take. Still, she wanted to be near them. Just in case.

A low growl sounded behind her as she reached the top of the stairs. She stole a quick glance over her shoulder to find Jarod on her heels.

"Thanks," she huffed.

Witch had to face witch. But demons could be taken out by a werewolf. Even if he couldn't help, his presence alone flooded her with relief.

Taking the steps two at a time, he acknowledged her with only a brief nod, his attention focused on their surroundings. Liana reached Ava's room first. She threw open the door, pausing only once she'd crossed the threshold. Blood drained from her face when she stood face to face with Dina.

Dina stilled. Her stance widened as her blue eyes measured Liana and her mouth quirked into a bittersweet smile. "Liana. So good to see you."

"Dina." She tried to calm her racing heart. Tried to settle her breath, even as she panted for air. Running up the stairs had taken more out of her than she'd thought possible. Encountering Dina exacerbated the effect.

She raised a hand and examined her fingernails, frowning when she encountered one she didn't appear to like. The white glow enveloping her hand couldn't be missed. "I'm going to end this, Liana." She paused to look into her eyes. "You need to decide what you're going to do. Either you're part of the solution, or you're part of the problem."

Fear surged through her at the finality of the words. She needed to do something now because without a doubt, Dina

meant business. First, where was Jarod? He had to stay out of the way. Her attention couldn't be divided between both him and Dina.

A fleeting glance to the doorway eased her concern somewhat. Red light surrounding the paneling glowed ominously. Jarod in wolf form paced the entrance, blocked from the room by magic. The snapping of his jaws and the curl of his mouth indicated his barking and snarling, but no sound traveled across the barrier. For all intents and purposes, she was on her own.

What to do, now? In the small room if either witch unleashed bolts of energy, they'd all be toast. That really didn't give her much choice.

Thinking quickly, Liana circled the room, energy sparking from her fingertips. Dina parried with her, her attention never wavering. A single cast out word from either of them could ignite a firestorm.

Liana had no intention of it coming to that. When she neared the small alter showcasing Ava's tools, she broke through the spell barrier and hurled the chalice at the doorway. Before it landed next to Jarod, she grabbed the athame with the intent of throwing it still in mind. With a bone-chilling grin, Dina stiffened when her hand wrapped around the double-edged knife. Dina snapped her fingers then and the room spun.

Clenching her eyes shut, Liana searched her mind for a spell to end the vertigo. Tried to determine what havoc Dina wreaked. Then a familiar burning sensation enveloped her like a cloud. When she opened her eyes, her breath caught in her throat.

She was standing in a darkened room, demons closing in from all sides.

Chapter Six

She was sure, later, when she tried to imagine it from their perspectives, the chaos that erupted in the expansive kitchen would make perfect sense. When she landed though, her entire body lit with pain and covered in blood, the flurry of people only added to her disorientation. Her chest hurt thoroughly and each agonizing breath threatened to be her last.

“Liana!” someone shrieked. It might have been Ava, but the voice was drowned by others’ in the room.

Doubled-over, she heard the horrified cries of ‘demon’. Growls and snarls from werewolves echoed over the voices. She tried to catch her breath. Tried to get them to stop.

“St—” She gasped weakly. The words wouldn’t come. Had to say them. Had to get them to understand.

She knew what it looked like. Drenched in blood, a demon by her side, she knew what it must have looked like to them. Still, she couldn’t catch her breath. The hurt paralyzed her when she needed to speak the most.

“Stop.” Her lips finally formed the word. But her voice, weak, couldn’t be heard over the cries of the others.

Goddess, help her. She needed them to stop. To hear her. She made it back from the demon realm intact, so they needed to listen.

Then Ronan was holding her tight. So tired, she wanted to collapse against him. She couldn’t. Not now.

She tried to push away from him. Tried to force him to hear her. To understand. But the pain still gripped her, keeping her captive.

The demon shrieked and her heart sank. A roar of fury blasted the room, followed by a growl so ominous her blood chilled. The demon shrieked again, agony reverberating in every pulse.

Liana pulled away from Ronan long enough to see the pure rage on Jarod's face. He held the demon against the wall by the neck, his bare hand crushing its throat. When the blade of his knife glinted, she cried out.

"Please," she pleaded. She pointed at the demon struggling beneath Jarod. "Stop, Ro-Ronan. St-stop!"

He paid no attention to her, and instead struggled with her to take her away from the room. Only the determination that the demon would not be harmed gave her the strength to resist him.

"Are you all right? Jesus, Li, where are you hurt?" His hands grazed over her, searching, no doubt, for the source of the blood. Then he grabbed her again, crushing her against him. "Jesus, Li."

The demon loosed a blood-curdling scream this time. When she could catch a glimpse, she saw Jarod's curved blade buried deep in its chest, near its shoulder. Tears stung her eyes as she tried again to get Ronan's full attention. "Ronan...please!"

He began to drag her away again, his hands slipping on the blood covering her wrists. Behind them, Jarod's growling words to the demon were distinctive. "You fucking dare to take what is *mine* from me? You fucking dare..."

"No, Ronan! The blood. It's not mine!" she said frantically. The words coming easier. "Please, listen."

Goddess, why wasn't he listening? His face knotted with confusion as if he were trying to understand, but it wouldn't be soon enough. Jarod would kill the demon if she didn't do something. Horrified, even now she watched him wrench the blade free, then poise to bring it down on the demon again.

She twisted free of Ronan's grasp, pushing past the people standing between her and Jarod. In the act of a desperate woman, she threw herself at him before the blade could complete its descent.

"Jarod, look at me!" She slid between him and the demon, blocking as much of the creature as she could with her body. "Look at me. I'm fine, I promise you. It saved me. It saved me!"

The rage still shone in his eyes, but a bit of the madness that fueled it started to relinquish its hold on him. He panted as if exhausted and she noticed the gashes across his neck. The open wound poured freely. Without thinking, Liana chanted a quick

spell of healing, placing her hand across it. Warmth spread from her palm, pouring out of her fingertips. By the time she lifted her hand, the energy dissipated and the wound was gone.

Liana stared at him, waiting for him to see her. Really see her. See that she was here and all right. She couldn't tend to the demon now because her priority had to be to the coven and the werewolf pack. Even though it saved her life, it was still a demon. Besides, it attacked one of the men she loved, regardless if it acted in self-defense. If the demon had severed an artery, if she hadn't been able to close Jarod's wound...

She shuddered at the incomplete thought.

"Liana?" Her name sounded strangled on his lips. As if he didn't dare believe she stood before him.

She stroked across his cheek again. "I'm here, Jarod. It saved me from Dina." How could she have forgotten? "And look what else it did."

He didn't allow her the chance to show him. His hands grasped her shoulders, and he drew her close. Anger in his eyes flared again as his gaze raked over her. His lip curved into a snarl. "Is this your blood?"

His fingers dug into her arms, an instant reminder of his strength. Of who he was. For a split second, she didn't know whether to be awed or afraid. His grip tightened and fear surged. "Is this *your blood*?" he repeated. Each word singed the air.

"Brother."

Ronan spoke so softly, she barely heard him over the pounding of her heart. The single word's effect was instantaneous, though. Jarod released her, his face haunted, as if he now realized what he had done. Might do. As a werewolf protecting his mate, he looked for any excuse to kill those he deemed responsible for her harm.

In those moments, the Jarod she knew was lost to her.

Steeling her nerves, Liana took a shuddering breath. "We have the Book of Shadows back. The athame, too. Because of that demon."

That's what she'd tried to tell him. What she'd forgotten to show everyone when she arrived. In her haste to protect the demon who saved her, she didn't get the chance to show

everyone the tide had turned. That the witches now regained control.

Aaron placed a hand on Jarod's shoulder. "Tend to your woman, Jarod. We'll take care of everything else here."

She glanced around the room, meeting the eager eyes of some of the werewolves. If she left the injured demon unprotected with them, they would be sure to 'take care' of it, all right. Calling to Selena, she said, "He's under my protection, Selena. Care for him. Please!"

Ronan slid a hand over her back and beneath her knees. When she tilted toward him, he picked her up bodily to hustle her out of the room. Not before she saw Selena's nod.

* * * *

"Strip."

She set her jaw, crossed her arms and stared in stony silence at Jarod. Now that the testosterone and adrenaline in everyone had diminished, she wanted an apology. His He-Man behavior was inexcusable. She would be sporting bruises on her arms that *he'd* left there for weeks. His eyes narrowed into slits, his teeth audibly grinding. He slipped past her, reaching into the shower to turn on the spray.

She cocked an eyebrow at Ronan who watched them both, wide-eyed. The look she gave him said *Get your brother or I will*. How dare he order her around, demanding that she strip? What gave him the right?

She didn't need this macho crap. Not from either of them. She could take care of herself. Didn't need a man—worse, two men—going all possessive on her at a moment's notice. Yes, there was that little blip when she'd been taken to the demon realm, but she'd come back and alive and well. No thanks to either of them, she might add.

Probably the most disappointing of it all was that it was Jarod who went ballistic. She almost expected it from Ronan. The latter brother wore his emotions on his sleeve. He never disguised how he felt. Jarod, on the other hand...Jarod was the quiet brother. The calm brother. The voice of reason.

The one who, when tested, ultimately snapped.

Maybe that was the universe's way of telling her that she didn't know these men. Not well enough to become their mate. Maybe her decision to join them had been too hasty. Despite what Ava advised, maybe she needed to think more with her head and less with her heart. Otherwise, look at what she might have gotten herself into.

"Li, please." Ronan's soothing voice snapped her out of her thoughts. "You need to wash that stuff off. I'll help you, okay?"

His use of the singular didn't escape her. It was probably the first time she'd heard either of them not refer to the other.

Jarod stepped back to lean against the sink. He crossed his arms over his chest, studying her. The scar splitting his eyebrow made him appear even more menacing than the scowl on his face. Ronan positioned himself in between them, cutting off the sight that threatened to kick her blood pressure into overdrive.

Jarod said, "I'll get some more towels." He left the small bathroom, closing the door behind him.

"I'll be right back," Ronan muttered. He opened and closed the door, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

When he left, she caught a glimpse of herself in the vanity mirror and almost gasped. She looked like death warmed over. Twice. For a split second, she empathized with Jarod's reaction. Could see why he'd been so concerned. Still, it was no excuse for his behavior.

With a shudder of revulsion, she peeled the sticky blouse over her head. She used it to swipe away the excess moisture on her face. Her stomach clenched at the coppery smell. Swallowing several times, she suppressed waves of nausea. She just had to remind herself that it wasn't her blood...it wasn't her blood.

As she bent to remove her pants, she overheard the tail end of a conversation between the brothers outside the door. Jarod's words were muffled, barely audible. He said something about the demon downstairs, but she couldn't distinguish what might have been said.

Ronan, closer it seemed, was easier to understand. "All I know is that you're pushing her away from us. *Fix it, J.* I don't want to lose her."

Liana took a few steps back as the doorknob turned moments later. Ronan came inside, several large towels in hand. Without acknowledging his presence, she removed the remaining clothes. Never wanting to touch them again, she'd make certain they became bonfire fuel.

Ronan said nothing at first. When she was naked and about to get inside of the shower, he sighed. "People expect more out of him than they do me." She turned to look at him. He kept his head down as he spoke. "Part of it, I guess, is because it takes more to rattle him than it does me. But when it does..." He looked up, smiling ruefully. "Watch out. Let him cool down and then tell him—us—what happened, Li. We were worried for you and helpless to do anything. You have no idea."

There was pain in his eyes. Obvious hurting. Arms open, she went to him. He pulled her into his embrace and she let herself relax into him. She could understand the overwhelming helplessness of not being able to do anything. When she realized where she was, what Dina had done, she'd been terrified. Thinking about the brothers and what they would have done helped her get through some of it. The unexpected aid of the demon got her through the rest.

Ronan relaxed his hold on her when warm arms embraced her from behind. Even though she hadn't heard him slip in, she would recognize his touch anywhere. Jarod's breath was hot against her neck as he spoke. His words bitter. "We promised to protect you...I was supposed to protect you, little witch and I didn't. I-I'm so sorry."

Guilt? That's why he behaved so abrasively? Guilt that he did nothing when Dina transported her away? Goddess, what could he have done?

Wrapping her arms across his, she leaned back until her head rested against his chest. She murmured, "Jarod, none of this is your fault. I'm alive and well." Her grip tightened. "We'll get past what's happened because we have to. Just remember, I'm here now, wanting to be with you. Needing to be with you...both."

He held her tighter, his body trembling against hers. Rock solid, Ronan pushed himself against her too. Her throat clenched against a surge of emotions as she accepted them both. Anger,

then relief, forgiveness, a smidge of pride and to her surprise, love.

They would all deal with the scare in their own ways. Ronan needed to talk. Jarod needed to lash out. And Liana? She didn't have to think long or hard about it.

At that moment, she needed to be cherished.

Sniffing once, she smiled. "Let's get into the shower guys. Then..."

She let the question hang in the air. Something told her they'd know what to do.

Chapter Seven

Probably because they hadn't taken full advantage of the privacy in the shower, not when she'd clearly given them the invitation, was why Liana burned in a fever now. Instead of the slow, seductive caresses she expected from them, they washed her efficiently. Almost clinically. Stumped, she stood by as they then cleaned the residual blood she'd left on them. When they were all done, Ronan held out a hand to help her out of the shower. His wink put the smile back on her face.

Wrapped in nothing but a towel and their smiles, they encountered Ava and Jenna in the hallway as they headed into the bedroom. The two witches exchanged a subtle nudge with their elbows before spinning in an abrupt about-face down the stairwell.

Let them think what they wanted. She had her men. Didn't want to be any place else but in their arms. Was about to prove that to them too.

Her smile broadened.

She followed them into the room, her body already humming in anticipation. From where she walked behind them, she caught glimpses of water glistening as it slid down their broad backs. Ronan's towel rode low on his defined hips, the view teasing. Jarod's towel threatened to unravel at a whisper. Her hands clenched her own towel like a lifeline, her mind urging her to be patient. Just a few more steps to go.

As soon as she shut the door, Jarod whirled and was on her. He slanted his mouth over hers, growling like a beast possessed. The breath rushed from her as he pressed against her, his need urgent and hungry. His hands searched beneath her towel, pushed it out of the way. Rough, greedy, he traveled over her body with his hands. Explored her mouth. Pulled her to him. Rubbed against her. Every ounce of him hard and ready.

The door behind her left her no place to go. She could only yield to Jarod. To his insistent lips. His probing hands. Her towel gave up under the assault, sliding to the floor without much of a fight.

She panted by the time he pulled away. His eyes were almost the color of midnight as he scanned her face. She barely caught her breath before he leaned forward again, muttering against her mouth words she couldn't distinguish. At one point, she heard 'ours', but the blood pouring through her ears drowned everything else out.

Then his kisses slowed. His tongue searched her mouth almost reverently. He kissed her now as if he needed to show her he remained in control. Could tease her into wanting him as much as he needed her.

The thing was, she already knew that.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you earlier," he murmured.

He captured her face between his hands, holding her as his lips worked over her slowly. Seductively. He worshipped at her mouth, then over her neck. Nibbling, biting, tasting. She arched into him, turning her head, inviting him to give more. By the time he pulled away again, she was boneless.

Taking her by the hand, he led them past Ronan. The brothers exchanged a brief look to which Ronan gave a slight nod. Before she could question what just occurred, Jarod was at her mouth again. Leaning into her, directing her onto the bed.

He moved down, trailing hot kisses from the dip at the base of her neck to her breast. With broad strokes, his tongue explored. His mouth scorched. Her breath came in hitching gasps in response to his measured control.

Jarod burned the trail further down, stopping long enough to bite the indent of her bellybutton before continuing on. Beneath hooded eyes, she watched his motions. Saw him pick up his head to capture her eyes with his. They locked stares as his mouth landed on her pussy.

Liana forced herself to focus through the torture on her clit. Forced herself to watch the motion of his head as he worked over her. The way he held her thighs spread before him. Then his tongue dipped inside and she gave in. Her eyes rolled to the back

of her head as she moaned. Her pulse thrilled under his assault, the wet sloppiness of his ministrations amplifying into the air.

By the time he stopped to crawl over her, she shuddered through singing nerve endings. Her vision hazy, she reached for him, pulling him closer. Needed his body on hers. In hers. She needed him to fill her. To complete her.

He made a tsking sound, then dipped down for a kiss. She could have wept when he pulled away again. His voice raspy, he said, "Turn around, little witch. On your knees."

When she turned, he wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her tight against him. His other hand stroked over her breast, teasing the nipple to a heated point. She reached between their bodies, still needing him, whimpering through the ache.

Jarod chuckled. "So impatient."

Liana could only nod as she found his hardness. Her fingers stroked over the length of his cock, and slid through the moisture at the tip. She tilted her hips, positioned him at her entrance. Jarod surged upward and she cried out.

Her thighs were slick against his. He held on to her as he pumped, his body rubbing against the sweet spot inside that made her tremble. Her moans traveled from deep within her chest, rushing to the air each time he pushed against her.

When probing fingers rubbed her clit, her eyes snapped open. Ronan kneeled before her, intensity written on his face. He brought his hand up, sliding his fingers into her gaping mouth. She sucked the digits, tasting herself. His attention was riveted on the motions of her tongue swirling over him, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed hard.

He pulled his fingers away to replace them with his mouth. Liana sucked on his tongue, her teeth scraping him. His slickened fingers rubbed her clit.

Jarod groaned. "She's close."

Ronan pressed his lips harder. His tongue plunged. His hand moved faster. Jarod picked up speed, his thrusts taking her to the very edge and back again. The culmination of sensations, the overload on her system cut off all thought. At that moment, she only knew the two men—one in front and one behind—as they challenged her every nerve.

Her body tensed in lightning fast brilliance and then shuddered uncontrollably as a wave of ecstasy washed over her. Her pussy spasmed around Jarod's pistoning cock. A scream locked in her throat.

Liana didn't know how long she trembled through the orgasm. How long before Ronan slowed. Before Jarod eased himself out of her body. She only knew the welcoming arms of Ronan when he pulled her forward, relieving the ache from her suddenly tired knees. Strong arms hugged her tight, pressing her against his chest.

He held her there, lying on top of him, until her breathing calmed. Until her vision cleared again. When she looked up into his eyes, the sweetest smile she'd ever seen greeted her. He tilted his hips beneath her, his cock finding where it would be welcome. Ronan released a slow hiss through the invasion, pushed forward until she cried out against him. His lips swept over her forehead in a soft caress. "We need you, Li."

She nodded against his neck. She needed them too.

Something cool was poured between her ass cheeks. She tried to turn, but Ronan caught her chin with his strong fingers. He looked into her eyes, speaking to her in a calming hush. "We both need you, Li. This one time—never again if that's what you choose—but this one time, we both need you."

Her heart thundered when the meaning behind his words became clear. Timid, but certain with her decision, she nodded again.

Jarod was gentle, his sure motions comforting. He teased a circle around her anus, the movement seductive and slow. He probed no further, just moved in lazy circles. Within minutes, her hips rocked to his tune. She pushed against Ronan until his cock slid back and forth within her folds, mimicking Jarod's touch.

A shiver crept over her and Jarod inserted one finger. Sliding, rubbing. Her hips still moving with him. The cool lubricant stimulated, the motion of his finger tantalized. Then he slipped another finger inside and Liana moaned.

The men were patient with her. Ronan pumped slowly, whispering encouraging words. Jarod massaged her lower back, easing the tension that built. His fingers never left her body, as

he worked slowly on opening her to him, getting her ready for him. The fear of the unknown left as she gave herself over to them.

Her lovers were her protectors. She could trust them to not hurt her. They were men who would literally die for her. She could do this for them...for all three of them.

In still tender movements, Jarod removed his fingers. He slid his cock through the lubricant on her ass, then steadied himself at her entrance. Liana relaxed, closing her eyes.

Ronan pulled her face to his. As Jarod pushed forward, so did Ronan. Shock, more so than pain, tore through her. She tried to cry out against it, but Ronan was there. Holding her, caressing her, loving her through the pleasurable pressure of their bodies stretching her until a hoarse cry finally escaped. Their lips brushed against each other in slow drugging kisses. When she thought she could stand it no more, Jarod's pelvis pressed against her.

The overwhelming feeling of fullness and completion cast a spell on Liana. She could only tremble from overwrought nerves.

"Hold on, baby," Ronan breathed.

They moved in sync, driving into her. She couldn't move with them. Could only clutch Ronan's shoulders, squeezing her eyes shut. It was more sensation than she could handle. This feeling that flowed over her heated flesh.

The men's combined urgings. The whispers of her name. Her passionate cries. All of it stacked on each other. Threatened to topple over and then drown.

She shuddered violently as a familiar urgency built from within her belly. Her muscles tightened as the tremors built in intensity and frequency. Jarod was the first to moan with her. His thrusts increased, the strokes long and deep. When Ronan picked up his tempo too, she was sure her heart would burst. The unending thunder in her chest was climbing and could only result in a crescendo.

Despite the ebb and flow, the pounding of her heart's beat, when the explosion came she was unprepared.

Liana screamed when her body clamped down. She called to both of them, cried out for both of them as wave after wave

sliced through her. Tense, needing, her body was rocketed to the heavens.

Jarod roared, then jerked as he spilled inside of her. His sweat-slickened body continued to gyrate behind her, working desperately to fill her with his essence. Ronan threw his head back, the muscles of his neck straining. In several spasms, his cock pulsed his seed against her womb.

By the time Jarod withdrew, she couldn't move. Ronan shifted his hips just enough to let his softening cock fall out of her. Panting, she laid on top of him, savoring the way he stroked her back. Jarod flopped beside him on the bed, but not before planting a soft kiss on her lips.

He pushed a strand of hair behind her ear and looked into her eyes. "Thank you, little witch. Our Li."

Theirs.

The word echoed in her mind as she drifted into contented sleep.

Chapter Eight

It had to be an impressive sight. Flanked on either side by two men who looked like they chewed glass for breakfast when she walked into the large basement had to raise a few eyebrows. Making it that much sweeter was the fact that the two werewolves were hers.

And she was theirs.

That thought still left her with delightful goose bumps.

Ronan and Jarod positioned themselves behind her chair. After she sat, Liana turned to find them leaning against the wall, cool eyes surveying the room and those gathered there. Jarod's hand played ominously with the blade resting in its sheath. His sweeping attention rested frequently on the demon.

The brothers had listened patiently when she explained what happened. How she managed to come back home. Jarod remained both skeptical and distrustful. Ronan, at least, seemed a little more willing to bend. Not by much, though.

Now, she just had to explain it to the rest of the werewolves and to the coven of witches. Get them to accept, or at least comprehend, the fantastic possibilities.

Leaning forward in the chair, she visually swept the room. All eyes were on her. This was it. She cleared her throat.

"I went to Ava's room to do what I could by protecting her tools. I don't know...I just had a feeling that if Dina went after the Book of Shadows, she might try for Ava's other tools as well. In fact, something we might consider later..." She looked directly at Aaron. "Is whether or not she might try for Ava herself."

Aaron's face darkened as he muttered a curse. The atmosphere in the room changed, almost as if an angry thundercloud hovered over it.

Liana added quickly, "It was just something I was thinking about."

"It's not bad thinking, Liana." Vince remained grim faced. "We'll make warriors of you witches, yet."

Ava drummed her fingers on the table, while silence blanketed the remainder of the room. Protecting Ava remained their highest priority. It was the reason the werewolf pack was there to begin with. Liana knew the hypothesis of Dina making an attempt on the princess's life drove the point home. Ava had to be protected. At all costs.

The implication floored every witch in the room. She knew how they felt. They all lived by the witch's rede: *an' it harm none, do what thy will*. Their enemy now, Dina tossed aside the guiding principle as if it never mattered, the consequences to be damned.

"Continue, please," Mayda said.

"When I got there," she said after a hesitation, "I managed to secure the chalice. But when I grabbed the athame, Dina transported us to the demon realm."

"Just like that? Isn't that impossible?" Jenna objected. Her eyes were round, her face pale.

Liana narrowed her eyes. "Not impossible at all. Dina is powerful. We would do well to remember that. How she did it so simply, like she could do it with just a snap of her fingers, is another example of how much stronger she's grown. I only know where I ended up because of her."

"*Goddess.*"

Aaron ran his hand through his dark hair, shaking his head. "Tell us about the demons. About this one." He inclined his head towards the demon pacing the rear wall. Three werewolves she didn't know kept their attention riveted on it. She almost felt sorry for it. One wrong move and she wouldn't be able to help. Thank the heavens Selena had already tended to its wounds, healing the place where Jarod's knife ravaged only a few hours previous.

Not *it*. Eleutherius. She had to remember it's—Eleutherius's name.

She closed her eyes at the onslaught of memories. The scrabble of sharp claws—fingers or something as they pulled at

her. Dina's steely blue eyes unwavering even as she called out to her. Pleaded with her for help, to reconsider. It would be a long time before she forgot the living nightmare, before she could get over it.

Her voice thickened. "She left me to them. I didn't know how to get back here. Not without preparation, so she left me to them." It took her last reserve of nerves to keep hysteria from settling into place, but she pushed through the smothering fog of emotion. "Most said I should be killed immediately."

Behind her, Ronan swore softly.

"But Liana," Ava interrupted. "Weren't you able to defend yourself at all?"

"You would think." The words were bitter even to her own ears. "I mean, don't get me wrong. I managed to zap a few in the beginning, but once they got a hold of my hands. Then they covered my mouth..." She let out a sorrowful sigh and shook her head. "My cousin, Regine, is a Wordsmith. You better believe I'll be contacting her for lessons on 'smithing. I will not be that vulnerable ever again."

She looked up when a hand rested on her shoulder. She leaned against Jarod's arm, finding it gave her another surge of determination. She would *not* be that vulnerable again. Neither would anyone else in the coven. Not if she had anything to do with it.

He looked down on her and said, "What of this demon here?"

"His name is Eleutherius." Everyone's focus shifted to the demon that stilled at the mention of its name. "And I wouldn't be here without him. He killed many of them to save me. He brought me back. It wasn't my doing alone."

Eleutherius hunched form straightened. With a permanent mask of contempt on his face, he surveyed the room. His long tail swished from side to side, almost as if jeering at everyone. The movement appeared to unsettle his guards who stepped closer to him. "At ease werewolves." His raspy tone sent a shiver down Liana's spine. "If I meant you harm, you would not stand so easily next to me."

"Then be still demon," Ronan snarled. "If it were not for this witch here, *you* would not stand so easily because you would be dead."

"Ronan." Liana tried to mask the warning. She would never be the reason he lost face in front of his brethren, nor especially the demon. "He has something to offer, he says."

To bolster her claim, Eleutherius said, "I know the Dina witch's plans."

"And?" Aaron prompted. There had to be more. Eleutherius risked much by helping her. She also had a feeling nothing the demon did could have been without a cost.

"Keep the portal open permanently and I will ensure she does not harm the Ava witch. Just remove the Dina witch from our realm when it is over. Never to return."

Her heart sank. Ava possessed the power to banish the demons. They would never again be a threat to anyone. If they left the portal open between realms though, they gave the demons carte blanche access to do as they pleased.

"Impossible." Aaron voiced what had to be running through everyone's minds. Impossible to let the demons continue their forays to a place they did not belong. Witches had a devil of a time already deporting them when found. Werewolves only recently picked up their ancestral role as protectors to the witches. If they left the portal open, more and more demons would come over. The job of keeping them at bay would grow increasingly difficult and more dangerous. Eventually, leaving the portal open could only result in one thing.

Outright war.

"Demon, while you will never again be welcome in this place, you have my eternal thanks for saving our sister. We will think on your request, but it is time for you to leave," Mayda told him.

The curve of Eleutherius's mouth dropped as his eyes narrowed. Liana's heart thundered as she digested Mayda's words. What did that mean? Was the High Priestess seriously considering joining sides with him? With leaving the portal open permanently?

"You know my name, witch. Call it when you need me again."

THE CRAFT OF THE WISE 3: RULE OF THREE

Mayda's lips thinned. She said a few words and Eleutherius vanished from the room. Aaron jumped to his feet at the flash. "What just happened?"

For the first time in a long time, Liana saw the age in Mayda's face. She looked tired and deserving of a long rest. When she glanced around the room, she realized they all did. The past month had been wearing them down, day by day.

"I sent him back to the demon realm." Her words proved instantly that a witch could transport people and objects between the realms as easily as Dina had done.

"Are you considering what he said?" Vince asked.

Mayda shook her head sharply. "Not at all." She looked directly at her granddaughter. "But all of this means we're out of time. I would have liked more time preparing you, but we have to stop Dina. There's no choice for it. At the next sabbat, Beltaine, we will confer the power of the coven to you. With the necessary tools in our hands again, it is time for you to assume the role you've been born into."

Ava reached for Aaron's hand.

"So mote it be," Jenna said softly.

Liana couldn't have agreed more. On the day the power of the coven was conferred to Ava, she would become the most powerful witch in thirteen generation of witches. Until that day, and perhaps every day thereafter, the threat on her life increased tenfold.

Goddess help them all.

Chapter Nine

Ronan stroked over her stomach absently. A thin sheen of perspiration still covered her overheated flesh from the attention the brothers paid her this morning. Still floating down from her orgasm high, she'd ushered Jarod into the shower with a wave of a tired hand. He seemed to go grudgingly, as if preferring to come back for a third round. Liana, however, was already numb from the waist down; one more might very well kill her. She made a mental note to herself to look up on the internet how many sex related deaths occurred annually.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked him sleepily. Damn, they had a way of doing that to her. He was silent for so long that she lifted her heavy head to scrutinize him. "Ronan?"

"I can't decide if I prefer you on or off the pill right now."

Nothing on this earth could have prepared her for *that* statement. "I-I don't even know how to respond to that."

She received a sexy smile in return. Several minutes passed while she chewed on her bottom lip. What did he mean exactly?

"Ronan?"

"Hmm?"

"How did you know I was on the pill?"

She inhaled on a quick breath, her eyelids fluttering closed. Ronan slid his finger through the slick moisture coating her nether lips. The spark was instantaneous. "Werewolf, remember? I can smell it on your skin. Especially when you're aroused."

Although she tried to ask another question, it only came out as a moan. Sensation returned to her toes. Her body, no doubt, encouraging her lover to continue his exploration. She breathed through the exquisite pleasure and tried again. "B-but what d-did you mean? On or off?"

The way he toyed with her, forming coherent sentences took more and more effort.

"I like the idea of you carrying our babies, Li. It excites me," he said. His mouth traveled over her cheek, coming to rest against her skin in delicate kisses. "But then, I also like the idea of having you whenever and wherever we want."

Oh yeah. Whenever. Wherever. Neither had been a problem so far.

Wait a minute.

Babies?

As in plural?

Liana tossed her head against the pillow as another wave of pleasure washed over her. Her thoughts were going fuzzy, but she realized she had so much to learn about the men. Especially what it meant to be with twins. Did that automatically mean twin children in her future?

Babies.

Brushing against the plush carpet, the door swung open and then shut with a soft noise. Surrounded by a cloud of the clean scent of soap, Jarod ambled to the bedside. Something playful sparked in his eyes as he looked down on her. He said, "On the pill for now. We'll make babies later if that's what you want, little witch."

He might as well have thrown a bucket of cold water on her. Despite the flash of instinctual disappointment, she wriggled out from beneath Ronan's touch. "How did you know what we were just talking about when you weren't here?" she demanded.

Ronan propped himself up on one arm, a grin stretched across his face. He glanced at Jarod. "In all the years we've been doing it, we're finally busted, brother."

Good Lord and Lady.

She squinted at Ronan. "You're telepathic?"

He shrugged. "Kind of and not really. We can't have a full conversation or anything like that, but we can kind of send impressions of sorts. It's a little hard to explain."

Jarod pulled off the towel around his waist and for a moment, the distraction stopped any further questions. She'd never get tired of looking at either of them.

He stretched out on the bed beside her, pulling her into his embrace. The kiss he planted on her lips was slow, sweet and sinful. His eyes darkened to the color of chocolate she'd fallen

hard for. With a husky voice, he said, “Care to guess what we’re thinking about now?”

She didn’t want to leave the topic of conversation. She could have fought against the seduction. Moved away from the massaging hands. Denied the drugging kisses.

But Goddess, why? Instead, she turned to Jarod. Grasped Ronan by the hand and pulled him closer, giving herself over to delight.

She had a lifetime to ask them all the questions she needed. To learn about them as men, as twins and as werewolves. Later they would stand side by side to fight a demon threat, but for now—for right now—there was no place on earth that she’d rather be than in the arms of her mates.

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.