



Three Ways to Wicked

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and occurrences are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places or occurrences, is purely coincidental.

Thanks to Aleka...

This book is for those who believe in magic.

Chapter One

“Now, anything you need, you make sure to let me know, although I’m sure we’ve bought you enough provisions for a month’s time.”

Krisily Carmichael glanced over at her new landlord, Seamus Gregory, and wondered once again why all the good ones seemed to be taken, and she was sure Seamus was good. He was gorgeous, and he’d gone out of his way to make her feel welcome here. He’d picked her up at the train station, taken her to the grocery store, or as he’d called it, the market. They’d stopped by a bookshop, and a drug store, and then he’d asked her, three times, if there was anything else she needed.

Most men would balk at driving a woman around all afternoon long. Seamus seemed to enjoy it. But three different times during the day he’d made reference to his wife, which had caused Krisily’s spirits to drop. She could use a good affair right now, one to make her forget the past four months.

It had been a huge stroke of luck that the advertisement for the cottage rental had shown up in her mailbox when it did. For the last three months, all she’d seemed to receive were letters from assholes who wanted to know if her body markings were a tat, or a birthmark, if her breasts were real, or enhanced, or if that was really a gold ring sticking out from between her legs, or if it was digitally installed.

It was when the letters turned nasty, from ones asking if she liked it doggy-style or missionary, to rants about a “woman your size posing naked,” that she’d stopped opening them. If she didn’t recognize the sender, the letter went directly into the shredder.

And then the ad for the cottage had come in, promising “peaceful country living in a beautiful English setting, complete with a thatched roof and an extensive garden.” If it hadn’t been in postcard form, she never would have seen it and fallen in love with the idyllic setting.

The card said the actual house was set on acreage and “kilometers away from the nearest neighbor.”

“Perfect,” she’d said as she’d traced her finger over the photo of the cottage. She’d called that afternoon and talked with Seamus Gregory, who had told her he needed to run a credit check, and if that came back good, then they would be all set. He’d returned her call within the hour, which had surprised her, and told her the cottage was hers, if she still wanted it.

It had taken another month to get things set up, to put her things into storage and put her house on the market. She didn’t plan on staying in England permanently, but she didn’t want to come back to the house that held such bad memories for her.

When an offer on the house had come in two weeks after it was up for sale, she’d had to postpone her trip even longer so she could complete the sale. She’d called Seamus, worried that they would give the rental to someone else since it was taking her so long to get there.

But he’d assured her that they wouldn’t “take it out from under her,” and the cottage would “be here, waiting just for you.”

Now here she was, driving along a narrow country lane with the windows down, the spring air held just a hint of rain. It was like being in heaven.

“How much rain can we expect this time of year?”

“Quite a bit,” he replied.

They’d left Bath and were heading toward the small village of Pennyquick. It didn’t seem like he was going to elaborate on the weather, so she searched for another topic.

“How did the village get its name? It’s unusual.”

“Named for the fault line.”

“Fault line?”

“It has something to do with the hot springs. Very technical.”

“Oh.” Her head bobbed as if she understood.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to be vague, but I don’t totally understand it myself. The fault lines bring the hot water that’s in the baths to the surface, or something like that. I don’t totally understand things like that.”

“Interesting.” She made a mental note to Google the Pennyquick fault line. “There is Internet service at the cottage, right?”

“Oh yes, we made sure of it, just for you.” He gave her a smile. “I hope it works as the salesman said it would.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.” They rode in silence for a few miles, no, she thought, kilometers, and then, from the corner of her eye, she saw him swallow hard, as if he were uncomfortable about something. She had lots of experience with being ill at ease lately.

“Is something wrong? Or is there something you’d like to tell me about the cottage?”

“Not at all.” He gave her another smile. “The cottage is perfect. There’s one bedroom downstairs and two upstairs. There’s only one bath, and it’s downstairs. The AGA is a little old, but it works like a charm, or so my wife says. We had the entire place rewired, so you shouldn’t have any problems with power from the generator. If it goes out, give me a call and I’ll be there in a flash to fix it for you.”

“Sounds great.” She glanced at the passing scenery. “So you live around the cottage, then?”

“No, we live in Bath, but it’s only an hour away.”

“Don’t you use the cottage for vacations?”

“No.” His grip seemed to tighten on the wheel. “It was an inheritance for my wife, and she’s a city girl. Her idea of a vacation is playing in London.”

“Sounds like fun.” She leaned against the seat, then sat forward again when he turned off the main road. “We’re there already? Have we been traveling an hour?”

“Somewhat.” He navigated around several bends in the road. “There’s an old car out here that you’re welcome to use. The keys are in the kitchen.”

“Great, thanks.” She watched the trees as they whisked by. “Is it a standard transmission?”

“Yes.”

“Wonderful, a four-speed that I’d be driving on the wrong side of the road. I’ll probably just stay put.”

They rounded another curve and the house came into view. Krisily’s eyes widened. “Oh wow, it’s like something off a postcard.”

The cottage was everything she'd dreamed it would be: brown stone walls with a thatched roof. The door was red and the picket fence around it was white. The grass was green and the flowers she could see were all bright colors: reds, blues, purples. Getting her hands into the dirt and planting things was going to be very therapeutic for her.

He stopped the car near the outside gate. "The boxes you had shipped are already inside. I took the liberty of putting them in the upstairs room, the one I thought you could use as an office for your writing. That's where the Internet is set up, too. It's not wireless, unfortunately."

"Thank you." She didn't want to tell him she didn't plan on doing any writing. Right now, all she wanted to do was sit in the garden and drink a bottle of wine, and another one, and another one after that.

They got out of the car and she put her hand on the gate; it seemed to hum with energy and a thrill shot through her. This was going to be so relaxing, so very sweet. In a few hours, she will have unpacked her bags and would be sitting in the gardens with a glass of wine.

To hell with that, she thought as she watched Seamus get her suitcases from the boot of the car. Wine and relaxing first, unpacking later.

She unlatched the gate and took a step inside. Her body buzzed with excitement as she walked down the cobblestone path. Maybe she would do some writing here. The whole place was so atmospheric that she couldn't help but imagine a love story set here, of a woman whose father died and left her the cottage, even though it was forbidden during those times for a woman to own property.

The woman would set up all sorts of traps to keep people from taking her new home away from her, and they all worked, until the day one handsome constable showed up to...

"The door's open."

Krisily pulled herself out of her daydream. "Excuse me?"

"The door, it's unlocked. You don't really have to worry about intruders all the way out here. Go on, open it." He indicated the latch with a hand, a suitcase dangling from his fingers.

"Right." She depressed the thumb notch on the handle and heard the latch give way. The wooden door opened easily and noiselessly. The smell of lavender drifted out of the house and she inhaled deeply.

"Oh, gorgeous." Once she'd stepped inside, she realized gorgeous didn't even begin to describe it. The furniture was large and rustic; the chairs in the living room were wooden with

overstuffed cushions lining the backs and seats. Logs already set in the fireplace, waiting to be lit for a roaring fire.

“Will it get cold at night?”

“Somewhat.” Seamus’s voice sounded muffled and she turned just as he started to descend the stairs. “I figured you’d want the bedroom upstairs. It’s more comfy, but if you prefer I can bring the bags down.”

“No, that’s fine.” She pointed to the fireplace. “Is this the only source of heat?”

“Oh no, we had heat installed. But if it’s not cool enough for it, the fire works well.” He clapped his hands together. “Let me give you the tour.”

“Perfect.” He pointed up the stairs and she followed him to a room with a desk. “The office,” he said, somewhat unnecessarily, she thought. He showed her a bedroom with a twin bed, and she said a silent prayer that the next room would have a larger bed. When they stepped inside, she sighed in pleasure.

A large, brass bed set in the middle of the room, well, not exactly the middle. It took up most of the room. There was hardly any room to walk around it. Her suitcases sat on the mattress.

“Perfect.”

“Good,” he said, leaning toward her. “You like that word, don’t you.”

“Yes, I do.” And I haven’t been able to use it much lately. “No bathroom up here?”

“No. It’s downstairs.”

She followed him back down the stairs where he pointed out the bathroom, dining room and kitchen. The downstairs was actually one big room, separated by pieces of furniture. It was obvious to her the bathroom had been added long after the house had been built.

“How old is this house?”

“It was built in 1542, or somewhere around then.” He waved his hands. “Let me show you the garden.”

He opened the door in the kitchen. “After you.”

She stepped outside and into a world of color. Her heart did a double-thump, and then a triple, and for a minute, she thought she’d skipped to the spot where she now stood, surrounded by delicious smelling plants.

“Did you do all this?” She whirled around as if she were dancing.

“No.” He was still standing in the doorway and he sneezed. “I have allergies. This is as close as I can get. We hire someone to come out, but since you’re here, we thought you might be able to take care of it.”

“Most definitely.” She glanced around. “It’s huge, but it’ll be a lot of fun. If I need help, do you have someone you hire on a regular basis?”

“Yes, I do.” He put his fist to his mouth and coughed. “Call me if it’s necessary and I’ll give him a ring.”

“Too bad about your allergies. This place is fantastic.”

He sneezed again and unease spread up her spine. He’d only sneezed twice, and that was when she’d asked him to come outside. The cough had seemed forced, too.

“I do have a bit of a favor to ask.”

“What’s that?” She walked to a bush and fingered the green leaves. She wasn’t sure what it was, but it was beautiful. She needed to get a book so she could identify some of the plants she was unfamiliar with.

“There are quite a few...ornaments around, gnomes and the like. There’s one thing in particular that my wife is very attached to. I was hoping that, if you came across it, you would bring it into the house and ring me so I could come and get it.”

“Of course.” She walked toward him. “What is it?”

“A cauldron.”

“Excuse me? Do you mean the thing where witches make their brew?” Krisily swirled her fingers around as if she were stirring a potion. “Double, double, toil and trouble. Fire burn and cauldron bubble? At least I think that’s how the quote goes in Macbeth.”

“Exactly.”

“What does it look like?”

He cleared his throat. “I have no clue. I’ve never seen it.”

Her unease, which had disappeared as she’d thought about the Shakespeare play, returned. “You don’t know?”

“It was my wife’s, and she set it down somewhere out here one day and then walked off. As you said, the place is huge. She forgot where it was.”

“Interesting.” She shrugged. She knew he was lying, but she didn’t want him to know that she knew. “I’ll look for it.”

“Thank you.” He gave her a slight bow. “That’s the only thing you should bring out of the garden. Everything else is in its proper place.”

Now he was really creeping her out. He wanted her to tend to the garden, but he didn’t want her to move anything, except for the cauldron. Why the hell would he make a point of saying nothing else needed to be moved? Did he think she was going to steal something? She wasn’t a thief.

“Suits me.” She shrugged again, hoping the gesture would hide her unease.

“Thank you.” He glanced at his watch. “Now, I’m going to carry in the groceries we bought for you, and then I’m going to head back to Bath. Are there any other questions you might have?”

“Nope. Just thrilled to have the fresh country air to breathe.”

He inclined his head slightly, then went into the house. She heard the front door open, and then inhaled deeply. “Fire burn and cauldron bubble indeed. To quote Shakespeare more, I think something’s rotten in the state of Denmark.”

Whatever it was, it was best to keep it to herself. Maybe she was making too much out of his remarks. Maybe someone had designed the garden and put things just so, and his wife was upset because she’d paid so much money for a designer, then ruined it by leaving her cauldron among the garden riches. Or maybe his wife was a practicing witch.

Krisily made her way toward the door. She would help him carry in the supplies, and then she’d tell him bye and settle into the garden with a book and a glass of wine. The perfect way to start her vacation.

Chapter Two

Her toes tingled. She wiggled them, looking down from where she sat in her chaise. After Seamus had left, she'd ignored what she should be doing, unpacking, and did what she'd said she was going to do.

She'd read fifty pages and downed a few hefty glasses of wine, which caused the tingling. "I should have eaten something before the wine," she said aloud as she put her book down. She and Seamus had eaten lunch in town, but the food had been long gone before she'd started imbibing. She definitely needed nourishment.

But she didn't want to cook. She didn't want to lose the buzz that felt so wonderful. She giggled, then wiggled her butt in the chair. This was the first time she'd been this relaxed in ages.

"There's some chips in there," she said. Then she giggled. "Not chips, crisps. Chips are French fries over here. If I ask for a sandwich and chips, I'll get fries. Not that fries are a bad thing; it's just that right now I want chips."

She stood and the world seemed to spin. "Stop talking to yourself and go get something to eat," she said. She headed for the door, and once inside she found the package of crisps sitting on the counter as if they were waiting for her. She tore them open, then turned and leaned her butt against the counter as she surveyed her surroundings.

It was still a little unbelievable that she was here, in this cozy cottage all by herself, with no one around who would ask her questions about "the photos."

She went to the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of soda. With it in one hand and the bag of crisps in the other, she headed out the door.

She stopped on the grassy area just in front of the garden. It was hard for her to believe this was all hers for as long as she wanted. The aromatic mixture of flowers and greenery teased

her nose and made her close her eyes and luxuriate in the wonderful smell. The garden stretched out before her, offering treasures for her to explore.

Seamus had told her it was large, and warned her about its many wandering paths. It was late in the day, but how hard could it be to find her way back out? She'd just explore a few of the plants, see if she could identify the different varieties.

One step inside told her that wouldn't be the case, though. "Large" didn't begin to describe the layout. The first part of it was an octagon, with paths going off each one.

"Ennie meanie miney, moe," she said as she gazed at each lane. They all featured different flowers, different bushes. The idea of exploring them, one by one, gave her great pleasure.

One path led to another, and she soon found herself in what she thought might be the center of the garden. There were pathways leading off it, too. This place was more like a maze. The light was fading and she mentally kicked herself for not bringing a flashlight out here. There was good moonlight, true, but artificial help would make things go a little smoother.

"I don't need a flashlight," she said, "a torch, that's what they call it here in England." She needed to remember the new names for things. She'd juggled her food from one hand to the other, tucking the soda against her body as she ate from the bag. She'd just finished the salty treats and was folding up the bag to put in her pocket when she tripped over something.

She fell forward, dropping the bottle and bag as she scrambled for purchase. The wind left her lungs as she hit the ground.

"Ouch! That hurt." Her knees ached, and she was grateful for the fact she wore jeans that would keep them from being scraped up.

She rolled onto her back, grasping for air as she popped herself up on her elbows. She looked around, realizing she'd tripped over a long staff lying on the ground. After a few moments she sat up.

She ran her fingers through her hair and glanced at the piece of wood. "Thanks a lot! Nice way to welcome the new girl." She picked it up, holding it out in front of her. It was huge, at least six feet tall. "Where did you come from, and what type of tree are you from?"

There was no way a tree branch could be this big. At least she hadn't seen a tree that she thought this could come from. She glanced around. It was even darker now than it had been

before, but something she saw made her smile. Off in the distance, she could see lights. She'd obviously left the cottage lights on when she'd gone outside.

"Follow the lights," she said as she swung her legs behind her and got up on her knees. She grasped the staff and was just about to stand when something else caught her eye. Under a large green bush was a black cauldron.

"Miracles never cease," she muttered as she reached for it. She pulled it out from under the shrub. The branches seemed to hold it in place and she had to tug it with all her strength. She ended up on her butt again and she cried out in frustration.

"Really! If this isn't the right one, I'm going to scream." She grasped the wood and used it to stand, then picked up the cauldron. It was heavy, made out of cast iron. She used the staff as leverage as she struggled to bring the cauldron along the path. She thought about leaving it, about coming back for it when it was daylight, but she was afraid she would forget where she'd left it.

She was close to saying screw it when she rounded a corner and the chaise where she'd been sitting earlier came into view. "Thank the stars above," she said. She dragged the cauldron toward the chair and she sat. Sweat streamed down the sides of her face. She took a deep breath, still clutching the staff.

"That was fun." She leaned her head against the wood. Her left knee was hurting like hell, and there was an ache in the small of her back. She thought about leaving the cauldron outside, but she wanted to look at it more closely, see if there were any markings on it that would make it special to someone. As far as she could see, it was simply a big cast iron pot with legs. She tipped it on its side: two legs. Didn't they usually have three?

"Oh, who cares how many legs it has?" She used the staff to pull herself up, then stepped out of the garden. A humming noise filled the air and she looked up at the sky. Was that thunder?

Her hands grew hot and she dropped both the staff and the cauldron. A loud crack resonated and she glanced down: the cauldron had split in two when it hit the paving stones, but the pieces were still moving—growing.

"Oh hell, what the..." she took a step back. The staff was moving, too. It was sprouting legs, and arms, and a head. "What the fuck?"

Her heart racing, she backed toward the house, her gaze on the objects she'd just dropped. The staff was now a man, a huge naked man. The cauldron was a woman; or rather, the two halves had made a half a woman each.

The man wheeled around and glared at Krisily, then he kicked at the half of a woman that was crawling toward him, her hand clawing against the stones as she pulled herself toward the man.

He kicked at her again as the other half of the woman started to crawl toward the first half. He reached down and picked up the second half, tossing it into the garden. The minute it flew past the trees that served as the entrance to the garden, the woman's body, or half body, disappeared and half the cauldron appeared. It dropped down onto the dirt with a thud.

Krisily's eyes widened and she gulped. Then she turned toward the man, who had reached down to pick up the other half. The woman had hopped up onto one foot, though, her single arm flailing out toward her opponent.

There was the sickening sound of flesh hitting flesh, and then man grabbed the arm and twisted it. It sounded as if bone cracked and Krisily gasped. He picked up the woman and drop-kicked her into the garden. As the woman crossed the threshold, her body disappeared, turning into the second half of the cauldron. Krisily's knees gave way.

She landed on the stoop. "It's not real. It's not real. It's not real."

The man grasped her by the shoulders and she screamed. He picked her up as if she were a feather, lifting her so that they were eye to eye.

"I guess I should have skipped the wine," she said, as all the air left her lungs and she collapsed against his chest.

Chapter Three

Forget lions and tigers and bears, oh my. They're nothing compared to what I saw. If I open my eyes, will I see half a woman being thrown across the yard by a naked guy?

Krisily opened one eye and peeked out at her surroundings. She could tell she was on something soft, but how she got there was a mystery. One look told her she was in the living room, lying prone on the sofa. And she was alone.

"Crap," she said as she sat up and put her head in her hands. "Tip number one for travel, eat first and have one drink, not the whole frigging bottle."

It had been a long flight, coupled with the stress of the last few months that had brought about her hallucination. Half women and sticks that turn into gorgeous men didn't exist. But it could be the start of a great book. Her agent would be thrilled if she were writing again.

She ran her fingers through her hair and sighed. A glass of water appeared in front of her face. "Thanks," she said as she took it. She was barely through the first sip when she realized there had been a hand wrapped around the glass, that a man had offered her the drink.

The water spewed from her mouth as she screamed and she dropped the glass, liquid seeping into the rug. She vaulted over the sofa and backed away from the man standing there, the man from her dreams.

"Who the hell are you?"

He cocked his head at her, but he didn't say a word.

"I asked you a question. Get the hell out of I'll dial 9-1-1." She hoped she sounded calm, in control. "Scratch that, it's 9-9-9 over here, isn't it?"

Confusion passed over his face and he inclined his head toward her. But he didn't advance on her, didn't act as if he wanted to hurt her.

“Who are you?” She glanced at her two exits. To get to the front door she had to get by her unwanted visitor. The other door led to the garden and the cauldron that turned into a woman—no, not a woman, what looked like a woman split in two. But the woman had changed back into the cauldron when she’d been thrown—kicked—back into the garden by the man standing in front of her.

He’d been naked outside. Now he wore a peasant shirt and leather jerkins, as if he’d escaped from a renaissance fair. Where had he gotten those clothes?

“Please don’t hurt me.”

He shook his head slowly, then he put his hands to his throat, running his fingers up the sides of his face as if he were caressing them. They came away from his face and he pointed to his mouth. He repeated the motion and pointed to his mouth more emphatically and an idea formed in her mind.

“Can’t you talk?”

His face brightened and he shook his head.

“Okay.” She glanced around again, trying to figure out an exit route. But what good would it do her, really, to go outside? Seamus had told her there was a car, and that the keys were in the kitchen, but he hadn’t told her where it was parked. Who knew what would happen while she was searching for it. Better to keep her eye on her unwanted visitor. She was stuck out here in the middle of nowhere with the man that came from the stick.

She giggled, and it turned into hysterical laughter. This time it was the man who backed up, staring at her as if she’d grown another head. Who knew, maybe she had. Anything was possible when you saw a cauldron break and become two halves of a woman.

“Screw this. I’m leaving.” She walked around the couch and made her way toward where her purse was on the table. She picked it up and headed toward the front door. She put her hand on the door and yanked it open. When she made to put her foot over the threshold, though, it was as if she’d run into an invisible wall.

“What the hell?” She put her hand out, expecting it to go out the door; instead it came into contact with a clear barrier. Panic shot through her and she turned and bolted for the back door. She stepped through the portal quite easily.

“Thank God.” She ran for the side gate, but when she reached for the latch, she hit the same type barrier she’d run into at the front door. She couldn’t see anything, but there was

definitely a blockade. There was another gate on the other side, but she was pretty sure she would find the same.

She let her gaze go to the porch. The man that had come from the staff stood there, watching her with an inquisitive look on his face.

“If you could talk, I think you might be able to explain this to me.” She was finding it hard to fight down panic. Her stomach churned and she thought she might lose it, losing everything she’d consumed in the last few hours. If she stayed calm, maybe he wouldn’t rush her; and maybe it would give her time to find a way out of this place, some sort of doorway not surrounded by a force field.

Or maybe she could jump the fence. It wasn’t really a fence, it was a hedge. She took her purse and swung it toward the hedge, letting go of it so it would sail through the air. It hit something solid, and undetectable, and then fell to the ground.

“Well, doesn’t that just suck the big one.” Krisily wheeled on the man. “Tell me what the hell’s going on here.”

He licked his lips and motioned for her to come back to the house.

“No frigging way,” she said, crossing her arms in front of her chest. She pointed to where she stood. “I’m not moving from this spot until I understand what the hell is going on here. And since you can’t talk, I suggest you figure out some way to explain it to me, because I know you can hear me, and you understand every word I’m saying. I can tell by the look on your face.”

He motioned again and she shook her head. “Start talking, or whatever it is you do to get your point across.”

He pursed his lips, and she could tell he was trying to decide exactly what to say. Maybe he didn’t trust her; if so, that made them even, because she didn’t trust him, either. They’d have to figure out some sort of way past this impasse, though, since they couldn’t get out of the house, or around it. There was no way on Earth or in heaven above that she was going near the garden entrance where the cauldron pieces/woman waited as if she were a junkyard dog in attack mode.

Time dragged on and she started to count the seconds. She didn’t care how long it took, she could wait him out. She had four sisters, and she frequently had to wait for things when she was a teen. This would be a piece of cake.

One minute.

Two.

Three.

She tapped her foot and almost smiled when he exhaled in exasperation. Then he waved his hand and the air around them shimmered. Krisily's eyes widened as three men appeared before her. It was almost as if she were at a drive-in. One of the "actors" was the man standing near her. The other two she didn't recognize.

There were three actors in this movie, the man standing in front of her and two other. They looked enough alike that it was possible they were brothers. Tights outlined their legs, and long tunics came down over their hips. They were laughing and speaking but she couldn't understand what they were saying. They were in the garden, and behind them was a table laid out with items Krisily didn't recognize. There were a few things she noticed, a scale like the one Lady Justice held, several spoons, a mortar and pestle, and some piles of grainy substances.

They started to talk again, and as if someone had selected the "English" option and turned up the volume, she could hear and understand perfectly.

"What are you doing, Uriel?" One of the men in the vision was speaking to the mirror-image of the man standing on the stoop. So his name was Uriel. "You had other things to do besides work on the flowers."

"My work is done," Uriel said. "That's why I'm working on the roses."

"You should be working on the potion," the man said in a low voice that showed he wasn't happy with Uriel's answer.

"That was Acolius's job for the morning," Uriel said, shrugging. He pointed to a third man who stood near the edge of the garden. He had a staff in his hand, and Krisily was pretty sure it was the one that she'd found today, the one that had become Uriel. At least it looked exactly like it. "It's not my fault Acolius didn't finish."

"I'm cultivating the lavender." Acolius picked up a purple flower from a basket. "It took me some time. Besides, Bythos, you worry too much. If we do nothing but alchemy, someone is going to be suspicious. We're supposed to be gardeners, preparing medical concoctions. If we work on the potions during the day, there is every chance someone could sneak up on us and find out what we're doing."

The one they called Bythos sighed. "We have the sorcerer here," he looked pointedly at Uriel, "to keep the things we are doing private. We only have a few days to deliver our final

product. Besides, what are you working on lavender for? We have no call for it in the medical concoctions we are preparing.”

Acolius smirked. “I am making an erotic blend for a wonderful lady to lather on her skin so I can hold her close and smell her while I introduce her to my love root.”

The three of them laughed and Krisily couldn’t help but smile.

“It would help your purpose if you actually introduced yourself to her,” Uriel said.

“Once she smells what I made for her, she won’t care what my name is.”

“And once she sees your root, she’ll be forgetting the smell and wondering about your name so she can warn the other lovelies how inadequate you are.” Bythos threw something green toward his friend. “A few more hours of work, my friends, real work that will produce results. After that you can go and play. Now, go and do as we talked of this morning.”

There were grumblings, but Acolius and Uriel went in different directions. Bythos dropped the cuttings he held in a basket, and then suddenly, he dropped to the ground.

Krisily’s eyes widened as a woman appeared beside him. She wore a green dress in the Tudor style, a headdress hiding her hair.

“I want what you have,” she said as she knelt down next to Bythos. She took a knife to his hair, cutting a huge chunk of it, which she shoved into a bag. “I take from you the power of the ocean. And so you can’t come back on me, I take from you the ability to see, so you cannot find me to do evil upon me.”

She stood, and then the scene changed. Whereas the previous vision had been light and full of mirth, this one was dark. Krisily felt cold and afraid as it played out. The screen now showed Acolius on his back. The woman held a lock of his hair in her hand. “From you, I take the power of the air. And so you cannot listen to your friends’ pleas for help, I take your ability to hear. That means you cannot listen to the evil things your friends spout about me.”

Once again the scene changed, and Krisily saw that Uriel was on his stomach. The woman stood above him, her foot on his behind. “I take your ability to make fire, and I leave you without the ability to speak. That means you can say no evil against me. You are the worst, sorcerer. Once I find the secret hidden in this place, you will be the first to die.”

She bent down and cut off a hunk of his hair, and when she stood, Krisily wanted to turn tail and run. Evil wafted off her in dark waves. She held out her hand and a bowl appeared. She

put the hair inside, then snapped. Fire appeared on her fingertips and she touched the hair. It all burst into flames and the woman started to laugh.

The woman ran through the garden and soon she was standing next to the prone body of Bythos. She bent down next to him.

“So easy to read, to see what you’ve been doing. I can see every ingredient you’ve used in your potion. It touched your bodies, got into your hair. Now that I know how you made your brew, I can do it myself.”

A sinister giggle escaped her throat and Krisily took a step back, even though she was pretty sure the woman couldn’t see her.

“The sorcerer first, and then I’ll deal with you, alchemist.” She turned around and a scream of frustration rent the air. “You!”

Uriel stood in front of her, anger blazing in his gaze. He opened his palm and a ball of fire leapt from his palm and flew toward the woman. She ducked and returned fire with one of her own. Soon the air was full of flames of different colors and sizes.

One particularly large one knocked Uriel off his feet. The woman laughed and she threw back her hand as if to deliver the death blow. Before she could do it, though, Bythos grabbed her around the ankles. She fell, kicking out as she did.

Bythos cried out in pain and the woman stood, rushing toward the table. She picked up the scale and threw it while screaming out what Krisily assumed was an incantation. The scale hit Bythos in the chest and seemed to absorb him.

The man disappeared and the scale fell to the ground. Uriel was back on his feet, rushing toward what Krisily now knew was a witch. She snatched the staff off the table, swinging it at him. He ducked, and Acolius tackled the woman from behind, knocking her to the ground.

She lashed out at Acolius, kicking and screaming as he got on top of her, pushing her face into the dirt. She reared back just as Uriel started to speak, his fingers pointed at her.

More strange words spilled from her mouth and Acolius flew backward through the air. He hit the sundial sitting near the table and it absorbed him, just as the scale had done to Bythos.

The witch was back on her feet. She and Uriel were circling each other like fighters in a ring. She picked up the staff that she had dropped and pointed it at him, smiling. In return he disappeared from in front of her, appearing at the table. He picked up the cauldron that had been

sitting there and threw it in her direction. At the same time, she threw the staff. They passed each other in the air as two different sets of incantations filled the air.

The staff hit Bythos and the cauldron hit the witch. Both humans disappeared and the items dropped to the ground, and then the scene vanished.

Krisily stared at the space where she'd just witnessed something that wasn't to be believed.

She turned to Uriel. "Is this England's version of Candid Camera?"

Chapter Four

At the rate Uriel was eating, there wouldn't be enough food left to last the day. Of course, if he'd truly been trapped inside a stick for the last however many years...

"Excuse me," she waved a finger at him. He looked up from the package of bread where he was taking out yet another slice. "What year did all that happen in, what we just saw?"

Krisily no longer felt panic. Instead she felt like Dorothy, the only difference being that she hadn't dropped a house on a witch, she'd just found one in the garden. She'd let this dream play out, and then she'd wake up, snuggled in her bed upstairs. She was sure of that.

Uriel folded the piece of bread in half and stuffed it into his mouth. As he chewed, he used his fingers to show the numbers one, five, two and three.

"What? Are you saying 1523? During the time of Henry VIII? You worked for Henry?"

Uriel nodded. He took another piece of bread and ate it in three quick bites.

"Which wife was he on then?"

Uriel frowned and she laughed. "He had six of them, you know.

This time his eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"Yup, six of them, divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived."

His obvious confusion grew and she burst out into laughter. "This is too funny, but we don't have time to discuss Henry and his wives. I want to know about what happened out there."

He ate another piece of bread, and then he smacked his lips.

"Thirsty?"

Again with the nod.

"Water from the tap, or there's wine and beer in the fridge." She pointed to the box.

A look of wonder passed over his face and he went to the refrigerator, running his hands over the smooth surface. He caressed it like he would a lover, and then he pushed against it. When it didn't open, he put his hands on either side and shook it.

"Oh for heaven's sake," Krisily said as she moved next to him. She nudged him away, and then opened the door. "There."

His mouth opened in a perfect O and he leaned down, peering inside. Krisily backed away and watched as he tentatively put his hand deep inside the fridge. He pulled it out and turned it from side to side, examining it.

"It's cold in there," she said. "I can't wait to see how you react to a freezer."

He frowned at her as he reached inside and pulled out a bottle of wine. He held it up and studied the label, then offered it to her.

"What's the matter? Can't open it? You're the sorcerer, right? Prove it." She crossed her arms in front of her chest and glared at him. He shrugged and gripped the bottle around the neck with one hand. With the index finger of the other, he pointed at it. The cork flew into the air, then landed solidly on the ground.

"Okay, you proved it." She ran her fingers through her hair. "Can you get us out of here?"

He shook his head.

"Why not? Are there limits to your powers?"

This time he shrugged, and she wondered what that meant. "You don't know if there are limits? The other guy, Bythos or Acolius, one of the two, they said you were protecting the area from being discovered. I would think that means you put up wards. I've done research on witchcraft, so I know what that is. If you put them up, you can take them down."

She was getting tired of him nodding. He took a swig from the bottle before he set it down on the counter. Then he took two boxes, one of crackers, the other cereal, and set them down next to it, pushing them close together.

"Does that represent the ward?"

This time he inclined his head as if in approval. He put his hands on her shoulders and moved her in front of it. When he touched her, heat raced through her body. It shot straight down to her clit, which tightened as if in anticipation of being touched.

As she was thinking about the pleasure his touch would bring, the boxes on the counter flew apart, going in opposite directions so fast that they lifted in the air just slightly.

“The witch blew them apart,” she whispered. “Did she add more to keep you inside while she did her dirty work?”

She couldn’t see the nod, but she could feel it. “So what happens now?”

Uriel still stood close behind her. She could still feel the heat from his presence and touch, and it disconcerted her. She’d managed to control her emotions by telling herself this was a dream, but if it was, it was the most realistic one she’d ever had. He moved just enough so that she could turn, and then he pointed toward the sink.

With a swirl of his hand an image of Bythos and Acolius appeared.

“You need them.” It wasn’t a question; she knew the three of them were linked. “Go into the garden and get them.”

This time he shook his head. He took a step back and put his hands together, then slowly moved them apart in a long line.

“If you go into the garden, you turn into the rod again.” Before he could nod she held up her hand. “I get it. I have to go get them, the scale and the sundial. When they cross the barrier, will they turn back into men?”

This time he smiled.

“Great, two more naked men. I guess I’ll have to...wait a minute.” She put her hand on his chest. “Where did you get your clothes from? It just dawned on me that you were naked when I fainted. Did you have those clothes in a closet here?”

No answer came, not a nod, a shrug or a head shake. Anger rushed through her. “Listen, Mr. Merlin Wannabe, if you want my help, you’re going to tell me the truth. I’m still not convinced this isn’t some sort of elaborate practical joke.”

It was as if a dark cloud had passed above them. The look on his face was pure anger. “Sorry about the Merlin dig,” she said, “but this isn’t adding up. Sure, you’ve done some magic, but something tells me you didn’t conjure up those clothes.”

She could tell he was debating about what to tell her. It was amazing what you could read on a person’s face when you looked at it intently. Most of the time when she talked to people she didn’t keep her gaze on them. But now, knowing he couldn’t speak, she kept her eyes trained on his face, which was a myriad of emotions.

After a long few moments he sighed, then he moved toward the fireplace. Krisily moved into the living room right behind him. He stopped in front of it and made motions with his hands as if he were shooing away flies. The fireplace disappeared, revealing a hallway.

Krisily's mouth dropped open. She'd had dreams about plots for books before, but nothing had ever been this lifelike. She didn't have to pinch herself to know this wasn't a dream. What was happening was real!

He stepped into the hallway and motioned for her to follow him. For the first time since he arrived, she took a really good look at him: maybe six feet tall and muscular; his hair was shoulder-length and curly, and she could see the spot where the witch had cut off a hunk of it. Why hadn't she noticed that before?

What color were his eyes, she wondered. From this distance she couldn't tell, but she imagined they were green, the color she mostly chose for her characters. He motioned for her again and she moved toward the fireplace. Nerves ratcheted through her as she thought about what would happen if she stepped inside the hallway and the portal closed behind her. There was every possibility that could happen. After all, she couldn't leave the house except to go through the garden. But Uriel stepped into this place with ease.

Maybe a little test would ease her anxiety, she decided. She stopped in the middle of the room and picked up a book from the table near the sofa. She tossed it into the hall. It passed through and plunked down on the floor.

"Works for me," she said as she remembered the way her purse had hit the barrier outside. She went in after him; it was dark, and she couldn't see much more than an outline of him, and then that disappeared. Within a few seconds there was a glow, and she had the idea that he'd lit a candle.

The glow increased and she knew that he'd lit another, and another. By the time she was in the room, there were six candles lit. She didn't see any matches, or any other source of fire, so she guessed he'd shot the flames from his fingertips.

This was obviously a... "Laboratory," she whispered. Much of the same equipment she'd seen outside was here, along with a few things that she couldn't name. "Awesome."

Krisily moved into the room, wanting to touch everything, to explore. Instead she glanced over to where Uriel stood in front of a table. His back was to her and his tunic came down over his butt. The romance writer in her wanted to lift the shirt to see if his ass matched the other fine

parts of him. She could kick herself for being so freaked out when she'd seen him naked that she hadn't focused on the dangling parts between his legs. What sort of romance writer was she?

The type that was scared to death, she figured as she glanced around the room.

"What is it that you do here?" She went to a table and picked up something long and wooden. "Is this a wand? Do you need one for your...spells?"

If he could have talked, she knew from the look on his face he might have said, "Hell no, I don't need no stinking wand." But then again, maybe not. He'd never seen a Bogart movie.

"So what happens in here?"

He shrugged. She guessed it was better than a nod.

"You had clothes in here, which means it's remained hidden for all these years." She sounded so calm, as if this was something that happened every day. When this was all over, she was going to check herself into the local psych ward. "So what do we do now?"

Uriel picked up a piece of parchment and a quill. He dipped it into a jar, but when he touched the quill to the paper, nothing happened.

"Well, the ink dried out," she said. "Come on, I have a pen out in the other room."

Without waiting for an answer, Krisily left the laboratory. She had a pen in her purse, but her purse was outside, and she didn't want to go near it. There was one upstairs, in the makeshift office. But surely she could find one down here. She went to kitchen and started rooting through drawers.

She found a pen in the third one. When she turned, he was standing right behind her, parchment in hand. He was peering over her shoulder, trying to see what was inside the drawer.

"We'll play catch up later," she said as she handed him the pen. "Write."

He held the pen gingerly, as if it were a snake. Then he lifted it to his nose and sniffed.

"It's a writing utensil," she said as she took it from him. She grabbed the parchment and put it on the table and wrote out her name.

"Krisily, Kres-a-lee. My name. You can write, can't you?"

He huffed and snatched the pen out of her hand. He sniffed it once more, then put pen to parchment.

"Need Bythos and Acolius," she read.

“Great, so go into the garden and get the sundial and the scale. That’s what they changed into. It stands to reason that, if it was the same thing that changed you and the...woman...then they would change back.”

He wrote again, and she leaned forward to see. He smelled like...sandalwood? “Cannot walk in garden,” she read.

“How do you know?” She took a step back. “You haven’t tried.”

“Do not want to try,” she read. “Disaster if cannot change back. Witch changed.”

“You’re right about that,” she said. “Fine, I’ll go in there, but we’re going to have to find something I can carry the sundial in, something with wheels. That thing looked heavy.”

He looked confused and she spun her fingers in circles. “You know, wheels. Of course you know wheels, they had carriages in your time. I need something like a carriage, only smaller.”

The confusion lessened, but didn’t leave, and she knew he wouldn’t be able to help her. She wondered if there was a shed in the garden, or in the area outside the house, where she could see if there was a wheelbarrow, or some sort of small wagon.

She turned to leave, and she could hear him hurrying behind her. He was going pretty fast. Maybe he was afraid she would find some way out and leave him here. If she could, she would. *Maybe*. She went out the backdoor and looked around. There was a shed off to the right.

Hopefully it wasn’t locked. She walked to it slowly and realized he wasn’t coming behind her. He stood on the stoop, and really, she couldn’t blame him. He hadn’t changed back earlier, but who knew if he would now.

“Listen to yourself,” she said as put her hand on the knob and prayed it would turn. When it did, she laughed out loud. It was dark inside, but there was a light switch. She flipped it on. Sitting in the middle of a room was a wagon. It looked just big enough to hold the sundial.

She grasped it and dragged it outside. Then she glanced at the sky. The beautiful, golden sunset had turned into a gorgeous, dusky twilight. Barely any light at all. Hell no. There was no way she was going into that witch-infested garden when the sun was down.

She pulled the wagon behind her, enjoying the look of wonder on his face as he examined it from her perch on the stoop.

“I’m not going in there until tomorrow morning,” she said. He shook his head and pointed at the garden. “If you want them tonight, you go. I’m going to go inside and get

something to eat. I'm not going in there and risk getting stuck in the dark, with the witch, and who knows what else."

He waved his hand over her and she started to glow, like a huge walking candle.

"Holy crap," she said, rubbing her hands against her arm as if she could get whatever it was off. "What did you do to me? I'm not radioactive, am I? You don't understand what that means. Crap, I wish I'd paid more attention in high school chemistry class."

He motioned her closer to him, and when she was right beside him, he grabbed her by the shoulders. Heat spread through her again, and when he leaned down and kissed her, the heat intensified.

And then she came, harder than she ever had in her life.

Chapter Five

They both stumbled backward. He into the house, and she onto her butt right at the edge of the garden. Krisily fought to gain control of her shaking body as she watched him crumple down on the stoop. He lifted the tunic and she could see a stain on his breeches.

He'd had an orgasm, too.

What the hell was that all about? When he looked up at her, his look was dark, and angry. Forget that, she thought as he pushed himself to his feet. He'd left angry behind. This was rage.

Uriel bounded down the steps and grabbed her by the wrists, pulling her up.

"Hey, that hurt!" She pushed at him but he kept hold of her wrists. Then he let one go and started ripping at her clothes. "Stop it!"

She clawed at his hand with her free one, but she was very ineffective. He ripped her shirt and she could tell he was examining her. For what, she wondered? Witch's marks?

He let her arm go and grasped her shirt at the bottom. He ripped it right up the front as if it were a piece of paper.

Krisily screamed and kicked out at him. In turn, he put out a leg, sweeping hers out from under her. She hit the ground hard, rolling over to protect her now naked front. He grasped the shirt and pulled, and it left her body.

When he straddled her hips she thought she might faint from the horror of what was about to happen to her. Instead, he put his hand on her hip, right about the waistband of her pants, and gently caressed her.

She knew what he'd found, the thing that she hated, the one she'd wanted to get rid of for so long. He continued to touch it, as if he were tracing it. At least he wasn't trying to strip her naked anymore.

Krisily took several deep breaths. “It’s a birthmark, asshole! It’s nothing, I...hate it, but...just a birthmark.” She propped herself up on her hands as much as she could, since he was still sitting on the bottom half of her. One glance over her shoulder showed that he was amazed about something.

“What? The mark? I tried to go to a plastic surgeon to get it taken off, but I chickened out at the last minute. My mother told me she thought it meant I was cursed somehow, not that her opinion matters much to me. Besides, most people don’t see it, since it’s under my clothes...” Well, that wasn’t true. Millions of people had seen it thanks to her rotten ex. Why did she feel the need to bare her soul to this man?

“Actually...” she took a deep breath, “there were some naked photos of me, taken by a former lover, that were published in a magazine not too long ago. You wouldn’t believe the ruckus they caused, with people wanting to know if the mark was real, or if it was some sort of brand, or a tat. Of course there was more than that discussed. I got letters from pervs like you wouldn’t believe. There’re weirdoes everywhere. And I...”

Krisily closed her mouth as he stood. His hands went to the waistband of his pants and she scrambled up.

“No, no, listen, I—what are you doing?” He pulled his pants down on one side to reveal a birthmark, one that matched hers exactly. The air left her lungs. She clutched at her neck, feeling as if she couldn’t breathe.

Despite her panic, her gaze was trained on his hip where a large purple circle contained a triangle, with a perfectly formed 4 in the middle.

When she felt as if she had control of herself, she looked up at him. “What does it mean?”

He was smiling, one that carried all the way up to his eyes. It wasn’t a predatory smile, like he knew he had her where he wanted her. Instead it was one that made her toes tingle, just like the orgasm he’d just given her with a single kiss.

They stared at each other, and Krisily wondered why she wasn’t running. After all, this man had just ripped her shirt off. But they matched, in a way she’d never matched with anyone before. They had the same exact mark.

He pointed at the wagon, and then at the garden. In return she looked at her chest, covered only by a bra. "I need a shirt." He took his off and thrust it at her. She put it on, surprised that it was so big. She was a large woman, and many shirts, even men's, were too tight.

One wave of his hand and she glowed again.

"Wow, instant flashlight. This is pretty good. I take it that this will last the whole time I'm in the garden?"

He nodded.

She glanced at the garden. The cauldron sat in the middle of the entrance. At some point, it had knit back together, which meant, to her, that the witch had power, even in this form.

"Should I kick her out of the way?"

His eyes widened in amazement, and then he laughed, a soundless one with his shoulders shaking in amusement. This time his nod was emphatic.

"If I don't come out, will you find a way to save me?" He closed the distance between them swiftly. His hands caressed her shoulders and he kissed first her forehead, and then her lips. She didn't come this time, but the tingle that shot through her made her think she might, with just a little more contact. Maybe it was just the first time they'd kissed that brought about the orgasm, and what an orgasm it had been. What would happen if they had sex? She wasn't sure she'd be able to withstand the intensity of that orgasm.

"Is there anything you need to tell me before I go in," she said. Their lips were inches apart. He shook his head slowly, but she could read the look in his eyes. Be careful, very careful.

He let go of her face and went to the shed. She watched as he tentatively put a hand inside. When nothing happened, he entered. A glow came from within. She waited for him to come out, and when he did, he had a rake in his hand, one with metal fingers at the ends. He went to the garden, held it out in front of him and struck the cauldron. It shrieked and Krisily took a step back. He hit it several times, the cries of pain increasing with each blow. Finally, he pulled back the rake and hit the cauldron like it was a hockey puck. It skidded across the path, landing in a spot near the hedge.

"Thanks," she said as he turned back around and put out his hand as if to indicate it was safe now. She knew it wasn't, though. The witch may be a cauldron again, but she had obviously summoned power from their encounter. How else would the cauldron be able to howl like she had?

“Well, let’s start the insanity,” she said as she took hold of the wagon and stepped across the garden threshold.

Chapter Six

“Cauldrons that turn into bitches, oh my...cauldrons that turn into bitches, oh my...cauldrons that turn into...” What the hell am I doing!” Krisily came to a standstill in the path, at least that’s what she thought it was. There were three paths leading off of it. But for the life of her, she couldn’t remember how she’d arrived at the area where she’d discovered the staff and the cauldron in the first place.

After adjusting her hold on the wagon, she looked up into the darkness, noting how high the full moon was in the sky. She wasn’t sure how long she’d been wandering around the garden, but she knew she’d been down two of these paths before. She was so turned around she just wasn’t sure which ones. They’d both ended at tall hedges, ones that there was no way she could get around.

Things were not looking good. When she’d first come into the garden, everything had seemed pretty innocuous. Right now, though, the plants hummed with power. She had the sense they could feel her presence and they weren’t happy about her being there.

She was very antsy, as if the ground was going to open up and swallow her at any second. *Deep breaths*, she coached herself for the millionth time. Then she repeated the mantra that had helped her to hurry before. “Bitches that turn into cauldrons, oh my...”

“Uriel, if you can hear me, help me find the right path, please.” She glanced at the three ways she could go. Nothing happened for a few moments, and then the path on her right changed. Tiny stones appeared in the middle, one coming right after the other as if they were leading a trail.

“Thank you!” she yelled out as she pulled the wagon onto the path, hurrying behind the stones as they appeared. Why hadn’t she thought about this before? Because it may not be him, a part of her responded. *What happens if this is the witch leading you in the wrong direction?*

“Go away,” she told the nagging part of her brain. She increased her step, almost running down the lane. Excitement soared through her as she came into the clearing and noticed the tables with instruments.

It didn’t take her long to get to the sundial. She parked the wagon next to it and put her hands on the stone. It hummed as if in anticipation and she knew she had the right piece. Had the staff and cauldron felt this way? She wasn’t sure, of course. She’d been more than a little tipsy when she’d found them. They might have hummed and she might have just thought it was her fingers tingling from too much wine.

“Lift with your legs and not your back,” she said as she grasped the edges of the dial and tried to pick it up. “Heavy.” She dropped it back down, making sure she moved her toes so they didn’t get in the way in case it shifted. She wasn’t sure she would be able to lift the heavy stone object onto the wagon.

She studied it for a few moments, then an idea came to her. If she tipped the wagon onto its side and wedged it under the stone, she might be able to work it into the wagon, then figure out some way to right the wagon with the sundial inside. There were tools on the table, weren’t there?

A quick examination revealed several long pieces of wood that she thought could be used as leverage to move the dial. She hit them together, and then waved them in the air. “Of course if I were Uriel, I could just say something like, ‘Rise, rise, into wagon you!’” She whirled toward the sundial and pointed the wood at it.

To her amazement, the stone levitated and came to rest in the wagon.

“Oh shit.” She dropped the wood and backed away. She knew her mouth was open in utter amazement and she must look like an idiot standing there, but she didn’t care.

Did she do that?

“Of course not! Uriel did that.” She held out her arms. “Thank you!” Her birthmark burned and she put her hand on her hip. “All right, time to get the hell out of here.”

Compared to the sundial, the scale was like lifting a feather, even though she was pretty sure it was made of pure gold. She put them in the wagon, then grasped the handle. When she turned back around, the stones were gone, and three more egresses had appeared in the hedges.

“Okay, witch, you’re not going to trap me that easily.” She leaned down and picked up one of the sticks, which she pointed at the path she was pretty sure had brought her here.

“Stones, show me the way out.”

They appeared as before, one after another. Krisily didn’t waste any time. She kept hold of the wood and pulled the wagon after her, its weight slowing her down. Despite the wagon, the trip went pretty fast, and when she entered the clearing from where she could see the house, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Uriel!” He stood up from he’d been sitting on the stoop. “I’ve got it.”

He nodded enthusiastically and walked toward her, stopping at the edge of what she knew was the “safe zone.”

She had the wagon right at the edge of the garden when something snaked out, wrapped around her ankles and tugged. She lost her footing and fell to the ground. A glance down showed vine from the hedge moving up her legs. She tried to kick out, but the coils were too tight.

“Uriel!” She could see him at the opening, using the rake to try and grasp the handle of the wagon and pull it over. “Uriel! Help me!”

He glanced at her, dropped the rake and held out his hands, but nothing happened.

“Do something!” The vines were up to her thighs and she was being pulled toward the bush where the cauldron had come to rest. What would happen if she touched it? Would she die? Or would the witch invade her body?

Fear engulfed her as she tried, and failed, to dislodge herself from vines. She sat up and clawed at them, but they just kept moving up her body. When something hit her in the head she cried out in pain. It rolled off her and thudded down next to her. Her gaze widened as she recognized the staff that she’d carried out of the garden.

One glance over her shoulder showed Uriel was gone. She imagined him launching himself at her as if he were diving into a pool. He would have changed in mid-air and hit her on the head. She grasped the staff tightly and hit at the vine.

A harsh cry of pain rang out and Krisily hit the vine again. The wail was keener this time and she hit it one more time. This time she felt the strike, pain ripping into her thigh.

The vine loosened and she kicked out, hitting it with the staff again and again as she worked to free her feet. When she was able, she crawled away from it, keeping the staff in front of her as a weapon.

She rushed to the wagon. She pushed it over the garden threshold as quick as possible, then rolled over, holding the staff close to her.

When the staff disappeared and it was Uriel she held in her arms, she felt tears leave her eyes. He stroked her hair and kissed her forehead. She hoped that, if he was able to, he would have said she'd done well.

"Is the lass all right?" The deep male voice startled her and she looked up to see a man who looked a great deal like Uriel. He was naked, and on the edge of his hip, she could see part of a circle that she was sure looked just like hers. He was staring off into air, and she knew he was the one from whom the witch had taken sight.

Another naked man stepped up beside him. He looked down at her and smiled. Once again, the resemblance was uncanny, and the identical mark was on his hip.

"She looks fine," he said. "I am Acolius, this is my cousin Bythos, and it seems you already know our cousin, Uriel."

She nodded, then murmured, "Yes." Uriel tightened his hold on her, and as he did she realized that he, too, was naked. "Three naked men and not one of them with a hard-on," she said. "I need to work on my charms, obviously."

She burst into laughter that slowly dissolved into tears. When three sets of hands were caressing her, not in a sexual manner, but trying, obviously, to give comfort, her sobs lessened.

"How is it he can talk, when he can't hear?" Her voice shook, but she didn't care.

"Acolius has not lost his voice," Bythos said. "When you speak, turn your head toward him so he can study your lips."

"Great." She settled her head against Uriel's chest. "I'll remember that."

"We have things to attend to," Bythos said, reaching for her with tender, inquisitive hands. He traced his finger up her arm, over her neck and to her face. His touch was gentle, as if he were memorizing the feel of her.

After they'd all helped her to stand, almost as one, they turned toward the garden. The vine was weaving itself into a woman's form. Absolute terror rushed through Krisily.

"She's stronger," she whispered. "Will the garden hold her?"

“We can only pray it will, until we find a way to destroy her,” Bythos offered. “We need to get to work as quickly as possible.”

Krisily glanced at the vine woman. It was moving, its chest heaving as if it were breathing, which, she supposed, it was. Bythos was right. They had to work fast or they would all be dead, of that she had no doubt.

Chapter Seven

Was it the restorative power of tea, or the three gorgeous men sitting around her that made her exhaustion disappear? Well, the tea was good, but not that good. Three hunks studying her intently was something she'd never experienced before. She'd had boyfriends, sure, but never had three men at once give her the "I want to fuck you" look.

"So you're all out of the garden, and life's good again, right? Does this mean we can leave the house?" She hadn't thought about checking that detail after their little duel with the witch. They'd all come inside, she to sit on the couch and the three men to go to the secret room, from which they'd come out fully clothed.

Which was a pity. This time she'd made sure to check things out. They were definitely in the well-hung department. And all three of them had the same birthmark that she had.

Now, as she sat on the couch with the tea she'd prepared for them, she wondered exactly what the mark meant. She wasn't certain how to broach the subject, though.

"We cannot leave," Bythos said. "Not yet, anyway."

"I see." She took another sip of her tea. "So, you guys are cousins? All three of you from different families?"

"Yes," Acolius said.

She glanced at him. "You can't hear a thing, but you can answer questions. That's odd. Can you read my mind?"

"No, but I can read your mood, and see which words you form with your lips."

"New skill?"

"No." He grinned at her and her clit tightened. "Being able to read lips is useful when at court. You can decipher the intrigue that way."

“Ah, good plan.” She took another sip. “What about a plan to deal with the green witch outside?”

“It’s not going to be easy,” Bythos said. “She’s strong, but the power from the four of us will help defeat her.”

“Four of us?” She leaned forward. “You mean the three of you.” She waved a finger between the men. “You’re all sorcerers, right?”

“No,” Bythos reached out a hand again, searching for her. She took his fingers and squeezed. The smile on his face made her shiver. “Uriel is a sorcerer. Acolius and I are alchemists. We have no real magical power, except for what we create potion wise. You and Uriel will have to provide the magic.”

“Me?” She stood up and started to pace. “I’m not a sorcerer.”

“You’re right,” Bythos said, humor in his tone. “You’re a sorceress.”

“Wrong.” She turned toward him. “I’m a writer, and not a very good one at the moment.”

“You’re part of the four.” He pointed in the general direction of her lower body. “You have a mark that matches ours, don’t you?”

“Well yes, but…” she threw up her hands in frustration. “It’s just a birthmark. Besides, you can’t see. How do you know where mine is?”

“Because it’s in the same place on all of us.”

Uriel was writing something on a piece of paper. He handed it to her and she read it. “No, you did the things in the garden, not me.”

He was shaking his head, and she glanced to Bythos, who appeared to sense his cousin’s actions, with or without use of his sight. “It stands to reason,” Bythos said, “that if powers could be used within the confines of the garden, the witch would be out. Therefore, it was not Uriel who laid the stones for you to follow or levitated the sundial. It was you.”

Her knees felt weak. She went to the sofa and sat back down.

“It shocks you because you were never exposed to it before, am I right?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Since we were children,” Bythos continued, “our family has had a prophecy about the four elements that would destroy the witch, the one who wanted nothing more than immortality. My cousins and I were born with the mark, and we waited for someone else in our family to

show theirs. It never happened. When we moved to Bath, and then here to the country to prepare for the battle, we assumed the proper person would appear. You never did, until now.”

“Sorry, but I don’t believe it. I can’t make stones appear and I can’t make fire just by thinking about it and pointing.” She held out her finger, aiming it at a chair sitting in the corner. It burst into flames and she cried out.

Uriel jumped to his feet and opened his hands. The flames disappeared, leaving a scorched chair.

“Oh crap.” Her hands shook. “This makes no sense, because nothing like this has ever happened to me before.”

“Never?” Bythos was laughing. “Maybe not the fire, because you never tried it. But have you never had something happen that you wished for, like finding a lost object, or moving something and then thought that maybe you had done it and forgotten?”

“Little things, yes, like wondering where I’d left an earring, and then finding it on the table. Or wishing I had a book and then seeing it on the sofa next to me.”

She’d always just thought those things were coincidences. But now... “Oh crap,” she repeated. “This is unreal.”

“You have never been trained to use your power,” Bythos said. “Uriel will help you harness it; since he seems to have helped you unleash it. It will take the four of us to defeat the witch.”

“I don’t wanna...no, no witch. Let’s just leave her there.” She put her head in her hands. “But we’re stuck here, right, until she’s dead.”

“Correct,” Bythos said. “When she attacked us, she took down the wards Uriel had constructed, and replaced them with ones of her own, to keep us in place until she had what she wanted. Until she is dead, we are prisoners here. This is our tower, effectively.”

“Great. So, I repeat from earlier, what’s the plan?”

Bythos stood, and Acolius followed suit. “We will go into the laboratory and work on a potion or two, try to find something that will kill her. Then you and Uriel will deliver it.”

“How will that happen? He can’t go into the garden. I’m the only one, right?”

“We will find a solution to that problem,” Bythos said. “In the meantime, allow Uriel to guide you on your path as you learn to control your magic.”

They both gave her sweet, almost seductive smiles, before Bythos placed a hand on Acolius's shoulder and they left. Beside her, Uriel's body seemed to dance with energy. His legs were bouncing and she was pretty sure that he was probably wiggling his feet, his toes on the ground, his heels lifted.

"So we..." He cut her words off with a kiss, covering her mouth completely, stealing her air, making her nipples tingle and her clit tighten. She groaned into his mouth as he stroked his hand over her cheek, never breaking the kiss.

When it finally did end, she gasped for air, and felt as if she'd barely taken in another lungful before he kissed her again. This time his hand moved to her breast and she thrust herself into his touch. She believed he was a magician in more ways than one, because he found her nipple with no trouble. He squeezed it gently, and then, as if he'd wished it, her clothes disappeared.

"What the..." she stopped talking when he lowered his head to her breasts. He caressed them with his hands, lifting them together, kissing first one then the other. She shuddered as he took a nipple into his mouth. He sucked it gently, nibbling on it, making it grow even harder than it had been.

"So good," she whispered as he traced his lips over her, turning his attention to the other one. She wiggled on the sofa, her body trembling, her insides heating.

Uriel lavished attention on her breasts, his tongue sliding up and down, his teeth gently nibbling. Her hips undulated as he seemed to devour her, and when he lifted his head and licked his lips, she knew what was coming next.

He grasped her hips and moved her so that the edge of her butt was at the end of the sofa cushion. Then he leaned down and ran his tongue along her slit. She groaned as he started to eat greedily, his tongue making itself at home in her folds. He moved up and down, teasing her opening before sliding up to the hard bundle of nerves that jumped at his touch. He kissed it gently and she came, her hips shooting off the couch.

"Uriel! Oh my...fuck me!"

He ignored her request, though, as his mouth continued to devour her. Krisily undulated under him, her hips seeming to move of their own volition. When a hand started caressing one breast, and then the other, she didn't think anything about it. She knew who it was, Bythos on the left, Acolius on the right.

Being loved had never felt so right, so perfect. Her birthmark felt hot, and when Bythos leaned over and kissed her, she came again, harder than she had before. One more kiss, this one from Acolius, made it a trifacta, only there was no way to decide who took first, second, or third place. They all made her soar, made her want them inside her as she'd never wanted anything in her life.

Uriel kissed her thighs, first one, then the other. The other two members of their foursome came and sat on either side of her, caressing her arms and toying with her hair. She wasn't exactly sure where to start when taking part in a foursome, with men you'd been linked with since birth, but didn't know it. Of course the births were several centuries apart, but that didn't seem to matter.

"We should go..." she clamped her mouth shut. She was about to suggest a bed, but she wasn't sure if the bed was large enough to hold the four of them.

"What you're suggesting is a fabulous idea," Bythos replied. "Unfortunately, we need to discuss something first."

Uriel waved his fingers and she was dressed again. There was a pause, and Krisily knew she wasn't going to like what was coming next.

"We need something out of the garden," Bythos said, his touch still gentle on her arm. "You are the only one of us who can go in there."

She was right, she didn't like it. "No way." She tried to stand, but they kept her in place, each of them caressing her not in a "*we need to make love*" sort of way, but in a "*you can do this, we need you,*" way.

"What is it you need?"

"*We* need," Bythos said. "Remember, we have known about this since birth. We have been working on potions to take care of the witch for a long time. We found that if we combined several substances, selenium and—"

Krisily waved her hands back and forth. It amazed her that, even though he couldn't see her, he stopped talking. "Don't tell me the ingredients; just tell me what it does."

"Well, when mixed with belladonna and comfrey, the substances in the bowl on the table inside the garden will make a potion that, when rubbed into the witch's skin, will immobilize her long enough for us to end her life."

The words made her shiver, and not in a good way.

“We have to kill her,” Acolius said. “The potion will freeze her powers, and her limbs. You have seen what happens with her. Even though she was a cauldron, she has transformed herself into a tree. She has powers beyond what other witches have. We had to find a way to surprise her.”

“And the flowers?”

“Belladonna is useful, but it can be fatal in large doses. Comfrey is the same, since it can make internal organs fail. The two of them together will temporarily inhibit her body functions.”

“What happens after that?” She was pretty sure she knew, and it made her palms sweat.

“Then you and Uriel kill her.”

The wonderful feelings that had infused her body slipped away. She’d never thought she’d find herself participating in a murder.

Uriel caressed her cheek, his look telling her he knew exactly what she was thinking.

“You have to remember,” Acolius said, “she wants complete power over everyone. She thinks we are working on a potion that will give her eternal life.”

Krisily’s eyes widened. “Like the sorcerer’s stone?”

“The philosopher’s stone, yes,” Bythos said. “It is pure myth, of course, but we had to lure her here somehow. The prophecy says that, if this woman finds a way to power, she will kill thousands of people. She is pure evil.”

She swallowed hard, trying to work through the idea of pure evil. Hitler was pure evil. Would this woman be another Hitler? If so, then she had to help take her down.

“I don’t know how to use powers,” she said. “I...”

There was a long pause, and then Bythos reached out, found her hand, and squeezed. “You used your powers in the garden without even thinking about it. Now that you know you have them, you will be able to control them.”

“We hope,” she said. “I don’t feel that strong.”

Acolius toyed with her hair, wrapping strands around his fingers and tugging gently before letting it go and starting again. Uriel turned his attention back to her thighs.

“There is a way to share power between us,” Bythos’s voice was soft, seductive.

“I gathered,” she replied, feeling suddenly shy and ready for sexual action at the same time. “I’m up for it, but before we start, can we talk about, um, the plan for me going into the garden?”

“We will distract her,” Acolius piped in. “You can slide into the garden through a path we cut into the hedge. It is to the left of the house, near the gate. You go there and into the garden and retrieve the bowl and pestle. Then you need to pick some comfrey. It’s on the first path to the left of the table. Come back out the secret path, and then we will finish the potion, and lure her out.”

Krisily thought about it for a few minutes. She might have come up with her words earlier, but the three men surrounding her were distracting her, with caresses and kisses that made her burn with need.

“Should we put the potion on her while she’s in tree form?” She moaned softly as Uriel kissed her mons, ran his tongue over her slit. “Will it...get into her...human form?”

Her hips lifted into his mouth.

“Yes,” Bythos replied, “I believe it would. We will work on that later, after we recover what we need, but first—”

Bythos cupped her face in his hands. He tilted her head and claimed her lips, the kiss gentle. Following the long, lingering touch he released her, his tongue tenderly sliding over her lower lip. When he moved back, Uriel’s hand caressed her cheek and he moved her head so he could kiss her. This kiss was deeper, his tongue pressing against her mouth. She opened for him, taking him inside.

The kiss ended and Uriel stood. He pulled her to her feet as the other two men stood.

Bythos kissed her again and her body quivered at their touch.

As he kissed her she could feel hands on the buttons on her jeans, hands tugging at the blouse she wore. She wasn’t sure whose hands were doing what. All she knew was that Uriel’s kiss had ended, and now Acolius was tipping her head in his direction, his lips claiming hers in a kiss not as gentle as Bythos’s, and not as deep as Uriel’s.

She gasped into his mouth as her blouse was pushed off her shoulders. At the same time her jeans were tugged down over her hips, her panties going with them. A deep masculine groan of approval made her flesh quiver with need, goose bumps making her shiver.

Uriel and Bythos traded places. Soon there were warm male hands, two, four, six of them, roaming over her body.

“Oh yes,” she whispered as desire flooded her. She gasped as Acolius and Uriel leaned in to her. They formed a chair under her, lifting her high, and then Bythos grabbed her legs, pulling

them straight so that she was lying flat on her back, supported by all three of them. Acolius and Uriel claimed a nipple, sucking them deeply into their mouths, teasing them with their teeth, their tongues.

She arched into them, her eyes closing in pure ecstasy as they suckled her. Suddenly, her eyes flew open as a mouth claimed her core. She knew it was Bythos, his tongue spearing apart her folds, licking up her wet center until he reached her clit.

Her body seized as Bythos sucked her hard bundle of nerves into his mouth. She cried out and all three nibbled on her at once.

Krisily came, her body rolling against the arms that held her tight. The mouths never left her; they just continued to suck, to nibble, as if they were nourishing themselves on her. The way she felt right now, she would gladly let them feed off her for the rest of her life.

They suckled and caressed, lips tasting her breasts, her thighs. She tried to whisper the word down, but it came out as more of a whisper of “da.”

She knew they understood what she said, though, because for just a few moments all three pairs of lips left her body and the three of them said, “Not yet.”

They continued to explore her, lips moving up and down her arms and legs, over her stomach, around her belly button. Their hands changed position to keep her where she was, and she never once felt as if she were going to fall. She felt safe and secure in their arms, her body hungry for more despite the overload that threatened to overtake her.

She quivered again and Bythos’s mouth once again covered her clit, sucking it hard. Her orgasm was harder this time than the last. Her body twisted and turned as he sucked it deeper. Acolius and Uriel tightened their grip on her, and when she finally came down from the high they’d provided she realized they were still holding her in their arms, but she was down lower than she had been, at waist-level for them.

She glanced at Bythos. Once again she got the feeling he could see straight through to her soul. Then she looked at Acolius and Uriel. They were all three smiling at her.

“What about, um, you guys.” She’d had orgasms all afternoon, but the three of them had yet to be satisfied.

“Don’t worry about us,” Bythos said. “This was to give you power. And we’re not done yet.”

Uriel's nod was emphatic, and he took her hands and eased her back onto the couch. They were back in their original positions, with Uriel kneeling in front of her, Bythos and Acolius on either side. Uriel held out his hand and a bowl appeared in it. He held it low enough so she could see what was inside: seeds, purplish ones.

"What is it?"

He held it up to her nose and she inhaled deeply. Lavender.

She murmured in appreciation. When he took a few of the seeds and put them into his mouth she frowned. "You can eat lavender?"

He nodded, picking up a few more and offering them to her mouth.

"I'm not so sure about that," she said. "I've never eaten flowers before."

Uriel gave her a playful frown before he stuck his tongue out. He wiggled it, then pointed to her mouth.

"You want me to...? Okay." Still a little uncertain about what she was doing, Krisily stuck out her tongue. Uriel touched it lightly as he dropped the purple offering onto it. She let it soak into her tongue and she nodded. It tasted a little minty, and there was just the hint of...

She pulled her tongue into her mouth and swallowed. "Oh my. It's hot. Wow." Her hand went to her chest and she gulped. It definitely had a kick to it.

Uriel's hands were at her lips again. She glanced at him. His tongue was out of his mouth, seeds resting on it. She took the ones he offered her, and then she shuddered in bliss as he kissed her. The mixture of the hotness of the seeds mixed with the male taste of Uriel, and the ones in his mouth, infused her with need.

Their lips crushed together and warmth invaded her mouth. Absolutely incredible, she thought as he cupped the back of her neck, keeping her close to him. The kiss seemed to last forever, but when it ended it was over far too soon.

She sighed as he caressed her lips with his thumb. Their gazes locked as his hand moved down to her chest, finding a breast and stroking it gently.

"You did something to it magically, didn't you? I meant the seeds."

He shook his head.

"Do you know of other flowers and herbs that we can eat?"

He nodded, and then he knelt in front of her. He was gently moving her legs apart, and she had no doubt what he wanted.

“You’re going to kill me,” she whispered as his tongue moved over her slit. “I want...” she tapped his head and he looked up. “I want you, too.”

Lustful delight filled his features and he stood. He stripped so fast she thought he might have done it with his powers. Then he lay on the floor and indicated his mouth. His intentions were clear.

Krisily wasn’t going to waste time wondering what the hell she was doing. She straddled his face, sighing in pleasure as he wrapped his hands around her thighs and brought her down fully on his mouth.

As he feasted on her she bent over and took him in her mouth. She’d never had sex with an uncut man before, but she’d done plenty of research for her books. She put her fingers on him and ever so gently moved the foreskin back, then she nibbled on the head that made an appearance.

Uriel didn’t need his voice to show her how much he enjoyed her attentions. His hips shot up and he thrust deep into her mouth. She lifted from him and coughed, then she leaned down and swallowed him again. His tongue worked on her clit as she savored the feel of his hard cock sliding in and out of her mouth.

She kept her mouth tight, his foreskin sliding the length of him as she sucked. Her clit tightened almost painfully. She’d climaxed more tonight than she had in the last year, and her clit was not used to the attention.

That didn’t mean she planned on stopping, though. She sucked him harder, and when a hand caressed her back she stiffened. She lifted her head from her delicious task and realized, with more than a hint of shame, that she’d ignored Bythos and Acolius. They’d been watching intently, and both of them sported straining erections. She wasn’t sure when they’d taken their clothes off, but she was thrilled that they had.

This was the most perfect experience she’d ever had, and it proved to her they were right. The four of them belonged together.

None of them needed to talk. Bythos moved behind her and she felt him kneel and take hold of her hips. When he slipped inside her she threw arched her back, bliss permeating her. She licked her lips as Acolius’s hard prick appeared before her mouth. She sucked him in as Bythos started to move. Uriel’s lips never left her clit.

They thrust in unison, her mouth going between Acolius and Uriel, giving them equal attention, relishing the feel of them all. When the two of them exploded, at the same time, they pulled from her mouth, not letting her taste what she wanted so much.

Bythos grasped her tighter and pumped into her harder. Another climax threatened her, and she wasn't sure she would be able to handle it. Her body trembled, and if it hadn't been for Acolius and Uriel she was sure she would collapse to the floor.

When Bythos thrust even faster, Uriel's lips feasted on her clit, and Acolius's fingers played with her nipples. She came again, electricity shooting through her, her body seizing up, and then going limp.

They lowered her gently, three sets of hands stroking her trembling body. Her heart raced from the sensory overload, but the soothing touch of her three lovers made her feel as if she were wrapped in a warm blanket, cocooned in a protective shell.

She rested for a few moments, and expected to be so exhausted that she couldn't move her legs. Instead, energy rushed through her. She felt as if she could take on the witch, and any of her friends that she had with her in the garden.

She glanced at Uriel, then at Bythos and Acolius. "Let's do this."

Chapter Eight

Uriel's presence beside her was calming. He'd walked along the path slowly, each step tentative as if he expected to fall flat, in the form of a staff. When they were at the right spot he'd stepped in front of her, his hands on her shoulders. He massaged her muscles, then leaned forward and kissed her. It made her want to forget about everything except going back to the cottage and being with the three men who were now in her life.

His gaze darted back down the path and she nodded. She knew he had to leave, that they had to do what was necessary to end this thing. She no longer had any fear about not being able to use her powers. She felt as if she'd be able to move the London Bridge if she had to.

After this was over, she and Uriel could train together. Until then, she'd go on instinct. He kissed her one more time, then turned and left.

Standing at the edge of the hedge, Krisily took several deep breaths, then put her palms flat on the greenery. She felt it hum, and just like Bythos had said it would, the hedge parted.

They'd told her to wait two minutes before she'd moved inside the garden, because they were sure the witch would sense her presence. They wanted the extra time to make sure she was properly distracted before Krisily went for the items they needed. She figured the witch would figure it out before long, but according to Acolius, the comfrey was right near the table, and the belladonna was already in the laboratory.

It was Acolius's belief that, since everything had been spelled in the garden and was in the same place it had been when the spell had taken place, that the bowl of what Krisily termed the "special ingredients" would be usable.

After their "energy" exercises, they'd taken time to eat and have a glass of water. While they were doing that, Bythos had asked her about the house.

“Do you own the land now?”

“It’s a holiday rental,” she replied.

“From whom?” the question had come from Bythos and Acolius at the same time, and Uriel had asked with his eyes.

“The man’s name is Seamus Gregory.”

They’d all three frowned, then said the name didn’t sound familiar. “I think it’s his wife’s land, but for the life of me I can’t remember her name.”

That bothered her now as she finished her count and started into the bush. This place was very well cared for, but now that she thought about it, Seamus wouldn’t come into the garden with her. That meant, to her way of thinking, that he knew exactly what was out here.

Was it just coincidence that she’d received an ad for this house months after nude pictures of herself, several of which showed her birthmark, appeared in a magazine and online?

“That son of a bitch used me,” she said, anger seeping into her veins. She stopped at the edge of the clearing and took several deep breaths. “Don’t think about it now. Rush in, get the stuff, and rush out. Rush, rush, rush.”

She did just that, hurrying across to the table. A mortar and pestle set in the middle of the table. It was made of what looked like granite, and it was filled with a silvery substance.

Bythos had been very specific about not touching it, although she wanted to. He’d told her to grab the comfrey that was just to the left of the table, pick up the bowl and boogie back out.

“Okay, so he didn’t say boogie,” she said as she headed toward the flowers. She’d never seen comfrey, but he’d told her it was a light purple bell-type flower that was hanging upside down. It was very easy to spot. She grasped the scissors from her pocket and snipped several different groupings.

It was when she was headed back toward the table that she felt a disturbance in the energy. She could feel it in the ground, as if the earth might move at any second. She had no doubt the witch had felt her presence in the garden, and was snaking her way toward where Krisily now was.

She hastened to gather the things she needed, praying she would make it back to the entrance before the witch got there. She’d barely taken two steps from the table when she knew she wouldn’t make it.

The witch was coming down the path. She'd uncoiled from the tree and was now a long vine, snaking her way toward the clearing. Krisily swore she could hear her hiss.

"Krisily!" Acolius's call drew her attention to the hedge. "Move quickly!"

She heard his words, but they didn't make sense. Since the witch was a vine, wouldn't it be easy to kill her this way? Would they still need the chemicals and herbs? Why not take an ax to her now and then burn the vines?

It sounded grisly, but it would take care of the problem. Could she hack the vine up, knowing it really a person? There would be no blood, and she was pretty sure it would—

She fell forward, her thoughts leaving as she slammed into the ground.

The vine was around her ankles, tightening. Krisily had no doubt that the evil woman would squeeze the life out of her, and it wouldn't bother the witch at all.

"An ax," she screamed, "bring me an ax." She looked over to where she'd dropped everything she'd been carrying when the witch had attacked her. What was in the bowl had spilled out, scattered in the grass.

"You bitch!"

"Kill you." The words rang out and rage spread through Krisily. "Kill your lovers. Kill them all."

"No fucking way! An ax!" The requested implement appeared in her hand and Krisily gripped it tight. There were some advantages to magic, obviously. She sat up and lifted the ax above her head. She realized there was no way she was going to hit the vine without hitting herself.

"Crap!" The vine was moving up her body, wrapping her legs. "I need a sword, extra-long, please."

She dropped the ax, then laughed as a sword appeared in her hand. Behind her, she could hear Bythos and Acolius telling her where she should aim, telling her to hit hard. She could feel Uriel, as if he were right beside her, holding her close. But that couldn't be. She knew he couldn't get here, though, because if he did, then he would be a...stick.

"You are nothing." The woman's voice dripped evil. "Insignificant bugs. I will squash you all."

"Chop her just below your feet," Acolius screamed. "Hit her hard, several times."

The sword felt unwieldy in her hands. Despite the number of times she'd written about sword fights, she'd never held one in her hands. It was heavy, and she hoped she could make it come down where it was supposed to, especially since the vine was up above her knees now.

"You think the prophecy of the four will kill me? Nothing can kill me. I am all powerful." The vine clutched her tighter and her legs throbbed. She felt as if she were in a vise, being squeezed to death.

She lifted the sword above her head, clutching the hilt in both hands. She screamed as she brought it down. The first strike hit the ground and the witch's taunting, evil laugh made her cry out in frustration. This time she kept the sword lower, and it was easier to aim.

"Can't even hit me, and you think you can kill me? I hope you enjoyed yourself with the men. It will be the last time you have with them. They are quite delicious. I have tasted them myself."

"Screw you!" The blade came down on the vine, slicing it right below her feet. There was a sharp cry of pain, and the vine around her loosened. "Take that you fucking bitch!" She hit again. "And that."

"Do not stop! I feel her. She is weakening!" Bythos's voice rang out. She did as his cousin had instructed, hitting just below the first strike. She kicked away the vine around her leg, and sitting up on her knees, brought the sword down repeatedly, in little increments. The cries of pain were whimpers now, but Krisily could still feel the other woman's power.

She dropped the sword and crawled to where the spilled chemical mixture was mixed in the grass. She scooped as much of it as possible into the bowl, then lifted it and the flowers before bolting to the entrance.

Before she exited she turned to look at the vine. It was slowly knitting back together.

"We're going to have to nuke the bitch," she whispered as she took the final step out of the garden. The hedge closed. Bythos took the bowl she pushed into his hands, Acolius the flowers. Uriel wrapped his arms around her and she settled her head against his chest. Bythos and Acolius both stroked her shoulders.

"We need to make the mixture," she said as she slowly pushed away from them. She didn't want to leave them. Staying this close was the only way for things to go, as far as she was concerned. But there would be time for that later. Hopefully.

She took a deep breath. She wanted to part the hedge, go back inside and hack the vine up, then take a blowtorch to it.

“Blowtorch! Why didn’t I think of that in there? It would be over.”

Three sets of eyes focused on her.

“It’s a fire maker. You press a button and...it, um, makes fire.” She felt like a moron for not being able to describe it any better.

“Fire will kill her, won’t it?”

“Lots of good people, branded as witches, have died by fire,” Bythos said. “Real witches, like the one in our garden, they have skirted the authorities by their skill to put on a good act. Fire should kill her, but I prefer the poison method. She has a human body, after all. The fire will destroy it, but...”

Uriel waved his hands and shook his head. He made movements that Krisily knew mimicked flames. Then he moved his fingers as if rain was falling. He knelt down and picked up dirt, letting it drop through his fingers.

“Ashes to ashes,” Acolius said. “I think Uriel approves of fire.”

Uriel slapped his palms against the ground, then stood, shaking his head furiously. He leaned down and picked up a handful of dirt. He pointed at it and it began to churn, like a tornado. Seconds later it turned into a colorful bird.

“A phoenix,” Krisily said. “She’s worked some sort of spell, hasn’t she? She’d rise like a phoenix out of the flames.”

Uriel nodded.

“Of course,” Krisily said. “It’s how she knitted back together when she was a cauldron, and how the vine went back together, too. How do we know the poison will work?”

“Kill from the inside,” Bythos said. “If taken internally, the comfrey will shut down her organs. There is nothing that will protect against that.”

Krisily lifted her eyebrows. “Really? If she can come back from flames, how do we know the comfrey will work?”

“Because it will mix with our potion,” Bythos replied, his tone confident. “Then, you and Uriel will work your magic, remember? The two of you will be able to counter her spell, and she will be gone.”

“We need to work,” Bythos said. “The longer we wait, the more power she gains. We have to get our things together and attack as soon as possible.”

Without waiting for an answer, Bythos and Acolius moved down the path, heads bowed together. She could see that Acolius’s head was tipped so that he could read Bythos’s lips and Bythos trusted Acolius to guide him.

Uriel touched her arm and she glanced at him. His eyes were dark and sensual and he gave her a smile that made her think they should bond together like they had before. But she knew there wasn’t time for that.

“Since they’re working together, I suppose the two of us need to do the same, the chemical side,” she pointed at the retreating alchemists, “and the magicians, um sorcerer and sorceress.”

He winked at her, and the gooey feeling intensified. She thought about hot, nasty sex with him...

Now wasn’t the time, however. She still had a few doubts about the plan, but she wanted to believe that it would work. She’d feel a little more confident if she’d been trained since birth, but she needed to believe that they were linked enough to battle the bitch that had just tried to kill her.

“I’m hungry,” she said. “What about you?”

He nodded before he offered her his arm. They walked toward the house, and she tightened her grip on him. She didn’t say anything as they made their way into the house. Bythos and Acolius stood in front of the refrigerator. Their arms were full of food, a block of cheese, apples, and a loaf of bread. Uriel pulled out a jar of mayonnaise and examined it.

“It’s spread for the bread, to make a sandwich.” She tried to remember when the Earl of Sandwich had stayed at the gaming tables and asked for pieces of meat between two slices of bread. The exact date escaped her, but she was pretty sure it was after these men became garden ornaments.

“Leave the bread and the meat, and the jar, and I’ll fix you things to eat. Take the cheese and the fruit. It won’t take me long to fix the other things.”

“Excellent.” Bythos felt for the top of the counter and set the items down, then he motioned for Acolius to follow him. He seemed to have memorized the layout of the cottage and

had grown accustomed to moving about easily. They disappeared in the laboratory, and Krisily went to the counter and opened the bread.

She picked up the jar and unscrewed the lid. Uriel stood right next to her, peering at all the objects she'd laid out as if he'd never seen them before. She gave herself a mental head slap: he hadn't ever seen them before. Well, he'd seen the bread, but not wrapped in plastic, and she was pretty sure the sliced meat in plastic wrappings was a shock to him, too.

"You're going to love this," she said as she laid out six slices of bread. She thought about how long they'd been sleeping, and she laid out six more. After she'd made theirs, she'd make a few for herself. "I can make macaroni and cheese, too. As a matter of fact, I make a great mac and cheese, but I'm going to hold that until after we've beaten the witch."

Uriel frowned and she laughed. "You're going to love mac and cheese." She spread mayo on the bread and then laid down pieces of ham. When it was done she put a small layer of mustard on each one, followed by slices of cheese. She went back to the refrigerator and took out a tomato, along with a head of lettuce.

"Might as well make them good sandwiches with vegetables." She sliced the tomato and dressed each sandwich. "Except, I think that technically, tomatoes are fruit. What do you think about that?"

She could tell he didn't have an opinion on it. There was a lazy smile on his face, but his gaze was fastened on the sandwich she was cutting into triangles. She put two on a plate and handed it to him.

"Pick it up and take a bite." He put the plate on the counter and picked up a half. He studied it carefully, tipping it from side to side. Then he took a huge bite. A look of pure bliss crossed his face and she laughed. "So glad you like it. Eat up and I'll deliver these to our friends."

She picked up the plates, but hadn't stepped out of the room before Bythos and Acolius were walking her way. They were talking about something, and she could only hear a few words: witch, delivery, poison.

"Eat," she said, pushing the sandwiches toward them and settling a piece in Bythos's hand. They mimicked Uriel's actions, and soon all the sandwiches were gone.

"We would like some more, if that is possible." Bythos said.

"Sure." She picked up the bread. "I'll make, you talk."

“The potion is mixed,” Bythos said. “It will be ready in the morning. But we need to think of a delivery system for it. She has no mouth for us to feed her.”

Krisily finished making the sandwiches. She didn’t bother to cut them this time. They scooped them up and started to eat. This time she’d made one for herself, too.

“Can’t we sprinkle it on her?” She took a bite and chewed.

Bythos was finishing up his third sandwich. She glanced at the empty plate. It was more as if he’d inhaled it.

“We’re going to run low on groceries the way you guys are eating.” She took another bite, and started to make more food.

“We can spread the mixture on her, but I would be more comfortable if we could make her ingest it.”

Krisily finished up several more sandwiches. The men were scarfing them down almost as fast as she made them.

“Ingest them,” she replied as she watched them eat. “Plants need water. It soaks into their roots and gives them nourishment. What would happen if we mixed your chemicals with water, and sprayed them over the vine?”

“It would work,” Bythos said. He poked Acolius with his elbow. The scientist had been busy with his food, and not following the conversation. She watched Bythos talk to him, his hands on Acolius’s hand, as if they were using hand signals to communicate. By the time he got to the end, Acolius was nodding.

“Yes, yes, it will work. But we need to make sure the vine gets soaked. When the chemicals are properly mixed, we need something to deliver the water in a large dose.”

“Oh, I’ve got that,” Krisily said. “I saw a hose in the garden shed. There were several containers to deliver pesticide. We can attach it to the hose and I’ll play gardener.”

She toyed with her food. “Now, I’m going to eat, and if you want more, here is the stuff. I think you can figure out how to make a sandwich. After that, it’s time for a bath, and bed.”

She could see her announcement met with approval, but she had a feeling there would be little sleeping done.

Chapter Nine

“It’s a tub.” She pointed at it, then ran her hands up and down her arms. “You bathe in it. I know tubs were different back in your day. The water comes from the tap, and then goes down the drain to...oh hell, I don’t want to explain pipes and the like, because frankly I’m out of my element. This tub’s not big enough for all three of us, unfortunately.”

The three of them moved together, their heads dipped as if they were deep in conversation.

“Yeah, don’t worry about me,” she said. She put her fingers on the water tap. “I’ll just get us going. I’m a little dirty after my roll in the grass and dirt in the garden.”

Before she could turn the handle, Acolius’s hand covered hers. “We have a better idea.”

“Of course you do,” she whispered. “Is there a bathtub in your hidden laboratory? Remember, we’re not going anywhere out of this house.”

“Come with us.” Acolius led the way. Bythos fell into step behind him, his hand on his shoulder, and Uriel indicated that she should follow. They went through to the lab, but when they were in the larger room, Bythos veered to the right.

Krisily hadn’t really thought about there being any more space here. She’d looked at the room, but she hadn’t really studied it. They went down a small corridor to a larger room. There was a tub cut into the rock below. It was already filled with water.

“Is this magical, or natural?” She pointed at the water. Steam rose from the surface. There was room for all four of them in there, with space to spare.

“A little bit of both,” Bythos said. “We had to keep this place to hide from the witch, of course, which meant we might have to stay in here for some time. We built the tub, and Uriel provided the water, which he’s done now.”

“Stolen from a nearby stream?” She thought about the hot springs that ran through this area. Uriel’s grin was mischievous, and it intensified the feelings that already ran through her. A foursome in a tub. Intriguing.

The men were all naked now; Acolius sat on the edge and dropped into the water. He went all the way under and came up suddenly, running his fingers through his hair as he slicked it back. Droplets of water dotted his body, sliding down his hard form.

He held out a hand. Krisily shed her clothes as quickly as she could. Bythos and Uriel each took an arm and lifted her, dropping her into the water. She laughed as she hit, going under the same way Acolius had. When she came up she was face to face with him. He stroked her shoulder, then kissed her. She could taste the sandwiches on him, and it made her giggle.

The water displaced around them and she knew Bythos and Uriel had joined them. They stroked her back and buttocks, as Uriel lifted her ever so slightly, his head dropping down, his mouth finding her nipple. She tensed as he sucked her in, her body hot with need.

As it had before, her birthmark heated and it increased the tension she felt, boosted her craving for all three of them. They stroked her gently, hands moving up her back, her front, her ass and legs as Acolius sucked her clit. He drove her crazy with his tongue and teeth, and before long she was tossing her head from side to side, begging to have a cock inside her.

“Please, please, I...fuck me.” She closed her eyes in supplication, and they flew open when Acolius grabbed her hips and slammed into her. The feeling shot through her body, an orgasm exploding through her as fingers sought her clit and pinched, hard. She came again as Acolius started to thrust. Bythos and Uriel held her in place as he thrust into her.

Wonderfully nasty fantasies ran through her mind: of being on her knees, sucking them one right after the other, lavishing attention on all three cocks, then going back for more; of being bent over the couch, having them fuck her, one by one, slowly at first, then hard the second time; of riding a cock while another slid into her ass, a third into her mouth.

Another orgasm raced through her and she screamed, the images in her mind speeding by, growing even naughtier. What these three did to her! She’d never once thought about taking more than one man at a time, and now she wanted three, filling her in every imaginable way, leaving nothing empty, making her complete.

She groaned in displeasure as Acolius slipped from her body, then gasped as someone, she thought it was Uriel, grasped her hips and took her hard. He throbbed inside her as he held her still, wiggling himself ever so slightly.

Krisily thrust herself back at him and two pairs of hands lifted her out of the water. Uriel slipped from her.

“No! Fuck me, damn it.” He slapped her ass and the sharp pain slid through her. Bythos and Acolius held her above the water as Uriel slapped her ass again. He ran his tongue over the place he’d just spanked and she tried to wiggle free from them. They were having none of it, though, and soon Uriel’s tongue was exploring her buttocks, the back of her thighs.

When he parted her cheeks and ran his tongue over her anus, she shivered, trying to pull away from them. They held her close, though. She twisted slightly, trying to look back. Uriel was bathing her backside with water, cupping it in his hands and letting it slide over her ever so slowly.

The water felt like kisses and when he poured some over her anus and pushed his thumb into her she came again, her body seizing as he slowly moved inside her, pushing the water around, cleaning her, preparing her.

Krisily closed her eyes and lost herself in the sensations. She knew what they were preparing her for, and she wanted them to hurry, to take her so she could feel all three of them inside her at once. But then again she wanted all this to last, for the awareness of the three of them touching her to stay with her forever.

Uriel’s thumb was all the way inside her now, stroking, exploring.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Please.”

He pressed his thumb down, the pressure spreading through her entire body. “Please!” She wasn’t sure how much more she could take. She needed them inside her, right this very minute.

Dark, sensual chuckles let her know they were enjoying the way they were torturing her, their hands getting to know every inch of her body.

Uriel’s thumb slipped from her, and she just knew that meant they would take everything to the level she wanted, to three cocks filling her. Instead one of his fingers took its place, dipping deeper inside her, causing new feelings to come to the surface.

She closed her eyes and tried to relax into them, tried to let the new wonder settle into her body. It was an incredible feeling, and though her body craved more, her mind wanted nothing more than to stay here, to let them touch her, explore her.

When he slipped away from her this time she knew her desires were about to come true. Bythos and Acolius stepped from the pool. They each grasped one of her arms and pulled her out as if she were light as a feather.

The air was warm, but goose bumps still dotted her skin, or maybe it was anticipation that made her tingle the way she did. Whatever caused it, it was a feeling she never wanted to let go of.

Bythos took her hand and led her away from the small pool. There was an alcove, with three places to sleep, none of them big enough for all of them. They each took fur coverings from the bed and lay them in the center of the room.

Bythos lay down and she didn't wait for an invitation, or for instructions. She straddled him, taking him deep inside her body. His hands were gentle on her hips as he stroked her, and she leaned over and kissed him.

His tongue flicked against her lips and she giggled as she took him inside her. Love making had never made her feel so light, so giddy. When the kiss broke she looked up. Acolius's cock was in front of her face.

She kissed the tip of it, sliding her tongue over him, savoring the taste. She took him slowly, inch by inch, sliding him in and out as Bythos did the same to her pussy, his cock moving at a snail's pace, building up the passion that was already at high velocity.

Uriel knelt behind her, his hands resting right next to Bythos's. He held her there for a few, long sensual moments, and then she felt the tip of his cock at her anus.

"Yes," she whispered as she laid her head on Acolius's thigh. He stroked her hair and her back as Uriel pushed inside her virgin territory. The pressure was almost unbearable, but despite that, she wanted nothing more than for him to continue, to take her totally.

He worked his way in slowly, stopping and stroking her. She wondered about their patience, how they could be so calm about it. Her birthmark burned, and she wondered what...she put her hand on Acolius's hip and he guided it back to the spot where the exact same design marked his body. Her fingers burned as she traced the warm flesh.

Bonding, she knew, the four of them were meant to be together, meant to find each other.

Uriel filled her now, his cock throbbing in her ass. She could feel Bythos doing the same inside her pussy, the thin wall separating the two of them.

She opened her mouth and sought Acolius. He gave himself to her and she sucked him deeply, hungrily; in and out, gasping for breath when she let him go before taking him again.

Her body rocked as Bythos and Uriel started to move, their timing perfect, one going in as the other slid out. Time lost all meaning as they melted together, hands moving over each

other, tongues mixing as she lost Acolius's cock only to kiss Bythos, Uriel and then Acolius before he fed her again.

She had no idea how long they'd been together when she felt Acolius's hot, warm liquid fill her throat. She drank him down as her body pulsed and she realized she'd come, yet again, as had Bythos and Uriel, the three of them filling her, making her feel more complete than she ever had.

They held her close as Acolius lay down next to them. He stroked her back and she leaned over and kissed him.

"Sleep now," Bythos said as they slowly separated. She wanted a bed where the four of them could be together. The one upstairs might work, but...

They had other ideas. The three of them settled around her, Uriel on one side, Acolius on the other. Bythos lay down so that her head was on his chest. She felt like the circle inside the triangle, the part that brought the three sides together.

It was a perfect feeling, one that she never wanted to lose.

Chapter Ten

Krisily hooked the nozzle to the container filled with the chemical mixture. Before they'd done that, she and Uriel had joined hands over the water, words had appeared in her mind and she'd spoken them, imparting power to the water, asking it to absorb the chemicals, to help rid the world of the evil that was the witch.

She didn't even know the woman's name, and she didn't want to; she just wanted the woman, no the beast, gone.

"This isn't exactly what I'd expected to find on my vacation," she whispered softly.

Uriel stroked her arms, and then he put his finger against her lips before he moved it to her heart. His free hand went to his ears and she frowned, but then his meaning became clear.

"You want me to tell you what's in my heart?"

He nodded, then pointed to the garden, and she knew exactly what he meant again.

"After."

The nod was slow.

"I will." She held tight to the hose. Just before dawn, the two of them had slipped out to do some reconnaissance work. The witch was still stretched between the opening at front and the clearing where they'd battled yesterday. They'd had a conversation then, Uriel using hand signals to tell her this was for the best, and they'd agreed that she would be able to soak the roots here, and the water would work its way up the vine, soaking into the witch, immobilizing her.

When that happened, Krisily would drag her from the garden, where they would finish the job. Her stomach felt a little queasy at the idea, but her mind knew it had to be done. Evil couldn't be left to do whatever it wanted. If they had the chance to destroy it, they must do it, with complete conviction.

She took a deep breath and the queasy feeling disappeared. This was why her trip came about. After this was over she needed to talk to Seamus Gregory, to see what he knew about all this.

“Are you ready?” She turned toward Bythos. He inclined his head as if he could feel her presence, and then turned to Acolius. Acolius bent toward Bythos and they started to talk lowly. Next to her, Uriel stroked her shoulder, then he leaned over and kissed her ever so gently, giving her more strength than she’d ever felt.

“Let’s do it,” she said, tightening her grip on the hose.

“Spray her with your device,” Bythos said. “Soak it into the roots so the potion can spread through her.”

She nodded, and without waiting for another word, stepped into the garden. The air felt cloying, and it smelled...well, evil. Krisily wrinkled her nose, then hurried to where the vine rested. It started to quiver as she moved across the grass. The roots were in the ground, and she had no trouble seeing where they’d planted themselves, feeding off the earth.

She aimed the hose and turned the nozzle. Water flew out in an arc, soaking the ground and the vine. Krisily felt sorry for the living plants that were around, and she prayed the deadly toxin in the water wouldn’t affect them. The vine pulsed, and then it stopped.

“That was easy,” she said, looking down at it. “Almost...” Fear shot through her, and then an evil cackle rent the air.

“I may not be able to take human form, but I can regenerate myself.”

Krisily turned slowly. The vine was there, but it wasn’t just the vine. It had been shaped into a woman; like when artists take chainsaws to hedges, carving them into animals and other things.

“Some of me knitted back together, yes, to keep you thinking that was it. But there were tiny parts that didn’t. I used those parts to remake myself. You gave me the whole evening to grow. So kind of you.” Her voice was soft, almost as if she were thanking someone for a birthday gift.

Krisily didn’t waste any time. She turned the hose on her new target, letting loose a torrent of water. The woman laughed, the shaped bush shaking as the laughter filled the air. But then she started to cough, the laughter disappearing.

The greenery started to glide, as if it were walking on air, moving closer to Krisily. She, in turn, edged toward the entrance, keeping the hose trained on her target. The men didn't make a sound. They'd decided earlier that the witch would feel more confidence if she didn't immediately recognize they were there.

The woman's cough increased, and a rasping sound accompanied them.

"It's working," Krisily yelled out, "be ready!"

The bush started to deflate, greenery dropping toward the ground. While the men did what they had to do, she planned on going through the garden, making sure there were no loose pieces lying around. The vine she'd originally sprayed would have to be burned, too.

The chemicals and herbs were definitely bringing the witch down. The shape of the woman had almost disappeared now, the greenery pooling on the ground. The rasping sound of earlier was still there, but it was softer, her breathing definitely labored.

Krisily backed up, keeping the stream trained on her. When the water container was empty she watched the vine. She glanced at her lovers a few times. They watched the place where the witch had come to rest, it moved ever so slightly and then, finally, it stopped.

She needed to drag it out of the garden so it could be destroyed, but she was afraid to do so, worried that, if she changed back into human form, she'd gain more power.

"New plan, she said. "Get me a torch."

They didn't argue with her. She stepped out of the garden long enough to take the piece of wood Uriel offered. He touched it after she had it in her hands and it burst into flames at the top.

Moving swiftly, she went back and touched the fire to the vines. There was no cry of pain, no scream of outrage, no demands for her death. The witch started to burn, and Krisily dropped the wood onto her. She raced to the other vine, dragging it across the yard to throw on the blaze.

When she was done, she ran down the path toward the clearing. There were little pieces of vine on the ground, wiggling, trying to move together.

"Thought you could fool me, huh?" She leaned down to grab one, nearly jumping out of her skin when a hand touched her back. She turned, ready to take down whatever it was, only to find Uriel smiling at her.

“Get that one,” he said. “Her power is weak, the spell is broken. We need to make sure all pieces of her are burned so she does not come back.”

“You’ve found our voice,” she laughed. “Does that mean...”

Acolius and Bythos were running into the clearing now. Acolius winked at her before he grabbed a piece of vine and headed back out. Bythos looked her up and down.

“Beautiful,” he said. “But then again, I already knew that.”

A flush ran through her.

“Let us finish the job,” Uriel said. “Then we will play, and enjoy our first day of freedom in hundreds of years.”

Epilogue

Krisily sat down at the café table and picked up her tea. She took a sip, then set the cup down gently.

“What did she say?” Uriel sat next to her. He put his hand on her thigh and squeezed. It brought back memories of last night, when the four of them had played in their rented cabin, with her tied to a bed and...

“Um, we need to concentrate,” Bythos said. “Once again, what did the landlady to the public house say?”

“She’s also the owner of the house that Seamus Gregory rented. She said he disappeared yesterday, packed up his things and hightailed it out of town.”

The four of them were silent for a few moments, and then Acolius cleared his throat.

“Tell us one more time how you came into contact with this man.”

Before she could answer, the squealing of tires and blasting horns filled the air. The three men jumped as if they’d just noticed an evil opponent in their midst and were prepared to draw swords on it.

“Sit down,” she hissed as she alternatively tugged on their sleeves. “It was just a near-accident. Sometimes drivers are careless and cars collide. Sometimes they avoid the wrecks by slamming on their brakes. You remember brakes, right?”

They sat slowly, Acolius first, Bythos second. But she had to physically nudge Uriel before he finally sat. Of course he’d been the most curious this morning at the cottage when she’d shown them the car. They’d all been fascinated, but Uriel’s interest had been different than his cousins. He was sure “some little warlock” was imprisoned inside the modern engine and that’s what made the car go.

She'd tried to explain things, but then she'd just stepped back and let them explore. An hour later, though, she'd told them they had to go. Getting them in the car wasn't easy, and she'd had to drive it up and down the road leading to the main thoroughfare before they'd been comfortable enough to tackle the trip.

Still, she'd had to pull over three times when agitation had struck; twice it had been when other vehicles had passed and they'd screamed at her for getting too close "to the beasts." The third time had been when an airplane passed overhead.

"I told you about them, remember? Flying coaches?"

"Only those who consort with the devil can fly," Bythos had replied. She'd explained planes once again. She knew from their reaction to the horns right now that it wouldn't be the only time she'd have to do it, though.

She made a mental note to find a bookstore where she could buy some volumes that would help them understand modern inventions. Then she tried to put the conversation back on track. "I received a postcard about the rental. My ex-boyfriend had just published scandalous photos that showed me in all my naked glory. I received the card after that, and thought England would be a nice place to get away from everything."

They all sat, but their gazes darted around, drinking in everything. Finally, Uriel said, "And you thought this Seamus Gregory owned the house?"

"Well, he said he and his wife did. I never met her." Krisily toyed with the cup. "I should have done more research."

If she had, she would have found out the house was owned by a man who lived in London named Blaine Marshall, that he leased it out through a local agency. When she'd gone into the office this morning to inquire about the property, the woman had told her it wasn't available, that it had been rented a few months back. When she'd asked about the name, the woman had told her it wasn't public information, until Uriel had waved his hand over her desk. After that she'd said the renter's name was Seamus Gregory.

"They set me up, didn't they?"

"They did," Bythos said. "They expected you to fail, I believe. Now that we've won, they absconded."

"Hey, you used a contraction, well done." She giggled. "You're learning about your new world."

Bythos gave her a lethal grin, one that made her toes burn. “We will discuss your comment later, young lady. Right now, we need to find out who this man was. Uriel, can you work your magic to try and bring up his image?”

“I have tried,” Uriel answered him. “Unfortunately, he has kept a field around himself, and his lady friend. He knows we are looking for him. We may never know who he is, or whether he wanted us to free the witch, or kill her.

“I just don’t understand,” Krisily said. “How did he know...mental head slap time. The birthmark. He saw it in the photos. But he was modern, I swear it. He drove, he had credit cards, he had—everything from present day life.”

“He could be one of her descendants, but I do not believe she had any children,” Acolius said.

“On the other side of the fence, it could be a member of our family,” Bythos said. “They all knew of the legend, as we said. They all had powers, of a sort, either that of alchemists or sorcerers. We need to take that into consideration. Maybe they were trying to free us.”

Uriel put his elbows on the table. “What are credit cards?”

“They’re little plastic things you give people instead of money. He used them to purchase some things when we were together.”

“Extraordinary,” Bythos said. “A moneyless society.”

“No.” She waved her hands to dispel the notion. “It’s...I’ll explain it all later, okay.”

One more book she needed to buy, obviously. Maybe the children’s section would have tomes that could explain it all to them easily.

“Did he use these things to purchase your clothing?” Uriel’s gaze was harsh.

“We’re not going into that again. This is the way people dress nowadays. Deal with it.” There had been a huge discussion before they’d left the cottage about her sundress, which, they’d all agreed, was “attire for under the dress”.

The conversation had been heated, but, in the interest of getting into Bath, they’d finally agreed they’d table the discussion for later.

“I must agree with Uriel on this,” Bythos said. Acolius shook his head for emphasis. “Your nipples should be for our eyes only.”

A man sitting at the next table lifted his head so fast, Krisily was afraid he would lose his balance.

“Hi, how ya doing? Go back to your book, eavesdropping isn’t nice.”

He dropped his gaze, but she knew he’d been listening to everything they said. It would serve him right if he repeated the conversation to someone and they said he needed a trip to the loony bin.

She leaned closer to the three men, and they all edged toward her. “My nipples are not showing.”

“Clearly they are,” Bythos said as Uriel said, “I can see them just fine.”

“As can I,” Acolius said. “They need to be sucked.”

The eavesdropper coughed on his tea.

“I hope it went up your nose,” she said to him. “Stop listening to us!”

He turned his head in the other direction, but she was sure he wasn’t going to stop anytime soon.

“This isn’t a conversation we need to have in public.” She took another sip of her tea to try and calm her nerves. “Now, why would they run? I don’t understand why they wouldn’t stick around to say hi if saving you were the case. I think they had evil intent on their mind. I’m worried they could be pissed that they lost.”

They were quiet for a few moments. “They know what the witch knew, that we were working on a process to turn things to gold,” Acolius said. “We have also been working on a new formula for the philosopher’s stone.”

“The stone that gives eternal life?” Krisily knew her words were much too loud. She smiled at the people around them who stared at her. “Hi, how are ya?”

She leaned toward her lovers. “That’s not possible, is it?”

“Anything is possible,” Uriel said. “We are powerful, and our power together, mixed with yours, will be unstoppable.”

“So what do we do?”

“Well,” Uriel replied. “First we go home and play...” She flushed at his words, glancing at the three of them. “After that, if we think it is necessary, we go on the hunt and find this Gregory. We discover his motives behind bringing you to England and we either stop him, or help him, depending on what he has in mind.”

“Isn’t it dangerous to leave him roaming around? Shouldn’t we be more concerned with locating him?”

“I believe if he meant us harm, he would have struck while we have been otherwise...occupied.”

Bythos's words made her blush. She thought about last night, of being tied to the bed while the three of them tortured her oh so erotically with their hands and tongues before they fucked her, one at a time, making her body soar to heights they'd never achieved before.

Krisily wiggled in her seat, her clit tightening with need.

“Is your quim wet?” Acolius's question made her shiver.

“Very.”

“Then it is time to depart.” He stood and offered her his hand. “We will retire to bed.”

She could swear she felt their hands on her already, exploring her, caressing every inch of her flesh.

“We should go to the agent first, see if she can talk to the owners of the cottage about selling it to us.”

“We will take care of that tomorrow, or the next day. Right now we want to be inside you, all of us.” Bythos and Uriel stood at the same time. They both grasped her chair and moved it back so she could stand.

Krisily imagined them back at the cottage, one cock in her pussy, one in her ass, one in her mouth. She came suddenly as Uriel leaned over and kissed her. Her body rocked as he cupped her chin. Bythos's hand was on her hip, Acolius still held her hand in his.

“Yes, we will do that and so much more,” Uriel whispered against her lips. “After all, there are more than three ways for us to do wicked things together.”

About the Author

Melinda Barron loves to explore Egyptian tombs and temples, discover Mayan ruins, play in castles towers, and explore new cities and countries. She generally does it all from the comfort of her home by opening a book.

Melinda loves to lose herself between the pages of a book. The only thing she loves more is creating stories from the wonderful heroes and heroines that haunt her dreams and crowd her head. She believes love is for everyone, not just those who are a size 2. Her books are full of magic, suspense and love, in all sorts of shapes and sizes.

Mel currently lives in the Texas Panhandle with two cats and a file stuffed with new ideas to keep her typing fingers busy, and your heart engaged.

***Find Melinda Barron's Desires of the Lamp Tales from
www.ResplendencePublishing.com***

Wish Me Up, Rub Me Down

With no love life to speak of, BBW Anya Bartholomew lives only for her job. This dedication has paid off. As a successful advertising agent, she has risen in the ranks of her firm to be the top money-maker.

But at the insistence of her two best friends, who claim she needs a break from work, Anya takes a weekend vacation to the small town of Pleasant, Maine. While shopping at an antique shop, she rubs a lamp that looks as if it could belong to Aladdin himself.

Things will never be the same.

Back at work on Monday morning, Anya finds that her boss has given her a new account...for a lamp factory. However, her clients—two very handsome, very sexy men—are more than what they seem.

They're Pleasure Djinn. And they have come to fulfill five of Anya's most secret sexual wishes.

Aliya Baban and the Cave of Pleasure

Advertising agent Aliya Baban is beautiful with a capital B. Unfortunately, she's also a witch with a capital B. In her twenty-eight years of life, she's managed to offend almost every woman she has ever met.

But she doesn't care, really. That's just the way life is.

When her boss tells her to get the *Cave of Pleasure* account, or else get a new job, Aliya takes her party invitation—and the strange lamp she's received—and attends the nightclub's grand opening, ready to do battle for her livelihood.

Matuse is more than just the owner of the *Cave of Pleasure*...he's a pleasure djinni. And Aliya has rubbed his lamp. For the next thirty days, she belongs to him. Though he intends to bring

intense pleasure to her body, it's also his job to make sure his "she-devil" changes her wicked ways.

Will Matuse be able to help Aliya overcome her painful past? Or will Aliya fail to make the five heartfelt apologies she needs to make to the five women she has hurt the most.

To Rub, Honor and Obey

Moreen McGee is a perfect example of how poor decisions made in youthful rebellion can haunt someone for life. Now on probation for ten years, she serves her court-ordered community service at a center for troubled teens in the hopes of stopping other kids from taking the wrong path.

But when one of her young charges pickpockets a wallet from her high school nemesis, Aliya Baban, Moreen decides to put the illicit skills she learned as a teenager to good use...by breaking into Aliya's apartment to return the stolen wallet, thus keeping the kid who stole it out of trouble and out of jail.

However, once she's in the opulent Manhattan flat, Moreen can't resist the urge to take one small token from the woman she still blames for her own downfall—an old, neglected oil lamp that she's sure Aliya will never miss.

Moreen accidentally summons a gorgeous demon-turned-pleasure djinni named Paran, and he's not too thrilled with the theft of his property. Moreen has rubbed his lamp, the contract is sealed. For the next thirty days, she belongs to him. And Paran intends to use this time to help his little felon learn some very important lessons, including the true meaning of the words *honor* and *obey*.

Smoke, Fire and Desire

Scientist Rhylie Dawson works hard, but when it comes to play she's pretty reserved. Until her friends take her to the *Cave of Pleasure* in New York City. She's there to celebrate her birthday, and maybe, just maybe, get lucky.

What Rhylie doesn't know is the *Cave of Pleasure* is run by Pleasure Djinn, and they're eager to show her that there's more to life than just work. On stage in front of a bevy of male dancers, Rhylie is told to choose one for her special birthday dance.

She picks the fireman, and quickly learns that where there's smoke, there's fire, and a great deal of desire.

The Not Quite Wicked Series

***Wolf in Men's Clothing* by Dakota Rebel**

Little Red Riding Hood has nothing on Rhys. On his way to his grandmother's house, Rhys' car breaks down in the middle of nowhere. Fortunately for him, there is a big, bad rescuer watching and waiting to sweep him off his feet.

***Just Right* by Bronwyn Green**

When Department of Natural Resources officer, Gwendolyn Locke, hits a black bear on the way home from work one night, her entire view of reality changes. She discovers that shape-shifters exist, and she's just become Goldilocks to three gorgeous, very aroused men who also happen to be werebears. Being snowbound has never been so hot.

***Open Sesame* by Mia Watts**

Alister Baban overheard a business discussion that netted him and his Uncle Cassimer a lot of money. When the Simsim Group stock crashes and declares bankruptcy within weeks, the owners immediately suspect the Babans of playing dirty.

Oz Adamo, one of four brothers who owned Simsim Group, agrees to abduct Alister to obtain information and win back the lost pensions of former employees.

Tied to a bed and lusting after his captor, Alister fights the sexual attraction he has for Oz. They want information and he isn't about to give it. But Oz loves a good challenge, and shrewd, serious, sexy Alister is naked and his—at least for now.

***Heart of Ice* by Brynn Paulin**

Kai is perfectly unhappy with his life. Cast into a role as shop boy and forced into marriage to save his family, he sees nothing good in his future. In fact, his betrothed, Gerda, seems to hate everything he enjoys. Especially winter and his attraction to dominating his partners. His prospects look grim...until the Snow Queen arrives.

Wyn has spent her life alone, living vicariously through those who love winter. When she learns of Kai's predicament, she knows she must save him. If only she could save herself. She craves his dominance, but there's one tiny thing standing in their way. No human can touch her without experiencing chilly agony. And that might bring any relationship to an icy death.

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***Taken by the Pack* by Cheryl Dragon**

Phases: Book One

Danny loves Alaska, but it doesn't seem to love him back. The full Wolf Moon sparkles over Fairbanks, but he's alone for those long nights. He wants to come out of the closet and date, but his frail family might implode. All he wants is the right man in his bed.

Brandon and Justin are lovers and wolf shifters native to Alaska. They're out to protect their way of life, and sometimes that means extreme measures. When Danny's brother proposes aerial wolf hunting, Danny enters their sights. Danny was the closet case in high school, and now, he'll be their sex toy. The shifter pair is ready to do whatever it takes to stop the hunting and maybe add a sexy human man to their pack.

***Coyote Savage* by Kris Norris**

Phases: Book Two

February's full moon is rising, only this year, it's bringing a new brand of hunger...

For coyote shifters Caden and Talon Brady, the upcoming hunger moon has ignited a different kind of appetite. They've been waiting several years for a chance to court their intended mate, and now that she's finally in their sights, they'll stop at nothing to win her over. But when local livestock start disappearing, their coyote refuge is put in the hot seat, and more than just their way of life is suddenly in jeopardy.

Sheriff Rebecca Savage never planned on returning to Becket Falls, or for falling for two handsome men. But fate seems to have different plans for her. Unfortunately not all of them are sexy and look fantastic in jeans. The local mayor is trying to run the Brady boys and their coyote refuge out of town. Nothing seems to make sense, but when she starts digging deeper, a new danger rises with the full moon—one that just might get them all killed.

***Unchaste* by Mia Watts**

Phases: Book Three

The mystical Portal of the Gods transports Flynn Chula, shifter and descendant of the Cahokia Indians, six hundred years in the past. Right into a tribal feud between Amaro and Koda, warriors of the empire. While Flynn finds his new circumstances impossible, Amaro and Koda know exactly what to do. Their culture dictates that shifters have to be tested, proving their place among the people--as priests. Only one high priest can rule the empire at a time, but the current apprentice reigns with blood sacrifice and fear.

As the sexual preparations begin, Koda and Amaro do their duty to rid him of any possible heterosexual leanings...by giving themselves to him wholly. Flynn, who's never wanted a woman in his life, can't believe his luck. Two hunky men can't get enough of him, and their eager to learn all the tricks.

When the blood priest discovers the plot to overthrow him, will Flynn, Koda, and Amaro escape alive, or will more than blood be lost on the altar?

***Glass Slipper* by Abigail Barnette**

Naughtily Ever After, Book One

When Julien Auvrey promises to help his goddaughter snag a prince, he has no idea that the squalling infant he held in his arms nineteen years ago has turned into a beautiful young woman. Once he sees Joséphine, he knows that she's just what the prince wants in a woman...and just the type of woman that Julien wants in his bed. But Julien is a life-long bachelor, and Joséphine deserves more than just a brief affair. With his help, she'll blossom into a wife fit for the prince—in and out of the bedchamber.

Joséphine Thévenet wants nothing more than to be quit of her father's crumbling house, her stepmother's temper, and her two obnoxious stepsisters. Notorious seducer Julien Auvrey appeals to her desire for escape, and plenty of her other desires, as well. When etiquette lessons turn to carnal instruction, Joséphine fears she will lose her heart before she can win the prince.

Julien can't deny the raw heat between him and Joséphine, but he also can't deny the promise he made to her father. To possess Joséphine, Julien must betray his friend, and give up his own life of indulgence. Can he truly ask Joséphine to turn her back on the chance to be princess for nights of endless pleasure? Can he trust himself to love her as she deserves?

***New Orleans* by Demi Alex**

Who makes life-altering decisions based on a fortune cookie?

Sans her family and sans a job, Lilly Marie is completely alone in the world. With only a broken heart in tow, she has nothing to lose by packing it up and starting over in the sultry Big Easy. And after all she's been through the past year, encountering an eccentric woman in Jackson Square and *actually* following her instructions to “step onto Bourbon Street and into her future” doesn't seem so weird. Who is she to question “destiny” when she'd uprooted herself because of a tiny piece of paper tucked inside a cookie?

What Lilly doesn't expect is for a hero to save her from a rampant bicyclist and whisk her away to a place called *El Destino* to meet his family— “family” being four of the handsomest men Lilly has ever seen. Whether it is fate or coincidence, the sizzling and sexy men of *El Destino* take her into their capable hands to prove that there is no such thing as happenstance, and that undeniable passion and true love can cure any ailment, including a broken heart.

***Alpheli Solution* by Anny Cook**

Bootcamp class seems to be the answer to her prayers. In her wildest dreams, she doesn't consider meeting not just one, but two hunky vampires who take her—in the car, in the shower, in the living room, in the hot tub, in hand—as they teach her everything she'll need to know about her new vampire life.

For centuries, Pierre has loved and pursued Julian with no success. After a hostile takeover of Julian's financial assets, Pierre is positive Julian will have nowhere else to turn. Julian, though, chooses to teach the Vampire Bootcamp class rather than surrender to Pierre on unequal terms. When one of Julian's students approaches him for help identifying her sire, Julian is stunned that she is his alpheli—an extremely rare mate whose blood will allow him to subsist on real food. What will that mean to his love-hate relationship with Pierre?

There are just one or two problems. Danamara is descended from Pierre's bloodline. And she's on someone's hit list. Julian and Pierre find unexpected erotic rewards and eternal love when they join together in a brutal war to protect their alpheli's life.

***Oriana and the Three Werebears* by Tia Fanning**

Oriana Ricci has taken over the family business—flying cargo and rich tourists around Alaska's barely inhabited Kodiak Archipelago. When her plane malfunctions and she's forced to make an emergency landing, she finds herself stranded in the middle of a National Wildlife Refuge. With no civilization for miles and no hope of rescue, she thinks all is lost... Until she stumbles upon the entrance to an underground bunker.

Jack, Jordan, and Jonathan McMathan own and operate a secret intelligence firm contracted by the US Government. Hidden away in an old Cold War spy station located the middle of the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge, the brothers are not only able to do their top secret jobs safely

without fear of discovery, but are better to protect their other, more personal secret: They have the ability to shift into Kodiak bears.

Like a fairy tale gone bad, the brothers return home to find their lunch tasted—or eaten, their computer chairs adjusted—or broken, and a beautiful blonde sleeping in one of their beds. This situation poses a big problem for the brothers... Their location is now compromised. But more importantly, what are they to do with the lady?

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