



THE CRAFT OF THE WISE  
HEALING HEARTS

Dee Carney

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*The Craft of the Wise 4:  
Healing Hearts*

A paranormal erotic romance short by

DEE CARNEY

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# *Chapter One*

The tension in the air made drawing in oxygen almost impossible, definitely difficult to breathe. Every werewolf stood facing the door, some with a ready hand on the hilt of his curved blade. None would allow any of the witches to leave the virtual security net they formed. If she didn't know better, Selena Owen would think the men were ready to battle against a threat instead of just greeting another of their kind.

Not just one of their kind, either. Aaron Remington's brother. As the alpha of the pack, Aaron should have been concerned by the wariness of his men, but his tightened jaw and stiff stance were evidence that he was just as agitated as them. Ava Valentine stood just behind him, holding his hand. From where she stood, Selena saw the gentle squeezes she gave him every few minutes. He kept his attention on the door, but Selena recognized the calm that seemed to wash over him every time his mate provided him with silent encouragement.

What she wouldn't give to have a man who stood by her like that. Someone to share life's troubles and victories with. Someone to love.

She looked towards the other mated witches and werewolves, a small, subconscious sigh escaping as she did. Jenna and Vince. Liana and the twins, Jarod and Ronan. Along with Ava and Aaron, all of them had been brought together to fight a single foe who threatened all of witchdom and mankind. Somehow the men and women found each other as mates, too.

Selena was happy for all of them. Really, she was. But she wished...just once...

Even though she also made up part of the senior leadership of the coven, somehow the fates had overlooked her. Again.

Not that she minded, but just once it would have been nice to be one of the popular girls. Or one of the pretty girls. Popular

*and* pretty? That would have been just downright greedy. Toss in being able to call herself a powerful witch like one of the others would probably make the world stop spinning on its axis.

She should be content with her part in this battle against Ava's cousin, Dina. She didn't have to put her neck on the line, but maybe she'd perhaps get a chance to offer her healing hands when needed. In the war against Dina's demons, the day would soon come when her skills might be useful to someone. She only had to sit patiently by until then. Ever the wallflower waiting to be noticed.

"Calm, Aaron," Mayda Valentine urged with a gentle voice. Her words weren't meant as an order for the leader. More of a reminder that his men picked up on his tension.

He glanced at her, turning enough so he faced both her and the closed door. "High Priestess, he is dangerous. I'm still not sure about bringing him here."

"He is your brother, Aaron," Ava reminded him.

"He is also unpredictable, Ava." He brought her hand to his mouth and dropped a kiss on the back of her knuckles before releasing her. "That he is my brother has nothing to do with the fact that he is demon-touched and could turn on any of us in a heartbeat. That includes me."

"Let's cross each bridge as we come to it. We need his help."

"But we don't, High Priestess. We don't have to know where the demons are in order to close the portal between the demon realm and ours."

"So rather than bring your brother here, you would risk Ava's life instead?"

He shook his head. "Of course not."

"Then, once again, we should consider the matter settled."

Aaron blew out a breath, but nodded.

Of course it was settled. From the moment one of the twins mentioned Aaron's estranged brother, the witches saw past the possibility of danger to focus on the advantage his curse could bring them all.

In just a few days, Ava would be instilled as the thirteenth High Priestess in a line of familial High Priestesses. Once there, she would have the ability to shut down the portal to the demon

realm, keeping the creatures trapped there forever. Her cousin would stop at nothing to prevent that from happening and from absconding with Ava's powers for herself. So far, she'd been thwarted in all of her attempts, but they were quickly running out of options. Their greatest fear was for Dina to become desperate enough to make an attempt against Ava's life. Especially before the power of the coven could be transferred from Mayda to her granddaughter.

To Selena's knowledge, no one asked Aaron how his brother had come to be cursed by the demons, but how on earth had it happened? Werewolves were notoriously difficult to beat, yet somehow a demon managed to hold one down long enough to cast a spell that would make the shifter's life a living hell.

Goose bumps covered her arms as the air rippled. Static charged around them enough for even her to pick up on a new pulse of energy, and pull her from musing. Footsteps, heavy like the weight of doom, came to rest just outside the door and caught her attention.

Her gaze trained on the slow turn of the doorknob, the shifting of the cold metal silent, the lack of noise ominous. Was it any wonder that she watched in fascination while, around her, every werewolf tensed? Whatever walked through the widening space held all of their futures in its hands.

Her breath caught when he, presumably Devin, stepped through. In the doorway stood one of the largest men she'd ever seen. Not just extremely tall, but *wide*. He filled the space, making it seem too small for him to pass through without turning sideways. Although Devin was Aaron's younger brother, he must have outweighed the brutish alpha leader by a good twenty pounds, if not more.

The familial resemblance had no place to hide. Like his brother, Devin's eyes seemed too dark to be labeled black. They were depthless pools almost hidden behind long tendrils of equally dark, unkempt hair. The cleft in his chin was more pronounced, the angles of his jaw and face more defined. What caught her attention first, though, separated him from his brother right away.

A red handprint, almost claw-like, imprinted his neck. The demon-touch. Some of the fingers of the print fit over his jaw.

Part of the palm sat just above his clavicle. He made no effort to hide the mark. His shirt gaped open wide enough to display the imprint and—*sweet Lady*—a very well-defined chest. His legs were thick like tree trunks, and her imagination admonished her for wondering what might hang in between them.

But a girl had to wonder. There *was* that saying about the size of a man's hands and feet to consider, after all.

"You must be Devin Remington," Mayda said. With grace, she walked toward him past the phalanx of werewolves, her hand extended.

Devin glanced at her outstretched hand and ignored the peace offering. His raking gaze traveled to where his brother stood. With a gritty voice, he announced, "The Devil Remington."

Selena winced. So, he knew the name the others gave him.

"I wouldn't know about that. I do know that we need your help and I'm very glad you agreed to meet with us." Mayda maintained a smile as she dropped her hand. If she'd been the least bit offended by him, she didn't show any sign.

"Welcome to our home," Ava added. She started forward, but Aaron shifted to block her path. He continued to say nothing to his brother, his silence as telling as any words they could have exchanged.

He pierced Ava with a slanted look. "I am *not* welcome and we all know it."

Devin stiffened and tilted his chin up. He sniffed the air, holding himself as if invisible hackles rose. His body all but vibrated as he scanned the room. When their eyes locked, Selena held her breath. In that moment, in the milliseconds of time that passed between them, his past, who he was—dear Goddess—*their future together*, filtered through her mind at rapid-fire speed. Images, emotions, sensations swirled around the core of her being, demanding that she understand. Acquiesce.

She'd never known anything before like it. Before her legs buckled from the weight of his presence sinking into her soul, his voice whispered into her mind.

*Mine.*

With impossible speed, Devin rushed forward, maneuvering past the other werewolves before they could react. A scream



locked in her throat, but he was there, looming over her, separating her from the others in the room. His menace filled her nose, the masculine scent of him awakening something within her that responded in a very feminine way. Heat echoed between their bodies, spreading over her until she could have melted from the intensity.

She backed up as fast as her unsteady legs allowed, but a wall prevented her full retreat. Devin pressed himself tight against her body, his arousal evident. All the while, her mind filled with his possessive growl.

Strong hands grazed over her skin, igniting a trail of flames. With the delicate strokes of a lover, he explored her, almost reverently. Then with his large hands, he gripped her jaw, tilting her face up to meet his. Selena's heartbeat roared in her ears when his mouth descended.

## *Chapter Two*

Behind him, the men erupted into a flurry of activity. Before their mouths touched, Devin was wrenched away by the others. “Who are you?” he shouted as they pulled him away.

That’s what she should have asked. Why did she know him, and feel obligated to some connection that drew him to her like on a string? How had he managed to get past the men with such speed and, more importantly, how had he managed to make her respond in such an expectant manner? She’d *wanted* his kiss. Had almost cried out from the interruption.

Liana pulled her close, her face lined with worry. “Are you okay? Did he hurt you?”

She shook her head. Her heart fluttered like the wings of a hummingbird, her mind still whirling. “I’m fine. I just—I just don’t know what happened. He moved so fast!”

Liana hugged her and, over her shoulder, Selena watched with dismay as four men slammed Devin against another wall. He kept his gaze locked on hers. If their struggling disturbed him, he didn’t appear fazed by it.

“High Priestess, he should not be here.” Aaron’s face glowed a brilliant red as he rumbled out his frustration. He pointed an accusing finger at Devin. “I cannot ensure the safety of anyone while he is around. You saw what he just did.”

Selena watched Devin, fascinated at his lack of response. He didn’t try to break free. His attention remained fixed on her. Whatever link had been created faded slowly, their memories echoing in her mind. She now knew this man, this demon. Yearned for him.

“Who are you?” he mouthed. His jaw tightened when one of the men pressed a meaty arm to his throat, but he could have been a statue otherwise.

“I don’t think he would have hurt me, Aaron,” she said in a soft voice. No, he wouldn’t. Something she didn’t know how to

name existed between them. How else could she explain hearing his thoughts? The instant desire to be wrapped in his embrace?

Aaron whipped around to face her. "Is that a chance you're willing to take, witch?"

Without hesitation, Selena said, "I am." When his eyebrows shot up, she grimaced. What in heaven's name was she thinking by standing up to the alpha leader? "I mean, I think... I mean..."

"I'm not as unpredictable as you think, brother. Call your dogs off me and I'll prove it to you." Devin spoke with bored laziness. As if he allowed the men to hold him down. For now.

"Aaron, give him a chance. He didn't harm her and we need his help," Mayda said.

Aaron's lips thinned. He scrubbed his face with a palm and walked toward Devin. When their faces were scant inches apart, he stared into eyes eerily similar to his own. "If you come near any of these women again, I will personally see to it that what that demon did to you is a cakewalk by comparison to what I will do *without hesitation*. Understood?"

"Do you really think you can threaten me? There isn't anything you can do that..."

"Enough!" Mayda's voice cracked like a whip. "We don't have time for this. Whatever family issues the two of you have to work through, need to be handled on your own time. Right now, my granddaughter's life is at stake and she has to be our focus. Is *that* understood?"

The two men faced off for a few more minutes. Someone stood in line to get an ass whuppin' if either one so much as blinked the wrong way, of that much she was sure. Instead, after an interminable wait, Aaron dipped his chin toward his men, who immediately released Devin.

Free to look in her direction once again, Devin fixed Selena with another stare that held her mesmerized. Fighting back the smile that threatened to curl her lips, she had to admire his boldness. No one with the ability to see could deny his fixation with her. She'd somehow become his singular obsession. The attention amused, aroused, and terrified her all in one. Probably because she was starting to feel the same way and, before today, knew little more than his name.

"None of them," Aaron growled.

Devin's gaze traveled from her feet to lazily meet her face. His mouth curved into a smirk sexy enough to make her head swim.

"Whatever you say, brother."

\* \* \* \*

Selena helped Ava stock the supplies in the cabinet. A dizzying array of dried flowers, dried fruit, and other sundry items had been stored in Mason jars. A quick glance at the glass containers confirmed when anything ran low. Most of her necessary stock passed through this room, so she kept a close eye on the contents.

The small pantry just off the main basement brought memories of warm fires and country living to Selena's mind every time she ventured there. Something about its compact coziness did that to her every time. She didn't mind spending so much time alone in here anymore. Really, she didn't. Especially when the other couples were elsewhere busy doing whatever it was couples did.

Ava handed her a bag of dried chamomile. "That man has it bad for you."

The abrupt shift in topic didn't disorient her. Devin had plagued her thoughts since morning. Why wouldn't he?

She nodded. "I know. The whole thing's kind of weird and great."

"Great?" Ava scoffed. "You aren't scared?"

Selena chewed her lip and bit back a reply. Ava couldn't understand what being the ugly duckling was like. *She* was pretty. Oddly enough, all of the witches in the coven were pretty, furthering her feelings of inadequacy.

Selena, on the other hand, had a hard time catching the attention of anyone. Someone with nondescript, straight brown hair and simple brown eyes, and no real curves to speak of fought hard to be something other than plain. If she wasn't a skilled healer, she didn't know what life outside of the coven might be like.

She shrugged. "He isn't scary."

"Yeah, he is. Still, I wish he and Aaron got along better."

Vilified by his family. Outcast by his pack. The demon-touch a scar not to be ignored, was there a wonder he shunned everyone around him?

Selena murmured, "Devin must lead a hard life."

She couldn't say she felt *sorry* for him, but she understood the loneliness which wrapped around him like a blanket. If his own brother feared and despised him, how could anyone else hope to get close to a man who could no more help his actions than the sun could help rising every morning? The demon-touch bridged him to the world of demons on a whim. He had no control and when overtaken by its lure, his behavior made him a danger to anyone around him, according to his brother.

Such a sad, lonely life.

Selena set her jaw and glanced into her hands. He'd been cursed, not born with his affliction. That made its removal at least possible.

So, was she a healer or wasn't she? If she approached his problem with the same dedication she approached any other illness, there was no reason why she couldn't figure out a way to break the malicious spell. She had no experience with the demon-touch curse, but a little research and a prayer or two to the Goddess couldn't hurt. If he would accept her help, she would search the Book of Shadows to find what she could.

The fact she was immensely attracted to him had no bearing whatsoever on her decision.

She almost snorted.

*Right.*

In any event, she needed his permission to move forward, only Aaron kept him under close watch by the other werewolves. Mayda's intervention allowed him to camp inside the house with the other members of the coven and pack, but that was about as much influence as the coven's High Priestess was able to exert.

She turned to Ava. "Do you think Aaron would have a problem with me helping him?"

"What are you thinking?"

"That I might be able to help with the demon-touch. I don't know for certain, but if Devin will let me, I'll try."

Ava grimaced. "That's going to be a tough sell, Selena."

"I can do this, Ava. I can't help you all with the whole demon-slash-Dina thing, but this is what I do."

She nodded. "I see your point, but just give me a little while to convince Aaron. And don't forget, we do need him—I hate to say it out loud—but cursed, until we can figure out what Dina and her minions are up to."

Selena allowed a hesitant smile to creep onto her face. "You would convince Aaron for me?"

"Of course I would, sweetie." Ava smiled back. "A second is all I need to see there's something going on between you and Devin."

"Is it really that obvious?"

She laughed. "To someone who's already in love? Yeah. It is."

Hours later, the conversation with Ava toyed with her mind. *Love*. It was such a foreign concept, she didn't know how to process it. Her psyche must have agreed because she spent hours tossing and turning, the sheets winding into a tangled mess before she gave up on the idea of sleep. Perhaps some night air would clear her head.

Only by the time she made it through the back door and set foot onto the cool, damp lawn with bare feet, Devin continued to plague her thoughts. She walked the yard's perimeter, trying to sort out how to help him. How to deal with...all of it.

"You shouldn't be out here."

So lost in her thoughts Selena almost screamed when he jolted her out of them. Of course she recognized the deep, sensual voice, but what was he doing outside at this time of night? She always walked in the darkness when she couldn't sleep. Besides, morning was technically just a hop, skip, and a jump away. Any minute now, the sun would peek over the horizon and bring a new day.

"Devin? How..." She peered into the small copse of trees at the property's border, unable to locate him.

"Do you always roam around wearing next to nothing?"

Next to nothing? She wore her usual ensemble to bed: a simple cotton shirt with matching boy shorts. He chuckled at her apparent confusion, a sound as rich as his speaking voice.

"Who are you?" he asked.

She ignored him for the time being. A quick glance around confirmed her suspicions that he lacked his guards at present. Aaron would have a conniption fit when he found out. “How did you get out here?”

“Answer my question first.”

He moved and she saw him then. He walked toward her, away from a backdrop of cherry and dogwood trees. His eyes glinted like stars in the fading moonlight, something erotic and feral deep within them.

She tilted her chin. “Selena Owen. The coven’s healer.” Drawing on a reserve of courage, she took a step forward. “Now answer *my* question. How did you get out here?”

“My brother knows I do as I want. His dogs only serve to test my creativity, not hamper my movements.”

Now what did that mean exactly? She couldn’t think about complex, deep meanings because suddenly he was upon her. Standing so close, she could feel the heat of his breath settle on her skin. All too soon, he allowed her another glimpse of how the curse must have served to his advantage. He moved like greased lightning. Here in one instant. Gone in the next.

He stared down at her and she felt protected in his presence. Everything she’d been told about him—the menace of his walk, talk, and stance said that she should have been afraid to be alone with him, of the transformation that could snatch his humanity away, but she felt calm. At peace.

“Why do you intrigue me so, Selena Owen?” His voice softened to just above a whisper. “Something in me cries out when in your presence. I want to touch you, be with you, and...and I don’t know why.”

He raised his hand to her face and stroked her cheek. Slid gentle fingers over her jaw until he traced her lower lip. “I could kiss you until we both weakened from it. Still that wouldn’t stop me. You are meant for me—you *are mine*—and I don’t know why. Why do you call to me like this? Demons believe in mates, matching souls that know each other from the first moment, but I was a werewolf before I was ever a demon. I shouldn’t believe in their stories.” His gaze dropped to her lips again. “But with everything that I am, with everything I feel in me, I know your heart beat, your every breath, as if they were my own.”

If he truly knew her heart beat as he'd professed, he knew it hammered now, his blunt confession spinning her mind off kilter. She dared not close her eyes, for his presence consumed her, his being like the aroma of a fine wine she inhaled until she became dizzy. If left to her own devices, if her mind didn't refuse for both of their sakes to believe in soul mates, she would have stood there until her body drank him in until full.

She needed to change the subject. Fast.

Speaking over a dry throat took effort. "I can help you, I think. If you'll let me."

His face darkened. "No one can help me."

Calloused fingers still traced over her mouth and she pulled her face away from the burning touch. One thing she knew well was her craft. No one told her what she could and could not do. "Let me be the one to decide that."

"You think your witchcraft is why I crave you? Because of what you might be able to do for me?"

It wasn't the only reason. She knew that, but logic needed to prevail here. "It makes sense."

"No," he said. "It doesn't. Not to me. I have this *need* for you..."

As if to demonstrate exactly what he meant, Devin's mouth crashed against hers.



## *Chapter Three*

The impact of his kiss made her breath catch in her chest. She could scarcely breathe with his large hands pulling her tight against him. His arousal, large like the rest of him, pressed against her belly and sent her mind reeling again.

*Mine.*

Like before, his thought echoed into hers as if they belonged together. Whatever this primal urging, he'd been driven to want her. To need her.

She shivered at the realization because, Goddess above, no matter how much she wanted to deny it, to tell herself jealousy of the other mated witches drove her response, her mind and heart would not be swayed. She needed him, too.

When she lifted her hands to his hair, she threaded her fingers through the unruly locks. Devin's moan of satisfaction rippled into her mouth. She yielded to the force of his kiss and boiling heat cooled to a simmer. He kissed her with a tenderness she didn't know could exist. His tongue touched hers, just long enough for her to learn the taste of him then yearn for more when they parted.

*Mine.*

His voice whispered now, no longer the growling declaration of possession from a moment ago.

Her body awakened against his, an ache growing between her thighs. Sadly, she could count the number of previous lovers on a single hand, and now didn't know how to ask him to touch her. To douse the growing heat threatening to overtake her bodily. All she could do was shift with embarrassing shyness against his erection.

When Devin pulled away, she opened her eyes to look into his. Even in the dark night, she saw the smoldering flames in them. "This is dangerous, Selena. No matter what I want—what I hope you want, too—this is dangerous."

Her swollen, moist lips stung. A thrilling reminder of him. His hunger. His need.

“These are dangerous times, Devin.”

He shifted his gaze away. “I would never forgive myself if I hurt you.”

She cupped his face in her palm, angling him until they looked directly at each other. “Then don’t hurt me.”

He hesitated a moment, then lowered his head. “I won’t,” he whispered before his lips caressed hers.

Somehow, for some reason, she knew he wouldn’t.

He slid a hand beneath her shirt, his fingers grazing against her breast. Her nipple awakened beneath his touch, rousing from a long slumber. She fit neatly in his large palm, and he squeezed until she released a sigh against him.

His tongue teased into her mouth. Swept over her lips and toyed with her. In his kiss she found his tenderness. His ability to cherish and be cherished. It made her yearn for more.

Impatient, he pushed her shirt up and she broke away from him to maneuver out of the material. Her hair settled across her shoulders and she shivered. The cool night breeze touched her nakedness and she wanted to curl up against him again. To feel his warmth wrapped around her.

As if he sensed her thoughts, he stepped close to her again, but not before sliding his hands into the waist of her shorts. Cotton panties and shorts rolled down her thighs until gravity brought them to the ground. She stood before him naked, exposed for his scrutiny. She didn’t consider herself much to look at. Small breasts, barely a curve to her hips. But when he looked at her, she felt majestic enough to grace the cover of a magazine.

She held her head high when his gaze traced the length of her body. A flush started in her cheeks and crept down until her body blazed beneath his stare. He looked into her eyes again before branding her with a gentle kiss.

“Beautiful,” he murmured.

When he stepped back to kick off his shoes and remove his shirt, Selena’s mouth dried up. Muscles and bulk rippled in the night air. The few glimpses the gap in his shirt provided had been just an appetizer to the real deal. And, sweet Lady above,

the real deal fueled her wildest fantasies. Even the red handprint branded on the side of his neck awed her. The imprint added a certain dramatic flair and sense of danger to him.

He glanced at her when he pushed his slacks over his hips. She should have been embarrassed, tempted to look away, but the slow unveiling of skin held her captive. He had to have known the effect he had on her based on the wicked grin splitting his face.

Then he was fully nude.

“Goddess,” she breathed.

Like the feral beast raging inside him, he advanced heedless to their surroundings, his gaze focused on his prey. The determined look on his face made her very well aware of his intentions—as if she didn’t know already.

Devin pulled her into his embrace and she melted against him. Somewhere in the back of her mind, something screamed that this didn’t happen for women like her. She was the plain Jane. The one always left behind. But her heart...her heart knew she belonged here. Knew on some level she and Devin were meant for each other.

His mouth captured hers and she vaguely realized he lowered them to the ground, the cool grass their cushion. She gasped when warm fingers slid over her folds, arousal and shock twisting within her. With one stroke of his finger, she arched her back, and shock gave way to a rush that sent her nerves skittering. He withdrew from her mouth, freeing her to cry out against his assault, to moan as he continued to torment her body with such delicious expertise.

“Just like that.” His hushed encouragement almost sent her over the edge.

Beneath half-lowered lids, she watched the way he scrutinized her. He seemed intent on her needs, unable to tear his gaze away from where he stroked with two fingers. Gliding through her moisture, over her clit and winding her body with pleasure. It coiled over her, sure and willful, ready to consume her until she could scarcely breathe.

Before he sent her there, just as she teetered on a ledge, Devin slid down her body and positioned himself between her

thighs. She almost cried out from the abrupt halt of sensation, but her mind zeroed on his new position.

“What are you doing?” The question came out on a breath, as she struggled to form every word. Her back stiffened, but the bulk of his body trapped her in place.

He looked up with more wickedness in his eyes. “This.”

Selena’s horrified gasp morphed into a moan of complete and utter rapture. Devin’s mouth worked magic on her pussy. The same thighs she just a few minutes ago used to try and maneuver herself away from him wrapped around his head, daring him to leave her replete.

An orgasm paralyzed her as it snaked through her body. The vibration started at the center of her core, where Devin’s tongue-toyed with her, and spread until she shook from the force of it. Her body clamped down and she couldn’t breathe, couldn’t scream, couldn’t fight the intensity ripping its way through her. He seemed encouraged by her immobility and worked harder, faster. His skill drew out the overwhelming sensation until she thought she would die a sated, boneless death.

Then he was at her mouth, kissing her with a fever and desire she’d never known before. The tangy taste of herself on his lips aroused her as surely as his passion. His erection pressed upward, the tip of his cock finding her entrance.

With an audible groan, Devin slid forward, impaling her with one swift motion. The force was both brutal and fulfilling. Her body wrapped around him, holding tight to his length as he filled her. Pleasure and pain, thrilling and terrifying, rocketed through her blood, through her being. The feeling of being stretched brought with it a flood of emotion that she couldn’t believe possible in the short time she’d known this man.

As if sensing her thoughts, withdrawing and plunging forward, he kissed her hard again. She opened eyes she hadn’t realized were closed and gazed into his.

“I love you,” he whispered. His breathing was ragged. The corded muscles of his neck strained. “I can’t explain why, but I know down through my soul that I love you.”

He increased his pace while she absorbed his declaration. Combined with his actions, she’d been shocked into silence.

Nothing on earth could have prepared her for his bluntness. Lust, sure. But love?

“I know it’s too soon. I know what I’m saying makes no sense, but I...”

“Devin.” The warning tone in her voice had to tell him. She couldn’t respond with anything he wanted to hear.

He captured her mouth with his in a kiss so desperate, she knew with certainty he meant what he said. As impossible as the notion seemed, in the hours they’d known each other, he loved her.

She grasped his jaw in her hands and returned his kiss. Gave herself over to the sensations building within her again. They could explore growing emotions later. For now, she just wanted to revel in this with him.

Blood roared through her veins and, over the pounding of her heart, she thought she heard his next muttered words. But they made no sense. Between whispered words of love and sighs of pleasure, he uttered something she could barely hear. A note of sorrow in his tone was unmistakable, though.

“Devin?” She choked on his name because at the same instant, her breath hung in her throat. A wave, the tip of renewed orgasm, caught her off guard as his languid strokes picked up pace.

“Not now,” he muttered. Another wave crashed over her even as his words became more distinct this time.

Not now?

“No!” His protest melted into a groan as he shuddered.

“Devin?” Selena pulled her face away from his neck to look at him.

Devin’s eyes were open and, Goddess above, in the rising sunlight she saw they were no longer the jet black she knew. His irises swirled in a conflagration of colors. Blacks, grays and oranges tumbled over each other. As she felt the first jet of his release inside of her, Devin’s eyes fixed onto one color.

Blood red.

He looked down on her, his body wracked with violent tremors, caught between a world of aroused exhilaration and pain.

His voice thick with emotion, he said, “I’m so sorry.”

DEE CARNEY

## *Chapter Four*

Selena barely had a moment to register his apology. A sensation as cold as ice clawed through her veins, the feelings of only moments ago a distant memory.

His skin mottled beneath her fingers and she almost snatched her hands away. Canine teeth elongated while others sharpened. Before she could react, Devin scrambled away from her, the removal of his body stripping her bare. His words hoarse, he cried, “For God’s sake, run Selena!”

She didn’t stop to think. The urgency in his voice, the unabashed apology told her everything she needed to know. Grabbing the first article of clothing she saw, she pulled her mind from its orgasm-induced haze and half-stumbled, half-ran to the house.

Cries of outrage and pain amplified behind her and she almost turned to look but fear kept her face forward, searching hard and fast for the door to safety. She didn’t fear Devin. Not the Devin she’d been making love with, anyway. But the Devin who was still cursed, who could be whisked away to the demon realm in the space of a heartbeat, the one who could himself be transformed into one of those dark creatures, she feared *for him*.

No wonder Aaron’s warnings echoed in her mind. *A danger to those around him. At all times.*

She managed to slip on his shirt before she felt the presence behind her. Dark and hungry.

Malevolent.

If she turned to face the menace, would she have the skill to defend herself? On some level within the reaches of her mind, she knew the creature chasing her was some iteration of Devin. And that’s what scared her most of all. Five minutes ago, she’d given herself to him without hesitation. If she saw him now, saw the creature he’d become, could she still find comfort in his arms when he was himself again?

She glanced down when a hand clamped down on her shoulder. The crushing weight of his strength almost caused her to stumble. Pain scorched through her skin, the tips of his claws undoubtedly drawing blood as they punctured the shirt and found purchase in her flesh. Thank the blessed Goddess, her hand wrapped around the doorknob to the house a split second later.

She'd been screaming. She didn't realize when she'd started, but a scratchy throat alerted her that she'd been crying for help. Pushing open the door, she fought and scratched at his grip. Almost managing to cross the threshold, he yanked her backwards.

With another blood-curdling scream, Selena did the only thing she could and, in a move that surprised even her, she twisted and threw her bodyweight to the side. Her maneuver gave her the precious seconds she needed to stumble into the safety net of the house. Mayda warded the house against demons a few weeks ago and he wouldn't be able to cross in demon form.

Her chest heaving, she looked up in time to see a blur of fur and sharp teeth shoot past her. Three of the werewolves were out the door before she could stop them.

"No!" she screamed from the doorway. "It's Devin—for Goddess's sake, don't hurt him!"

The wolves didn't slow and she whirled to watch them. Her eyes widened as she looked on Devin's transformation for the first time. He stood bare-chested, the muscles of his abdomen flexing, agitated and heaving. Skin the color of grey slate, beautiful and horrific, reflected the sun. Thank Goddess for small favors, unlike other demons no tail whipped behind him. While he seemed big before, his menace was larger than life now. If she didn't know this was her Devin—she'd deal with when he became *hers* later—she could not have faced him.

Surrounded by stalking wolves, the demon stood its ground, its red eyes ominously glaring at them. She'd seen the wolves in action against a demon before. If he so much as twitched, they were capable of taking him down, permanently. None of them, not Devin, either, made the first move. They watched him warily, low growls rippling through their throats.



When the demon glanced up at her, however, she thought the glare softened. Almost as if the Devin of only moments ago reached out to her.

Strong hands gripped her arm and pulled her further inside the safety of the house. Aaron spun her around to face him. "Has he harmed you?"

He looked her over from head to foot. When his jaw tightened, he gently moved her to Ava's waiting embrace. Nice time to remember she wore nothing beneath Devin's shirt. The places where Devin had touched her while they made love stood out in stark contrast to her pale skin. The button-down shirt gapped in enough places for Aaron to draw his own conclusions, erroneous or not. Red stains of blood where the demon's claws dug into her flesh previously didn't help matters.

She wrapped the flaps of material around her body, ignoring the stinging wounds. "Aaron, please...don't make assumptions about what you see. I promise it's not what you think. Don't let them hurt him."

He exchanged a glance with his mate before looking at her again. "He's my responsibility. As is the safety of the witches in this coven, Selena. Go with Ava."

She shook her head. "I won't. Not until you promise me you won't harm him."

Mayda interrupted her thoughts when she entered the large kitchen, her gray hair in disarray and sleep still on her face. Selena turned to her. "High Priestess, please, help me."

Outside, a wolf howled and she looked to see what was the matter. Growling from the other wolves increased in volume as did their yips of excitement. The demon continued to keep a wary eye on them, but tracked movement inside the house with equal curiosity.

"Are you watching, Aaron?" Vince sidled up to his alpha and pointed with his chin toward Devin. "Is it just me or is he paying attention to what's going on in here?"

"Her," Aaron said. "He's paying attention to her."

All eyes turned to Selena and another flush colored her skin.

"What the hell is going on here? What's this draw you have to him?" Aaron asked.

She shrugged. How could give them an answer that she scarcely believed herself? Everything in her, gut instinct, women's intuition, whatever it was called said she'd been waiting her entire life for Devin's arrival. As if some part of her life was missing. As soon as she laid eyes on him, she recognized him as the missing piece. The solution to her puzzle.

Standing inside the house, away from him, felt wrong. A jumble of emotions screamed for her to cross the threshold and join him. "What would happen if I went to him now, you think?"

Mayda's intake of breath was audible. "Absolutely not."

She glanced at Aaron and could see that the question had taken root in his mind. He didn't appear as startled by her query as Mayda. In fact, the way he studied her, his brows drawn in made her wonder if he weighed the risks in his mind. Perhaps his curiosity was getting the better of him.

"Aaron?" The decision was his to make. She would follow Mayda to the end of the earth, but when Devin and the other werewolves were involved, she had an obligation to look toward Aaron for guidance.

Outside, the wolves were growing restless as they continued to circle Devin. A gray speckled wolf howled when the demon extended his arm, palm up, toward the open door. The invitation couldn't be mistaken for anything else. He wanted her with him. For what purpose was anyone's guess.

"Goddess," Ava whispered.

Her astonished voice snapped Aaron out of his musings. "No. To attempt going to him is too dangerous." He slanted his eyes towards Selena. "But I would love to know what he wants with you."

She took a tentative step toward the doorway. "I can help him." She spoke in a whisper. Almost as if reminding herself more than anyone else in the room. She could help him if given the chance. As the hours passed, her confidence with the idea grew.

"I can help him," she said again. This time she spoke with determination. A declaration to everyone present of her status and skills.

"I have to. It's what I was meant to do."

Her chin tilted into the air and she moved into the doorway. That no one had stopped her up to now was a source of wonder. If they knew what she was thinking, what perhaps Devin himself wanted her to do, they would have.

Selena turned and looked into Ava's eyes. Her friend would understand.

"He needs me," she told her.

With those words, wind gusted into the room at the same time the three wolves outside howled. In a flash, the demon stood in front of her. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her into his embrace.

Then they were both gone.

## *Chapter Five*

Selena could do no more than lay doubled-over on the cold ground. Liana had told her what traveling to the demon realm had been like after she'd crossed over twice before, and Selena hadn't believed her. Had no idea the burn wrapping itself around her would be so intense. Capable of stealing her breath away, really.

His footsteps were muffled against the sand, but she heard his approach. He dropped down to one knee next to her. A glance verified his thick fingers curled into the soot, grasping on to the grains and soil beneath as if they kept him tethered to the world, such as it was. He took great, shuddering breaths, his sides heaving, his eyes closed. Muscles in his jaw flexed and loosened, his teeth audibly grinding. He fought some emotion that rolled off of him like heat.

Pushing through the pain, she gasped out, "Devin?"

Devin's head snapped up, the movement lightning fast, as if she'd startled him. His world must have tilted on its axis as he staggered upright. He listed to the side before collapsing, the thunderous crash making Selena wince.

On all fours, he scrambled away, his face twisted into an expression of horror and disbelief. Why did he look at her like that? Had something happened to his memory once they crossed into the demon realm? A quick check of her faculties assured everything was still in place, but Devin's low, continuous growl, his knotted brows, and eyes full of worry didn't give her the warm fuzzies. Not in the least.

Raising an arm weighing a hundred pounds, she tried to touch him. "Devin?"

"What have I done?" he moaned, writhing away from her touch. His thick, guttural voice brought the truth slamming home, gripping her lungs and squeezing them until her breath caught.

She was here. In the demon realm.

Worse yet. With a demon.

Whom she could easily fall in love with.

"I shouldn't have brought you here. You have to go back...you can't stay here." He pushed himself to standing, this time allowing his legs a chance to acclimate before trying to take a step forward. "You can't be with me here."

The thickness of his voice, so different from his normal tone, took some getting used to, but through the roaring pain in her head, she translated his words. All she could do was nod in response, not quite certain what she was agreeing to. Where did this concern come from?

"Why *are* we here?"

He shifted his gaze away. "I come here because I don't trust myself in this form. If I hurt someone...if I hurt you...it's hard to think like the man I am when I'm like this. I can't control myself." A note of panic rose into his voice. "I have to get you back. You can't be here!"

"I won't go back without you," she replied, voice firm.

His jaw tightened. "We'll see about that." Stiff, he bent down and wrapped his arms around her but effortlessly stood. Selena cradled herself against him, seeking and finding some comfort against him. "A stroke of luck—or misfortune, however you want to look at it—got you here safely. I don't trust myself to transport you back, but I know someone who can. You *will* go, Selena." This time his tone softened. "Please."

She couldn't reply. She just didn't know what to think right now. In fact, what must the others be thinking? She didn't have time to warn or prepare them. She just knew with everything that was in her that she belonged with Devin. That their destinies were entwined and had been before they'd ever met. If she could have sought Jenna out to ask her what it all meant, she knew the coven's diviner would have told her. That almost seemed like cheating, though.

The Craft taught her *an' it harm none, do what thy will*. But what would the others say if they could see her right now? Would they be able to see past the demon holding her?

When Devin said he loved her, he meant it. No part of her doubted that. The demon he became more than bothered her,

though. Despite what he said as a man, even she recognized the danger in trusting that the demon inside of him felt the same. Fortunately, the way he held her now eased some of that concern.

“Do you know where we’re going?” She raised her head to look into his face. The burn had left her limbs and she felt capable of walking on her own now. But Devin didn’t seem to mind carrying her, nor seemed affected by doing so.

He pointed with his chin. “There.”

She twisted and looked toward where he indicated. In the distance, a clearing had been created, all evidence suggesting a man-made formation instead of nature’s handiwork. The circle was too perfect, its circumference marked by boulders. The middle had been cleared away, as if the area had a predetermined purpose. In direct contrast, outside of the circle was weathered. Dried and withered plants had been trampled beneath careless feet.

“What is that?”

He didn’t reply, so she looked at his face again. His red eyes remained focused on what lay ahead. Smooth, gray skin reflected the dim light. If she peered close enough, she could find some remnant of Devin in him, but the stark differences made that difficult. At first glance, all she saw was a demon.

The hair on the back of her neck started to rise and every instinct screamed as if a jolt of electricity coursed through her. Devin’s grip tightened and the first hint of fear staked its claim on her.

“Devin?”

He continued walking toward the clearing. She tried to wriggle out of his grasp, but while not hurting her, he made certain she couldn’t go anywhere. She turned again and a chill traveled down her spine. As they approached, the very distinct outline of several demons near the clearing’s edge came into focus.

And Devin headed straight for them.

“Devin, please!” No matter how hard she shoved against his chest, he kept a firm hold on her. She wouldn’t scream, wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of knowing how deep her fear ran, but Goddess, she would not make this easy for them.

Whispered words calmed her for a brief moment. “Trust me, Selena. No matter what happens, trust me.”

Trust him? Although it seemed late now to question the unreserved dependence she placed in him, how could he expect complete faith, a willingness to follow him blindly, from her now? She felt gullible through and through. She’d made love to this man—this demon—under the guise he loved her. Under the pretense that something pure existed between them.

She’d thrown Aaron’s warnings to the wind. Paid no attention to the common sense which told her people didn’t fall instantly in love. Everyone’s concerns that Devin was dangerous and could not be relied upon, even for an instant, seemed overly cautious. As a result, she walked blindly into his arms. He rewarded her devotion by bringing her to their enemies.

“Dina!”

His chest vibrated as he bellowed the name. If Selena thought she’d been afraid before, she became paralyzed by that name. He called for the witch who betrayed all of witchdom by joining with the demons. If she was here...

*Goddess above.*

“Devin. You’re back.” Dina’s sultry voice traveled over the dusty air. She walked out from the middle of the demon throng, at ease with herself and with them. Ava’s cousin seemed genuinely pleased to see him. The smile on her lips met her blue eyes and Selena realized something about her posture, the way she glided to where they stood which made her emotions flare.

The witch was attracted to him.

When Devin released her onto unsteady legs, Selena hesitated, torn on how to react. She should be running and screaming in the opposite direction. She simply did not possess the magical strength to face Dina head on.

But if she ran, she left Devin in Dina’s clutches. The hungry look in her eyes, the come-hither pose of her slender body and the heat radiating from her in waves left little to the imagination as to what might happen under those circumstances.

Almost subconsciously, Selena stepped back, pressing herself against him.

Dina took in her movement and directed her attention to Selena for the first time. “Selena. It’s been a long time.”

Only a month had passed since Dina betrayed them all, but the interval felt like years. Perhaps even decades since the witches began steeling themselves against Dina and her forces. Aligning themselves with the werewolves to stand against a foe which threatened all of them.

“I see you’ve met my pet, my little creation,” Dina all but purred.

Selena’s breath caught in her chest. *Her pet?*

“I’ve done what you’ve asked. It’s your turn.” Devin sounded annoyed.

More confused than ever, she turned to him. “Devin? What’s going on?”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.” Dina rolled her eyes. “I remove the demon curse in exchange for a witch sacrifice.” She looked directly at Selena. “And look at what we have here...A witch.”



## Chapter Six

Devin pushed Selena forward. “Let’s get this over with, but first, remove my curse.”

She couldn’t breathe. Her lungs refused to fill up with air and provide her the oxygen she desperately needed. All she could do was listen to her mind echo Dina’s words over and over again.

A witch sacrifice.

To remove Devin’s curse.

She was a fool.

She believed every word he said. Every lie he uttered to her. The way he’d made love to her—his seduction—none of it meant anything to him. Her throat tightened with emotion, but she refused to allow a single tear into her eyes.

Dina slid past Selena and ran her hand over his bare chest. “Why would you want to remove the curse, darling? You haven’t fully explored all of the possibilities yet.”

He grasped her hand in his and withdrew from her touch. “I know everything I need to know. More than any person should ever know.” He sounded so wistful that, even in her anger, Selena felt a pang of regret for him.

Dina tsked. “A demon-werewolf hybrid. The possibilities boggle the mind, Devin. You have the best of both worlds within you. Why would you throw that away?”

“It’s called a *curse* for a reason, witch.”

“It’s only a curse because you’ve yet to master everything entailed in what’s been given to you. Think, Devin. Think about how I could train you to harness the power of the wolf and the demon. The best attributes of either at your fingertips. Your wolf’s natural strength. The demon’s durability. Think!”

Dina left something out of her logic. Something tickled Selena’s mind, but she couldn’t put her finger on it quite yet. Devin didn’t appear fully convinced, either, but he looked

contemplative. After an eternity of silence, he shook his head. "You wanted a witch here and I brought you one. End my curse."

Dina's eyes narrowed. "Fine," she said between clenched teeth. "Bring her."

Her legs rooted themselves to the ground, but with a gentle shove to her back, Devin propelled her forward again. He whispered so softly she almost didn't hear him. "I love you. Trust me."

Selena almost looked at him for confirmation, but there could be no mistaking words she hadn't made up. At least, she hoped she hadn't made them up. Between Devin's callous behavior and the confrontation with Dina, her nerves were frayed to an unusable state. Her jumbled thoughts led her to question Devin's intentions. To question her gut instinct by trusting in him. In trusting in herself.

She wished she had a way to communicate back with Devin without alerting Dina or any of the other demons. How was she supposed to trust him? Everything in her whirled with confused emotions and self-doubt. Could she trust him, really? Should she?

His hand still rested on her back. The gentle stroke he slid over her could have tipped his hand, but nothing in the other demons' or Dina's behavior suggested they noticed. She let their inattentiveness provide a small measure of courage in what seemed an ill-fated venture.

"Dina, answer me this." Could the other witch hear the tremor in her voice? "Did you expect him to believe you? I mean, demon or not, Devin isn't so gullible as to think you are capable of helping him. I'm not certain what kind of promises you've made, but you're just not that good."

Dina's face reddened, and then paled.

"The last time I checked, even if you were the one to curse him, you don't have the skill to remove the demon-touch. Not many witches do." She glanced at him over her shoulder before turning to stare Dina down. "I mean, Devin, have you ever wondered why a witch chooses to concentrate on certain aspects of the Craft while others focus elsewhere? I bet she didn't explain to you that some gifts just come naturally to some. No

matter how hard she might study, other aspects of the Craft will always seem just out of grasp. That's because in order to maintain the natural order, most witches are given maybe one or two gifts to work with. Mayda Valentine is a rare exception and why she's our High Priestess."

She felt Devin tensing behind her. Based on the way Dina's face dropped, something about her words struck a chord. Perhaps she'd tried to convince Devin of the very opposite thing. Feeling braver, Selena continued.

"Mayda and Ava Valentine have knowledge and the capability to successfully work most spells. That's why the Book of Shadows is so important to them. Liana is another rare gem. I don't think you've met her, Devin. She could very well be a High Priestess, just not as powerful as Mayda. I could go through the coven name by name and point out their amazing skills. Me? I'm not like any of them. My skills are a little more mundane." She shrugged. "All I can do is heal."

"When you said you could help me..." Devin's voice caught.

"Has Dina spent her time trying to convince you that the curse should stay? That you have no reason to want its removal? How many times have you listened to her and not questioned *why*?"

"I—I needed the appropriate tools. The appropriate preparations, Devin. Don't let her sway your belief in my ability to remove the curse."

Selena laughed. "You need another millennium of life to learn how to heal in a way that comes naturally to me." Goddess, talking down to Dina was easy while pretending that a horde of demons didn't surround them. Although, the immense satisfaction she received from watching Dina squirm made her warm all over.

She almost stumbled when Devin strode past her to reach Dina's side. He grabbed her by the throat, squeezing until the flesh beneath his fingers turned white. "Is it true?" he growled. "All this time you've been falsely leading me on?"

Little more than a squeak came out of Dina's mouth. Her face reddened as his grip tightened. The other demons shifted where they stood, but none made a move to come to her rescue.

“Who’s right, witch? Are you able to remove it or not?”

Dina’s hands scratched at his, but he didn’t loosen his hold. When her lips began to turn blue, Selena’s own fear for her heightened. If he didn’t allow her some oxygen soon, there’d be one less witch in the world.

Although...

“Devin.” She’d kick herself later for coming to Dina’s aid, but in the long run, she’d feel worse if she did absolutely nothing. Even Dina didn’t deserve this sort of end. Her crimes against witchdom demanded retribution, but not necessarily death.

He ignored her still, so she walked over to him. Placing a hand on his shoulder, Selena said again softly, “Devin.”

When he glanced down on her, the intensity behind his red eyes made her shudder. He dipped his chin in a curt nod though and dropped his arm. Dina collapsed in a heap next to him. Her desperate, ragged breathing an indication of just how close she’d come to being choked to death.

She looked up at them both with venom in her eyes. “How dare you.”

“Don’t bore me, witch. You value yourself more highly than you should.”

“Value myself? I’ve brought order to the demon realm. I’ve—”

Devin chuckled, a hollow, mirthless sound. “Do you really think they care about that? Do you think they care about you?” He bent at the waist, bringing his face close to hers. “Who do you think the demons will back in a fight, a witch...or another demon?”

She scrambled away from him, kicking up dust in her hurry. That didn’t stop Devin from advancing like a dark menace. He said, “Only one who can keep her promise is valuable to them. Prove yourself, witch. End my curse!”

Selena almost feared for him in that moment. The way Dina glared at him gave every indication just how quickly she could turn on and off her attraction to him. The fact he rebuffed her every advance didn’t help his case any. In that moment, she wondered if Dina tolerated him because she couldn’t do anything else. Regardless, if she had been the impetus for the curse in the

first place, she created a monster she could not control. Her only resort would be to destroy him.

Dina rose to her knees before standing. Her clothing, now caked with dust, emitted puffs of dirt as she moved. When she stood, she no longer seemed the beautiful vixen intent on domination. She looked like a dirty child in need of a nap.

She lifted her gaze to Devin and, when she spoke, her voice held all the huskiness and cunning Selena had always known her for. “Bring her. First, we sacrifice the witch. After that, we end your curse. Then we’ll see just who is the valuable one.”

## *Chapter Seven*

Despite the callousness of her words, Selena listened with little more than contempt for what Dina had to say. Obvious to her, and possibly Devin, Dina couldn't deliver on what she promised. Even though Selena didn't feel she could trust him completely yet, no one could deny that Dina had shown her true colors. And they resembled a cowardly yellow.

Dina whirled on her heels and pushed through a small formation of demons. Behind them, Selena spied something she hadn't noticed before. A stone tableau had been erected at the trees' border. On the surface, several witch's tools lay side by side. She recognized a grimoire, a chalice, an athame and a caldron. Surrounding them were a few unlit candles and various herbs, most of which she didn't recognize, however. Probably native to this realm if she had to guess. Off to the side, almost hidden, a beautiful offering bowl rested.

"Bring her," Dina called over her shoulder.

With her heart thudding louder than she thought possible, she looked to Devin whose expression hadn't changed. The emotions behind his eyes were unreadable, even if her faith in him had begun to grow again.

*Trust me.*

She held on to those words, wanting to believe in them. Really she did. But between the two dozen demons surrounding her, the evil glint in Dina's glare and the fact a demon nee werewolf asked for that trust was—well—overwhelming to say the least! Still, she forged ahead.

Taking a deep breath, she walked side by side with Devin until they reached Dina who filled the offering bowl with liquid and slid a medallion inside. Although the words she chanted didn't mean much, Selena listened enraptured to the way they rolled off her tongue. Perhaps she'd been too quick to judge Dina's abilities because to her knowledge, no one else in the

coven could speak the native language of the demons with such fluidity. The short clicks and staccato jumble of words played like a song.

Dina swayed to the melody she sang. She lit the candles one by one, the rites of a ritual evident. The crinkle of leaves could be heard despite her chanting as she crumpled them in her hand. The pieces of leaves were scattered into the offering bowl. Then she dipped her fingers into the liquid and with the other hand pointed up. When she finished chanting, she turned. "Cat got your tongue, Selena? You're awfully quiet now compared to before."

Selena could only stare in part horror, part awe.

Well, *hell*.

Her coven sisters' ears would be ringing, but she couldn't come up with any better phrase. If they witnessed what she stared at now, they would be at an equal loss for words.

The sky above them darkened. The rolling of clouds allowed only snatches of light in the dark sky. The clean scent of rain filled the air and, as if to exacerbate the effect, off in the distance a low rumble of thunder sounded. If they didn't find shelter soon, they'd be drenched. No doubt, something just shy of a hurricane brewed. Then she noticed the one thing about the unnatural change around them that made her skin crawl.

A large rip, like the one found in her favorite silk shirt she swore she'd someday repair, made a ragged hole directly opposite of where Selena outstretched her arm. The aberration extended as far as she could see in both directions. Nothing came out of the opening, if anything it might have been a vacuum of space.

"What is that?" she cried.

"How much skill do you think is required to open a rift between the demon realm and the world you call home, healer? Do you really think I don't have enough power to fix some stupid curse?" Dina pointed to the tear. "Are you so sure about that?"

This was bad. This was *so* bad.

Goddess help them all.

The strength of Devin's presence behind her washed over Selena, wrapped around her until she could almost feel its

embrace. His previous calm, mental reassurance provided a solid foundation beneath legs that felt like overcooked spaghetti. Underneath her thundering heartbeat, she could scarcely hear his whispery words, but she couldn't deny their effect. Devin was her rock at this moment in time.

"Stoking evil is not a sign of power," she said with a shaky voice. "Anyone who would turn their back on the Craft, on goodness, could destroy just about anything she wanted."

Dina turned eyes filled with rage on her. "Yes, she could, sister. Anything or *anyone*."

"Goddess, Dina, do you understand what you've done? With that rift, you threaten not only to open the way between realms, but you could destroy both of them if it becomes unstable. Is that really what you want?"

"I'm too good to allow that to happen."

A spike of courage appeared out of nowhere and Selena took a step forward. "Are you? Are you *sure*?"

Devin stepped between them, and she used those precious seconds to gulp down air, trying to figure out how in heaven's name she would get out of this mess. She was no match for Dina. Never had been and never would be. But this...this destructive path their enemy set them on had to be diverted.

The sure strength of Devin's voice eased the tension surrounding them. "If you're so powerful, Dina, why not up the ante?"

Selena peeked around him in time to catch the puzzlement on her enemy's face. "What do you mean?"

"Send the witch back. Let her carry a warning message to those who would try and stop you." His voice dropped lower, almost seductive in the way it stroked along Selena's spine. "Show everyone that even with the combined actions of witches and werewolves working against you, you're still able to connect the two realms permanently."

Dina frowned. "I need her to remove your curse, or have you changed your mind?"

"I still don't believe you can do it. Do this first, and if you succeed—"

"There's no doubt, werewolf."



“If you succeed, there’ll be plenty of witches to choose from.” He lifted a shoulder and let it fall. “Who knows? With demons wreaking havoc amongst humans, overrunning werewolves and the like, I might find it in my best interests to stay exactly as I am.”

To Selena’s utter surprise, Dina paused, mulling over his words. For her to consider this self-destructive course pointed to how unstable Dina’s mind worked. Never mind it worked in Selena’s favor.

Dina lifted her gaze to meet Devin’s. “One condition.”

“What would that be?” He folded his arms over themselves, widening his stance.

“When I have permanently opened the gateway, I get your,” she pointed a long finger at him, “undivided loyalty. In *everything*.”

“No!”

“Done.”

The simultaneous clash of their words made Devin turn and look at Selena. In his red eyes, she saw his humanity, and his love for her. His willingness to sacrifice what they’d found if it meant keeping her alive.

His gaze still locked on hers, he murmured, “Send her back, Dina, and I’m all yours.”

Selena’s heart dropped in that moment.

\* \* \* \*

“Your brother doesn’t give you enough credit.”

Her head rested against his chest. The slow rise and fall rocked her into a lull. Her mind was a whirl of plans and ideas, fears, and decisions. She should run inside to tell the others she had returned safely, but for just a few minutes more she wanted this time alone with him.

They owed him. Big.

Dina sent Selena back without ceremony, landing her in the safety of Ava’s yard. Bolts of fear made her blood run cold when she realized Devin wasn’t beside her. Before she could panic, he appeared, still as a demon. His form didn’t matter. He was here.

For now, she sat cradled next to him on the lawn. A large oak tree blocked their view of the house, but at the same time, it blocked anyone inside from seeing them.

He said nothing as he watched her. The uncharacteristic silence made him seem torn on how to proceed before at last, he finally spoke. "I had to make sure you returned safely. I can't stay here."

She reached for him. "Please, Devin. Just for a little while. I—I'm confused. I just need to talk it out, for a second."

"Witch?"

She lifted her gaze to stare into his eyes. "You knew we were going about this the wrong way, didn't you?"

"Just a hunch. Dina worked hard on opening the rift. Because that task was so important to her, I assumed it would then be important to you. I just didn't think the coven was as prepared as it could have been."

"But if we'd taken Dina down without closing the hole she created, it would have been bad for both sides."

"If you say so." He looked away. "Just know that despite what you see in front of you, I don't want the world overrun with demons, either."

Again, wistfulness crept into his voice. She thought he would have shifted when he crossed over, but the demon form stayed with him. She cupped his jaw in her hand and tilted his face toward hers. "You could have joined sides with Dina and let her try to remove the curse first, but you didn't. I want you to know this, Devin. I will do everything in my power to remove the curse. *Everything*."

"I know. And don't think I'm not aware that my bargain with Dina depends on it." He smiled, his razor sharp teeth flashing at her. Before she met him, she might have run screaming from the sight. Now, his amusement made her smile in return.

She stared a moment longer into eyes red like rubies and made a decision. When she slid her hand behind his head, a flash of confusion crossed his features. He might have sensed her own hesitation, but she brushed it aside as quickly as it had risen. She wanted this.

Selena elevated herself just a little bit more and touched her mouth to his. He pulled away, startled when she opened her eyes to meet his astonished ones. Such as they were, his brows were elevated high on his forehead. He shook his head.

“No, no...not when I’m a demon.”

“What you are at this moment is not *who* you are. Who you are is Devin Remington, the man who says he loves me, and Devin? Yes...oh, baby, yes.”

He didn’t resist her when she brushed her mouth against his this time. He tensed as if ready to bolt, but she had no plans of letting him go anywhere. She let her lips play against his, caressing, soothing him until he kissed her back.

When his arms wrapped around her, she knew she’d won. And when he all but melted against her, shaky confidence grew until it stood firm.

Time stood still as she let herself become swept away by the feel of him. Demon or werewolf, the man beneath, the one she wanted to spend time with and get to know, had caught a hold of her heart in a short time. She couldn’t return his feelings—not yet—but without a doubt in her mind, she knew one day he’d have her body and soul.

The crunch of leaves as someone stepped on them upon approach broke her reverie. They broke apart as a male voice cursed. “God damn it.” The bright glare of a flashlight made her shift her face away. “Make this easy on everyone and don’t move, Devin.”

Holding a hand up to block the beam, Selena squinted in the direction of the voice. “Vince?”

The lieutenant ignored her, keeping the concentration of light on Devin. “Whatever you do, Devin, just don’t move. After that stunt you pulled, your brother’s gunning for you. I don’t know what you were thinking, but between the pack and the coven, everyone’s out for your head.”

## *Chapter Eight*

They allowed her time to shower and change into some decent clothing before she had to appear before Mayda with an explanation. No one had to tell her how much trouble she was in. The looks on their faces and the silence in the room as she walked past the other witches was a dead giveaway. Not to mention Mayda's slow inspection of her wearing nothing more than Devin's shirt resulted in a flood of heat washing over her face. Somehow she'd completely forgotten about the circumstances leading to traveling into the demon realm.

By the time she arrived in the conference room, as they called the room in the basement these days, most of the key players had already assembled. The room's rumble of noise fell away when they noticed her. One by one, conversations died, as she stood poised in the entranceway. She spotted him almost immediately.

Devin—the werewolf—fixed her with a look of such desire her blood boiled. Her heartbeat raced at the sight, a subconscious brush of her tongue over now dry lips the only movement she could make beneath the intensity of his gaze. Goddess above, she could almost forget the others waited with them. When he looked at her like that, she could believe the two of them stood against the world.

As if to prove her point, Devin rushed forward, the small guard of wolves surrounding him of little consequence in their attempts to stop him. He cupped her face in his hand and she leaned into his touch. She closed her eyes, cherishing him, wanting this moment to last just a little bit longer. Just a little bit of time was all she asked.

“Are you all right?” he murmured.

She was now. Standing next to him made her more than all right. How, in such a short amount of time, could she feel exposed without him by her side? When they stood before Dina,

the terror she should have felt didn't reach the level of hysterics warranted. Devin's presence, his promise of love which fortified her then and gave her strength now.

Someone cleared his throat loud enough to shake her from her thoughts.

"I'll be fine." She slid her hand over his and let it linger before curling her fingers in his. Hand in hand, they turned to face the room.

"Would you care to sit, Selena?" Mayda asked in a gentle voice.

She nodded and headed for the first open space. Devin accompanied her, but before they could take three steps, someone wrenched his hand away from hers. Selena spun on her feet to find Aaron blocking her path to him.

"I warned them of the mistake in bringing you here and they didn't listen to me. You've gone against me for the last time, Devin."

Tension crackled the air and Selena broke out in a cold sweat. Whatever came next couldn't be good.

"Wait, Aaron." Goddess, she could barely hear herself over the din of growls from each man.

"I am your alpha, *your leader*, whether you like it or not Devin."

She shifted around Aaron long enough to see the light fade from Devin's eyes. His face went lifeless. His manner changed too, the emotion lifting and evaporating into the air. He closed his lids long enough for her to recognize the change in his posture.

His voice went low, deep. "I am led..."

He lifted his gaze, and the blood in her veins ran ice-cold. The blacks of his irises swirled with browns.

"By no man..."

Oh, Goddess, *no*. Not before she could tell the others what she knew.

"No werewolf," he growled. The colors began to shift now. Browns turning into orange. Soon oranges would turn into yellows. And then yellow would form into a solid slate of crimson. "And most certainly, not by my brother."

“Devin, don’t. Please,” she pleaded. The colors in his eyes shifted faster now, the change coming over him with a suddenness that took her breath away. Selena reached for his hand, but his remained limp in her grasp. The only indication he recognized her occurred when he looked down.

“I love you,” he said.

Then he was gone.

Her hands flew to her chest and she clutched her heart against the pain of its beat, the best she could manage against his disappearance. She knew what happened to him. The call of the demon realm would be irresistible to him when he shifted. He would return to a world where he felt comfort. Where Dina would welcome him with open arms, despite his recent flight from there.

Her duty and her responsibility demanded she ensure it was for the last time.

“Damn it!” Aaron yelled. “How much more do you expect me to put up with from him, Mayda? How helpful has he been to his brethren? To Ava?”

Without thinking, a reply flew out of Selena’s mouth. “He’s just saved our lives. All of us. Sit down and I’ll explain.”

They listened well. Hardly anyone interrupted when she gave them the bottom-line version of what happened in the demon realm. By the time she explained the rift, the sound of her own voice was the only noise in the room. Ava watched her wide-eyed as the look on Mayda’s face became grimmer.

“We’ve been going about this the wrong way,” the High Priestess said when Selena stopped speaking. “If we’d closed the realm without closing the rift first, we would have done more damage than we were trying to prevent.”

“Closing the rift. That’s beyond me, Grand,” Ava said after a moment of silence passed. She voiced what Selena already knew to be true. They’d been rushing forward, trying to stay one step ahead of Dina and their haste left Ava ill-prepared to take over as High Priestess.

“And me,” Mayda replied. She pushed away from the table and stood. All eyes followed her as she began to pace.

Selena worried at the inside of her lip. She’d been so focused on Devin, she’d failed to focus on the bigger picture.

Somehow she'd gone from the quiet mouse to the harbinger of doom. She'd spent so much time wishing for more importance, to be counted as someone special all these years. Now that she was there, she wondered at what price.

"Are you telling me there is no hope for closing the rift?"

Mayda glanced at Aaron. The smile that crept onto her face brought back a glimmer of hope. "I wouldn't say that."

"High Priestess, speak plainly, please. Even with Ava's help, I'm not as versed in the way of the witch as I could be."

She laughed softly and Selena quirked an eyebrow. Laughter? When everyone stood so tense they could almost snap in two with the slightest movement, Mayda managed to laugh?

"I think we definitely have a shot at this if we go about what we need to do the right way. Closing the rift is a relatively simple task but, just as you said, Aaron, one I'm not as versed in as I could be." She stopped walking and faced Selena. "The rift is a tear that can be mended until it is whole again. Who better to mend what is ill than our healer?"

Selena had been drifting off in her own thoughts until she heard the word "healer." A quick replay in her mind of Mayda's words made her eyes widen.

She'd not just been brought to the forefront, she'd been thrown there.

"Wait, wait, wait. High Priestess, you can't be serious!"

"Don't look so stricken, Selena. When you get over your shock, you'll be able to appreciate just how serious I am. What I'm saying makes sense, don't you agree?"

"But—but, what about Ava? Why did we go through everything we've done if Ava isn't the key to closing the demons' way into our world?"

"My dear, Ava has her part the same as you have yours. You are best suited, better than I am, to do this. Close the rift and let Ava seal the way permanently."

She glanced at Aaron and another thought struck her. "What will happen to demons on this side of the divide when she seals the way?"

Liana spoke up. "We could work on a way of sending them back. There won't be many. It shouldn't be hard to do."

“But what about one who is cursed to be a demon only part of the time? What will happen to him if he’s demon-cursed at the time the spell is cast?”

Aaron’s sharp inhalation could be heard across the room.

Mayda shook her head, her eyes sad. “My best guess is one of two things. Neither are options you’ll want to hear. He could be killed or, possibly worse, Devin would be caught up in the spell and sent to the other side. Permanently.”



## *Chapter Nine*

Selena rolled onto her back, doing her damndest to not look at the neon display of the digital clock in the process. If she glanced at the numbers just one more time and saw that only another fifteen minutes had passed—*again*—she'd go mad.

Her mind whirled with thoughts of healing and rifts and Devin and demons. Nothing she tried simmered the bubbling thoughts from tumbling over themselves. She'd already tried once to go outside and walk away her worries, but the werewolves stopped listening from the moment the words left her mouth, even after she offered that maybe one could accompany her. They shot her down immediately.

"Trouble sleeping, love?"

Devin.

She held out her arms to him and almost sobbed with relief when he fell into them. How he managed to be there, she'd figure out later. Not that it mattered. He was Devin and did what he wanted. Only then did she recognize the soft hair over his arms, the elasticity of his skin. Demon no more, at least for the time being.

He wrapped her in his embrace, her body warming all over with comfort and wiping away her concerns. Then he pressed his lips to hers—delicate kisses, and passionate sweeps of his mouth across hers. Selena pulled away long enough to peer at him in the darkness. "I've missed you. I didn't think it possible, but Goddess, how I've missed you."

He pulled her close to his body. "You must have known I would be back for you."

She did. But not until she'd actually laid eyes on him, until she felt him with her own hands would she believe he would come. "It doesn't matter what I thought. Only that you're here now. There's so much I have to tell you."

"Later," he whispered. "Tell me later. Love me now."

His lips found hers in the darkness and he kissed with more of his unique, desperate need that she shivered from the intensity. Devin drank down her soft moans, his tongue sneaking into her mouth. When he pushed her shirt up, she wriggled out of the material, hating the loss of contact with him for those few seconds.

“Damn, you’re beautiful.”

She giggled at the awe in his voice. “You can’t even see me in here.”

“Oh yeah?”

The feel of his hot, moist mouth on her breast choked off the mirth in her voice. The only sound coming from her now was a low moan as his tongue teased her nipple into a stiff point. Her eyelids fluttered closed as he shifted, laving her other breast with the same hungry attention. By the time both breasts were heavy and aching, he raised his head and kissed her on the mouth again. “I can see every lovely inch of you, Selena. In the dark or not.”

Devin nuzzled her neck, nips of his teeth sending more shivers over her skin. She arched into his touch, swallowing hard in anticipation of his hands sliding lower, snaking inside the waist of her cotton shorts. She could scarcely breathe, each touch of his hands and his mouth making her chest constrict, her airway close in, waiting for the next touch and then the next.

Her fingers trembled as she groped for the edges of his shirt, pushing until muscle rippled beneath her hands. He shrugged out of the material, his mouth connecting with hers time and again.

Their motions were frenzied, too much clothing separating them. Having to wait for him to shuck off his trousers seemed an eternity. She needed to feel him, his skin against hers. His body inside of hers. The fates allowed her so little time with him. Every second was precious, not to be wasted. She gripped his face in her hands, pulled him close to touch her mouth to his. Tenderness turned into a battle to remain connected to him. To keep him here, with her.

“Hey, hey,” he soothed. “You’re going to hurt yourself like this.”

Devin wrapped his arm around her waist and rolled them until she sat astride him. His erection prodded her where it lay

trapped between their bodies. She'd heard the smile in his voice. The subtle undertone of teasing.

Selena rocked her hips, sliding the heat of her pussy over him. As teasing as his words. "You said you wouldn't hurt me," she said, her voice husky.

"Never."

She leaned forward and briefly pulled on his lip with her teeth. "Even if I wanted you to?"

"Christ," he groaned.

She moaned with him as he lifted his hips, surging into her in a single stroke. Her body poised frozen above his. He sat upright, his cock pushing impossibly further into her and kissed her hard. The best she could manage was another small gasp.

A slow rock of her hips delivered a thrill into her pussy. Devin's hands stroked over her skin, traveling over her breasts, her belly. When they finally met her waist, he tilted her body, moving her until she undulated with him. "That's it, love. Ride me."

She threw her head back and swallowed. Up and down, a slow, sweet ride. Devin's luminescent eyes glowed in the darkness, his gaze shifting to where his body entered hers. Partially hidden beneath hooded lids, she remained focused on the way they watched her. Watched the passion unfold in them.

A starburst of bliss raced through her veins when he stroked over her clit. Startled, she almost stopped, almost waited for him to take her body towards oblivion, but his whispered words of encouragement spurred her on.

"God, yes, Selena—show me how you like it."

She cried out with each of his touches to her clit. He used her moisture to lubricate the sensitive bud, two fingers playing with her until she trembled from the onslaught. By now he drove into her, his hips lifting from the bed and sending more waves of pleasure through her.

"Devin, please—"

"Please what, love? Tell me what you need."

He stroked harder. Faster. Ecstasy coiled around her spine, spreading over her limbs until she was almost immobile.

“Please!” she cried, not sure why she pleaded. Just knowing that Devin was there, sending her to a place where together they would meet unbridled bliss.

“Please, what, love?” He pushed deeper, his grip on her waist tightening.

“Devin—oh, Goddess...”

Then she was there. Her muscles clamped down, her pussy tightening around his cock. Each pulse pulled from him, greedily seeking his sacrifice. Low keening cries escaped, one coming after the other. Devin pulled her face to his, his mouth devouring her cries. All the while, he pushed into her, filling her, feeding her need.

He kept her soaring for a moment longer before easing his strokes on her sensitive clit. The way down was gentle, easy. His kiss lost its needful insistence, instead now demonstrating his consuming love. He remained buried inside of her, each push and pull meant to keep them connected.

Selena rested her head on his chest, breathing hard against the crook of his neck. She whispered, “Please, Devin—don’t leave me.”

He ran his hand down her back with long, luxurious strokes. “Never, love. Never.”

“If I can’t heal you, Devin...”

“Sssh. Right now, I just want you to love me, Selena. That’s all. Just love me, okay?”

She nodded against his neck, then found herself lying on her back in one smooth move. She reached up to touch his jaw, to run her fingers over the cleft in his chin. She wanted to memorize every detail of his face, be able to recognize every line. The fine crop of stubble, the way his Adam’s apple bobbed when he spoke. All of him.

Her eyelids fluttered closed as Devin began to thrust. She wrapped her legs tighter around his waist, pulling him closer to her body. Every emotion within her reached out for him, relished in the way they connected. A wave swept through her at the realization that her feelings for him did border on love. Maybe something more.

The tempo of his breathing picked up pace. She rotated her hips beneath him and he groaned against her ear. Each stab of his

cock sent heated waves to ripple through her and she meant to take him over the edge.

He was there, too.

Devin surged forward with a single violent urge, his cock swelling. With a loud groan, he came hard, jets of his seed erupting against her womb. He pushed through the orgasm, his valiant thrusts slowing as pleasure coursed over him. She stroked his arms and chest as he shuddered to a stop. When he lowered his mouth to kiss her, she kissed him back with all that she had within her.

She loved him, without a doubt in her mind. And she would not lose him to the demon realm.

## *Chapter Ten*

“Why does Aaron think you’re dangerous? As far as I can tell, you’ve always retained who you are, even when overtaken by a demon form.” She lay tucked against him, the small bed bowing beneath their combined weight. Light filtered in through the sheer curtains, but she didn’t want to get up and face the others yet. The inevitable clash between brothers could be avoided for a few minutes more, she hoped.

“That’s you, Selena. I have a feeling you sometimes think I’m feeding you a line when I say there’s something about you that completes me, that keeps me sane. But it’s true. I’ve never been in as much control over my change as I have been since I met you.”

“Did Dina really do this to you?” She kept her face down, dreading the question almost as much as she dreaded his answer.

“Curse me? No. She did give me reason to seek her out time and time again.”

“With promises of removing the curse.”

“My desperate stupidity.”

She still hadn’t told him about healing the rift. Apprehension about facing the daunting task mixed in with a healthy fear for him kept the words from coming out. What if she could only do one without fixing the other?

“Today we celebrate Beltane.”

“What does that mean to me, witch?”

She shoved at his chest. “Don’t be difficult. It means that Ava will assume the position of High Priestess.”

“And this disaster will be ended.”

“Yes...” Her voice trailed off as the reality of their situation struck her. If she couldn’t heal the rift, if she couldn’t heal him, all of this ended badly for everyone. The weight of responsibility hovered just out of reach, a thin thread keeping the burden from crushing her.

She couldn't breathe all of a sudden. He—*it*—smothered her. Her throat closed in, her chest no longer willing to expand and receive a new exchange of air. Arms flailing, she pushed away from him, sitting upright.

"Selena?"

With balled fists pressed to her eyes, she gulped down shuddering breaths which brought her little relief. The entire coven, Devin, witchdom...they all depended on her. She couldn't do this. Too much—way too much for them to ask of her.

Hot tears stung her eyes and spilled down her cheeks.

Devin pulled her to him. "Jesus, Selena. Talk to me. What is it?" His voice trembled with a healthy coating of fear.

"I-I can't do this, Devin. I c-can't."

"Do what, love?"

Goddess above, she hadn't told him yet. What could she say? She had one shot, just one, at healing him or he'd be lost to her and this world forever.

Too much for her to take. Too much for her heart to take.

She looked into his face, searched his eyes for the emotion always on display for her. "Love me, Devin."

A frown creased his face. "Always, Selena."

"Now. I need you to love me right now." *For the last time, love me.*

How she'd managed to fall so hard and fast for him, she'd never know. Their relationship was one great big whirlwind of highs and lows, love and fear, trust and faith. One thing she was sure of. She wouldn't have had it any other way.

A few minutes later when he was inside of her, she let the tears flow. He kissed them away almost as quickly as they fell, but she couldn't stop crying. The comforting weight of him, the murmured whispers of love, the joy he spread over her couldn't keep the same thought from echoing over and over in her mind.

*For the last time.*

*Love me.*

\* \* \* \*

Ignoring the scratchy, cowled robe against her bare skin, she paced the clearing in the back of Ava's house, part-chanting, part-praying to the Lord and Lady above for guidance. Always, their will be done, but for the first time since practicing the Craft, she prayed their wills coincided with hers.

She could do this. She could. Healing was what she did. Just because this time she needed to heal the sky shouldn't matter. Concentrate on healing and everything would fold into place. Her gift came naturally to her, as familiar as breathing.

Then why did this knot in her stomach refuse to go away?

She looked up to find Devin watching her. He stood at the edge of the clearing, arms folded over his chest, his legs rooted to the ground. Aaron didn't bother with the guard entourage this time. As Devin loved to taunt his brother, they only served to fuel his creativity, not hamper his movements.

He knew the risks as well as she did now. And she almost wanted to despise him for taking the finality of her message so well. He just shrugged away the fact she held his life in her hands. *It's where you hold my heart, love.*

Mayda's approach cleared her thoughts of him. "You're ready, I'm sure?" she asked. Her blue eyes held the concern of a mother for her fledgling child. She was dressed in ceremonial garb, the silken robe draped over her shoulders a stark contrast to the one Selena wore. Then again, the spells they would be casting were as different as night and day.

Selena nodded. "I don't think I've been involved in something so complex before."

First Selena would cast her spells, one to heal Devin and then one to heal the rift. Then Liana and Mayda had to follow with simultaneous spells. Liana's task was to transport demons in this realm to their own world while Mayda would confer the power of the coven to Ava, who would finally close off the way to the demon realm. And in between all of that, they had to pray Dina didn't discover the workings and try to stop them.

Goddess above.

"Will you able to do it? If you can't, say so now before we rain down the fury of every demon in their realm upon us."

"I—"



“Will you be able to let Devin go if you can’t heal him, Selena? Before we start, know for sure. You have to know first.”

She clenched her eyes shut against the pain ripping its way through her chest. He’d acknowledged his blind faith in her. They had no real way of knowing if her spells would work, but he’d been confident she knew what she was doing. If she could heal a rift, he’d reasoned, surely removing a curse would be child’s play?

Keeping her face down, she responded, “The sun is setting, High Priestess. We should begin.”

The heat of Mayda’s stare stayed with her until the older woman turned away and walked to the rest of the coven who waited on her. Werewolves lined the very outside of the clearing, standing guard over the witches. Once the spell casting began, Dina would be able to hone in on their positions with unfailing accuracy. If the spells didn’t work as predicted, there would be the devil, almost literally, to pay. At least the guards provided a small sense of security.

With a final glance at Devin, she walked to the center and loosened the sash of the robe. She shrugged the rough material from her shoulders and it fell to the ground in a heap. The cool night air caressed her naked skin with the gentleness of a lover. A gentle breeze licked her intimate places, arousing and titillating every nerve ending.

He’d been livid when she’d told Devin about spell casting skyclad. But she wanted every edge she could muster to make this work. If appearing before the gods in the nude helped, so be it.

Standing next to the small altar of tools, she began. “In the name of the Goddess and God who breathe life into us all, I consecrate and charge this circle as a magical place for healing,” she said, her voice low. She gestured to Devin. With her prompting, he entered the circle until he stood in front of her. “I light this candle that represents your child Devin, and all that he is. Being natural. Being unnatural.”

She walked to the remaining candles surrounding them, lighting each in turn and dedicating each to the five elements of air, wind, fire, earth and spirit. When she stood before the last unlit candle, she drew within herself all of the healing magic of

the universe. Her body felt alive with life, with familiar healing power. With each passing second, her confidence with the spell grew.

A green sash had been laid near the candles. She began to weave it around each candle in turn, carefully creating a pentagram, and said, "Elements of power, heal your child now, in his desperate hour, so mote it be."

The light flared until its glow covered Devin like a blanket. A grin split her face, the force actually enough to make her cheeks hurt. She couldn't stop the smile even if she wanted to. It worked! Already the red handprint of the demon began to fade.

Without stopping to test their good fortune, she cast a similar spell, this time focusing on the sky above. Behind her, Liana entered the circle and began chanting. Together their voices created a harmonic melody. By the time Selena's last spell ended, she wanted to collapse. Her spine and legs felt boneless, barely able to support her any longer. The spells drained her, but had been oh, so worth it.

She knelt with the intention of picking up the robe when she noticed Devin's posture. He was doubled-over, his arms wrapped around his waist. Her eyebrows knit together as she assessed him. The spell shouldn't have caused him any sort of pain.

"Devin?"

Mayda stepped inside the circle, her voice joining Liana's. Only a few more phrases to complete before Liana would banish all demons back to their realm.

The robe forgotten, Selena took a hesitant step to him. "Devin?"

She froze at the sound of his soft groan. When he looked up, the first thing she noticed was the sweat streaming down his reddened face.

The next thing she noticed was the too familiar swirl in his eyes.

"Oh, Goddess, *no!*"

She ran to where he hunched over. Her hands hovered inches above his face, not sure how to touch him, how to stop this from happening. She searched her mind for something—*anything*—that would keep him here. They had mere seconds

before Liana finished her spell and the incantation took him to the demon realm forever.

A new well of tears made seeing him difficult. She wiped at her eyes with the back of an impatient hand. "Please, Devin, stay with me. Fight it and stay with me!"

Orange to yellow now. So close. The change was so close.

She looked over when an angry growl sounded next to her. Unable to spare the emotion, she didn't focus on the shock of seeing Aaron in the circle. His commands to his brother explained more than she needed to know.

"Stay with us, brother." He grabbed Devin's arm, his fingers digging into the flesh. Pools of white marked where Aaron's grip stopped the circulation of blood. "I will not lose you to that place. Stay with me."

The only thing she could think to do was start the spell over. As fast as she could speak, her words running into each other, she recited the incantation. She grabbed on to Devin's other arm, willing him to stay with them. "Elements of power. Heal your child now!"

Devin threw his head back and howled a sound so mournful, so full of regret, a new well of tears filled her eyes. Aaron joined in, his howl as rich and deep as his brother's.

Around them, the other werewolves, one by one, picked up the howl. Soon a cacophony of growls, yips and howls filled the air, overriding the soft, gentle chanting of the witches.

He lowered his head, his gaze finding hers. Red swirled with black, pain and disappointment mingling with each other. Selena dropped his hand and threw her arms around his neck, bruising his mouth with a kiss of desperation. Aaron's crushing embrace circled them both, pinning her against Devin as the breath rushed out of her.

"D-don't go, brother," he choked out.

Devin's legs collapsed beneath him, taking her and Aaron down to the ground. The jarring impact almost dislodged her from his hold, but she would not be rid of so easily. It would take more than that to make her let him go.

Time slowed to a crawl as she stared into his eyes. More and more of the crimson color she'd come to hate filled them, the natural blackness retreating like a thief in the night. She

looked into the changing color one last time, memorizing the details of lines on his face, the smell and feel of him. Dislodging the lump in her throat, she held on to a last tendril of hope and said the only thing she could think of.

“I love you, Devin.”

His eyes slipped closed for a microsecond, a blink she almost didn’t notice. When he opened them again, his eyes were tinted with one color. Red.

“Witch,” he sighed.

His body went limp in her arms at the same time Ava’s voice behind them finished the last line of her spell: *so mote it be*.

Selena screamed.

## *Chapter Eleven*

Selena folded the last of her clothes and placed them inside the small bag. She'd led a simple life before circumstances forced her to camp out in Ava's home. Now that she would return to her own apartment, a not-so-simple life awaited her. She'd learned a lot about herself over the last few days. A lot about love. Now she needed to take the lessons home and deal with them.

"You don't have to leave, you know. I'm so used to this house being crowded with bodies, I don't know what I'll do when it's empty again." Ava watched her pack, concern written all over her face. She looked ready to protest each item that made its way into the bag, but caught herself each time.

Selena smiled. "It'll be far from empty. You have Aaron. And the other mated couples will be staying, too. With both of you leading your respective groups, the last thing this place will be is quiet." She glanced towards the backyard even with the sheer curtains blocking the view. "Besides, you don't need a healer here full-time. I'll be around when you need me."

"You're still a part of this coven, right?"

"Of course, High Priestess."

Ava grimaced. "I can't get used to that. Grand will always be High Priestess as far as I'm concerned. Whenever someone calls me HP, I look around for her."

"You'll get used to having privacy again. You and Aaron both."

"Some days I wish I didn't have to. It would be nice if Aaron could just be my mate and not my protector all the time."

"He loves you."

"I know. I love him."

They fell into a companionable silence as she finished folding the last two items and storing them away. Before she picked up the bag, she looked at Ava again. "You realize Dina is

still out there. That you're not safe? You need his protection and the protection of his pack."

She exhaled audibly. "She might be in the demon realm."

"And she might not be, High Priestess. Besides, even if she is there and if there is any chance of her coming back over here..."

"Yeah, I know. Dina will be the one to find a way back. I'm not safe. I get it."

"Just take care of yourself."

Ava reached for her hand and squeezed gently. "You, too." This time Ava looked towards the window. "Are you sure? Are you sure you won't stay?"

Selena looked toward the window too. "Never surer in my life, High Priestess. Thank you."

Ava dipped her chin as she let go of Selena's hand. No need for goodbyes. They would see each other again and often. Coven gatherings necessitated frequent contact.

She hoisted the bag over her shoulder and walked out of the room. As she made her way downstairs, she had to agree with Ava. The house did seem quiet now. The past month was like a bad dream. She couldn't focus on the past, though. The future was too close, too full of promise and waiting for her with open arms.

At the threshold of the backyard, she stopped in the doorway to breathe in the air. Sunlight cascaded over everything, again reminding her of the beauty of life. Summer would be here soon enough and the same sunlight dishing out sweltering heat in spades, but for now, the weather was meant to be enjoyed.

His larger-than-life presence filled the doorway behind her. Without thinking, she tilted her head for the kiss he would inevitably press to her neck. When his warm lips traveled over the sensitive skin, she suppressed a small shiver of delight.

"Ready?" he murmured.

She turned and wrinkled her nose at the dark shades he wore. "I don't think I'll get used to seeing you in those things."

He gave her a lopsided grin. "Perhaps, but I don't think the rest of the world will ever get used to the color of my eyes, either."

True. Still, it was a small price to pay to have him here.

The best they could figure was her spell wasn't specific enough. Her spell didn't heal him of what *they* considered to be wrong with him. They may not have appreciated his demon self, but it was a natural part of the order of things. Not meant to be *healed*, per se.

What the spell did do was extinguish the uncertainty of his change. The red claw mark on his neck vanished, but his red eyes were here to stay. The demon in him brought to the forefront and mingled with the werewolf. The resultant change was so sudden and fierce, he'd passed out from the brutality of the changes.

A new breed of warrior. Just as Dina had predicted and wanted.

"Maybe I'll get contacts soon."

"Oh?" She quirked an eyebrow at him. "And what of your sons? What would you have them do?"

A pained look crossed his face. "Are you sure, love? Are you sure you want to start a family with me? With what I've become?"

"And how many times, my love, must I tell you? *What* you are is not *who* you are. I am in love with who you are. I look forward to the day when I tell you I'm pregnant with your child."

He studied her face and she bared his scrutiny without comment. Her heart thudded in her chest but she remained patient. She knew him too well now. After a minute passed, he smiled and shook his head. "I love you, witch."

"And I, you, Devin."

Reaching down for her bag, he picked it up and glanced at her over his shoulder. "And when would you like to start working on making this family of ours?"

The smile on her face grew even wider. "How quickly can you get us home?"

*So mote it be...*

DEE CARNEY

## *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](http://www.DeeCarney.com) for more information on her available titles.