



Guarded by the Gargoyle (Hidden Hollow #3)

Author: *Evangeline Anderson*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Willow

What do you do when the huge stone gargoyle you just happen to touch comes to life and declares he's your protector? Well if you're me, you try (unsuccessfully) to send him away. But Kael doesn't want to leave my side. He says he has to keep me safe from the danger coming after me and I can't exactly deny it. I have an abusive ex who's determined to get back together—whether I want to or not.

Kael

The moment I felt Willow's touch, I knew she was the one I had been waiting for. She woke me from the slumber of stone and made me flesh again. How could I help falling in love with her? But she refuses to let me get close to her—her past relationships with human men have ruined her trust in anyone male. How can I prove that I'm not like them? And how can I convince her to let me protect her?

I'm sure I'll find a way because in the magical town of Hidden Hollow...anything is possible.

Total Pages (Source): 42

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:52 am

PROLOGUE 1

KAEL

For untold centuries I was frozen in stone.

It was a punishment for my disobedience—for choosing the wrong side in the great war of Heaven. A punishment for my pride.

The one I followed promised freedom...so I was given servitude as my penance. He swore that we would rule...and so I was tasked with protecting and bowing to those lowliest of all of the Almighty's creations—the humans. But not just any humans—I was bound to protect and serve women, those descendants of Eve who first tasted the forbidden fruit and caused all of humanity to fall, as I had fallen myself.

Nor was that the end of my punishment. I was given a new form—a hideous visage I would be forced to wear whenever I did battle. No longer was I a beautiful archangel...now that I was fallen I was also a gargoyle. One doomed to serve forever or until the holder of my key no longer needed me and released me.

At first my pride was hurt—I wanted nothing to do with my new role. But then I was called forth, called out of stone and given one to watch over. She became everything to me—my light, my life. But she was not free—she was owned by another. The one who tasked me with her care.

He hurt her—the one who first held my key. He made me watch over her but he kept me from protecting her. When she died, I could not save her.

I vowed then that never should another male hold my key. Before I turned to stone again, I asked a witch to place the spell on me. I begged her to make sure the next woman I protected would also be my keyholder, so that none should stop me from keeping her safe.

Whoever she was, I swore to guard her with my life, to protect her from any danger, and to give her my heart...even if it meant my death.

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PROLOGUE 2

WILLOW

My Grandfather left me three gifts when he died. The first two were keys—a huge old, wrought iron monstrosity with an intricately formed head that looked like a lion and a tiny golden key that looked like it might open a little girl’s music box or unlock a diary.

“Keep them with you always, Willow my love,” he told me in a husky whisper—his voice a sad shadow of the friendly bellow it had been when he was healthy. “One will lead you to safety and the other to protection—never let them leave your side.”

I swore to do as he asked—it was his dying wish, how could I deny him? I put the two mismatched keys on a thick silver chain and hung them around my neck. I didn’t do it because I truly believed that the keys could really keep me safe or protect me—I did it to remember Pop-pop who had loved me and raised me since my parents were killed when I was only eleven.

But I told you that he left me three gifts, didn’t I? Well, the third gift I didn’t know about until it was almost too late—and it nearly got me killed. I didn’t truly understand what it was until I was running down a dark alley not far from Bourbon Street, being chased by creatures beyond my mortal comprehension that hungered for my soul...

I cast a glance over my shoulder and saw that they were still there—the red, glowing eyes and the slavering mouths, open and panting for my blood. Oh Goddess, what

was I going to do?

“Faster, my child!” whispered a voice in my ear. “They are almost upon you, Willow my love—you must hurry—HURRY!”

“But where...where am I...going?” I panted. As a curvy girl, I wasn’t exactly built for this kind of exercise. Also, the voice I was hearing was absolutely Pop-pop who had been dead for over a year now, but I wasn’t about to question him or wonder how I could hear him speaking in my ear.

“You will know it when you see it. And you must not hesitate!” my Grandfather’s voice warned. “Hurry, Willow my love—those are Hell Hounds. If they catch you, they will drag you down into the Pit with them!”

I put on another burst of speed, though by now I felt like my lungs were going to explode! I nearly tripped over a drunk sprawled out in the alley as I passed several stinking dumpsters, overflowing with last night’s waste. We party hard here in The Big Easy and we leave a big mess too.

“Around the corner, Willow my love!” Pop-pop’s voice urged me.

I saw a corner straight ahead—I nearly missed it because I was going too fast to stop. But I managed to skid to an almost-halt and run down an even darker and narrower alley. The breath was tearing in my lungs and my thighs and calves were on fire. I couldn’t keep this up much longer!

And then I saw it—there, glowing at the end of the alley, was a door.

I don’t mean the whole door was glowing—it was more like the frame of the door was outlined in light.

“There—the door! Use it—use the key!” my Grandfather urged me.

“Wh-which...k-key?” I gasped, so out of breath I was barely able to get the words out. If I got out of this mess, I was definitely going to hit the gym, I promised myself. Not to lose weight—just to be sure that it was easier to run for my life. I skidded to a stop in front of the door which was outlined in silvery light and started fumbling for the keys around my neck.

“Pop-pop...which key?” I panted again.

But there was no answer from the little voice in my ear. Instead, I heard a low, ominous growling coming from the other end of the alley. Turning my head, I saw three sets of glowing red eyes glaring in my direction.

Shit.

Yanking the necklace off my neck, I grabbed for the keys as they slid off the chain. I only had time to try one of them and if I guessed wrong, I was dead!

But maybe I’m getting ahead of myself. Even though it ended so disastrously, the day I learned about my third gift started normally enough.

How could I know it would end with me opening a portal to Hell...and then finding my way into Hidden Hollow?

1

WILLOW

My alarm went off at six—the same time it does every morning. But even before I opened my eyes, I heard a “Mmmmrow?” and a paw patted my cheek.

“All right, Miss Sassy,” I muttered, batting at my cat. “I hear you—I hear you.”

I wanted to roll over and go back to sleep, but I knew the bundle of calico fur sitting on my chest wouldn’t let me. Besides, it was time to get up and open the shop. There are always a few practitioners who want to get in early and grab some supplies before the start of business hours.

Yawning, I rolled out of bed and went to get a quick shower. Twisting my long, wavy black hair up on top of my head to keep it from getting damp, I swiped the steam off the mirror and glanced at my face. I have what they used to call a “roseleaf complexion”—which really just means I’m too pale and my skin bruises easily. The skin I got from my Mom. My thin nose and full lips came from my Dad.

My pale green eyes, that have no other color in them, I got from my Great Grandmother—at least that’s what Pop-pop always said. He claimed that his mother was a great beauty—so gorgeous that the artists begged to paint her and put her picture on cigar boxes. Which was a big deal back in the day—like being an Instagram model, I guess.

My eyes weird some people out though, because they almost seem to glow in the

dark. “Cat eyes” my ex, Carlo used to call them.

He always hated cats.

I tried to push Carlo out of my mind as I stepped into the shower. He was a chapter in my life best left closed. The day he had signed the divorce papers, over two years ago, had been one of the best days of my life. I had been set free of a horrible, abusive marriage and I wasn’t about to take my freedom for granted.

Especially since I was fairly sure my Pop-pop had paid for my freedom with his life.

That might be hard to understand unless you know that my Grandfather had Romany blood in him—he always claimed that he was descended from a Gypsy Queen. And when I told him you can’t say “Gypsy” anymore, because it’s considered a slur, he would always wave me off.

“Please! It has always been an ugly name for our kind, Willow my love!” he told me. “But I will not let them make me ashamed! I have the blood of the Gypsy Queen in my veins and The Power that comes with it.” Then he winked at me. “Someday, you will have The Power too.”

I would always wave him off. I might have his blood in my veins, but I didn’t have any of the powers that my Grandfather did. Maybe because my blood was too diluted. Pop-pop was only half Gypsy—or Traveler, which is the nice way to say it—himself. Which made my Dad only a quarter Traveler and so I was barely an eighth.

Pop-pop’s other half was Italian—I could always tell when he got upset or excited because his accent got thicker. He could swear a blue streak in Italian too, which never failed to impress me when I was younger.

As for magical powers, Pop-pop really did have some, though it was hard to tell how

much was genuine and how much was sleight-of-hand and skillful deception. He knew about a million card tricks and he was always making coins appear from behind my ear.

He did Spirit sessions and Tarot readings too—he had a special set of cards that were passed down to him from his Mother—she of the cigar box beauty fame. Despite their age they hadn't faded a bit and the intricate patterns in golden ink stamped on their backs remained as fresh as the day they had been made.

The cards were special—almost as special as the keys that Pop-pop had begged me to keep with me always. I stored them in a shoe box in the small safe under the front counter of the shop and only took them out occasionally to look at them and remember my Grandfather.

I sighed as I got out of the shower and dried off. Thinking of Pop-pop still made me feel sad and guilty. I was sure he had given his life for me, though I wasn't quite sure how he had achieved it. But he had only been sixty-five when he died—and a really young sixty five at that. I was sure he might have lived longer if things hadn't gotten so bad with Carlo...

There my mind went, straying back to my no-good ex again. Why was I thinking of him so much this morning? He was out of my life for good and I no longer had to worry about him hitting or hurting me—or making rude, belittling comments about my weight, either.

Yes, I admit it—I'm curvy. I have full breasts and big hips and "thunder thighs"—at least according to my ex. But guess what? That's just too damn bad. After the season in hell that was my marriage, I had decided not to try to conform to anyone else's standard of beauty. I used to starve myself, hoping I could please my husband. Now if I wanted that extra donut, I was damn well going to eat it.

After all, it wasn't like I was ever going to get married—or even date—again. My time with Carlo had made me extremely wary of every other man on the planet. All except my Grandfather, of course—Pop-pop had never raised a hand to me, even in my rebellious teenage years. He was never anything but loving and kind and patient and understanding and...

And I was crying. Sniffing, I swiped at my eyes as I pulled on some clothes. My closet was still kind of chaotic because, while I had boxed up all Pop-pop's clothes, I still hadn't been able to make myself donate them. So the small walk-in was crammed with cardboard boxes as well as my own colorful wardrobe.

Back when I was married, I dressed mainly in black. Not because I liked the color, but because it was slenderizing and made my juicy behind look a little less massive. But now I didn't care about hiding my curves—in fact, I liked to flaunt them.

I found a red silky blouse with flowing sleeves and paired it with a long, deep blue skirt covered in red flowers. I wrapped a scarf around my head, letting my long wavy black hair hang down behind it and added a string of gold beads as well as the thick silver necklace with the keys Pop-pop had left me.

A pair of soft red flats finished the outfit which—while it wouldn't work if I was employed at a bank—did just fine for running the Magic Supply Shop my Grandfather had left me. I looked like a Traveler Princess which was good—customers like to see someone mysterious behind the counter. Or so Pop-pop always claimed—especially the tourists who came in to ogle at our eclectic mixture of magical artifacts and New Orleans souvenirs. So I did my best to dress the part.

I went to the small kitchenette and fed Miss Sassy, who had been meowing almost non-stop since I stepped out of the shower. I put her morning can of soft cat food on a dish beside the automatic feeder and the automatic watering tank I had bought her at great expense. She routinely ignored the dry food that the feeder dispensed, though

she would drink from the little reservoir below the tank as long as I changed the water daily.

She's damn picky, my cat—probably because Pop-pop spoiled her rotten while she stayed with him during my disastrous marriage. Carlo refused to have a cat in his house—he claimed he was allergic but the truth was he was just an asshole and he didn't want me to have anything at all that might make me happy.

“Ugh, this stuff smells!” I told her as I served her the “tuna delight.” “Don't know how you stand it!”

She just twitched her tail at me as she dug in. She was getting a little bit chunky, but she still did a great job keeping the mice and rats out, so I didn't think it was fair to put her on a diet when I refused to put myself on one.

I had inherited both the Shop—Madam Callahan's Magic Supply—as well as the small apartment directly behind it when Pop-pop died. But I'd been living with him and taking care of him before that—I had grown up there as a child and had moved back in after my divorce. Shortly after I moved back, Pop-pop got sick and I had to be there to nurse him, so I never got around to finding my own place.

Now there didn't seem to be any point in moving—unless I had to, which unfortunately seemed like a distinct possibility. The rent is really high on anyplace in the French Quarter and we had been getting fewer tourists lately, ever since the beignet café beside us went bust.

I missed the café for more than just the tourists it had drawn—if you've never had beignets, they're these little pillowy pieces of fried dough that are usually tossed in powdered sugar. They are horrible for you and taste absolutely amazing. I used to have them for breakfast along with a big cup of chicory coffee—the café's other specialty—every morning. Now there was nothing to do but grab a protein bar and

make myself a coffee in my Keurig.

I sipped it as I made my way out into the store and turned the sign in the front door from CLOSED to OPEN. I unlocked the door and then took a look around the shop, making sure everything was presentable.

We had quite an eclectic mixture of things for sale but I tried to keep it all neat. There were the souvenirs of course—a collection of coasters, t-shirts, magnets, and mugs with voodoo skulls and variations of “New Orleans” or “The Big Easy” printed on them. There was also a display of Annie B’s chewy pralines and assorted caramels from the Royal Praline Company as well as some “Red-hot Slap you Mama” hot sauce.

These were the kinds of things that tourists came in to buy. We kept the real stuff—the supplies that magical practitioners came in for—behind the counter.

I had a huge stock of dried herbs—the kind you can’t get at the grocery store—as well as various crystals in all shapes and sizes. There were also candles—some that had been blessed and some that had been cursed—vials of holy water, feathers, hand-carved wands, tarot card decks, and everything else you could think of.

We also had quite a library including books on Wicca, White Magic, Black Magic, Voodoo practices, Mindful Meditation, Astral Projection, Divination, Clairvoyance, Telepathy, and every other mystical subject you could possibly dream up—and a few most people probably had no idea even existed.

I didn’t believe any of them, of course. Pop-pop’s claim that he had magic power and that I would someday too, only went so far with me. I guess I’m kind of a natural skeptic—though of course I would never tell that to any of the customers that came into the Emporium looking for supplies. Usually I do my best to look mysterious and just ring them up and send them on their way.

Satisfied that the shop was in order, I went through the back room and into the tiny kitchen to make another cup of coffee. I kept telling myself I was going to cut back and then not doing it. What can I say? Coffee is a weakness and a necessity all rolled into one for me.

I was just adding way too much cream and sugar to my second cup and contemplating raiding the display of chewy pralines—Annie B’s makes the best—when I heard the front door jingle and hurried footsteps running into the front of the shop.

“Hello?”

I put down my coffee and came back to stand behind the counter. There was a young boy, around eleven or twelve, looking around with wide, panicked eyes. He looked like he might have some Creole in him—his skin was light brown and he had a riot of curly black hair.

“Hey, are you okay?” I asked him. “Are you lost?”

He looked up at me, his eyes wide with fear.

“Please help me, lady! They say I took some stuff, but I didn’t—I swear!”

“Who’s ‘they?’” I asked but at that moment, I heard a familiar voice right outside.

“In there—little fucker went in there!” the voice said.

The sound sent a cold shiver right down my back

“Come back here—come on!” I motioned to the trembling boy.

At first he seemed frozen to the spot, but then he rushed behind the counter where I was standing.

“Good, now get down.” I put a hand on top of his curly head and gave him a little shove. “Get down and don’t move and don’t say a word,” I ordered him. “I’ll do my best to get rid of them.”

The boy nodded quickly and ducked down just as the bell jangled and the front door opened yet again.

Standing in the doorway was someone I had hoped to never see again—my ex, Carlo.

WILLOW

Carlo was a big, burly guy with sandy brown hair and brown eyes. He was powerfully built and had played football back in high school, where I met him. Back then he was a big deal—the quarterback of the winning football team at Cohen College Prep High—go Hornets!

Despite its name, Cohen College Prep or CCP wasn't great at getting anyone ready for higher education. It was, in fact, a pretty rough place with metal detectors at every door and teachers that were dead behind the eyes from all the violence they'd witnessed. I felt like the luckiest girl alive when Carlo turned his attention to me and offered me his protection.

I wasn't feeling quite so lucky after we graduated, went to college, and got married. The minute I said, "I do" the abuse started. It was the beginning of a long, miserable chapter in my life that I was still healing from. For a time, I had become convinced it would end in my death as Carlo got more and more violent.

Yes, I became one of those women—I wore long sleeves to hide the bruises on my arms and sunglasses even on cloudy days to disguise my black eyes. I tried to pretend that nothing was wrong—both to myself and to everyone around me—but Pop-pop saw through my deception.

"Willow my love," he said sorrowfully. "He's no good for you, this football boy. He's hurting you all the time!"

“I’m fine, Pop-pop,” I mumbled, trying to smile. Inside I was aching though. At that point the abuse had been going on for years and I was used to it—resigned to it. I was numb because I thought I would never get away.

Lots of people wonder why abused women stay with their abusers—why they don’t leave immediately. Why they leave and go back again and again to the same, awful situation.

The reason is complicated and complex. A messy mixture of love and hate and emotional manipulation and betrayal that sucks you in like a spider’s web and keeps you from ever quite getting free.

At first, Carlo would cry after he hit me. He would beg for forgiveness—bring me flowers and take me on dates to fancy restaurants—ones with low lighting where the makeup hiding my bruises wouldn’t show so much. He swore he loved me and he just lost control.

“You know you make me crazy, babe!” he’d say, giving a rueful little laugh. “I wouldn’t get so worked up if I didn’t love you so much!”

I spent years believing that was true—believing that my husband loved me so much it made him hit me. And that somehow it was all my fault. If only I didn’t provoke him so much, he wouldn’t hurt me. Though usually all it took to provoke him was serving him dinner five minutes late or having another man notice me when we went out, or any of the hundred other little things that made him lose control.

I only began to believe otherwise about halfway into our marriage, but by that time it was too late—Carlo had graduated from the Police Academy and was a full-fledged cop.

Now, I’m not saying “all men” or “all cops” but you can look up the statistics for

yourself on how many wives of cops are abused every year and how little they can do about it. The department protects its own and they almost never prosecute a fellow cop, no matter what his spouse says—or how bad she looks at the annual Christmas party for that matter.

I did hear Carlo's partner, Josh Sampson, try to say something to him once after he came to our house for dinner and saw the state I was in. This was right after Carlo had pushed me down the front steps of our house and I'd ended up with some broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder, and multiple bruises.

"Jesus, man!" I heard him mutter to my husband when I was in the kitchen, trying to wrestle a roasted chicken out of the oven one-handed, since my left arm was in a sling. "You've got to start going easy on your wife! Willow's looking really banged up!"

"What's that got to do with me?" Carlo had demanded defensively. "She fell down the steps—that's all. Landed on the fucking sidewalk—not my fault."

"You sure you didn't help her down those steps?" Josh demanded. "This isn't the first time I've seen her looking like shit."

"She looks like shit because she won't take care of herself," Carlo had protested. "Getting fat as a fucking pig, sitting around here all day while I'm out slaving to keep her in style. So what if I gave her a little push? I had to teach her a lesson. Women are too fucking mouthy—gotta keep 'em in line, right?"

And then I'd seen him nudge his partner with an elbow and grin as I stared through the crack in the door.

"Yeah, well...just don't push her into a fucking grave." Josh had looked uneasy. "That would be going too far."

But apparently shoving me down the steps and punching me in the face wasn't going too far. I saw Josh giving me sidelong glances throughout the meal, but he never said anything else—and never tried to help me either.

So much for “to protect and to serve.”

That moment in our marriage was a kind of wake-up call for me. I began to open my eyes—which had been swollen shut too often from Carlo's punches—and realize that what was happening wasn't right. At long last, I began to think about getting away from my husband.

The problem was, Carlo wasn't about to let me go.

When I tried to bring it up—pointing out that I had never been able to give him children and he deserved to be with someone who could—he shut me down, hard.

“You're never leaving me, babe—you understand?” He had me by the shoulders, his fingers digging into my arms and his face shoved right into mine, our foreheads touching. His breath smelled like stale beer and the cigars he and his partner liked to smoke to relax. “Fucking never. You try and I'll hunt you down and drag you back home—and you won't like what happens next, I promise you that!”

So that was my life. I had just about given up all hope of ever getting away from him when suddenly, for no apparent reason, he just seemed to start losing interest.

He stopped calling me all the time to check on my location. Our whole marriage I hadn't been allowed to have a job because he wanted me at home where he could keep tabs on me—that way he said, he didn't have to worry about “other men sniffing around,” as he put it. But all of a sudden, when my Grandfather asked if I could help him at the shop, Carlo agreed, though he had refused to give me permission for years.

That was just the start. Gradually, my husband's grip on me loosened. He began to stay out late with his friends and go to bars with the guys instead of coming straight home, where I had better have supper waiting for him if I didn't want a twisted wrist or a fat lip. He even stopped looking through my phone on a daily basis to make sure I hadn't been "flirting" with strange men. (I never would have dared. The one time a male friend from high school tried to contact me on Facebook, Carlo put my arm in a cast.)

At the time, it felt like a kind of miracle. Slowly but surely the noose that had been around my neck ever since I was stupid enough to say, "I do," began to loosen. Sometimes Carlo would stay out all night and when he finally came home, he seemed surprised to see me there—it was as though he had forgotten all about me. As though he'd forgotten he even had a wife.

I knew he was seeing other women at this time—I didn't give a damn. I was just happy and relieved to know that he was finally loosening his grip on me. From high school on, he had been obsessed with me—completely fixated on everything I did and said—and somehow everything was always wrong.

Now, he stopped hitting me if the kitchen table had some crumbs on it. He no longer went into a furious rage if dinner wasn't exactly what he wanted and ready the minute he walked in the door. Because half the time, he didn't even show up for dinner, leaving me in peace.

At the same time this was happening, Pop-pop started getting thinner and looking his age—which he never had before. His thick black hair finally turned silver and then started to thin and his booming voice got softer.

I'm ashamed to say I didn't put two and two together—I just thought Pop-pop was aging. It wasn't until later that I suspected there was a link between my Grandfather's gradual illness and my husband's loss of interest in me. I was too busy trying to get

free of my awful marriage to consider why Carlo was slowly loosening his stranglehold on my life.

Finally, I dared to present him with divorce papers. With Pop-pop's encouragement, I had gone to a lawyer he knew of who specialized in no-fault divorces. All I needed was Carlo's signature and I would be free.

I really expected him to lose the strange calm that had come over him and beat me when I showed the paperwork to him. Instead, to my incredulous relief, he signed—actually signed and let me go!

That very night I moved back in with my Pop-pop, who continued to get thinner and weaker. I had never heard from Carlo again...

Until now.

Now my ex was standing in the front of my shop, his eyes narrowed as he stared at me. It was as though I was an old acquaintance that he used to know from high school—someone he was trying to place.

"Hey, uh...uh..." He snapped his fingers like you do when you're trying to remember a name or a word that's on the tip of your tongue.

"Yes, officer? How can I help you?" I asked blandly, not giving him any help.

Carlo didn't answer my question.

"I know I know you from somewhere," he said to me. "Your face is so familiar!"

My heart was pounding in my chest but I tried to keep my expression calm. My suspicions about why Carlo had let me go were cemented in that moment.

Remember I told you I was pretty sure that my Grandfather had something to do with it? Well, now I was absolutely sure. He must have put some kind of spell or curse or something on my ex to make him lose interest in me and then, to eventually forget me completely.

But now he was back in my shop and I could almost see the memories flooding back into his head.

“Carlo—that’s Willow, your ex,” his partner Josh said, frowning. “You telling me you don’t even recognize her?”

“Willow?” A look of dawning comprehension broke over Carlo’s cruelly handsome face. “Oh, yeah— Willow!” he said, striding over to me.

“Hi, Carlo,” I said, still trying to play it cool. “I thought your precinct was across town.”

“Yeah, well—they moved us. This is our new beat,” Josh answered for him.

I saw a brief flash of frustration on his face and knew at once what had happened. Carlo had probably roughed a suspect up and gotten the department sued for police brutality again.

I say “again” because it most definitely wasn’t the first time this had happened. Carlo had gotten more complaints than almost any other officer on the New Orleans PD but instead of suspending or firing him, they just kept moving him around and giving him second, third, and fourth chances.

And now, apparently, his new precinct was the one right near my shop. Of all the lousy luck.

Still, I tried to keep calm.

“I see,” I said coolly. “Well, is there anything I can do for you? I was just setting up the shop.”

“Anything you can do?” Carlo repeated stupidly. He was still staring at me, looking more and more like a man who has woken up from a dream. Did that mean the spell my Pop-pop must have put on him was fading? I certainly hoped not.

His partner, Josh took charge.

“We saw a shoplifter run in here,” he said to me. “Black male, maybe five’ two—curly hair, brown eyes, probably around sixteen.”

Carlo blinked.

“Oh yeah—the little fucker ran right in here.” He nodded. “So where is he?”

I could feel the little boy trembling against my leg as a surge of indignation ran through me. There was no way he was a day over twelve, but I knew Carlo and his partner would pretend otherwise so they could rough him up.

“Sorry,” I said coolly. “I haven’t seen anyone who fits that description. Maybe he ran into some other shop, further down the block.”

“Nah, I’m pretty sure he ran in here. Let’s just have a look in the back—maybe the little fucker is hiding.”

Carlo started to come around behind the counter but I blocked his way, very aware that the little boy was hiding behind my skirt.

“Sorry, you can’t go back there,” I said firmly. “That’s my private residence.”

Carlo gave me an incredulous look.

“What are you talking about? I been back there hundreds of times—I remember now. Back when your Grandpa was still around. Where is old Pop-pop anyway?”

I felt a stab of grief but tried to keep it from showing on my face.

“He died,” I said quietly. “About a year ago. Now please leave my shop—there’s nothing here for you.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” Carlo was looking me up and down in that appraising way I used to dread when we were married. “You look hot in that Gypsy girl outfit,” he said to me. “Kind of whorish, but hot. Don’t know why I ever let you get away.”

My heart skipped a beat and not in a good way. Goddess above, whatever my Grandfather had done to him was definitely wearing off. I needed to get him out of my shop before he decided he wanted me back.

“I really need to go now,” I told him. “It’s inventory day—you know how long that takes.”

He frowned.

“Thought you said you were just opening the shop?”

“I really need to get back to work,” I said, not answering his question. “Your shoplifter isn’t here so why don’t you go check some of the other shops in the row? He’s probably getting away.”

“Fuck yes—he probably is!” Josh exclaimed impatiently. “C’mon, Carlo—we need to go!”

He turned for the door, but my ex still lingered. He was staring at me as though he was fixing me in his mind—making sure he didn’t forget again.

“This isn’t over, babe,” he said.

“Yes, it is. We’re divorced,” I snapped. “Now please leave .”

I knew the moment the words were out of my mouth they were a mistake. Carlo had always hated “mouthy women”—which meant any woman who disagreed with him.

“I don’t think so!” He stepped closer to me and grabbed my face in one big hand, pinching hard enough to really hurt. “I’ll leave when I’m Goddamned good and ready—not before. You got that, babe?”

Oh Goddess! Now my heart was pounding so hard it felt like it was trying to break right through my ribcage. I was having waves of flashbacks—horrible memories crowded my mind like bile. All the times he had hit me, beaten me, belittled me—it all came back like a wave of putrid water trying to drown me. I felt sick—like I might faint or throw up. My mind was a blur of panic.

“Josh!” I gasped, appealing to his partner. Sometimes he could rein Carlo in—not that he tried very often, I thought resentfully.

“Carlo, come on.” His partner came over and put a hand on my ex’s shoulder. “We need to get going—that little fucker could be anywhere!”

Carlo ignored him.

“You know, for the life of me I can’t remember why I let you go,” he said, glaring into my eyes. “You were a pretty good fuck and I always liked your cooking—when you bothered to do it right. You’ve let yourself get fat but you could lose the weight—with the right motivation .”

To my shame, it was all I could do not to beg him to leave me alone. I hated to admit that he reduced me to blind panic but the way he was hurting me was bringing back so many bad memories!

Somehow, I managed not to beg.

“You’re hurting me,” I said instead, my voice coming out high and tight. His fingers and thumb were digging into the flesh of my cheeks—I was sure he was going to leave bruises on my pale skin.

“Carlo...” Josh said warningly. “You know what the Captain said—we need to avoid any incidents—at least for a while.”

A surge of anger went through me almost eclipsing the panic—why was it that men like Carlo were allowed to keep on being assholes and nobody stopped them? Why did he keep getting away with it?

“Let me go!” I said in a low, trembling voice, somehow managing to get the words out. “I’m not your wife anymore.”

“Yeah? Well, we’ll see about that.” Carlo let me go at last and took a step back, but that appraising look was back in his eyes. “Seems to me that you and I have some unfinished business, babe.”

I didn’t say anything, just stared at him as he and Josh finally left the store, the bell tinkling to announce their departure. Trouble...this meant nothing but trouble, I was

sure of it. Carlo had remembered me and now that Pop-pop was gone, whatever spell or curse he had cast on him was clearly wearing off. I had a really bad feeling that I hadn't seen the last of my ex—not by a long shot.

I put up my hand to touch the place where he had grabbed me and my fingers came away wet. Damn it, was I crying? I swiped at my eyes and took in a trembling breath that was more than half sob. It seemed that I was, though there was no way I ought to be crying over my asshole ex.

But the awful memories from my marriage—memories I had tried really hard to bury and forget—were now uppermost in my mind. They made me feel sick and sad and scared all at once. Carlo was the reason I was never, ever going to trust any man ever again. He was also the reason I never wanted to have any kind of sexual intimacy because he always made sure sex hurt. He?—

“Hey, lady—is it safe to come out?” a little voice asked and someone tugged on my skirt.

“Oh!” I looked down in surprise. In the wave of awful memories that was crowding my brain, I had completely forgotten about the boy who had been crouching behind the counter all this time, doing his best to be invisible.

“Yes—it's safe,” I told him, swiping at my eyes again. “Though you'd probably better leave by the back way, just to be sure.”

“Okay.” He nodded. “I really didn't take anything,” he said, looking at me earnestly. “I mean, I picked up something but I put it right back. I wouldn't never steal—my Mama would beat my ass if I did!”

I smothered a watery smile.

“I believe you. Here...” I went to the praline display and grabbed a few of the plastic wrapped candies to give to him. “Just go home and be safe, okay?” I told him.

“Thanks!” He examined the pralines eagerly. “These are my favorite .”

“You’re welcome.” I ushered him through the small back apartment and let him out. “Be careful!” I called to him as he looked around cautiously before running down the side street.

He threw a wave back at me but didn’t say anything. I watched him disappear in the early morning crowd of tourists and then shut the door and double checked the lock. I didn’t blame the boy for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, but he had certainly brought a whole heap of trouble to my door that I really didn’t need.

I wondered how long it would take for Carlo to show up again. Now that he had remembered me, I was very much afraid he wasn’t going to leave me alone.

WILLOW

The day dragged on but at least my ex didn't come back. Neither did the tourists, though. I only had two or three people duck their heads in and nobody bought anything.

At the end of the day, I found myself looking through the books and feeling extremely worried. There was no way I was going to be able to make rent on the shop at the end of this month if things didn't pick up considerably. How had my Grandfather managed all those years?

Pop-pop had never had trouble paying the rent or any of the bills for that matter. For some reason, he was always solvent, even when business was bad.

I wished I knew his secret! If things kept on like this, I didn't see how I would keep Madam Callahan's Magic Supply open even one more month. But closing it would kill me—it had been Pop-pop's pride and joy and it was all I had to remember him by. Well, besides Miss Sassy, who was currently snoozing on one end of the counter, completely unworried about our financial situation.

Just as I was closing up for the evening, two strange men walked through the door. They weren't police and they weren't tourists—they might be locals but both of them were dressed in nice suits, like they were going to church.

"Er, can I help you, gentlemen?" I asked, lifting my eyebrows at them.

“Yes, ma’am, you can,” the first one said in a soft, Cajun accent. “Our boss wants to meet with you.”

“Who’s your boss?” I asked, frowning. “And what does he want to meet me about?”

“You ever heard of Big Nicky?” the second man asked, raising his eyebrows. “Nicky Valentino?”

I felt a shiver go down my back. I certainly had heard of Nicky Valentino—I’d listened to Carlo talk about him more times than I could count when we were still married.

I don’t think most people realize that Organized Crime is still a real problem in the US—especially in port cities like New Orleans. The Mob takes a bite out of everything that comes through Port NOLA and Big Nicky Valentino was all the way at the top of the food chain, taking the biggest bite of all.

He was protected too—the police couldn’t touch him because he had several senators, bought and paid for, in his pocket. Which was one reason my ex was always bitching about him and how the police couldn’t stop his illegal activities.

“Er...no,” I said, since it didn’t seem wise to admit that I knew their boss was the head of the local Mob. “Never heard of him. Does he need some magical supplies?”

“Magical supplies?” The second man frowned at me.

“I mean, is he a practitioner?” I nodded at the display of crystals behind me. “We have everything you could want.”

“A practitioner of what?” the second man demanded.

“She wants to know if Big Nicky is into Voodoo,” the first man said and laughed. “No, chère —that’s not why he wants to see you,” he said to me.

“Well then, why?” I demanded, beginning to get nervous. “Is there some kind of problem or...?”

“No problem, sweetie,” a new voice said. I looked up and saw an older man—almost the age Pop-pop had been, standing in the doorway. Somehow he had kept the bell from jingling and alerting me to his presence.

The new man was wearing an extremely expensive looking dove gray silk suit that was probably hand-tailored. He had salt and pepper hair and lots of wrinkles around his sharp brown eyes. A neatly trimmed goatee made him look both charming and slightly devilish. So this was Big Nicky Valentino.

“Er...hello?” I nodded at him uncertainly. “Can I help you?”

“You can,” he said nodding as he walked into the shop. “You can help me talk to my dear departed mother.”

“Oh, I’m afraid I don’t do Tarot readings or Channeling or anything like that,” I said quickly. “That was my Grandfather’s business, but I’ve never had The Gift?”

“Yes, I knew your Grandfather well,” Big Nicky interrupted me smoothly. “He helped me speak to my mother every year on my birthday—which happens to be today,” he added. “And in return, I helped him stay solvent. Ricardo!” he said to one of his guards and snapped his fingers.

The man reached into the inner pocket of his suit coat and pulled out a fat envelope which he handed to me.

“Go on, count it,” Big Nicky said, nodding at me. “I think you’ll find it’s quite enough to cover your expenses for some time.”

With trembling fingers, I peeled open the envelope and stared, wide-eyed, at what I saw. Did you know they print a thousand-dollar bill? I didn’t until I saw what was inside.

“There must be fifty thousand dollars in here!” I exclaimed.

“Sixty-six thousand, actually. Every year I add a thousand—for my birthday, you know,” Big Nicky said cordially. “I trust that’s enough to awaken your ‘Gift’ so that you can help me communicate with my mother?”

“Oh, well...” I licked my lips which had gone very dry.

It was true that Pop-pop had done Spirit Channeling, talking to people on “the Other Side,” but I had always assumed it was trick—that he was only pretending to speak to the dead.

Now I was being offered the chance to follow in his footsteps...but could I be convincing enough to fool Big Nicky Valentino? If I could, I would make enough to pay the rent on the shop for a long time.

But if I wasn’t convincing and he figured out that I was faking it, I could be in a world of hurt. I really didn’t want to find myself sleeping with the fishes in Port Nola at the end of the night.

Big Nicky seemed to sense my hesitation because he frowned at me.

“Come on now, sweetie,” he said in a tone that was half cajoling/half threatening. “Your Grandfather assured me that after he died, his power of communing with the

spirits would pass to you—his Granddaughter. So let's get on with it!"

It seemed that I didn't have a choice. The amount of cash the Mob boss was offering me was considerable, but I still wished that Pop-pop hadn't put me in this position—or at least that he had warned me that Big Nicky would be coming in. I've always been a pretty straightforward person—which means I'm not nearly as good at the kind of trickery it takes to be a really good fake Medium. Still, it seemed like I was going to have to try and give him what he wanted.

"Of course, Mr. Valentino," I said, nodding at the Mob boss. "Would you like to come with me?"

He smiled broadly.

"Now that's more like it! Yes, I would very much like to come with you. Lead the way!"

So I did. What else could I do?

WILLOW

“O ver here, Mr. Valentino,” I said to Big Nicky and led the way.

I didn’t have far to lead him—Pop-pop had set up a “Spirit Room” on the far side of the shop. Really, it was just a large janitor’s closet which he had converted, but it served its purpose well.

I opened the door and parted the strands of long red beads that served as a curtain. The beads clacked gently against each other as I ducked through them into the tiny room.

Inside there was a small, round table with two chairs sitting across from each other. There were also a few shelves where Pop-pop had placed some props—a real human skull someone had gotten from one of the many above-ground cemeteries in our area, a crystal ball on a golden stand, a set of fancy Tarot Cards with elaborate pictures fanned out to display their gorgeous artwork, and various other mystical looking things.

Pop-pop had never used any of these props—I knew because I had spied on him “communing with the spirits” more than once when I was little. Mostly he just sat at the table, closed his eyes, and spread his arms. Then he called for the spirit of the dear departed. When it came, he allowed it to “Indwell” him, as he called it. Then he spoke in the dead person’s voice, telling their loved one who had paid to hear from them what they were thinking and feeling.

Pop-pop really had his act down to a T, too. I remembered how creepy I used to think it was when his eyes would roll up in his head and his voice would change. It would go all high if he was letting a female spirit “Indwell” him and low and rough if he was channeling a male. It was a weird business, but it brought in a good amount of money.

Come to think of it, that was probably how Pop-pop had managed to keep the shop solvent all those years. Especially if Big Nicky Valentino had been giving him a ton of cash annually just to talk to his dead mother.

Pop-pop, I really wish you would have told me about this yearly appointment, I thought, as I switched on the small lamp with the red shade in the middle of the table and lit a stick of incense. If my Grandfather was going to have me follow his footsteps in the family “business,” the least he could have done was to warn me about it—and maybe leave me some details about Nicky Valentino’s mother so I could effectively impersonate her.

Still, it looked like I was stuck winging it. I just hoped I could do a good enough job to satisfy the Mob boss who was settling in the chair across from me.

“I just want to tell you I’ve never done this before,” I said to him, trying to manage his expectations. “I saw my Grandfather do it often, but I’ve never done it personally.”

“Yes, Giovanni said you might say something to that effect,” Big Nicky murmured. “But he assured me that when you opened yourself, the Power would come. I’m prepared to be patient—as long as you deliver results.”

Well, so much for managing his expectations. I swallowed a nervous lump in my throat and nodded.

“Very well, let us begin. The spirits are waiting to speak to us,” I said, because that was what Pop-pop had always said at the start of a Channeling session. “Tell me the name of your dearly departed and I will attempt to open a door into the next world.”

“My Mother’s name was Myra,” Big Nicky said. “Myra Valentino, may her soul rest in peace.”

“May her soul rest in peace,” I repeated, nodding. I took a deep breath, trying to center my mind and let the atmosphere of the small room work on me. The red lamp shade over the dim light bulb cast the small space into crimson shadows and the sweet and spicy scent of the incense filled my nose. I tried to remember everything my Grandfather had done in one of these sessions—I had to emulate him as exactly as I could.

Closing my eyes, I extended my arms, palms up. And then, familiar words rose to my lips.

“I call upon the Other Place

Another Time...

Another Space...

I call a Door to open Here

To bring the soul I call for Near

I call?—”

There was more to the incantation, but I didn’t say it—because suddenly I felt a cold, damp wind blowing right in my face. It was so strong, it was blowing my hair

back—it felt kind of like when you go to the beach and the wind is blowing off the ocean.

I gasped and opened my eyes. Hovering right in front of me—just above Nicky Valentino’s salt and pepper hair—was an actual door. Or at least a doorway. I couldn’t really see the door itself—I could only see the rectangular space where it had opened.

It seemed to be a space filled with fog—gray tendrils of it were creeping out around the edges and I kept seeing flashes of faces and eyes through the mist.

“Oh... wow!” I whispered in awe, forgetting that I was supposed to be a mysterious Medium. I had never seen anything like this in my life. Was I really looking through a doorway into the Other Side? Did I actually have The Power?

I tried to take stock of myself to see if I felt any different—there was a kind of energy humming through me, like an electrical current. It didn’t hurt but it was definitely there—as though I had plugged myself in to some huge, invisible generator or battery. It made me feel buzzy and lightheaded and slightly high.

“What? What is it?” Big Nicky looked up to where I was staring, but he clearly didn’t see anything. “What do you see?” he demanded.

“A doorway,” I said, still staring into the mists. “It’s filled with some kind of fog...fog and faces. But I can’t quite tell what any of them looks like.”

“Look harder!” he urged. “Call for her—your Grandfather always called.”

“Myra,” I called, searching the shifting faces in the fog. “Myra Valentino, your son wants to speak to you. Myra, where are you?”

But no one answered. I began to feel nervous. Big Nicky was looking at me expectantly and I wasn't producing results. I tried again.

"Hello?" I called. "Is there anyone on the Other Side who wishes to speak to Nick Valentino? Anyone at all?"

Suddenly, a face became clear in the mist. It was a woman's face, pretty but angry and somewhere between thirty and forty. I frowned—had his mother died young?

"Myra?" I asked uncertainly.

"No, I'm not Myra," the spirit said, scowling at me. "But you asked if anybody wanted to talk to Nicky and I do. I have plenty to say to that rat bastard!"

"I really don't think—" I began, but before I could finish the face had formed into a long funnel of smoke and rushed right into me.

The spirit dust entered through my nose and mouth, filling me to the brim with the dead woman. Her taste was bitter and acrid, like secondhand smoke, and I could feel myself choking on her anger.

Suddenly my mouth began talking—the dead woman was using my tongue and voice box to convey her message.

"Nicky, you lousy bastard!" she snapped, making me lean forward in my seat to scowl at the Mob boss.

"Mama?" Nicky Valentino looked at me uncertainly.

"No, it's not Myra—what a horrible Mother-in-Law she was!" the dead woman exclaimed. "She raised you to be a Mama's boy and look at you—all these years later

and still that's all you are! Just a big baby crying for his Mama!"

I wanted to stop her from spewing the angry words out of my mouth but I had never been Indwelled before and I felt lost and disorientated. According to my Pop-pop, Indwelling was one step below Possession, meaning that the host—in this case me—should be able to expel the spirit inside them. But I had no idea how to do that.

Meanwhile, it seemed that Big Nicky had figured out who was talking to him through me.

"Kitty?" he asked, frowning. "Kitty, is that you?"

"Yes, it's me you big asshole!" she snarled. "Finally I get a chance to give you a piece of my mind!"

It was a very disorienting feeling to have my features making faces that went with emotions I didn't feel myself and to hear words coming out of my mouth that I hadn't thought of to say. I felt like a puppet being jerked around on strings, but I still didn't know how to stop it.

"You were the worst husband!" Kitty went on relentlessly. "Leaving your dirty underwear all over the floor...never putting the toilet seat back down...not to mention the way you cheated on me day and night with anything that would hold still long enough for you to screw it!"

Okay, I really had to stop this. Big Nicky's face was red with anger and I could just imagine how pissed off he was getting. He had come here for a nice, comforting talk with his dear departed Mom and instead he was being berated by an angry ex.

"Get out! Get out of me!" I shouted mentally at the dead woman. But I felt her resisting me.

“Not until I have my say! I’ve been waiting twenty years to tell Nicky Valentino what I think of him!”

So much for just asking her to leave. I was going to have to expel her some other way.

I pictured reaching around inside myself like a woman feeling in a dark cupboard. I had an idea if I could get hold of Kitty somehow I could grab her with a psychic hand and yank her out of me, but her spirit felt slippery under my psychic fingertips—slippery and slimy.

“You scum!” Kitty shouted through me. “You womanizing, cheating, lousy, dirty bastard!”

Big Nicky’s face got even redder.

“You can’t talk that way to me, you bitch!” he growled.

Things were rapidly getting out of control. But the next moment, they got even worse because I heard Kitty say,

“I know you had me killed! You had the brakes cut on my car. You wanted me to crash that day.”

Shit—now I was in real trouble. I was listening to the details of a homicide, but not just listening—I was shouting them out loud! Or at least, Kitty Valentino was shouting them through me.

“You killed me! You killed me!” she howled so loudly it hurt my throat.

“Okay, that’s enough!” I snapped at her mentally. “I don’t know if he killed you or

not but I can't have you using my body for your revenge!"

"Too bad, because that's exactly what I'm going to do!" she snapped back.

She jerked at my body and suddenly I lunged across the table and wrapped my fingers around the Mob boss's throat! Then I began to squeeze with superhuman strength—strength that wasn't mine.

Nicky Valentino's face began to turn from red to a dark plum color—I was actually choking him! I could hear his guards banging on the door of the Spirit Room, shouting for him.

"Boss—hey, Boss! What's going on in there?"

Oh my God, I had to stop this now! I pictured myself grabbing the spirit inside me—which looked like a long, scaly snake made of grey smoke. I dug my fingernails into the snake's body and pulled as hard as I could with my psychic hands—my physical hands were still wrapped around Big Nicky's throat.

Kitty Valentino squawked and struggled. I could hear her shouting in my head.

"No, I'm going to kill him! Let me kill him! He deserves to die!"

I had no doubt he probably did—you don't get to be an Organized Crime Boss without committing some pretty reprehensible acts—but she wasn't going to use my body to kill him. Grimly, I dug my nails in and yanked on the grey spirit snake.

"Get out of me! Get...

OUT!"

The last word came out of my mouth instead of being shouted mentally as I finally got control of my voice again.

I coughed and choked and retched as the roiling gray cloud of spirit dust finally spewed from my mouth and nose. It was like projectile vomiting second hand cigarette smoke and chalk dust at the same time—it left my throat and sinuses as dry as a bone and my stomach was rolling.

As soon as the angry spirit was out of me, I yanked my hands away from Big Nicky's throat.

“Sorry! I’m so sorry!” I babbled and then broke down choking and coughing—I thought I might puke for real in a moment. The inside of me felt so dry . Dry and violated.

“You fucking better be sorry!” He snatched up the fat envelope filled with bills and stuffed it into his inner pocket. “How the fuck did you let my ex-wife come through? Your Grandfather never did anything like that!”

“I told you, I’ve never done this before!” I gasped and coughed some more. “Please don’t hurt me! I didn’t mean to let her in—she just rushed right into me!”

Nicky Valentino pointed a finger at me.

“I’ll forgive you— if you send her back to Hell where she fucking belongs! Send her back right now!”

“All right—all right!” I held up my hands in a “don’t shoot” gesture. I didn’t know if I really had the power to send Kitty Valentino’s spirit anywhere, but I could at least pretend. Anything to mollify the angry Mob boss.

“Kitty Valentino,” I began, spreading my arms again. “Never again shall you Indwell. I send your spirit back to Hell!”

As rhyming magic went it wasn’t much to speak of—short and to the point. But I felt a surge of power go through me—as though someone had turned up the electrical charge that was already flowing through my body. The next minute, I saw another doorway being drawn in the gray mist.

This one was outlined with a fiery reddish orange light and instead of gray smoke, I saw black curls of vapor sliding out around its edges, almost like tentacles. Was that what I thought it was? An uneasy feeling began to slide through me, like cold water trickling down my spine.

“Willow my love, no! What are you doing?” I heard my Pop-pop’s voice in my ear. “You must not open a doorway to the Pit!”

But it was too late to take back my words. The door opened and with a whoosh I saw Kitty Valentino’s spirit being drawn into it.

“No! Noooooo!” she wailed but it was like she was being sucked into a vacuum—her screaming face was pulled backwards into the roiling blackness and then she was gone.

I expected the door to close then—after all, it had served its purpose. But it stayed open. And then I saw them—the three sets of red, glowing eyes staring at me from the blackness.

“Oh my Goddess!” I blurted, leaning back abruptly.

“What? What the fuck is it this time?” Nicky Valentino demanded. “Did you send that crazy bitch back to Hell where she came from?”

“I sent her back,” I said, my voice trembling and my gaze never leaving the three sets of glowing red eyes that were staring at me. “She’s gone—she won’t bother us again.”

“Then what are you still staring at?” he demanded impatiently. “And where’s my mother? Can you bring her out to talk to me?”

I couldn’t believe he wanted me to try again after such a disastrous conclusion to my last Channeling. But I didn’t get a chance to answer him because whatever was attached to the glowing eyes started growling.

And then something big and black and shadowy lunged at me.

“Run, Willow my love!” I heard my Pop-pop shout in my ear.

He didn’t have to tell me twice. I bolted up from the table and was out of the Spirit Room in no time flat. I rushed past Nicky Valentino’s guards, both of whom were wearing worried expressions.

“Hey—come back!” one of them shouted, but neither of them followed me—they were clearly too anxious to check on their boss.

I wasn’t going to go back for anyone. They might not be able to see the thing—or things—that were chasing me, but I could. I could hear the growling and snarling and when I threw a glance over my shoulder, I saw the roiling mass of black smoke which was vaguely dog-shaped, was right on my heels.

I ran through the shop, through my tiny apartment, and managed to get the back door open. I thought about slamming it behind me, but I doubted any regular Earthly door was going to stop the beast that was after me. And I didn’t dare to take the time to close it anyway.

Instead, I left the door wide open as I ran into the night, dodging and ducking through dark streets and alleys...

Until I came to the glowing doorframe and heard my Pop-pop telling me to use the key.

I fumbled for the keys in my hand—which would work? The huge iron one as long as my hand or the tiny golden one that was smaller than my pinky?

It was the larger key that came to my fingers first, so I jammed it into the glowing keyhole, which was spilling golden light onto the dirty pavement at my feet.

To my relief and surprise, the key worked. It turned smoothly in the lock and I was able to push the door open.

I ran though it...and into a whole different world.

WILLOW

I was panting with terror as I turned to slam the door shut behind me. But to my surprise, it slammed itself shut. And not a moment too soon—I could see the slavering jaws of the three-headed, six-eyed thing just starting to cross the threshold. Then the heavy oak door clapped closed in its monstrous faces...and then quietly disappeared as though it had never been there in the first place.

My heart was still thundering in my ears and for a moment, all I could do was press a hand to my chest and try to breathe. I had no idea where I was—only that I was safe. At least for the moment.

Slowly, I began to take stock of my surroundings. I seemed to be standing in the middle of a street that ran through a small town. I saw shops and business—all closed—lining the road. Where was I?

Well, it must be someplace on Earth because nothing really looked alien or strange and also I could breathe, so that was good, I thought. It was nighttime—just as it had been back in New Orleans—but the air felt different. Back in my hometown, it was already getting hot and sticky, even though it was only the middle of April. But here, the air was cool and crisp and I smelled scents I associated with Autumn—the smell of dried leaves and the scent of smoke. There was also a hint of what might be snow on the air, though it wouldn't be here anytime soon...

“My dear, are you quite all right?”

I gasped and my heart started galloping in my chest again as I whirled around to see who was talking.

It was someone standing on the front porch of the huge old Victorian structure across the street from me. It looked like a house that had somehow overgrown its boundaries and turned into a hotel of some kind. Its faded white exterior seemed to glow softly like a ghost ship floating in the shadows.

“Who...what...?” was all I could get out.

The person who was talking to me came out into the moonlight which was streaming down and I saw it was an older woman with curly gray hair piled on top of her head. She was wearing a long robe with flowing sleeves trimmed in ostrich feathers that floated elegantly around her wrists.

“I’m sorry if I frightened you,” she said, coming down the front steps of the Victorian structure, her heels clacking on the wood. “I was just out here because I couldn’t sleep—I have simply dreadful insomnia, you know—and I saw you come to town.”

“Come to town?” I repeated stupidly. Was that all she had to say about the way I had run right through a magic door and found myself in this strange place?

“Why yes—I saw the Portal appear and then you came through it,” she said patiently. “And you looked so distressed. I assumed that you came here from necessity rather than choice. Though I notice you do have a key with you.”

She nodded at the iron key which I was still clutching in my fist. I was still holding the tiny golden key as well, and the silver chain I always wore them on.

“Oh, uh...” I stared stupidly at the key in my hand. “My Pop-pop gave it to me,” I muttered.

“Your Pop-pop?” She raised her eyebrows delicately, the brilliant moonlight winking off the gold rims of her spectacles.

“My Grandfather,” I corrected myself. “His name was Giovanni. Giovanni Callahan.”

“Oh, Giovanni!” she exclaimed, coming closer. Her low kitten heels, which were also trimmed in floating ostrich feathers, clicked on the pavement. “Why didn’t you say so? How is the dear man? I haven’t seen him in positively ages!”

“He...he’s dead,” I said, still too rattled to be anything but blunt.

Her hand flew to her mouth.

“Oh my dear! How dreadful!” she exclaimed. “Oh that poor, dear man! What happened to him? Was he...” Her voice dropped. “Was he killed by whatever was chasing you?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “He...he died about a year ago. But I heard his voice tonight,” I added—though I wasn’t sure why I was telling her this. “He told me to run because those...those things would drag me down into the...the Pit!”

I was starting to cry for the second time that day (or night) which made me mad at myself. I hate crying—I did enough of it when I was married to Carlo and it never helped anything. It only made things worse. I sniffed hard and swiped at my eyes, willing myself to get my wayward emotions under control.

“You poor thing! Here I am questioning you in the middle of the night and the middle of the street!” the woman exclaimed. “Where are my manners? I’m Goody Albright and you must be Willow—the Granddaughter that Giovanni spoke of so often.”

“Yes, that’s me. Willow Callahan,” I said. I had taken back my maiden name after I

finally got a divorce.

“Well, Willow—welcome to Hidden Hollow,” Goody Albright said. “We’re something of a sanctuary town for Creatures and people who are magically gifted.”

“Magically gifted?” I shook my head. “But I don’t have any magic.”

“Are you sure, my dear?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. “Because I promise you, the Portal to Hidden Hollow won’t appear for just anyone, even if their need is dire. It only comes to those who have magic. No mere magicless mortal can pierce the veil that protects us, you know.”

I opened my mouth to deny I had magic again...and then I thought of how I had been able to open a doorway into the Other Side and how The Power had flowed through me like an electrical current.

And don’t forget the other door you opened, whispered a guilty little voice in my head. The one that let that Hell Hound through!

Ugh! Just thinking of the six-eyed beast—if it was only one beast—made my blood turn to ice in my veins. I shivered all over as though a chilly wind had rushed over me.

“Look at you, shaking like a leaf! We can’t keep talking out here in the street—it gets cold here during the Autumn months,” Goody Albright said. “Why don’t you come with me and we’ll have some nice hot tea to warm up?”

Feeling like I had little choice in the matter, I nodded.

“All right. Thank you.”

“Good, just come with me my dear. We’ll have a seat out on the sun porch and you can admire my garden while we talk. It’s quite lovely by moonlight,” she added.

Not knowing what else to do, I followed her up the steps of the huge Victorian mansion. The wide front porch was shadowy but I managed to make out a wooden sign by the front door. It had a stylized lion carved in it and the words over it said, The Red Lion.

“Oh, a lion!” I exclaimed and looked down at the iron key I was still holding.

“Yes, The Lion has been around since the sixteen hundreds—it was established not long after the Salem Witch Trials,” Goody Albright told me.

“No, I meant my key —the one my Grandfather left me. It has a lion on it. See?”

I showed her the key and she nodded her head.

“Well, now I know I was meant to help you. Thank goodness I was awake when you came to town. Just imagine if you’d gone knocking on doors and wound up at, say, Mr. Horn’s house. Minotaurs are so grumpy when you disturb their slumber,” she added.

“Minotaurs?” I asked, following her through the shadowy interior of the huge house. It was kind of like a maze inside, with long corridors that led in different directions, so I made sure to stay close to her.

“Well, it’s not fair to single out the Minotaurs—a Kraken would have dragged you down to the watery depths first and asked questions after too. Really, any kind of Creature can be alarming when you interrupt their sleep. It’s one reason people in the Human world call them ‘Monsters,’ she went on glibly. “But they’re not really monstrous, you know—you just have to know how to get along with them.”

None of this was making any sense to me, but by this time we had reached the back of the huge, rambling structure and had stepped out onto a glassed-in back porch.

“Now you just have a seat,” Goody Albright said, indicating a small table that had two chairs. “I’m going to make you some of my best cinnamon spice tea. It will warm you up and then we can talk.”

She bustled off as I settled myself at the table. Through the glass widows I could see the garden she was so proud of spread out under the moonlight. There seemed to be wildflowers mixed in with a variety of vegetable plants and the effect was one of chaotic beauty.

Standing in the middle of the garden was a large marble statue. It appeared to have two faces and the one facing me was of a hideous gargoyle. I saw curving horns and twisted features scary enough to give anyone nightmares. Large bat wings extended from its broad, gray shoulders and spread wide in the moonlight. Just looking at it made me shiver.

“Here we go!” Goody Albright bustled back, carrying a silver tea tray in both hands. She set it on the table and I saw that it held a steaming teapot, two cups, a little pot of honey, and a small pitcher of cream. “I see you’re admiring my Garden Guardian,” she remarked.

“Yes, he’s...really something,” I said, nodding at the snarling face in the moonlight.

“You ought to see his other side, it’s absolutely gorgeous,” she said, smiling. “The face of an angel and the body of an Adonis.”

I shook my head as I took the cup she handed me.

“No thanks—I prefer the ugly side. Pretty men are trouble.”

Carlo had always been the most handsome man in almost any room he walked into. It was one reason I felt so flattered when he attached himself to me—and look where that had gotten me.

“Hmm, well you could be right.” Goody Albright offered me the honey pot and I drizzled some of it into my cup. “So tell me dear, what brings you here tonight? Or should I say, what chased you here?”

“I don’t know exactly what it was,” I said, adding a dollop of cream and then sipping carefully at the hot tea. The warm steam rose to tickle my nose and the cream added just the right touch—it was like drinking a cinnamon roll. “ Mmm —this is really good.”

“It’s a family recipe,” she said, smiling. “So if you don’t know what was chasing you, just tell me what happened. Maybe I can help you figure it out.”

I normally wouldn’t tell a complete stranger my private business, but I had to admit that I was way out of my depth. Besides, Goody Albright had known my Grandfather and she seemed like a trustworthy person.

I started out by telling her about how Pop-pop had always claimed I would get “The Power” that he had at some point.

“Which I guess is the power to reach over to the Other Side and you know, talk to the dead,” I admitted hesitantly.

Goody Albright shook her head.

“My, my—that’s a dangerous power, my dear. Especially if it’s used the wrong way.”

“I don’t know if I used it the right way or the wrong way,” I said. Then I shook my

head. “No, that’s not true. I’m pretty sure I screwed it up right from the start. But I didn’t think it was true—all that stuff about ‘The Power’ or ‘The Gift.’ I thought Pop-pop was making it all up—that he was just pretending to Channel the spirits of the dead.”

“Oh my—so you’re not just talking to them, you’re Channeling them as well?” Her eyes grew wide. “My dear, that takes the danger up a whole order of magnitude. Why, do you know what can happen if you allow a spirit to enter you that doesn’t want to leave?”

“I have a pretty good idea,” I said dryly. I told her about trying to Channel Big Nicky Valentino’s dead mother and getting his dead wife instead. When I got to the part where Kitty Valentino wrapped my hands around his throat, she stifled a gasp.

“Oh no! How did you ever get her out of you?”

I explained about how I had envisioned myself pulling the spirit out of me and she nodded.

“Yes, visualization is a key component to any strong magic, whether it’s witchcraft, necromancy, or what have you.”

“I wouldn’t call what I did ‘necromancy’ exactly,” I said uncomfortably. “I mean, I just talk to the dead—or let them talk through me. I don’t actually bring them back to life.”

“True, you’d need a body to raise to do actual necromancy. But Channeling does fall under the general umbrella of the Dead and Undead. That’s neither here nor there, though—tell me what happened next?”

I explained how Big Nicky had been so angry with me and had insisted that I send his

ex-wife's spirit back to Hell.

"Oh my dear...tell me you didn't," Goody Albright exclaimed.

I nodded reluctantly.

"I'm afraid I did. I was so flustered and I didn't want to risk her getting back inside me. Having her in me was...just awful." I made a face, remembering the feeling of being filled with the dead woman's hate and resentment, as bitter as stale cigarette smoke. I had never felt so violated. Not even when Carlo...but I cut that thought off abruptly.

"So did you send her to the Pit?" Goody Albright asked.

"I think so. I saw her getting sucked into a kind of black hole outlined in red flames—almost like she was being sucked into a vacuum," I explained. "She went right into it. But then I saw something coming out of it."

I described the shadowy monster which was vaguely dog shaped and its three heads and six burning red eyes.

"It nearly got me but I heard my Pop-pop telling me to run," I told her. "And then I saw a door outlined in light standing at the end of an alley."

"Yes, the door or Portal to Hidden Hollow sometimes appears during a low point or a time of great danger and need," she explained. "And it seems that your Grandfather had prepared you for it, since he gave you a key."

"He gave me two keys." I laid them both on the table, the huge iron one and the tiny, delicate golden one. "I never knew what they were for. I still don't know what this one is for." I nodded at the golden key.

“Well, something tells me you’ll find out when the time is right,” Goody Albright said mysteriously. “In the meantime, you’d better spend the night here and give that door to the Pit you opened time to close.”

“Oh, will it just close on its own then?” I asked, feeling relieved. “Because I wasn’t sure what to do. I’ve never had The Power until tonight and I still don’t really know how to use it.”

“My guess is you’ve had it ever since your dear Grandfather died,” Goody Albright said. “A Gift like that tends to pass from one person to another in a family—it can only manifest in one family member at a time, you see.”

“That must be why my Grandfather always said that someday I would have the same Power he did,” I said thoughtfully. “I guess he meant it literally—when he passed, it jumped to me.”

“ Exactly , my dear. And of course, it can be quite disorientating to suddenly have a Power you know nothing about filling your body.”

“Tell me about it!” I muttered. “I just don’t understand why Pop-pop didn’t warn me about it more.”

“He might have thought that you wouldn’t believe him,” she said gently. “Didn’t you tell me that you thought he was just ‘pretending’ when he Channeled spirits in the past?”

“Well...yes,” I admitted. “How did you know him, anyway?” I asked.

“Oh, Giovanni came to me a couple of years ago asking for a Spell of Disinterest and Banishment,” she told me. “He said he wanted the strongest one I had. Of course, I warned him that it wasn’t a good idea to tie it to his own life-force, but he insisted.”

“Tied to his own life force?” I said, feeling numb. “What...what do you mean?”

“Well, there are spells of Banishment to get rid of bad people in your life, but those don’t usually work if the person is really fixated on you,” Goody Albright explained. “Which was how your Grandfather explained it to me. To get rid of someone who’s really obsessed, you need to give the spell a continuous flow of power. And since Giovanni wasn’t a witch and his Channeling power couldn’t really be harnessed in that way, he had to have some way to keep feeding it—the spell, I mean.”

“So...he hooked the spell of Disinterest to his own life?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Yes, the spell drew a little vitality from him every day. I warned him that he would have to monitor it—to stop it before it was too late and it drained too much of his life away. But he—oh my dear, whatever is the matter?”

For a minute, I couldn’t answer her. I could feel my face going the wrong way—twisting the way it does when you’re trying not to cry. I was so tired of being emotional tonight! But what she was saying was just confirming the awful suspicions I’d had myself—that Carlo’s willingness to let me go was somehow linked to some kind of magic spell—a spell that made my Grandfather grow old and die before his time.

“My dear, what is it?” Goody Albright reached across the table and put a hand on my arm. “You can tell me,” she said softly.

“He...he didn’t stop it in time,” I whispered, still trying not to cry. “He used that spell to free me—to get rid of my horrible ex, Carlo. But then, I guess he just let it keep going. Why didn’t he stop it after Carlo gave me the divorce? Why?”

“Oh my dear, I’m so sorry!” Goody Albright shook her head sorrowfully. “It’s possible that he went past the point of no return, after which it doesn’t matter if you stop the spell or not. It’s like a kind of balance—once you reach the tipping point, there’s no return.”

I buried my face in my hands and breathed deeply. Poor Pop-pop! He had sacrificed himself for me—given his life to get me free of Carlo. How I wished he hadn’t done it, but I knew if he hadn’t, I might be dead right now.

Carlo had been getting really violent near the end of our marriage—violent and unpredictable. I could never tell when he was going to go into a rage at the littlest thing...or nothing at all. Sometimes he didn’t even need an excuse because he just wanted to hit me.

“I’m sorry,” Goody Albright said again. “I should have dropped in and monitored him. But he seemed to know exactly what he was doing...”

“No, it’s not your fault,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s mine. It was my stupid choice to marry my ex and Pop-pop paid for it.”

“I’m sure he did it because he loved you,” Goody Albright said quietly. “I know you miss him, but with your gift, you can still reach him.”

“I heard him tonight,” I admitted. “But I don’t know about calling him up and talking. After what happened with Kitty Valentino, I don’t think I ever want to deal with the dead again!”

“That’s quite understandable,” she nodded. “And of course, you don’t have to use your Power. After all, it lay dormant inside you all the time after your Grandfather passed until tonight. You can just go back to living your life and ignore it...if you can.”

“If I can? What does that mean?” I asked, frowning.

“Well...” She sighed. “It’s different with different magic users, but sometimes once the Power in your blood wakes up, it’s difficult to put it back to sleep again.”

“I don’t care how hard it is—I never want to use it again!” I said firmly. “I just want to get back home to New Orleans and run the shop and live a normal life. Well, as normal as I can,” I added.

Goody Albright patted my hand.

“I completely understand. Just wait until the morning before you go home. As I said, you want to give that door you opened to the Other Side time to close.”

“I don’t know,” I said frowning. “I left the shop’s back door wide open. What if somebody robs the place? Or what if my cat, Miss Sassy gets out?”

“Better to lose a little money than your life,” Goody Albright said sternly. “You need to wait until its safe to go back. The light of day will be a good protection against any evil spirits or demonic creatures who are trying to get to you. Stay here for the night—I’ll put you up in one of my guest cottages. I think The Flower Bower is free right now.”

“Well...all right,” I said grudgingly. “But how do I get back home when I’m ready to go?”

“Oh, that’s easy—you hold the key to getting home right in your hand— literally .” She nodded at the iron key. “Just imagine where you want to go, draw a doorway in the air, and wait for a door to manifest. Then push it open and walk through. The door will disappear on its own afterwards,” she added.

“Wow—I didn’t know it was that simple.” I looked down at the key, feeling tempted to try it right away. But then I remembered the three-headed Hell Hound and decided it wasn’t such a good idea. Besides, I was bone weary. As worried as I was about the shop and Miss Sassy, I needed to get a little shut eye.

I can get up early at the crack of dawn and go back, I told myself.

“Do you have an...” I yawned. “Sorry. An alarm clock?” I finished. “So I can wake up early?”

“Yes, my dear—there’s one in the cottage I’ll be putting you in,” Goody Albright assured me. “It’s at the far end of the garden. Just let me put away these tea things and we’ll get you settled for the night.”

She bustled away with the tea tray and I rose and went out into the garden.

By the light of the moon, I could see the other side of the hideous gargoyle statue. It was, as Goody Albright had said, an extremely handsome angel. He had chiseled features and a short beard. The wings on this side were feathered instead of leathery and they were spread as though the angel was just about to fly away. Around his neck was a chain with a small lock that hung in the hollow of his strong throat.

He really was gorgeous—a literal angel, I thought. And he was definitely a male—the artist had carved him an extremely impressive piece of equipment.

Curious, I went to the gargoyle side to see if he was the same size. It was just as large as the angel side, but...was that a barb on the end of his shaft where the head should be? Ouch—no thank you!

Then something else caught my eye. There was a kind of stone plaque at the base of the statue. I shouldn’t have been able to read it—even in the moonlight there were

shadows everywhere. But the letters carved in stone almost seemed to glow—they caught my gaze and I couldn't look away.

Feeling almost hypnotized, I braced my hand on the statue's thigh and leaned over to see them better. As they glowed even brighter, I began to read aloud, murmuring the words to myself.

“Though I am carved of coldest Stone

And here I stand bare and Alone

She who holds my locket's Key

Will be the one to master Me

She may wake me from my Sleep

When her need for me is Deep

My wings shall shield her from her Fears

My softest feathers dry her Tears

My deadly fangs shall tear her Foes

My faithful ears shall hear her Woes.

Until she deigns to set me Free

Her Faithful Guardian I shall Be.”

“Wow!” I muttered as I finished reading. “Must be nice to have a gargoyle-angel to watch over you! I could have used someone like you tonight, buddy,” I added, looking up into the carved stone face. “I wish I had a protector, considering the mess waiting for me when I get home.”

I was thinking of how Carlo had remembered me again and also the fact that Big Nicky Valentino was probably still angry with me for how his private Spirit Session had turned out. Not to mention that there was still a three-headed Hell Hound out there looking for me. I just hoped that particular situation would resolve itself. If the door I had opened would just close on its own?—

My thoughts cut off abruptly because something weird was happening. I had been bracing myself on the statue’s thigh as I bent over to read the carved inscription at its base. But for a moment I had sworn that I could feel the statue’s stone flesh moving under my hand.

“Get a grip on yourself, Willow,” I muttered, pulling my hand away and rubbing the palm uneasily. “It’s just your imagination. There’s no way?—”

And then the statue blinked and looked down at me.

“Mistress?” he rumbled in a deep, smooth voice. His feathered wings flexed as he spoke.

“What the hell?” I jumped away from the statue, my heart pounding

“Mistress...”

The statue stepped down off his pedestal—it was the angel side talking to me, I saw. Or no—now he was all angel and the gargoyle had disappeared. Maybe absorbed into him when he came alive? I didn’t know. Also, he now had some clothes on—just a

pair of tight black trousers and some black boots, though. His chest and arms were still bare and still impressively muscular.

Also, what the hell was happening to me? Was I dreaming all this?

I didn't seem to be. The former statue was staring down at me intently and he seemed as real as I was.

“Mistress, I am Kael—I am here to serve and to protect you,” he said.

And then he knelt at my feet.

KAEL

I couldn't understand why the curvy little human jumped away from me. I wasn't showing her my Gargoyle side—which is the fearsome visage that comes out when an attacker is near. Nor was I menacing her in any way—I had even knelt at her feet to make myself less frightening. I didn't want to loom over her in the moonlight like a beast.

But still she gasped and jumped away from me, her eyes wide with fright.

“What's wrong?” I asked, frowning at her. “You asked for a protector and you hold my key, do you not? No one else could break the spell that held me in stone.”

“Your what?” She still looked panicked. “What are you talking about?”

“My key,” I said patiently. I pointed to the locket that encircled my throat—which had been placed by the hand of the Almighty himself after I fell from grace. “You hold my key—you are my Mistress.”

“I...I don't know anything about any key! I don't...” She trailed off, looking down at her hand, which was gripped into a fist. When she opened it—her fingers trembling—I saw the tiny golden key. She was indeed the holder of my key—my rightful Mistress.

I felt a sigh of relief leave me. Thank the Heavens that it was a woman holding my

key this time. The last time I had been brought to life, it had not been so. Which was why I had asked that an inscription be added to my stone form, specifying that the one who held my key must be female.

The last woman I had been called to protect...but I chose not to think of that. I had a new Mistress now—a new charge to protect and I was determined to do exactly that.

But it seemed my new Mistress did not wish for my protection.

“Stay away from me,” she said, backing away. “You just stay aw—” Just then her foot caught on one of the many plants in the garden and she tripped and started falling backwards.

Luckily, I am blessed with super-human speed and strength. I reached for her and caught her almost at once. Before her head could hit the ground, I had her in my arms. I looked down into her face...and I must admit, I liked what I saw.

She was curvy, as I said before, and she had long, black hair that fell like a waterfall down her back. Her features were delicate—she had luscious lips and big eyes that were such a pale green they almost seemed to glow in the moonlight.

Then I saw the marks on her face—bruises on her pale cheeks that could only have been made by a hand—a male’s hand, no doubt.

I felt the anger rising inside me—the Protective Wrath was filling me, causing me to change my form, to change from Angel to Gargoyle. I tried to tell myself to hold back—to push the Wrath back down. I couldn’t help remembering how my first Mistress had reacted when she saw my demonic form...but I couldn’t stop myself. The idea that anyone would hurt the woman I now protected made me so angry .

“Who did this to you?” I demanded, and my voice had deepened to an inhuman

growl. “Who hurt you, Mistress? Tell me and I will hunt him down and bathe in his blood!”

Her pale green eyes got so wide they seemed to swallow her face.

“Goddess,” she whispered. “Please...please d-don’t hurt me!”

And then she went limp in my arms.

WILLOW

I came back to consciousness slowly. As the world swam into focus, I saw two anxious faces looking down at me.

One of them was Goody Albright...and the other was the face of the stone gargoyle-angel who had somehow come to life.

He was back to being an angel again, which was a big relief—his gargoyle side was absolutely terrifying. But he was also holding me in his arms, cradled against his chest. I noticed that even though he was now a living, breathing man—or gargoyle-angel or whatever—his skin was still the same pearly gray it had been back when he was still a statue. A “Garden Guardian,” as Goody Albright had called him.

The look of worry on his chiseled features changed to one of relief when he saw me open my eyes.

“There you are, Mistress,” he rumbled—he had an extremely deep voice. “Thank the Heavens above. Are you well?”

“I...I think so.” I shifted uncomfortably. Other than Carlo grabbing my face, this was the closest I’d been to any man since my divorce two years ago and it made me nervous—really nervous. I no longer trusted anyone who was male—be he human, angel, or gargoyle. If he had a penis, I didn’t want him close to me.

“Kael says you fainted,” Goody Albright said, frowning anxiously at me. She pronounced the name “Kay-elle.”

“Who?” I asked. Then my eyes flew up to the enormous male that was holding me. Oh—he must be Kael. Not that I cared—I just wanted to get down—to get away from him.

“Let me go!” I demanded, struggling in his arms. He must be massively strong if he could hold my chunky ass off the ground for so long. Which only made me want to get away from him more.

“My goodness, Willow—whatever is the matter?” Goody Albright exclaimed.

“What’s the matter? How can you ask me that?” I gasped. “This...this thing—your gargoyle-angel came to life and grabbed me!”

“I did not ‘grab’ you, Mistress,” the gargoyle-angel said with impressive dignity. “I caught you when you were falling—as I will always save you when you are in danger.”

“Stop calling me Mistress!” I exclaimed. “I’m not your Mistress.”

“You hold my key,” he pointed out, nodding at the small gold key still in my hand. “You touched me in my stone form and wished for my help—therefore you are my Mistress.”

“No, I’m not!” I protested.

“Oh dear...” Goody Albright murmured.

“What? What is it?” I demanded. “I can tell you’re thinking something bad—tell me

what it is.”

“Well, it’s just that since you do hold the key to his locket and you apparently did wish for his help, I’m afraid you really are his Mistress now, Willow dear.”

“What?” I squeaked. “You can’t be serious!”

“I’m afraid so. The two of you have entered into a magical contract that is legally binding,” she told me. “As long as you hold the key, he must protect you.”

“I’ll take care of that right now,” I said. I gripped the tiny golden key tight for a moment, then threw it across the garden.

It didn’t go very far—it wasn’t easy to throw anything while I was being cradled against the chest of a recently-stone giant gargoyle-angel—but I did my best.

However, it didn’t do a damn bit of good. I heard a soft ringing sound, ting-ting-ting, and then there was a golden glimmer between my breasts and I saw that the key had reappeared like magic. Which was probably exactly what had happened—magic, I thought ruefully. The damn thing had even found itself a new chain to hang on to replace the one I had broken in my mad dash to get away from the Hell Hound. It looked like pure gold and it was clasped firmly around my neck.

“Mistress, please do not attempt to get rid of me. I only wish to guard you.” The look on the gargoyle-angel’s face was hurt—as though I had rejected him romantically. “Forgive me for frightening you earlier and allowing my demonic visage to come out—I was overcome with Wrath at the idea that someone had harmed you,” he said.

“Nobody harmed me!” I exclaimed, and then remembered Carlo grabbing my face earlier. “Okay, well my ex did grab me, but this is nothing to what he used to do.”

“What? What else did he do?” His stone-grey face was suddenly like a thundercloud and it occurred to me that though his skin was still the same color as marble, his body actually felt like it was made of muscle—a lot of muscle. There wasn’t a spare inch of fat on him anywhere. Not that I cared—I just wanted to get down.

“Look, put me down—we can’t keep talking while you’re holding me—you’ll hurt your back,” I said, trying to give him a reason to let me go.

He frowned in apparent confusion.

“I will? How?”

Goddess, did I really have to spell it out for him? Apparently so.

“Because I’m too heavy—I’m not thin,” I emphasized.

His eyes—which were an improbable pale silver—were suddenly half-lidded.

“I know that Mistress—you have the curves of a goddess.”

“The what of a who? Never mind,” I said, before he could either repeat himself or say something even worse. “Just put me down. Now.”

Reluctantly, I thought, he set me down on my feet. Then he immediately knelt in front of me again.

“Mistress,” he rumbled, bowing his head. “Please forgive me for disturbing you. I wished only to help.”

“Well you can help by leaving me alone,” I said briskly.

“Alas, I cannot—I am bound to you,” he said.

I looked at Goody Albright who seemed to know a lot about this kind of thing.

“Is that right? Does he have to stay with me?”

“I’m afraid so, my dear,” she said. “But consider—this could be a good thing. Didn’t you tell me that you have several people after you right now who wish to do you harm?”

“Where are they?” Kael’s eyes began glowing red—which was exactly what they’d done before he morphed fully into his scary-ugly gargoyle form. “I will kill them for daring to threaten you, Mistress!”

“Would you please stop calling me that? My name is Willow,” I said. “And you don’t need to worry about them—they’re not here.”

“Tell me their names and I will seek them out.” His eyes were still glowing. “I will tear them limb from limb—they will not live to see another sunrise!”

The offer was tempting, I must admit—especially in Carlo’s case. But a dismembered policeman would only cause me more trouble, not less. The New Orleans PD takes the murder of their own very seriously and a disgruntled ex-wife would probably be high on their suspect list.

“Thank you for the offer, but no,” I said firmly. “I can handle things myself without ‘tearing anyone limb-from-limb.’”

“Very well.” He nodded gravely. “Then I will wait until you order me to dispatch your enemies.”

“I’m not going to ask you to ‘dispatch’ anyone. And would you please get up?” I asked. I felt ridiculous—like some kind of queen with an overeager knight kneeling before her, offering to go slay a dragon or something.

“As you wish, Mistress. Forgive me— Willow,” he rumbled, rising to his feet.

The minute he was up, I almost wished I hadn’t told him to stop kneeling. He really was massive—he towered over me and the top of my head didn’t even reach his muscular shoulder.

“Okay, well...” I wasn’t sure what to do next. I looked at Goody Albright. “Can I see that guest cottage now?”

“Oh, certainly my dear. This way.”

She started down the garden path and I followed her, trying to ignore the fact that Kael was right behind me. At the far end of the garden and through a grove of trees, there was an adorable little cottage with two window boxes, right in front, overflowing with flowers. It was so tiny I thought it would probably be the size of a small studio apartment inside. I didn’t mind the size though—I just wanted a place to sleep for the night. And next morning, I was going to get up early and use the heavy lion-head key to draw a door back home so I could check on the shop and Miss Sassy.

“This is the Flower Bower,” Goody Albright said proudly, opening the door and gesturing me inside. “I do hope you don’t have any allergies to plants or flowers, though—this isn’t the sort of place for people with those problems.”

“Oh no—I work with medicinal herbs and flowers at the shop all the time,” I assured her. “I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

I started to step through the door, and then noticed that Kael was about to follow me.

“Nope, I don’t think so.” I turned to face him. “You are not coming in here with me.”

He frowned down at me.

“Why not?”

“How about because I’m not letting a strange man—or gargoyle or angel or whatever you are—into the place I’m planning to sleep,” I snapped. “I don’t even know you.”

His frown deepened.

“What is there to know? I am your protector. But how can I protect you if I’m not with you?”

“That’s your problem, not mine,” I informed him. “All I know is that you’re not coming in with me.”

The hurt look returned to his face—as though he couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t allow him to just come on in and make himself at home.

“Mistress, I would never harm you,” he rumbled. “I wish only to serve you in any way you desire and to keep you safe.”

I felt a part of me melting—the part that had been locked in ice ever since the first time Carlo hit me. But I still wasn’t going to give in.

“Look, it’s not you, it’s me,” I told him. “I just don’t trust men. I’m sorry.”

Then I got angry with myself for apologizing—I shouldn’t care about his feelings. I didn’t know him—I had never met him before he’d come to life and declared himself my “protector.” I had every right to deny him entrance to the place I was going to

sleep. I would be vulnerable—especially to a magical being who was twice my size. How dare he demand entrance ten minutes after he'd met me?

I waited to hear his answer with all those angry, scared thoughts in my head, ready to spill out of my mouth if he protested again.

But the huge gargoyle only nodded.

"I understand," he murmured. "A male hurt you and now you fear to trust another."

"Well...something like that." I cleared my throat and looked back at Goody Albright. She hadn't said anything but she'd been watching our exchange closely. Behind her horn-rimmed glasses, her sharp eyes gleamed with interest.

"Well, since you've settled your sleeping arrangements, let me show you the Flower Bower's amenities, my dear," she said to me.

"Oh, thank you." I nodded and followed her into the tiny cottage, letting the door shut in Kael's face.

WILLOW

To the big gargoyle's credit, he didn't try to follow us. I caught a glimpse of his broad back through the front window. He looked like he was just standing there. Was he intending on staying outside all night? The thought made me feel uneasy. Were the locks on this cottage strong enough in case he decided to break in during the middle of the night?

"Er, Goody Albright?" I said tentatively. "I hope you don't mind but I have a question about the locks..."

"Don't worry my dear—no one may enter unless you invite them in," she said, giving me a knowing smile. "Not that Kael would come in unless you asked him to—even without the magical wards on the door, you are perfectly safe with him."

"I am?" I shook my head. Why did I even care? It wasn't like I was ever going to see him again. I was not accepting some strange gargoyle as my new "protector." Besides, he would probably just get bored and wander off in the night after he realized I really wasn't letting him in. Let him find some other woman to bother.

"You are safe with him. Kael is bound by the power of the Almighty to serve and protect women—especially the one woman who holds the key to his lock," she told me. "He was an angel to begin with, you know—it was only after The Fall, when a third of the Heavenly Army defected to Lucifer and were punished for their betrayal, that he gained his demonic or gargoyle form."

“So...he’s a fallen angel?” I asked, frowning.

She nodded.

“Essentially, yes. And his punishment is to protect and serve women—which most males would hate. But in Kael’s case, I think he rather likes it.” She winked at me gravely and then turned to go further into the cottage. “Come with me—let me show you around.”

The Flower Bower cottage turned out to be much larger on the inside than I would have believed. There was a quaint country kitchen with a deep stone sink and a kitchen island made of the same sandy brown stone. A kitchen nook beside it held a small wooden table and two chairs right by a window, which I knew would let in lots of natural light.

The kitchen area led into a living room with a fireplace, a loveseat, and two overstuffed armchairs perfect for reading or just dozing by the fire. There were two bookshelves on either side of the fire and when I glanced at the spines of the books, I saw several titles I had read—mostly mysteries. I love whodunits.

Then Goody Albright led me upstairs—though I could have sworn the cottage was only a single story structure. The top of the landing led into a bathroom with a massive, claw-foot tub I immediately wanted to try. The tub in my little apartment back home was so shallow and short that parts of me—mainly my boobs and my knees—always stuck out of the water and got cold. The claw foot monstrosity looked deep enough for me to sink into it up to my neck.

The bedroom was large and comfortable with a queen-sized bed at one end and another fireplace on the other. The bay window had been made into a reading nook with several plush cushions and another shelf built into the wall, which was stuffed with more mysteries and a few romance novels of the bodice ripper variety.

That was another genre I loved—give me an open-door love scene every time. I hate when the hero and heroine are just getting together and then one chapter ends and the next chapter starts, “The next morning...” It feels like being cheated, especially after all that build-up.

But back to the cottage. Before I forget to mention it—every flat surface had a vase of flowers on it. The kitchen table and the kitchen island, the mantelpieces of both fireplaces, the top of the toilet across from the claw foot tub, and the dresser in the bedroom, all had huge bouquets of fresh flowers.

“This is all so beautiful—and so much bigger than I thought it would be,” I said to Goody Albright.

She laughed.

“Yes, that’s the magic of our guest cottages. They are exactly as large as you need them to be and they also tend to supply the things you need and want. For instance, if you should be hungry for a midnight snack, you have only to look in the refrigerator, the cupboard, or the oven and you’ll find whatever you’re craving.”

“Really? That’s amazing!”

I was surprised but not as stunned as I would have been before finding out that magic did actually exist and I myself had a magical gift—albeit a dangerous and useless one since I didn’t particularly want to contact the dead. Well, except for Pop-pop maybe.

“But how did you know I was coming?” I asked her. “I mean, how did you know to stock all these fresh flowers?” I waved at the vase full of white and purple lilac blossoms on the dresser. They smelled heavenly. “Or was it made up for someone else?”

I felt bad if I was taking the place of a paying guest—I really couldn't afford to pay what this place was worth. Not when my shop was barely scraping by back home.

“Oh, the cottage itself replaces the flowers as they die,” she told me. “And you can request different blooms, if you wish. Simply touch the vase and say the name of the flowers you want. Within an hour, they will appear.” She raised an eyebrow at me. “Would you care to change any of the flowers now?”

“Oh no—definitely not. They're all so beautiful,” I said quickly. “But I'm not sure I can afford to stay here. This place has more amenities than most five star hotels!”

“There is no charge for a friend—you are the granddaughter of Giovanni,” she said and sighed. “That poor, dear man. I know you must miss him, my dear.”

I felt tears pricking behind my eyelids and nodded.

“I do. He was the best grandpa anyone could ever ask for.”

“He was a truly rare creature—a good and loyal man,” Goody Albright said solemnly. “They are so few and far between—especially in the Human Realm. That's one reason I came to Hidden Hollow in the first place—the ‘Monsters’ as humans call them—are often more trustworthy and kind than any human man could ever dream of being.”

“Well, it wouldn't take much to be an improvement on the men I've known,” I said, thinking of Carlo. Then I surprised myself by yawning. “Oh, excuse me—I must be more tired than I thought.”

“You need some sleep—you've had a very stressful day,” Goody Albright said to me. “I'll go and let you rest. But please promise me you won't leave without saying goodbye tomorrow morning.”

“I promise,” I said, though I knew I was going to be itching to get back to the shop and Miss Sassy.

“Good.” She patted me gently on the cheek. “You’ve come to the right place, Willow my dear. Hidden Hollow hasn’t had a decent Medium in ages.”

“I’m not going to move in here,” I protested. “Though I am grateful that Pop-pop’s key brought me here for safety when I was in trouble.”

Goody Albright sighed.

“A pity you don’t want to stay. We have an empty shop just up the street—not far from The Lost Lamb Bakery. If you don’t wish to be a practicing Medium, it would be perfect for a magical ingredients emporium. The local grocery store carries a few items, but they don’t have what you’d call a comprehensive collection of ingredients for the conscientious magic practitioner.”

“Oh, well...” I wasn’t sure what to say to that. I had lived in The Big Easy all my life. I couldn’t imagine moving away from the gritty streets of The French Quarter. Besides, how would I go about moving all my inventory through the magical door? Also, I didn’t know anyone in Hidden Hollow but Goody Albright and the huge gargoyle who claimed to be my protector. And hadn’t she pretty much implied that the town population mostly consisted of monsters?

I gave myself a mental shake—I shouldn’t even be considering the logistics of moving here because it wasn’t going to happen.

“You just get some rest and think about it,” Goody Albright said to me. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Then she glided down the stairs, leaving me alone for the night in the magical

cottage.

WILLOW

The first thing I did was run a bath in the huge claw foot bathtub. I found some bubble bath pearls that were all different pastel colors in a crystal goblet under the sink and dropped a few in. Soon the tub was filled with scented foam and I was just about to climb in...when it occurred to me that a glass of white wine would be just the thing to sip as I relaxed in the tub.

Deciding to test Goody Albright's promise that anything I wanted would be waiting for me in the kitchen, I turned off the water and went downstairs.

I kept a wary eye out for Kael, but the big gargoyle was nowhere in sight—until I reached the kitchen. Then I saw him through the window. He was still standing outside the front door with his muscular arms crossed over his broad chest.

It occurred to me that he looked like a bodyguard watching for intruders or any other threats that might come in the night. I was slightly irritated that he was still there—I had hoped he might wander off and find someone else to “protect”—but I confess, I wasn't as unhappy as I might have been. After so many years of abuse and then the concerns of living alone in a big city, it was kind of nice to have someone watching over me.

Not that he'd been watching me for long, I reminded myself. When I drew the magic doorway that would take me back home tomorrow, I was going by myself. He would not fit in around The French Quarter.

Okay, well, actually he probably would . People would probably just assume he was a street performer trying out an especially elaborate costume for next Mardi Gras. But that didn't matter because he was not coming home with me.

Putting the giant gargoyle firmly out of my mind, I peered in the refrigerator which looked like an old-fashioned rounded one from the 1950s on the outside but turned out to be state-of-the-art when I swung open its retro door.

Like the cottage, the fridge was bigger on the inside than the outside. It looked big enough to store food for a family of eight. And sure enough, sitting on one gleaming white shelf was a bottle of really nice Chablis.

I took the bottle out of the fridge and put it on the counter. Then I went hunting for a bottle opener.

I found one in the first drawer I opened—was that the cottage supplying me with what I needed again? I thought it might be. I put the bottle on the kitchen island and began to try opening it.

But something must have been wrong with the cork—I couldn't get the twisty silver corkscrew to pierce it no matter how hard I tried. I was just about to give up when my eyes caught on the broad gray back outside the window again.

Should I?

I hesitated for a moment, but Goody Albright had seemed to think that Kael was perfectly safe. I shouldn't trust the judgment of a woman I'd only met that night, but somehow I did. Maybe because she'd been Pop-pop's friend. At any rate, the big gargoyle claimed he wanted to serve me and Goody Albright had promised that no one could come into the magical cottage unless I asked them in. So it should be safe to at least hand him the bottle and ask him to open it.

I decided to go for it. My bubble bath was getting cold and I really wanted a chilly glass of Chablis to sip while I relaxed in the claw foot tub. Taking a deep breath, I walked over and opened the front door.

10

KAEL

I wasn't surprised when the curvy little human opened the door to her cottage. I was already attuned to her so I'd heard her moving around inside, and sensed her indecision. She still wasn't sure if she could trust me or not. Some human male must have hurt her badly for her to be so leery of one who wished only to protect her.

Still, I understood that her trust must be earned. So I stood quietly, only cutting my eyes to the side when she thrust the bottle out the doorway at me.

"Here—can you open this? Please?" she added, rather grudgingly, I thought.

"I can," I said quietly. Turning, I took the bottle and the opener she was holding out to me. I noticed that she was staying safely inside the cottage, secure in the knowledge that the magical wards around it would keep out any unwelcome intruders.

I wanted to point out again that I was not an intruder but a protector, but I sensed that I would have to prove myself to her before she allowed me near her. A great pity because I was already much taken with her curvy figure and her beautiful eyes.

I opened the wine bottle with no trouble and handed it silently back to her. She took it and I thought she was going to close the door in my face again. Instead, she hesitated in the doorway.

“Thank you for opening the wine,” she said.

“Anything for you, Mistress,” I told her and I meant it. My life was bound to hers now—I would literally kill or die to defend her. I just wished she was willing to believe that.

“I asked you not to call me that,” she reminded me. “Er...would you like some wine?” she added.

I nodded.

“It’s been nearly a millennium since I last tasted the fruit of the vineyard. Yes, I would like some very much,” I told her.

She gave me a look and disappeared into the cottage. I heard the clinking of glasses and a moment later she came back and handed me a delicate crystal goblet half full of the pale golden wine.

I brought it to my nose and inhaled deeply—it smelled wonderful. I had been locked in stone for centuries—truly it was good to be out in the living world again, able to taste and feel instead of just observing from my stone pedestal.

I thought that Willow would leave me then and go back inside, but still she lingered in the doorway with her own wineglass in her hand.

“Goody Albright says you’re a fallen angel,” she offered, in a way that made me think she didn’t quite believe it.

“That’s true,” I said and took a sip.

The wine tasted as good as it smelled. I enjoyed the dry sweetness of it on my tongue,

though what I really wanted to taste was my new Mistress. I wondered if she would ever allow me to worship between her thighs. My last Mistress had...but I tried not to think of her. Even after hundreds of years, the memory of losing her was still painful.

“So what’s Heaven like then?” Willow asked me, sounding genuinely curious and only a little skeptical.

“It is too beautiful to describe,” I told her truthfully. “Everything the Bible says—streets of gold and walls of pearl—that’s all true. But the true beauty of Heaven is being in the presence of the Almighty. His might and power are indescribable.”

“Then why did you want to leave? Why follow the Devil, er, Lucifer, in the first place?” she asked, taking a sip of her own wine.

I shrugged.

“Being in his presence for eternity is a joy, but I also found it overwhelming. I longed for something different—something new.” I sighed. “And I got it. When the overthrow of Heaven failed, I was cast down to Hell...and then sent to the Mortal Realm to become a protector of women.”

“So your punishment for the rebellion in Heaven was to watch over women?” She sounded skeptical. “Is that really so bad?”

“No,” I said. “It’s not. As long as I don’t allow myself to fall in love with the one I am protecting. Unfortunately, that is the mistake I made last time I was flesh instead of stone.”

“You fell in love with your, er, former Mistress?” she asked, raising her eyebrows.

“I did,” I admitted. “Deeply. Her name was Alandra—she was beautiful. She had the same full shape you do yourself, Mistress,” I added, allowing my eyes to slip from her face down to her generous curves.

Her cheeks were pink with a blush when I looked back up at her face.

“That’s not...I don’t...” she started to say, and then shook her head. “What happened to her?” she asked instead.

“To Alandra? She died.” I could hear the sorrow in my own voice and I took another sip of wine, trying to swallow the lump that had risen in my throat. Even after all these years, her memory still burned me.

“How, though? What happened to her? I mean, if you don’t mind talking about it,” Willow added quickly.

Strangely, I found that I didn’t mind—though it still hurt, the pain was less when I shared it.

“Her husband was my key-holder,” I explained. “Meaning he had control over me.”

I saw her look down at the small golden key hanging around her neck but she only nodded.

“Go on.”

“He...he hit her.” My throat had gone thick again—it was difficult to talk about this. “I hated him for that. I wanted to stop him—to kill him for hurting her—but he held my key so I couldn’t touch him. Couldn’t do a thing.”

“Really?” Her eyes grew wide. “Not anything?”

I shook my head.

“I am bound from hurting my key-holder in any way. So I couldn’t punish him for hitting her—I could only heal her afterwards. Which I did, many times.”

I closed my eyes briefly, remembering the way Alandra had sobbed in my arms as I wrapped her in my wings and kissed her pain away. Healing was one of the angelic gifts I had been allowed to keep, due to my position as a Protector of Women.

“That’s awful!” Willow said indignantly. “Couldn’t she call anyone? Or try to run away?” She sighed. “I shouldn’t ask that—I know from experience how hard it is to leave an abuser.”

“Was the male who put those marks on you the one who abused you?” I asked, nodding at the bruises on her pale cheeks.

She nodded and looked away, taking another hasty sip of wine.

“Yeah—my husband, Carlo. Ex -husband now, thank the Goddess. My grandfather put a spell on him to make him lose interest in me but now he’s back.” She shook her head. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

“Because I want to know,” I said simply. “And because we need to get to know each other.”

“No we don’t,” she said flatly. “I’ll be fine—I’ve dealt with Carlo before. Go on with your story—what happened to your other, er, Mistress?”

I took a deep breath—this was a hard story to tell.

“One day her husband came storming into her bedchamber,” I said. He began to hit

her—to beat her. I couldn’t hit him or kill him but I could stand between them so that was what I did—I stepped between Alandra and her husband to take the blows that were meant for her. Meanwhile, she ran out onto the landing, trying to escape.

“Her husband got around me, though I did my best to stop him,” I spoke quickly, trying not to relive the bad memory as I spoke. “I followed him out of the bedchamber to put myself between them again. We were on the second floor of the house and there was a steep staircase. Alandra was there, at the head of the stairs—I feared that she would fall. I tried again to stop her husband from hitting her but I wasn’t able to touch him—the binding that keeps me from hurting my key-holder was too strong. In my rage, I allowed the Wrath to overcome me and I changed forms.”

“To your gargoyle form, you mean?” Willow’s eyes widened. “That’s pretty terrifying—I have to admit.”

“It is my demonic form,” I told her. “The ugliness of my betrayal of the Almighty manifested in physical form.”

She nodded.

“I see. So what happened?”

I closed my eyes tightly. This was the hardest thing to speak of—the worst thing of all. But my Mistress had asked me a question and I wanted to answer her truthfully and fully.

“Alandra had never seen anything but my angelic form—this form.” I nodded down at myself. “When she saw me in my demonic form, she shrieked in terror and lost her balance. I reached out to catch her but...” I swallowed hard. Why wouldn’t the lump go down? “But she pulled away from me. She wanted nothing to do with me in my other form—not even if it meant saving her life.”

“So... she fell down the stairs and, er...?” Willow looked up at me uncertainly.

“She broke her neck,” I said in a low voice. “My only consolation is that her husband fell down after her. He broke both legs and died of blood clots that traveled to his lungs in the day following. A most agonizing and painful death, I believe. Which is no more than he deserved—the bastard .”

Of course, I’d had the option to heal him—but he didn’t know that and I hadn’t offered the information. I wanted him dead and then I wanted to be turned back to stone so that I wouldn’t have to feel the pain of lost love so sharply. Flesh always feels more deeply than stone.

“So Alandra was gone, barely a year from when I first started guarding her,” I said, completing my story. “Gone because she feared me too much to let me save her. Her death was my fault. Even in my submission to the Almighty’s punishment, I cannot seem to stop hurting those I love.”

“What happened was awful for you,” Willow said softly and I looked up to see that her eyes were filled with pain. “But it’s not your fault.”

“Yes, it is,” I said fiercely. I squeezed the wineglass in my hand convulsively and it shattered suddenly. I let the shards pierce my fingers and felt the sharp pain as the alcohol seeped into my wounds—physical pain is always better than emotional pain. It’s so much cleaner.

But my actions upset my new Mistress.

“Oh—look what you’ve done!” Willow exclaimed, her green eyes wide. “Come here—come in and let me get that glass out of your hand!”

She reached out and grabbed me by the wrist.

I felt a shock run through me—an instant tightening in my groin as my shaft got hard.

Willow must have felt it too because she gasped and for a moment she dropped my hand.

“What...what was that?” she asked uncertainly.

I shook my head.

“I don’t know. Some kind of magic?”

She frowned.

“Well, magic or not, you’re dripping blood. Come on.”

She grabbed my wrist again and this time I felt nothing but her soft fingers on my flesh. Tugging me with her, she pulled me into the kitchen of the cottage.

“Are you sure you want me in here with you?” I asked, looking around at the interior, which was very cozy. “I thought you feared me.”

“That was before you hurt yourself. Come over here to the sink.”

Willow was all business. She plucked the glass shards carefully out of my hand, leaving them in a blood-smeared pile on the side of the sink. When she was sure she’d gotten all of them out, she turned on the water and let the cooling flow pour over my injured hand.

I watched in bemusement as my new Mistress attempted to heal me. Wasn’t it my job to heal her instead? Alandra, my old Mistress, had never worried about me getting hurt. Even when I stood between her and her attacker and took blows meant for her,

she never asked if I was all right afterwards. She had been beautiful, but self-absorbed and yet, I couldn't help loving her—she was my Mistress.

“There,” Willow said, breaking my train of thought. “I think that’s good and clean now. If I could just get some paper towels...ah-ha!” She reached for a white cylinder that had suddenly appeared on the counter at her words. “Gotta love a house that gives you everything you want as soon as you ask for it,” she remarked and tore off several thin sheets from the cylinder. She used these to blot my hand dry. “Okay, I don’t think any of the cuts were too deep, so if we can just find some bandages...”

“No need,” I said. Peeling off the thin sheets of absorbent paper, I showed her my hand again.

“Oh! You’re already healing!” She looked at the rapidly shrinking cuts in surprise. My injuries were sealing themselves. “How is that possible? Is it a gift?”

“I do still possess the angelic gift of healing,” I told her. “But I believe the reason I am healing so rapidly is the care you gave me.”

“What? But how is that possible?” She shook her head, looking confused.

“Though I am now flesh and have also been stone, I was an angel first,” I said. I flexed my fingers—my hand was now completely healed. “In the Heavenly Realm, emotions and intentions have physical consequences.” I cupped her cheek which was soft and warm and looked down into her eyes. “I’m healed because you cared for me, Willow,” I murmured. “Thank you for caring.”

“Oh, I...” Her cheek grew even warmer and she dropped her eyes for a moment. “I don’t...I just didn’t want you to be hurt.”

“Thank you,” I said again. “I can heal you too, you know.”

“Heal me?” She shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“Here.” I brushed my fingertips lightly over the bruises on her pale cheeks. “Will you allow me to heal these ugly marks?”

“How, though? I mean, how can you heal me?”

“Like this.” Taking her face in my hands, I bent down and pressed a soft kiss to one bruised cheek. I put all my will to heal into the kiss—all the emotion I felt for my new Mistress. She had already captured my heart with her compassion and beauty—I wanted to make her better.

“ Ohhhh ,” Willow sighed as I finally ended the kiss. She looked up at me uncertainly. “You can heal with a kiss?”

I nodded.

“It is one of the angelic powers I was allowed to keep. Will you let me heal your other cheek as well?”

“I...I guess so.” Her voice was soft and breathless. I could hear her heart beating as rapidly as a little bird’s. Her warm, sweet feminine scent came to me, proclaiming her desire. She wanted this healing more than she cared to confess.

Ducking my head again, I kissed her other cheek. This bruise was closer to her mouth and I took my time, letting the healing power flow through me.

Then she turned her face and for a moment our lips met.

Willow gave a little gasp and pulled away...then she put her arms around my neck and kissed me again—harder this time.

I was more than willing to return the kiss, especially when I felt her melting against me. She was so soft and warm and her curvy body felt so good against mine. I could feel my shaft getting hard as her sweet lips parted for me and I was able to taste her more fully...

Then, suddenly she pushed me away.

“No, we can’t...can’t do this!” she panted, her eyes wide and panicked. “I don’t even know you!”

Reluctantly, I stepped back from her. “I’ll go now,” I said and headed for the door.

“Wait, you don’t have to...I mean...” She paused, nibbling her lush lower lip indecisively. I wished I was nibbling it instead. “I feel bad about making you stay outside all night,” she said at last.

I shrugged.

“It won’t hurt me. I stood outside on my pedestal for centuries, watching the world go past. One more night won’t be the death of me.”

“But still...” She paused again and then blurted out, “So there’s no way you can hurt me? I mean, while I’m wearing the key?” She nodded down at the golden key that glimmered between her breasts.

“No way,” I echoed. “Not that I would, even if I could. I am a Protector of Women—I would sooner burn in the Lake of Fire than injure one of the fair sex.”

She gave a little laugh, her cheeks going pink.

“The fair sex? Your speech is so old-fashioned!”

“Forgive me,” I said with dignity. “As I said, I have been locked in stone for centuries.”

“No, no—it’s not a bad thing. I like it,” she said quickly. “Look, why don’t you sleep down here tonight? As long as you don’t come upstairs, I don’t mind having you in the house.”

“I do not sleep,” I said gravely. “But I can rest. I will stay here and guard your slumber, Mistress.”

“You don’t have to call me...oh, never mind.” She waved a hand and sighed. “I’m going to pour another glass of wine and take a bath now. I’ll probably have to run some more hot water—I’m sure what’s in the tub is stone-cold by now.”

As she filled her wineglass, I thought about asking if I could help her bathe...and then thought better of it. Alandra had allowed me the privilege of seeing and bathing her naked body, but I sensed that Willow was more shy and retiring than my old Mistress had been. The fact that she had kissed me was surprising—I shouldn’t push for more.

“Good night, Willow,” I said instead. “I wish you deep slumber and sweet dreams.”

“Thank you.” She gave me a tentative smile. “Er, good night, Kael.”

Then she turned and hurried back up the stairs with her glass of wine as though she thought I might follow her.

But of course, I didn’t. She had asked me to stay downstairs and so that was where I would stay. I would break my vow and go up to her only if I heard sounds that led me to believe she was in danger of some kind. I didn’t anticipate anything like that, though—we were alone in the house and it had many magical wards around it.

I settled down on the couch before the fireplace where a low flame flickered. I had much to think about...much to consider about my new Mistress. I could still taste her sweet lips and feel her soft, curvy body pressed to mine.

I was already falling in love with her.

11

WILLOW

O h my God, I can't believe I kissed him! What is wrong with me? I never should have done that!

I was half-afraid the big gargoyle might chase me up the stairs, wanting more than just a goodnight kiss, but when I got to the top and looked around, Kael was nowhere to be seen. I peered back down the stairs and saw him sitting on the couch in front of the fireplace. His large, feathery wings were tucked over the back of the couch so I could see all of his long, silvery-white feathers. They were beautiful.

I thought of the leathery bat wings they became when he turned from an angel to a gargoyle and shivered. Seeing his demonic form set in stone was one thing. But when he had changed in front of my eyes and become the monstrous, sneering thing with a wide, red mouth and fangs dripping with some kind of green venom, it had scared me so badly I had actually fainted! He was as ugly in his demonic form as he was beautiful in his angelic form.

Kael must have felt me watching him because just at that moment he turned his head, as though he would look over his broad shoulder and up the stairs at me. I skittered quickly away, the Chablis sloshing in my long-stemmed wineglass as I hurried back to the bathroom.

I still felt flushed from the forbidden kiss and I spent a moment catching my breath with my back to the bathroom door. Goddess, what had possessed me to do that? I

hated men—I didn't trust a single one of them. And yet, his kiss had been so gentle and when I looked in the bathroom mirror I saw he had been telling the truth—he really had healed me!

Feeling a bit dazed, I decided to take the bath I'd been longing for. I was expecting to have to drain the tub and draw a new bath. I had spent at least half an hour talking to Kael and healing his hand—though I hadn't known I was healing him at the time—so I was sure the water would be cold. But I was amazed to see that the Flower Bower cottage had actually kept my bath warm. Steam was still rising from the tub and the bubbles hadn't even gone flat—they were a white puffy mound floating on top of the water invitingly.

I made sure the door was locked and then made sure again out of habit—Carlo used to love to come in and shout at me when I was trying to relax in the tub. He would wait until I had just gotten in and then find some tiny detail to nitpick and scream at me about. Like why hadn't I sewn the button he lost back on his second favorite uniform shirt or the fact that when I mopped the kitchen floor, I missed a spot. He would insist that I get out of the tub and fix whatever it was at once, so I never got to soak more than five minutes at a time.

Little things like that wore me down and eventually I stopped trying to take a bath at all. One of the things I liked best about getting divorced—aside from not getting beaten on an almost daily basis—was being able to soak in the tub for as long as I wanted with no one bothering me. But as I said, the bathtub in the little apartment at the back of the shop was short and shallow. Sinking into the claw foot monstrosity was like sinking into a warm, sweet-smelling cloud.

I sighed happily as the hot water closed over my body. As I had suspected, it came all the way up to my neck and everything from my shoulders down was submerged completely. The bubbles smelled sweet but not overpowering and the bubble bath pearls had given the water a silky quality that seemed to nourish my skin. It was

absolute Heaven .

Speaking of Heaven, I couldn't help thinking of the fallen angel/gargoyle who was currently sitting on the couch downstairs. Should I have allowed him to stay inside with me, especially after kissing him? Probably not, I thought, but it was done now. I would be sure to lock my bedroom door, though considering he was nearly seven feet tall and extremely muscular, he could probably break it down if he wanted to.

Only he didn't seem like the type to do that. Carlo certainly was. I didn't dare to try and lock him out to hide from him. He'd taken an axe to our bedroom door once, not long after we were first married, and at first I was sure he was going to chop me up too, the way he'd chopped through the wooden door.

Kael didn't seem like that. Yes, he had gotten mad and went full-gargoyle when he saw the bruises Carlo left on my face, but his anger hadn't been directed at me. And I couldn't help remembering the gentle way he'd kissed my cheeks to heal me.

In his angelic form he was one of the most beautiful men I'd ever seen and his silver eyes were so unusual. Also, what was that strange, almost electrical surge I'd felt when I took his hand to bring him in the house? It had tightened my nipples and made my pussy instantly wet. A sensation I got again when we were kissing. How?—

Stop it, Willow—what are you doing? I scolded myself. I hope you're not catching feelings for the statue-man who came to life and says he's your protector. Because that's crazy and you know it. You're leaving Hidden Hollow tomorrow and you're going alone—you are not bringing him back with you. Where would you even put him? And what if he just seems nice now, like Carlo did at first, and then turns into a monster—literally!

No, I decided, I was better off trying to forget all about this crazy adventure and going home to New Orleans. I would make myself scarce if Carlo came around and

as for Big Nicky, I would just have to apologize again and hope he would forgive me. It might be nice to think about taking a huge angelic/demonic protector home, but in the end, I was sure he would cause more trouble than he would solve. Besides, he was male, and I still wasn't ready to trust a man again—and never would be, I didn't think.

You trusted him enough to kiss him, a little voice in my head pointed out. But I refused to listen to it. I was going back home alone and that was that.

Decision made, I put the whole mess out of my mind and tried to relax in the tub.

WILLOW

I had the best sleep of my life in the Flower Bower. The cottage was the perfect temperature and the bed was just the right combination of firm and soft. It must have been a magical mattress because nothing ached when I woke up—not even my lower back which twinged sometimes if I slept in the same position for too long.

I took a shower—the claw foot tub had turned into a shower stall, probably because the cottage somehow knew I preferred a shower in the morning and a bath at night—and got dressed in my clothes from the day before, which had been cleaned and pressed for me.

“I could get used to this,” I murmured as I finished dressing and checked my appearance in the oval bathroom mirror over the sink. “I just wish I had my makeup so I didn’t look so tired,” I added, frowning at my pale cheeks and the dark circles under my eyes. Even a good night’s sleep hadn’t been able to erase the effects of yesterday’s stress.

At once, a familiar looking makeup bag appeared on the side of the sink. It was mine—from home, I was surprised to see. So apparently the Flower Bower was able to bring things I wanted over to Hidden Hollow as well as making new things appear—interesting.

I used my makeup to cover my dark circles and I couldn’t help thinking that if Kael hadn’t healed me, I’d be using it to cover the bruises Carlo had left as well.

The thought provoked a heavy sigh. I had thought I would never have to worry about bruises or black eyes again after I finally got divorced. I wondered if Carlo might forget me again but I doubted it. My ex was like a dog with a bone when he wanted something. Probably he was thinking of me right now and wondering again why he had ever let me go...

The thought sent a shiver down my spine and I did my best to push it away. Tucking the small makeup bag into one of the roomy pockets of my skirt, I went downstairs.

Goody Albright and Kael were sitting together at the little kitchen nook, talking. The small dinette table and chairs were completely dwarfed by the huge fallen angel—he looked like an adult sitting in a kid’s chair. When he turned to look at me, I felt my cheeks get hot with a blush.

“Er, good morning,” I said lamely.

“Good morning, Mistress,” he rumbled and I thought how beautiful his lips were and how his mouth had tasted...like warm honey.

Luckily Goody Albright was there to break the tension. She stood up with a wide smile on her face.

“There you are, my dear! I hope you don’t mind me being here—Kael let me in.”

“Oh, of course not. It’s your cottage, after all. It’s amazing how it makes things appear,” I added, smiling politely.

“Yes, I had a very strong Heart’s Desire spell put on it when I placed the magical wards,” she explained. “That’s why it’s able to manifest whatever you wish for.”

“Well, it’s been a magical night staying here,” I told her. “And I can’t tell you how

much I appreciate it. But now I really need to get home to my shop and my cat.”

I put a hand in my other pocket for the lion-head key but Goody Albright put a hand on my arm to stop me.

“Wait please—before you go, just come to The Lost Lamb for a pastry. They have the most amazing almond croissants and to-die for donuts in the morning.”

“I really shouldn’t,” I said. But my stomach was growling and the idea of a fluffy, flaky croissant was certainly tempting.

“It will only take a minute—it’s right up the street,” Goody Albright promised. “Please come—you can meet some of the townsfolk.”

“Well...” I didn’t really want to meet a lot of new people, but I didn’t want to be rude either. She had let me stay in her magic cottage for free and all she was asking was that I come meet a few people and eat a pastry with her. I couldn’t really refuse—it would be rude.

“Please?” Goody Albright asked again.

“All right.” I nodded. “I just can’t stay too long—I need to get back to my shop. I left the back door wide open,” I added.

“It’s an hour earlier where your shop is,” Goody Albright reminded me. “You don’t want to go back in the dark, right?”

She was right about that. I would prefer to return to the shop during the light of day rather than running into someone who might have wandered in, in the dark. That decided me completely.

“All right,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“I will come as well,” Kael said. He had been silent up until now, just watching us talk. Now he rose from the kitchen nook table, towering over both of us.

“Er...okay,” I said, since he was looking at me. “But I’m going home alone,” I added.

Kael said nothing to that, he just flexed his wings which rustled quietly with the movement. I wondered randomly what it would feel like to have all that feathery softness wrapped around me...and then I pushed the thought out of my head.

Goody Albright led me out of the cottage—which locked itself automatically—and down the garden path again.

Though her garden was in full bloom with riots of flowers and ripening vegetables, it appeared to be Autumn in Hidden Hollow. The sky was a clear, deep blue and the sun was shining but there was a definite nip in the air that made me glad my blouse had long sleeves.

The towering oak and elm trees I saw all around me had changed colors—their leaves were vermillion and scarlet and gold and the air smelled spicy as though someone was burning a Halloween scented candle.

Since it was January in New Orleans, the weather surprised me.

“How can it be Fall here when it’s winter in the rest of the country?” I asked Goody Albright, who was walking beside me.

“Oh, because that’s what the Town Council set the weather to,” she said.

“The Town Council?” I shook my head. “How can they affect the weather—whoever

they are?”

“Because Hidden Hollow is inside a magical bubble—a barrier that keeps out the rest of the non-magical world,” she explained. Everyone in town took a vote and we all decided we like Autumn the best. So it’s almost always Autumn here now. Of course, we have a month of Spring weather in May and then a Month of summer in August and all of December is Winter weather with snow and icicles and all that, but other than those three months, it’s always Autumn at the height of leaf season here in Hidden Hollow.”

“That’s amazing,” I murmured, as she led us back through the enormous overgrown house that was The Red Lion Inn. There were strange people moving around the building—most of them seemed to have brown, bark-like skin and long, knobbly noses. Their limbs looked almost like tree-branches. I wondered if they were magical creatures and decided they must be, because they certainly weren’t human. None of them batted an eye at the seven-foot-tall fallen angel trailing along behind me and Goody Albright. They just nodded a silent greeting and went on working.

“Most of my staff are Brownies,” Goody Albright said, as she noticed me noticing them. “They’re such good hard workers and they’re not easily upset. Which is a good thing when you live in a town full of Creatures.”

“Creatures?” I asked, frowning as we finally made our way out the front door and onto the broad wraparound porch.

“What humans call ‘Monsters,’” she explained. “For instance, you wouldn’t see H’rux there walking down the street of a regular human town, would you?”

She pointed and I followed her finger and saw something that made my jaw drop. There was a Minotaur—an honest-to-God Minotaur—strolling down the sidewalk as casually as you please. He had a muscular human body and a bull’s head with a set of

broad horns. There was even a gold ring through his flaring nostrils. He saw us looking at him and raised a hand in a friendly gesture.

“Goody Albright.” His voice was extremely deep and had a resonant quality to it. He came to a stop in front of the porch. “How are you this morning?” he asked politely.

“Fine, H’rux. I hope you’re well?” she returned. “This is Willow—she’s new in town,” she added, introducing me before he could answer. “She’s thinking of taking over the old Apothecary shop by The Lost Lamb and turning it into a magical supply shop.”

I started to protest, but the Minotaur was already nodding in a friendly way to me.

“Good to have another practitioner in town,” he snorted. “Nice to meet you, Willow.”

Then he continued on his way, humming in his deep, husky voice.

I turned to Goody Albright.

“I never said I was thinking of taking over any shop!”

“No, but you will be once you see it. But first we need to get you one of those almond croissants. And maybe a hot chocolate or a coffee from Goldie’s Diner to go with it.”

She hooked her arm through mine and practically dragged me down the porch steps and onto the street.

Hidden Hollow looked like the coziest New England town imaginable. Quaint little shops and storefronts lined the street on either side and I saw a lot of other “Creatures” as Goody Albright called them including a centaur, several fairies with wide, iridescent butterfly wings, and a tall blond man that she informed me was a

kraken.

“Though he’s in his human form now,” she murmured in my ear. “Watch out—he can be a little grumpy at times. But that’s to be expected—there aren’t any lady krakens left, you know. So of course he’s lonely, poor thing.”

We reached the end of the tree-lined street and she steered me towards an empty storefront with wide front windows.

“Just have a look at that,” she said, gesturing at the empty store we could see through the glass. “There are already shelves set up and a register too! And there’s so much room for merchandise!”

I admitted it was a nice space—even nicer and much roomier than the shop back in New Orleans. But the Emporium back home had been my Pop-pop’s baby—I couldn’t think of letting it go to move to a magical town where I didn’t know anyone.

Goody Albright seemed to be intent on changing my mind on that, though. The next place we went was the bakery next door called The Lost Lamb. Inside, the air was filled with the warm scent of fresh bread and frosting and a crowd was already forming. When we got to the front of the line, a handsome man with reddish skin and horns took our order.

“Hello, Malik—we’ll have three almond croissants—two human sized and one Creatures sized,” she told him and then glanced back at Kael. “Unless you want something else?”

He shook his head.

“Whatever you order will be fine. I haven’t eaten in centuries—anything will taste delicious.”

I thought of how it must have been for him—frozen in statue form and watching other people live their lives around him while he never got to live himself. Never got to eat or drink or fall in love... Hey, where had that come from? I pushed the idea firmly to the back of my mind.

“Two human and one Creature sized, got it,” the man with red skin and horns—come to think of it, maybe he wasn’t a man but some kind of magical person—said, nodding. Then he turned to the back of the shop. “Celia, baby—we need a Creature sized almond croissant!” he called.

“Got one coming up,” a feminine voice replied and a woman with golden brown hair and blue eyes put her head out from the back. “Oh, hello, Goody Albright—and who are these two?”

“This is Willow—she’s a Medium. And this is her protector, Kael,” Goody Albright introduced us.

“I’m not really—” I started to say, but Celia the baker was clearly busy.

“Nice to meet you! I’ll have your Creature sized croissant out in a minute!” she promised and then popped back into the kitchen area, presumably to get our order ready.

We collected our croissants—two normal sized and one so large it looked like something you’d only order for Instagram pictures—and Goody Albright paid the girl at the register who had long, dark hair and a warm smile.

“How are you today, Sarah? And how’s Rath?”

“He’s busy setting up the WiFi for two new residents today,” Sarah said. “I swear this town is growing by leaps and bounds!”

“That’s because the human world is getting so chaotic,” Goody Albright said, nodding wisely. “So more and more magic practitioners are being drawn here. Don’t worry—the bubble around the town will grow to accommodate them but we won’t lose our small town charm. That’s part of the magic of Hidden Hollow.”

“I hope you’re right,” Sarah said. “I left a city down in Florida that was completely ruined by all the new people flooding in. No offense,” she said quickly to me. “I know the town needs a new Medium.”

“Oh, but I don’t really, uh, practice that,” I said quickly, wanting to manage expectations.

“No, she’s decided to open a magical ingredients shop next door instead,” Goody Albright said brightly. “Wouldn’t it be nice to have everything you need for a spell all in one place instead of having to hunt all over town?”

“It really would,” Sarah agreed. She smiled at me. “I hope you stay. If you do, we could be neighbors.”

“Do you ever do beignets here?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“Hmm, I don’t think so but I bet we could. I went to New Orleans once and they’re delicious,” she said, smiling. “I’ll talk to Celia about it.”

Then we had to move on because there were more customers behind us including a deaf centaur shouting that he wanted two dozen donuts stuffed with “crispy hay,” whatever that was.

As we left the line, I had to admit I couldn’t help liking the people I had met so far. Though I really thought it was wrong of Goody Albright to tell everyone I was about to set up shop in Hidden Hollow when I had no intention of doing so.

We went outside to eat since there was no seating in the bakery but before I could take my croissant out of the crackling white paper bag, Goody Albright suggested we get some coffee at the diner across the street. It had a big neon sign that read “Goldie’s” out front.

“But can we take outside food in there?” I asked uncertainly as she led us towards the diner.

“Oh sure—Goldie won’t mind as long as we order something. We’ll get some coffee,” she said.

Kael held the door for us and then came in after. Inside it looked like a classic 1950s diner with vinyl booths and metal tables. I even saw tiny juke boxes—one on each table—where you could put in a coin and pick a song.

Half the restaurant was clearly set up for humans and the other half was apparently for the “Creatures.” There was a tall table with no seats around it which might be good for centaurs. Also, there were several oversized booths where the tabletop would come up to my chin. Those must be for the really large residents of the town, I thought.

A full-figured waitress with curly blonde hair bustled up with a coffee pot in one hand.

“Hello, Goldie,” Goody Albright said to her. “This is Willow—she’s thinking of moving here. And this is her protector, Kael. We just got a few pastries from The Lost Lamb—can we eat them here if we get some coffee to go with them?”

“Sure, not a problem.” Goldie nodded and smiled. “I’ll put you in a half and half booth. Come on.”

She led the way down the row of human sized booths until we came to the end. The booth she showed us had a human sized bench on one side but on the other side the bench was much larger—clearly meant for someone Kael’s size.

We got seated in the booth with Goody Albright and me on the human side and Kael sitting comfortably in the Creature sized side across from us. Once we got settled, Goldie asked for our order.

“Decaf or regular?” she said.

“Oh, Decaf. I couldn’t sleep last night so I need to watch the caffeine,” Goody Albright said. She brightened. “But if I had been asleep, I would have missed Willow’s entrance which was quite dramatic!”

“Got chased here, did you?” Goldie asked me. “A door appeared for you? That kind of thing?”

“Well, yes,” I admitted. “Er, does that kind of thing happen a lot?”

“In Hidden Hollow? More than you’d think.” She gave me a friendly smile. “So what do you want to drink?”

“I don’t suppose you have chicory coffee, do you?” I asked tentatively.

She looked thoughtful.

“No, but I could make some. I’m part Kitchen Witch—it wouldn’t be hard to bespell a pot of regular for you.”

“Oh, would you?” I hadn’t had good chicory coffee since the café beside my shop back home closed down,” I said.

“Sure, no problem.” She nodded and looked at Kael. “What about you, big fella? What are you drinking?”

“Whatever my Mistress is drinking, I will drink also,” Kael rumbled.

“Oh yeah?” Goldie raised her eyebrows. “And which one of these lovely ladies is your ‘Mistress?’”

“Willow is,” he said, nodding at me. “She is my key-holder—I would give my life to protect her.”

I felt my cheeks get hot with a blush. He was giving me such an intense look! And Goldie was grinning, clearly enjoying the moment.

“I see,” she said. “So one decaf and two chicories.”

“Oh, I’m not really his—” I began, but she had already turned and was sashaying her way down the aisle between the booths.

“You can’t tell people I’m your Mistress,” I hissed, turning on the big gargoyle—or fallen angel or whatever.

He frowned.

“Why not? It’s true.”

“No, it’s not!” I insisted. “Look, I’m going to take care of this right now.” Taking the key from around my neck, I stood and leaned across the table. “Come here so I can reach your lock,” I said to Kael.

He leaned forward obligingly—there was no need for him to stand. Even with him

seated and me standing up, we were still eye-to-eye because he was so tall.

I fitted the tiny golden key into the lock at his throat, trying not to notice how good he smelled—like the best men’s cologne you’ve ever smelled times ten—and tried to turn the key.

But it wouldn’t budge.

“Hey, what...” I twisted it back and forth but the tiny key wouldn’t move, even though it was inserted firmly in the lock. “What am I doing wrong?” I demanded, looking at Goody Albright.

“Nothing my dear. I believe the fact that the key won’t turn means you are still in danger—still in need of a protector,” she said mildly. “The magic that holds Kael to you will not release him until you are settled in a safe place and no more threats are coming your way.”

“This is crazy,” I muttered and withdrew the key to hang it back on the golden chain around my neck.

“No, it’s magic ,” Goody Albright said.

“Do you really wish to be rid of me so much?” Kael asked and his silver eyes were wistful.

“I told you, it’s not you—it’s me,” I said, feeling bad that I was hurting his feelings. “I just don’t trust men.”

“You trusted me to guard you last night,” he pointed out.

“Yes, but I just can’t—” I began but just then Goldie came back with a tray. She

passed out coffee mugs—regular sized ones for me and Goody Albright and a huge one that looked like a novelty gift for Kael. Then she poured for us from two different coffee pots. She also gave us cream and sugar.

“Try it, would you?” she asked me once I had my coffee fixed to my liking. “I’ve never made it before and I want to be sure I got it right.”

I brought the cup to my nose and inhaled deeply. The slightly bitter scent of chicory met my nose, making me tingle all over. I took a sip and the nutty, rich flavor flowed over my tongue.

“Mmm!” I looked up at her and smiled. “That’s the best chicory coffee I’ve ever had! It’s even better than the little café by my shop.”

“Glad you like it.” She gave me a warm smile. “Okay, enjoy.”

We drank our coffee and ate our almond croissants—Kael seemed to enjoy both very much, though he said the coffee was bitter.

“I like it though,” he added, taking another sip. “It cuts through the sweetness of the confection.”

“The croissant ,” I said, grinning despite myself. I had to admit, his old-fashioned way of speaking tickled me.

But almost before I knew it, the hour I had allotted myself was up. I offered to pay the bill before I remembered I didn’t have any money.

“That’s all right my dear,” Goody Albright said, smiling. “This is my treat. You and Kael just run along home now. But remember, you can draw a new doorway and come back to Hidden Hollow anytime. As someone with a magical gift, you have a

standing invitation. And I do wish you'd consider moving here. We'd love to have you."

"I'll think about it," I said awkwardly. "But I'm going home by myself," I added, as Kael rose from his side of the booth.

He frowned.

"I don't think that would be wise, Mistress. The fact that the key would not turn in my lock indicates you are still in danger."

"I'll be fine," I said stubbornly. "I have to face things on my own—I'm an adult. I can solve my own problems."

Goody Albright looked like she wanted to object, but she only shook her head.

"Very well, dear. If you get into trouble, just draw another door and come back," she told me.

I reached into my pocket and grasped the lion-head key Pop-pop had left me.

"Yes, I'll do that," I promised. I nodded at Kael. "Goodbye. Um..." I had been going to say I hoped he had a happy life or something like that, but it occurred to me that it might sound callous. So instead I just nodded at him. "Goodbye, Kael," I said, trying to push the memory of kissing him out of my head.

"Call for me when you need me, Mistress and I'll be there," he rumbled and his silver eyes were half-lidded. "For anything you need."

"Okay, uh, thanks," I said lamely. The way he was looking at me made my heart flutter. His eyes seemed to say that he was remembering our kiss too...and that he

wanted to kiss me again and do more— much more.

Which was something I definitely couldn't allow.

The silence between us was getting awkward. I was either going to have to say something else or leave the diner.

I left the diner.

I had no idea the mess I was going to be walking into or how soon it would be before I would wish I'd agreed to let the big gargoyle come back home with me.

13

KAEL

I watched my Mistress go with deep misgivings in my heart. Clearly she wasn't out of danger yet. If she was perfectly safe and secure, only then would the key she wore turn in the lock around my neck and set me free of my endless servitude.

Goody Albright frowned at me.

“Well? Aren't you going after her?”

“I cannot unless I know she's in immediate danger or she calls for me,” I said. “Please don't worry—I can hear her call from anywhere. That's part of being bound to my key-holder.”

“I still don't like her going off alone.” She sighed and shook her head. “I feel responsible for her—her grandfather was a friend of mine and from what she's told me, she definitely needs protection. She's got an abusive ex, a Mob boss, and a Hell Hound all after her at the same time!”

“I didn't know she had so many threats against her.” I felt my concern growing as Goody Albright listed the many dangers my Mistress was facing. I shouldn't have let her go alone. But it was almost impossible for me to go against the wishes of my key-holder—especially if she gave me a direct order.

“Yes, she really should have taken you with her.” Goody Albright shook her head.

“Such a stubborn girl!”

“I believe she’s simply frightened of me because I’m male,” I said quietly. “I know from what little she told me that her former husband was cruel to her and abused her. It will take time for me to prove to her I would never hurt her and that I only wish to keep her safe.”

“Time is what she doesn’t have.”

Goody Albright shook her head again and I couldn’t help thinking that she was probably right.

I just hoped that my Mistress called for me soon—I wanted desperately to be by her side so I could shield her from any impending danger.

But for now, all I could do was wait and listen for her voice.

WILLOW

The sun was up and the back door of my shop was still wide open when I stepped out of the magical doorway I had drawn to get me from Hidden Hollow back to The French Quarter. I approached the dark opening warily, knowing that anyone or anything could have found their way in while I was gone. New Orleans isn't exactly the safest city in the world.

I hesitated in the doorway to my shop. Should I give Kael a call and ask him to come in with me? But how did I even call him? Did I just shout his name or what? Maybe I should have asked before going off and leaving him in Hidden Hollow. Should I?—?

Just at that moment, Miss Sassy came out of the door. She meowed loudly at me and then began purring and rubbing against my legs.

My fear lessened considerably. If there was some kind of threat waiting for me inside the shop, my cat would have been much more on edge. She's extremely perceptive about people, which was one reason I never should have trusted Carlo—Miss Sassy hated him right from the start.

“Okay, all right—I know I missed feeding you breakfast,” I said, reaching down to stroke her soft calico fur. She twined around my legs once more and then looked up and said,

“Mmmmmrow?” which translated from cat language meant, “Well? Are you coming

in to feed me?”

“Yes, I’m coming,” I told her. “Here, I don’t want you tripping me.”

I scooped her into my arms and carried her with me as I stepped into the shop.

At first, everything seemed okay. I didn’t see anyone and nothing looked out of place. It wasn’t until I had opened a can of wet food and put it out for Miss Sassy that I heard a sound coming from the front of the shop.

The sound froze me in place. It was a kind of snuffling, crackling sound and I had no idea what—or who—could be making it. I suddenly wished that I had bought that taser I’d been thinking about getting for self defense.

Keeping low and creeping quietly, I peeked out into the front of my shop.

There, sitting on the floor with his legs splayed out, was an old man in a ragged gray coat. He was eating his way through the display of pralines and candied pecans, which accounted for the snuffling and crackling sounds. There were plastic wrappers scattered all around him.

My heart—which had been beating triple time—began to slow. I knew who the intruder was and he was harmless.

“Mr. Joe?” I called, stepping out from behind the counter. Mr. Joe was a homeless man who hung around the street corner near my shop. I gave him spare change sometimes when he asked.

“Huh?” He jerked his head up and stared at me with dull blue eyes. “What’chu want?” he demanded. There were bits of pecan in his dirty gray beard.

“I want for you to stop eating up all my inventory,” I told him. Leaning down, I got a hand under his arm. He smelled strongly of urine and I grimaced as I lifted. “Come on now—you know better than this, Mr. Joe. There’s a mission that will give you all the food you want just down the way.”

“They always make me listen to preachin’ to get any damn food. I hate preachin’!” he grumbled but he seemed willing to be lifted to his feet. I shook my head at the mess he’d made of the praline display, but things could have been so much worse—I really couldn’t complain.

And then things got worse.

I had ushered him to the front door of the shop and was in the act of pushing him gently but firmly back outside when he twisted suddenly, shaking loose of my grip.

“Hey—what...?” I began, but I never got any further.

Mr. Joe glared at me and I saw that his dull blue eyes were now a blazing red.

“You left it open... left it open,” he hissed and his face contorted into a demonic mask of hateful glee. The corners of his mouth turned up and he grinned, showing broken brown teeth still sticky with the remnants of the sweet candy he’d been eating.

“Left...left what open? Mr. Joe? Is that you?” My voice was shaking. He looked so evil.

I tried to tell myself he was just a harmless old man, but I was suddenly filled with terror. I had never seen him look like this—never seen him act like this. Mostly he just wandered up and down the street mumbling to himself and asking tourists for change. What was going on here?

“Expect a visitor tonight,” he hissed at me and his grin got even wider. His breath was foul enough to make me gag—a horrid mixture of rotten teeth, whiskey, and the sweet, sugary pralines. I thought I might never want to eat one again.

Then, suddenly, it was over. Mr. Joe slumped in the doorway and nearly fell. I grabbed him instinctively by the arm and when he looked up at me, his eyes were the same dull blue they’d been when I first saw him.

“Wha’ happened? Where am I?” he mumbled, looking dazed.

“You’re in my shop but you’re leaving now,” I said, trying to control the shaking in my voice. Had something just inhabited him? Some creature from The Pit, as Pop-pop had called it? He’d said that I left the door open—was he talking about the door I had accidentally opened when I tried to contact Big Nicky’s mother?

I pushed Mr. Joe firmly out onto the street and closed the door behind him. It was almost time to open up for tourists, but I locked it anyway—I needed time to clean up the mess and be alone in my home for a moment.

Still feeling shaken, I went to get the broom and dustpan...only to see someone standing in the narrow hallway that led back into the small apartment behind the shop.

“Oh my God!” I whispered, taking a step back from the shadowy figure. Had I forgotten to shut the back door? Then I remembered—I had left it ajar on purpose in case I had to run from anyone who might have come in during the night. I’d meant to go right back and shut it if the shop was empty but then I’d gotten distracted by Mr. Joe.

Then the man stepped out of the shadowy hallway into the light.

“Hey, babe,” Carlo said, grinning at me. “I thought you and me could have a little reunion.”

15

KAEL

I stirred restlessly, my wings rustling with my movements. I felt strongly that something was wrong with my Mistress—but she had yet to call on me. I wanted badly to go to her but I had to wait.

The cruelty of the protective curse laid on me was that however much I loved the woman I was protecting, I couldn't go against the words of my key-holder. I couldn't go to Willow unless I knew for a fact she was in danger or unless she called me.

Call on me, Mistress! I thought, aching to hear her voice. Call me and I'll come to you!

But though I strained with all my being, listening for the sound of my name on her lips, I heard nothing.

16

WILLOW

“Carlo? What are you doing here?” I demanded, taking a step back from him.

“Just came to say hi and see how you’re doing, babe,” he said. As he spoke, his smile broadened and his eyes narrowed.

From years of studying his face and reading his moods for my own self-preservation, I knew what that smile meant. It meant he was feeling cruel—like a cat that enjoys playing with a helpless mouse and I was the mouse.

“I’m just fine,” I said briskly, lifting my chin, trying to be businesslike. “So thanks for stopping by but I have to clean up and get the shop open now.”

But of course it wasn’t that easy to get rid of my ex.

“I don’t understand why I let you go, you know that?” he asked, ignoring everything I’d said and coming closer. “I remember what a great fuck you were.”

“I’m not your wife anymore,” I reminded him tightly. “Where’s Josh?” I asked, hoping that maybe his partner could rein him in.

Carlo shrugged.

“He’s back at the PD, doing paperwork. He doesn’t even know I’m here—he thinks I

went out for a coffee.” He smirked at me. “But then I thought of something hotter and sweeter.”

Suddenly, he was on me, his meaty hands biting into my upper arms as he pushed me against the wall.

“Hey! Let me go!” I gasped, twisting and struggling.

“Don’t think so, babe. See, I think you tricked me somehow.” He glared down at me, his black eyes narrowed with suspicion. “I think you or your Pop-pop put some kind of witchy spell on me to make me forget you. Why else would I let a fine piece of ass like you get away from me?”

I began to feel panicked which was bad because panic makes my brain go numb—especially when it comes to my ex.

Psychologists say there are three responses to trauma and danger—flight, fight, or freeze. Being near Carlo made me freeze.

During our marriage, running from him never helped—he just caught me and hurt me more. And the few times I’d tried to fight back he had nearly killed me—it enraged him when I refused his advances in any way.

I wanted to push him off me as he dragged me to the floor, but my body didn’t seem to be my own. I could feel my mind floating away, going someplace safe where no one could hurt me and what happened to my body didn’t matter.

Assholes who don’t understand always ask rape victims why they didn’t fight more—why they didn’t shout or hit or bite. It’s because some of them can’t—some of them freeze. It’s not something you choose—it’s what your body does to survive.

It was what my body was doing now.

I could feel Carlo fumbling roughly between my legs but it seemed like something that was happening to someone else, far, far away. I tried to fight the cloudy unreality that was closing in around me but I couldn't shout or scream—I could only whisper.

“Go away,” I said in a soft, barely there voice. “Go away—I hate you!”

I wanted to shout it but I couldn't manage more than a murmur.

Carlo heard it though. He stopped fumbling for a minute and grabbed me by the neck. Squeezing hard, he glared into my face.

“Hey, you bitch!” he snarled. “You don't talk to me like that! You're mine —I fucking own you. And don't fucking forget it!”

I started coughing and choking. His hands were big so even one-handed, his grip on my throat was tight. I began to feel like I couldn't breathe.

“Please!” I gasped out as he cut off my air supply. “Can't...don't...”

“Oh, does that hurt?” The cruel smile appeared on his face again as he squeezed even tighter. “ Good . Maybe you'll learn a lesson about mouthing off, babe.”

Just as the world was going gray and I was sure he would choke me to death, he took his hand away again. But I barely had time to catch my breath before he reached between my legs and pinched me hard, on my inner thigh.

Pinches were one of Carlo's favorite little cruelties. He used to wait until I was almost asleep at night and then pinch me hard on the breast or my ass—whatever vulnerable place he could reach. Then he would laugh when I cried out and say I was

making too much of it—that he was just “kidding around.”

I was often covered with bruises from all his “kidding.”

But the pinch did one good thing for me that even the choking couldn’t do—it woke me up. It cut through the protective cloud that was forming around me and gave me strength. I gasped in a breath and suddenly, I found that I could move again.

“No!” I shouted in his face and this time my voice really was a shout, not a whisper. I shoved at his chest as hard as I could and Carlo was so surprised he fell over with his dick still in his hand.

All I could think was thank the Goddess he hadn’t gotten it in me! I wasn’t on birth control and I never wanted to feel him inside me again.

I managed to get on my feet, scrambling up on shaky legs.

“Get out of my shop!” I said, my voice trembling but firm. I pointed at the front door. “You’re not my husband and you don’t own me. Go now or I’m calling for help.”

Carlo sneered at me.

“Who you gonna call, babe? You know nobody at the PD is going to listen to you. I already told them what a crazy cunt you are and how they can’t believe anything you say. Besides, what’s wrong with a husband taking his rights?”

“We’re not married and you never had any right to me,” I snapped. “I’m not just a body for you to use and abuse whenever you feel like it. I’m a person and I never want to see you again, you abusive asshole!”

I knew at once that I had said the wrong thing.

Carlo's handsome face went ugly with rage as he stood up and reached for me.

"You little bitch," he growled. "You're going to fucking pay for your nasty words! Go ahead and try to call for help—nobody's going to hear you. And even if they did, nobody cares."

That might have been true in the past, but now I thought there was someone who might hear me...someone who might care.

"Kael!" I shouted, taking a step back from my ex as he made a grab for me. I narrowly avoided his grasping hand. "Kael, help me! I need you!"

I didn't know if shouting for the big gargoyle would help or not. If it didn't, I was going to run, lock myself in the bathroom, and make another door to Hidden Hollow. But I had to evade Carlo first.

"Who the fuck is 'Kael?'" he snarled at me. "You been cheating on me, you little whore?"

I was about to tell him that even if I had been with another man, it couldn't possibly be cheating because we were divorced, when a ripping sound split the air.

Carlo and I both jerked our heads around to see where the noise was coming from. As we watched a blood-red, vertical fissure began to appear about three feet to my right. It started at least two feet above my head and tore downwards in a jagged line. It was like someone had taken a knife and was cutting the fabric of reality as we watched.

It only took a moment for the vertical rip in reality to be drawn—or cut or whatever.

And then a huge form came through it.

17

WILLOW

I t was Kael, I saw with vast relief. His perfect, chiseled features were full of concern for me.

“Mistress?” he rumbled. “Are you well? I heard your call.”

Before I could answer, he turned and saw Carlo, with his dick still hanging out of his uniform trousers. His face abruptly darkened and his eyes began to turn demonic red.

“Who is this, Mistress?” he demanded, his voice dropping to a menacing growl. “Is this the one who abused and hurt you?”

“Yes.” I somehow got the words out, though my voice was trembling. “He...he’s my ex. The one who hurt me. He was...” I swallowed hard. “Was trying to hurt me again when I...when I called you.”

“He’ll never so much as touch you again, Mistress,” Kael promised.

And then he began to change. His perfect features melted into the ugly sneer of the gargoyle—his mouth widened and his fangs came out, dripping with venom. At the same time, he seemed to get even bigger and his beautiful wings with their silvery-white feathers turned to huge, leathery bat wings.

Carlo was also watching the transformation. His eyes, which had been narrowed in

disbelief, got wider and wider.

“What the fuck?” he uttered in a hoarse voice. “What is that thing?”

“I am Willow’s protector,” Kael growled. “And you are about to die!”

He lunged forward and grabbed Carlo’s head in both hands.

“Hey, what the fuck? What the fuck?” my ex screamed, his voice going high and frightened. “What the—ow! Ow—let go! Letgo-letgo-letgo!” He was scrambling for the gun he wore on his police belt but he couldn’t seem to get it out of the holster. After a moment he gave up and reached for Kael’s hands, trying to pry the gargoyle’s long fingers off his skull.

He was not successful.

I could see the muscles on the big gargoyle’s arms bunching and then there was a horrible, muted crunching sound and Carlo’s head caved in.

18

WILLOW

“O h...oh my Goddess,” I whispered as my ex ceased to struggle and went limp in the gargoyle’s enormous hands. “You...you killed him.”

Kael turned to look at me, his eyes still blazing red.

“Did you want me to do it slower, Mistress? I should have made his agony last,” he growled. “I should have made him pay more for hurting you.”

“No, no!” I exclaimed. “No, I didn’t mean...it’s just...he’s a cop.”

“A what?” He frowned. Already his twisted features had begun to revert to their usual angelic beauty but the limp body still dangled from his hands.

“A policeman—an authority figure,” I said, when I saw the confusion in his eyes. “I’m trying to say he’s going to be missed. His partner might come looking for him at any minute!”

“No need to worry—I will dispose of him,” Kael told me.

“Dispose of him?” I felt sick. It was like we were talking about throwing away Carlo’s body like a used tissue. His eyes were bulging out of his head and one had popped out and was dangling down on his cheek. The sight made me sick and I looked quickly away. “Where...where would you put him?” I got out at last.

“Don’t worry, Mistress—I’ll put him where no one will ever find him,” Kael promised. Without another word, he tucked Carlo’s limp body under one arm and stepped back through the red horizontal rift he had come through. The rift closed neatly behind him, like someone zipping up a zipper and then there was no trace of either my ex or my gargoyle protector.

I just stood there staring for a minute, unable to process what had happened. If it wasn’t for the dull ache in my throat where Carlo had choked me and the stinging pain on my inner thigh where he had pinched me, I would have thought it was all a bad dream.

But it was definitely real and my shop was still a mess. I went to get the broom and dustpan but as I reached for them, I felt suddenly dizzy. I stumbled and went down on my knees. Turning, I leaned my back against the kitchen wall beside the automatic cat feeder. Goddess, what was wrong with me?

Miss Sassy seemed to have the same question. She came to rub against my legs and look up at me anxiously.

“Mmmrow?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“I don’t know. I just felt dizzy for a minute. I think I’m in shock. He just...he killed Carlo. Not that he didn’t deserve it—I hated that asshole! But I’ve never...I didn’t expect...”

I couldn’t seem to finish my thought. Instead of talking anymore, I opened my arms and Miss Sassy climbed in my lap. She started purring at once, which always soothes me. I closed my eyes and petted my cat, trying not to think of all the bizarre things that had happened to me over the past few days.

Channeling Big Nicky's angry dead wife, opening a door to the Pit, being chased by a Hell Hound, finding my way to Hidden Hollow, somehow gaining a gargoyle protector, and then watching my ex-husband's head get caved in by that same protector...it was a lot. Maybe more than I could deal with.

But I was going to have to deal because it was still a work day. In fact, I could hear someone banging on the front door right now.

"Hang on, I'm coming!" Counting my blessings that Carlo's death hadn't been especially messy—at least there was no blood to clean up—I got up on shaky legs and made my way to the front of the store.

When I got there, I was sorry I hadn't just pretended that the shop was closed. It wasn't a group of tourists standing there wanting to come in and buy novelty gifts and Big Easy t-shirts. It was Nicky Valentino and two of his thugs.

19

WILLOW

I inwardly, I groaned. Could this day get any worse? Should I open the door for them? Did I dare to not open it?

Reluctantly, I decided I didn't dare. They were certainly all "packing heat," to quote one of my Pop-pop's favorite crime dramas and they could shoot me through the glass windows of the store if I tried to run.

I unlocked the front door again and stepped aside to let them in. All three were wearing impeccable suits, just as they had been the night before, but Big Nicky was giving me a wary look as they filed in.

"Hi, what can I do for you?" I asked, trying to keep my composure. "And please don't ask me to contact the spirit world again," I added quickly. "That caused a lot of problems, if you recall."

Big Nicky frowned at me.

"I do recall that, young lady," he said sternly. "But I also recall that I didn't get to talk to my dear mother on my birthday for the first time since she died. She misses me—she wants to know I'm okay. So I'm going to need you to sit in your little room and call her up."

"You don't understand," I said desperately. "When I sent your ex-wife to Hell like

you asked, I accidentally opened a portal to The Pit! And it still hasn't closed. If I try again, who knows what might come out of it?"

The Mob boss's frown deepened.

"That sounds like a load of horse shit to me! Now, I want to talk to my mom and you're going to get her for me!"

I thought of how his dead wife had said he was a "mama's boy"—I tended to agree with her.

"Listen, you don't understand—" I began.

"I understand you're going to sit at your little table in your little room and get my mom on the spirit phone right now or you're going to be sorry, sweetheart!" Big Nicky snapped. "Very sorry. It looks like somebody already worked you over pretty good." He nodded at the red marks on my neck. "You don't want my boys to have to finish the job, do you?"

I put a hand to my bruised throat where Carlo had choked me. Goddess, I never should have come home—I couldn't go two minutes without being threatened or attacked!

"Kael," I murmured, hoping my protector could hear me even though I wasn't shouting. "Where are you? I need you again."

Big Nicky's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Hey—who you talking to?"

"No one. Just...trying to commune with the spirits," I said weakly. "I just?—"

At that moment, the red rip in the fabric of reality began again. But this time it was behind me so I didn't see the beginning of it. I just saw Nicky and his thugs look over my shoulder when the ripping sound began. Their eyes got wider and wider and when Kael stepped out of the jagged red vertical slash, all three of them took a step back.

"What the actual fuck, Boss?" one of the goons breathed.

"Hell if I know," Nicky muttered. "What is that thing?" he asked, jerking his head at Kael.

"He's my protector," I said, frowning. "He also happens to be a gargoyle so I'd be careful if I were you."

But this turned out to be the wrong thing to say.

"I don't care what the fuck that thing is, nobody threatens Big Nicky!" the Mob Boss snarled and all three of them drew their guns.

Kael came up behind me, his wings flexing.

"Is there a problem, Mistress?" he rumbled, staring at Big Nicky and his men. "Are these humans bothering you?"

"They want me to try and contact the other side again," I explained to him. "But last time I did that, I opened a portal into The Pit and a Hell Hound came out and chased me."

"Was that the freaky three-headed dog we saw?" one of the goons asked.

"Yes, that's it," I said, nodding. "We don't want any more of those running around The French Quarter, right?"

“No.” The guy shook his head emphatically. “That thing was fucked up!”

“Yes, it was!” I agreed. I turned to Big Nicky. “So now can you see why it’s a bad idea for me to try and contact your mother again?” I asked. “Please, all of you just put down your guns and listen to me.”

The Mob boss got a stubborn look on his face.

“I want to talk to my mother!” he complained. “I miss her and I need to talk to her at least once a year.” He pointed his gun at me. “I don’t care about any fucking Hell Hounds or whatever the fuck you call up—I’m going to count to three and if you haven’t started contacting my mom, the two of you are going to be very fucking sorry. One...two...”

“Oh my Goddess...” My voice went high and tight. “Please—please don’t shoot us!”

“Do not worry, Mistress—their weapons will not harm you.”

Kael pulled me backwards until I felt his broad chest against my back. Then his huge wings—already turning from feathery to bat-like leather—encircled me.

“Three!” I heard Nicky say and then the sound of gunshots nearly deafened me.

I heard the sounds of the bullets hitting Kael’s wings...but none of them pierced the gargoyle’s leathery hide. I was covered from head to toe by his bat wings—I couldn’t see anything and the sound was so loud I had to clap my hands over my ears.

I wondered if the bullets were just bouncing off. They must have been because I heard someone shriek and the gunfire stopped immediately.

“He’s hit! He’s hit!” I heard one of the thugs shouting. “The Boss is hit!”

“The damn bullets ricocheted off that fucker’s wings!” the other one said.

“Kael, let me see!” I exclaimed.

I heard his protective growl—despite the fact that my ears were still ringing—but the wings in front of me parted a tiny bit and I was able to look through the crack between them.

Big Nicky was clutching his shoulder and there was blood dripping on the floor. The arm of the expensive suit he wore was soaked with it.

“They hit me!” he screamed. “The bastards shot me!”

“You shot yourself!” I snapped. “The bullets just bounced off Kael’s wings!”

But Big Nicky wasn’t listening.

“Get me the fuck out of here!” he snapped at his two thugs. “And send someone back to finish these fuckers off!”

“Yes, Boss—right away!” they said. One of them pointed a finger at us.

“You’re gonna be fucking sorry. Nobody shoots Big Nicky and lives to tell about it!”

A moment later the three of them were out my door with Big Nicky dripping blood behind him. But I had a bad feeling I hadn’t seen the last of them.

20

KAEL

I wanted a moment to be sure the human males were gone before unfolding my wings and letting Willow out of the protective cage they formed. I was already returning to my angelic form—I knew my demonic visage scared her.

“Oh my Goddess, that was crazy.”

She put a hand to her forehead as she surveyed her store. The bullets that had bounced off my wings had ricocheted everywhere, damaging a lot of the merchandise.

“Look at this mess!” She wandered over to a display that had contained bottles of some kind of syrup. Several of the glass bottles had burst and the sticky liquid was leaking all over the floor. Other items had huge holes in them and one of the large plate glass windows in the front of the store had been hit and was displaying an enormous spider web of cracks. It really was a mess, as she said. But I couldn’t let her agonize about it too long.

“Better the merchandise than you,” I pointed out. “Mistress, those men have promised to come back and try to hurt you again. I can’t kill all of them and protect you at the same time. We need to leave.”

I thought she would protest at first, but then she gave a deep sigh.

“Yeah, you’re right,” she muttered. “There’s too much going on here. Sooner or later Carlo is going to be missed and Big Nicky is sending back his thugs to get us. Not to mention that weird situation with Mr. Joe.”

“Mr. Joe?” I frowned. “Who is he?”

“Never mind.” She waved a hand. “I’m just saying we should get out of here.”

“We should go back to Hidden Hollow,” I told her. “I’m sure Goody Albright would let you stay in her cottage again.”

“She probably would. It’s just hard to leave everything behind, you know?” She looked up at me with pleading eyes. “This shop was my Pop-pop’s dream. I hate to abandon it.”

“You don’t have to leave forever if you don’t want to,” I said, though to be honest, I doubted it would ever be safe for her to come back to this city. “But for right now, we need to get you someplace where no one is trying to hurt or kill you. It will be easier to protect you in Hidden Hollow.”

“All right.” She nodded decisively. “But I need to pack a few things first. And I have to find Miss Sassy—my cat. Can you keep an eye on the front? The police will probably be here soon if someone reported the gunshots but don’t let them in. I don’t need to answer questions from Carlo’s partner.”

“I’ll keep watch,” I promised. “And no one will come in.”

“Good. Thank you.” And she left to go get her things, leaving me to wander through the ruins of her shop.

I felt bad that she was leaving her grandfather’s dream behind, but there was no other

way to keep her safe and that was my top priority.

21

WILLOW

I found Miss Sassy hiding in the bedroom, which is where she usually goes when things get too loud.

“There you are,” I said, reaching under the bed to pull her out. She hissed for a moment, then settled down and started licking her fur. I was glad to see she was fine—she had obviously been in the other room when the shooting started.

I knew I didn’t have much time before the police were called. Surely someone had heard the shots Big Nicky and his thugs had fired—even in New Orleans someone will come check gunshots out—especially in a tourist area.

As soon as I had Miss Sassy sitting on the bed where I could get her quickly, I grabbed a duffle bag and started filling it with clothes. I took a pretty random approach at first until I remembered that the town I was going to was in a perpetual state of Autumn. So then I mainly concentrated on warmer clothes. I brought my favorite pair of boots and all my best sweaters as well as some of my lined leggings and plenty of warm socks.

I was just squeezing my best underwear into the bulging duffel when I heard someone knocking on the shop door.

“Willow?” Kael’s deep voice called from the front of the shop. “There are humane men outside. They’re wearing the same kind of uniform your abuser had on.”

My stomach seemed to jump into my throat—crap, it was the PD! Probably Carlo's partner Josh was there too, wanting to know where my ex had gone. I didn't need to be answering their questions or explaining how my shop had gotten into such a mess. If I let them in, I was going downtown with them—I was one hundred percent sure of it.

"Come in here," I called to him. "I'm going to draw the doorway!"

He emerged from the hallway, ducking his head to fit into the small bedroom. I already had the lion-headed key in my hand and I swiftly drew a door in the air, reaching as high as I could and making it extra wide so Kael could fit through it with me.

It occurred to me that only an hour ago, I had been determined to make it on my own without my new gargoyle protector. But I had to admit that it seemed life had other plans for me. I had too many people after me—it would be stupid not to admit I needed him. Besides, I couldn't forget the feeling of being wrapped in his wings. His broad muscular chest against my back and his long arms holding me tight as he kept me safe...

You're falling for him, accused a little voice in my head. You swore you'd never trust another man again but you're falling for him!

No, I'm not, I tried to deny. But I really didn't have time to think about it. As soon as I finished drawing the outline of the magical door in the air—the key made glowing lines as though I was drawing with a magic marker that used fire for ink—it became solid.

I twisted the knob—which had a lion face on it that matched the one on the key—and it opened at once.

Sweeping Miss Sassy off the bed and into my arms, I took a deep breath and stepped through with the duffle bag over one shoulder and Kael right behind me.

Though I hated to admit it, even to myself, I doubted I would ever go back to The Big Easy.

WILLOW

“Well that was a quick trip,” Goody Albright observed, when we knocked on the door of the Red Lion Inn.

“Yeah, I had to come back in a hurry,” I confessed. “There are too many people after me back in New Orleans.”

“I’m sorry my dear—I was afraid that was the case.” She looked up at Kael. “I take it your protector kept you safe?”

“Yes, he did.” I glanced shyly up at the big gargoyle—though he was now in his fallen angel form again. “He saved my life—more than once,” I told her. “Thank you by the way, Kael—I don’t think I told you how grateful I am.”

“Anything for you, Mistress,” he rumbled softly and the half-lidded look he gave me made me blush.

“Oh, and I see your brought your familiar!” Goody Albright remarked. She extended a finger to Miss Sassy. “It’s very nice to meet you,” she said to my cat, who sniffed her finger carefully. “You and Willow are very welcome here in Hidden Hollow.”

“Er, Miss Sassy isn’t really my familiar—she’s just a cat. She was my Pop-pop’s cat, actually,” I said. “I inherited her when he passed.”

“Oh, she’s a familiar all right.” Goody Albright nodded knowingly. “I can tell she’s much more than a regular cat.”

Miss Sassy gave a “Mrrow!” as though she was agreeing with Goody Albright’s assessment and I had to wonder if maybe she was right.

“I hate to ask, but could we spend another night in the Flower Bower?” I asked uncertainly. “I, uh, packed my wallet this time so I can pay.” I nodded at the huge duffle over my shoulder.

But Goody Albright waved me off.

“Don’t be silly, my dear! Your money is no good here. You may stay in the Flower Bower for as long as you like. If you decide to move here and open a shop like we talked about, then we can negotiate a fair rental price if you’d like to stay permanently.”

“I don’t know,” I said doubtfully. “This all feels like everything is moving so fast. I didn’t even know about Hidden Hollow before last night.”

Goody Albright gave me a sympathetic pat on the arm.

“I know my dear, but sometimes Lady Fate moves us in mysterious directions.

“Of course, of course. Only we probably need to get your inventory out of the old shop and into the new one,” Goody Albright told me. “Unless you think it’s safe to leave it all behind for a while?”

I thought about how the police had probably gotten the door open and seen the evidence of the shooting by now. Would they impound my entire inventory as evidence? I wouldn’t put it past them—especially once they realized that Carlo was

missing.

“No, it’s probably not safe,” I admitted. “But how can we get everything from New Orleans up to New England. Er, we are in New England, right?”

“We most certainly are but the distance isn’t a problem. We can simply do a large-scale transfer spell,” Goody Albright told me. “Would you like to do it now? We can always do another transfer spell later if you decide you want to move on from Hidden Hollow and go someplace else.”

“Um, okay.” I shifted—the duffel I was carrying was getting really heavy.

Kael seemed to sense my problem because he lifted the thick strap from my shoulder.

“Let me take that for you, Mistress,” he murmured.

“Take it back to the Flower Bower if you wouldn’t mind, please Kael,” Goody Albright said politely. “And I’ll gather what I need for the spell.” She eyed me for a moment, her eyes lingering on my neck. “Would you like to freshen up before we start?”

I realized she was looking at the bruises Carlo had no doubt left on my throat and felt my cheeks getting hot. It felt shameful that my ex had marked me.

But he’ll never be able to mark me again, I thought and shivered as I remembered my last sight of Carlo with his head caved in and one of his eyes dangling from its socket. I quickly pushed the grizzly image away.

“Yes, thank you,” I told her. “I’ll just take Miss Sassy up to the cottage and get her settled.”

“Very good. Come meet me on the porch when you’re ready. Take your time,” Goody Albright added. Then she glided back into the inn, presumably to get whatever she needed to work the spell.

I sighed and looked up at Kael.

“Well, I guess we’re heading back to the cottage.”

“After you, Mistress.” He gestured with one hand, his muscles bunching with the motion. It occurred to me that I was basically moving in with him—was that going to be weird? We barely knew each other.

And yet, we’d been through so much in the short time we’d been together, I felt like I knew him more deeply than I’d ever known a man before. I knew he would kill to defend or avenge me for one thing. And I knew he would protect me no matter what. That said something about the big gargoyle—it spoke of his loyalty and his caring.

I wondered if I could finally begin to trust a man again...I supposed I was about to find out.

23

WILLOW

The transference spell was fascinating. Goody Albright set up five white pillar candles in the shape of a large four-pointed square right in the middle of the empty store. Four candles stood on the floor to form the points of the square and the fifth was in the middle on a tall silver candleholder which put it about the level of my chest.

“I thought a pentagram had six points,” I said, as I watched her setting up the candles to form the square.

“Oh, it does but we don’t need a pentagram for this. We are not calling on any demonic or angelic elements,” she told me. “We just want to transfer all of your inventory from your shop in New Orleans to here.”

“Is this spell like the one in the cottage, where you can wish for anything you want and the cottage brings it?” I asked curiously.

“In a way.” Goody Albright made a see-saw gesture with one hand. “But this will be on a much larger spell. We’re not just asking for a single item at a time—we need multiple items which is why we’re doing a much larger spell.”

“Is it okay for me to fill this place with my stuff, though?” I asked uncertainly. “I mean, who owns this building anyway?”

“All the shops and stores along Main Street are managed by the Town Council with the exception of Goldie’s Diner and Goodman Kreature’s Grocery and Emporium,” she told me. “They decide what businesses they want in the stores and then they put out a magical call for just the right proprietor.”

“But I didn’t come because of any magical want ad,” I protested. “I came to Hidden Hollow running for my life!”

“That doesn’t matter, my dear. Many people with magical talents are drawn here in times of great danger or need,” she said briskly. “And don’t worry about the Town Council, either—they have already approved you and the use of this building for a new Magical Supplies shop.” She winked at me. “I talked to them earlier.”

“Wow—were you really so sure I was coming back?” I asked.

She looked serious.

“Well, after you told me about all the dangerous people and entities that were after you, I rather thought you might change your mind and return to Hidden Hollow. We really are a friendly, lovely little town, you know,” she added. “I think you’ll love it here if you give it a chance.”

I wasn’t sure about that but then, I wasn’t sure about anything. The fact was, I had to get out of New Orleans and nobody else was offering me a home and a new place to set up business.

“Thank you,” I said to Goody Albright. “I’m very grateful for your help.”

“It’s the least I can do for a granddaughter of Giovanni,” she said, smiling. “Now if you’re ready, we can begin.”

She had me stand in the center of the square across from her with the middle candle between us. Then she raised her hands, closed her eyes, and began to speak.

“Hail to the Guardians of the Watchtowers of the West,” she called. “We call on thee for guidance and assistance in this, our time of need.”

As she spoke, I saw one of the candles, which had all been unlit up until now, flicker to life.

“Now you,” Goody Albright whispered to me. “Call upon the Guardians of the Watchtowers of the East.”

Feeling strange, I did as she said, repeating the words she’d used exactly. I felt a rush of some kind of power move through me like a wave and then another candle—the one in the Eastern corner of the square—flickered to life.

“Wow—I can’t believe I did that!” I exclaimed.

Goody Albright gave me a mysterious smile.

“Didn’t I tell you that you have power? I knew you were a witch the moment I first met you. And the fact that you already have a familiar just sealed my certainty.”

“But—” I began to protest.

Goody Albright shook her head and put her finger to her lips.

“We must concentrate and finish calling the corners.”

She called upon the Guardians of the Watchtowers of the North next and then I did the South. For a finish, we held hands and Goody Albright said,

“Good and helpful spirits, enter this circle now and lend your ear to what we need.”

As she spoke, the fifth and final candle flickered to life between us and I felt another rush of power filling the space all around us.

I looked around with wide eyes but though I felt a definite presence and heard something like the excited squeaking of mice, there was nothing to see.

“They’re here—can you feel them?” Goody Albright murmured.

“I feel...something,” I confessed. “And I hear them—their little voices sound like mice. They sound excited,” I added.

“Yes, the helpful spirits love to be of use to witches who know their ways,” she said mysteriously. “Now—how well do you know your inventory, my dear?”

“Do you mean in general?” I asked. “Or in particular? Because if I have to name every single herb and crystal and book we have on our shelves?”

“No, no,” she interrupted. “It will be enough for you to just picture the row of books on the shelf—you don’t have to go into detail and name each title. Visualization is key. And once you hold the image in your mind, simply send a request to the helpful spirits and ask them to bring what you’re picturing to you.”

“Okay, I’ll try it,” I said. Closing my eyes, I pictured the rows of books on the shelf behind the counter. Luckily not many had been damaged by the bullets—most of the mayhem from Big Nicky and his thugs had been confined to the very front of the shop.

Taking a deep breath and holding the picture of the shop’s books firmly in my mind, I sent a silent request to the helpful spirits.

“Please bring these things to me,” I asked them. “All the books—please bring them from my shop in New Orleans to the shop here in Hidden Hollow.”

I didn’t know how important it was to be specific but I thought it couldn’t hurt.

I heard a twittering and cheeping in my ears and then a rushing sound as though all the spirits had left at once.

A moment later there was an audible pop! behind me. When I opened my eyes and looked around, I saw a huge stack of books towering up to the ceiling behind me.

“Oh my Goddess—that’s going to fall!” I exclaimed as the leaning tower of books swayed from side to side.

“Yes, if we’re not careful. Spirits, please divide those into four stacks,” Goody Albright said aloud. “They’ve very helpful but they can also be mischievous,” she added to me, in an undertone.

As I watched, the tall tower of books was suddenly dismantled. It was like many tiny hands were at work at once because individual books began flying off the top of the pile and then assembling themselves neatly in four different columns. These were shorter and more manageable piles, none taller than my head.

“There, that’s better. Thank you!” Goody Albright called to the invisible spirits. “Now if you could just attend, we have a few more things that need to be moved.” She looked at me. “Go on and visualize something else in your inventory that you want brought here.”

I closed my eyes again and thought of the massive collection of dried herbs and powders that Pop-pop had amassed over the years for use in magical spells. I also pictured their location—the many drawers and cupboards behind the counter of the

shop.

“Please bring them all to me,” I told the spirits, speaking out loud this time. “Everything in the drawers and cupboards needs to come. And please put them on the shelves of the shop here,” I added. I figured I could always sort through them later and place them where I wanted if I decided to change things around.

There was the rushing sound and then the pop again and suddenly the empty shelves around us were brimming with magical ingredients.

“Oh my! What a lovely collection!” Goody Albright exclaimed, looking around us. “Giovanni must have spent a lifetime gathering so many magical ingredients!”

“He did,” I said. “For as long as I can remember, he was always looking for new ingredients and herbs and flowers for the practitioners who came to us.”

“Bless him—what a lovely man!” Goody Albright smiled fondly. “Now what else do you need to bring over?”

We spent at least an hour sending the friendly spirits back and forth. I could only imagine what the New Orleans PD must be thinking if they were in the Emporium right now. Evidence must be disappearing before their eyes!

It almost made me laugh...and then I remembered Carlo and the urge to laugh left me abruptly. It was going to take me some time to get over his latest attack, I thought. Even though I knew he was dead, my throat still hurt where he had choked me and the inside of my thigh was probably developing a nasty bruise from his pinch.

Still, it could have been worse— much worse—if Kael hadn’t gotten to me on time.

The thought of the big fallen angel waiting for me back at the cottage made my heart

pound faster. I was kind of getting used to the way he called me “Mistress.” And I still remembered being held in his arms when he was protecting me from the bullets. Not to mention the way he had kissed me when he was healing me last night...

With my mind so full of my gargoyle protector, it was a wonder I could concentrate on the spell Goody Albright and I were doing. But I managed somehow and eventually we got it all done.

The shelves around us were stuffed and there were also piles of things on the floors. All the shop’s crystals and mystical stones were lying along the tops of the shelves and the books were still in four neat stacks.

I made the decision not to bring over any of the novelty tourist items—many of which had been ruined in the shoot-out. When we were finished with the spell, I was glad I hadn’t asked for anything from the front of the shop—there was no room for any of it.

“Goddess,” I murmured, looking around. “I guess I didn’t realize how much stuff we’d accumulated over the years. I don’t know what half of this stuff is!”

“A simple identification spell will take care of that,” Goody Albright said, smiling. “But maybe another day? You’ve had so much excitement already and it’s barely even noon. Would you like to relax in your cottage and try to take it easy?”

“That sounds wonderful,” I said gratefully. I was thinking of a hot shower again...and the fallen angel who was waiting for me. I also wanted to make sure Miss Sassy was settling in all right. She had never lived anywhere but the Emporium back in New Orleans. Being someplace new was probably going to be a big adjustment.

“Let’s go out and leave the rest for later, then,” Goody Albright suggested. “We can come back tomorrow and identify and label everything. Then you can open for

business.”

“Wow—so quick!” I remarked.

“Quick and painless, I hope,” Goody Albright said, smiling. She took me in her arms and gave me a warm hug. “Welcome to Hidden Hollow, Willow,” she murmured. “I hope you’re home to stay.”

I hoped so too. Though I still had twinges of sorrow for the shop I’d left behind in New Orleans, it seemed I was getting settled in my new place and everything was finally going my way.

I had no idea how wrong I was.

24

WILLOW

“Welcome, Mistress,” Kael rumbled when I came back to the Flower Bower. This afternoon there was a vase full of Jasmine flowers on the mantelpiece over the fire and their scent perfumed the entire cottage.

“Hi Kael.” I still felt a little bit awkward around him. But I was drawn to him too.

“Would you like to come and sit by the fire?” He indicated the leather couch across from the fireplace in the living room. Miss Sassy was already curled up there, snoozing in the warmth. “You can relax while I make you something to eat.”

“You cook?” I asked, surprised.

He nodded.

“Though I might not be knowledgeable about the kinds of foods you like. Still, in this cottage it’s hardly necessary. We can just ask the Flower Bower to provide whatever we want.”

“I really appreciate the offer but what I want right now is to take a shower and get changed.”

Of course, I’d had a shower that morning but it seemed like a million years ago now. And all the shooting and craziness back in New Orleans had made me feel dirty.

“Of course, Mistress—please take your time.” Kael came to stand in front of me. Looking down he cupped my cheek in one big, warm hand. “And when you finish bathing, maybe you’ll allow me to heal you.”

“Heal me?” I asked, my voice coming out breathless.

“Here...” His long fingers brushed against the bruises forming on my throat. “And anywhere else the bastard who hurt you touched you in anger.”

“Oh, well...” My heart was pounding and I suddenly felt hot and wet between my thighs. I couldn’t help remembering that his way of healing was to kiss the injured area. Did I want to let him do that? Yes, I did, I decided. “I...I guess that would be all right,” I said at last.

“Thank you, Mistress,” he rumbled. “Then I’ll be waiting for you.”

He went to sit on the couch and Miss Sassy at once found her way to his lap. He gave me a smile as he stroked my cat and I couldn’t help feeling myself melt as I watched the two of them together. Miss Sassy was an unerring judge of character—if she loved someone, I knew they were safe and a good person. If she hated them, well—like I said, I should have trusted her instincts about Carlo.

“I’ll be back down in a little while,” I told him.

He nodded.

“I’ll be waiting.”

His words spoken in that deep, velvety voice sent a shiver up my spine and I hurried up the steps.

The bathroom still had a shower stall instead of a tub—I supposed the cottage must have heard me. If I really stayed here, it would be amazing I thought. The idea of living in a house that anticipated my needs and wishes and changed to fulfill them was mind-blowing. Also the fact that I could ask it to make me any meal or snack I wanted gave “convenience” a whole new meaning. It would probably even provide me with clothes. I shouldn’t have bothered lugging all my stuff here in the big duffel bag.

Then again, I liked having familiar things around me. It made the Flower Bower seem more like home. Which I supposed it would be, for the foreseeable future. But right now I needed something to wear after my shower. I didn’t want to put on a bulky sweater and lined leggings since we were going to be sitting by the fire.

“Er, I’m going to take a shower now,” I said to the cottage at large as I pulled off my clothes. “While I do, could you please get me something nice to wear around the house?”

I didn’t specify exactly what I wanted because I wasn’t quite sure myself. Plus, I wanted to test the cottage and see exactly what it might provide.

I twisted my hair into a knot at the crown of my head and stepped into the shower. It was already the perfect temperature and I reveled in the steaming water washing away all the blood and violence and nastiness of the morning.

The cottage had stocked the shower with an exfoliating bath mitt and a choice of three different shower gels. One smelled like mint, one was pink grapefruit, and the third was something soft and floral and feminine.

All three smelled great but I chose the third one because the scent relaxed me. As I soaped myself up, I winced at the tender places on my neck where Carlo had choked me. Also, just as I had suspected, the place he had pinched me was bruising. It was

high up on my inner right thigh, almost to my neatly trimmed pussy mound.

I ran the bath mitt over these hurt areas carefully and thought again about letting Kael heal me. Of course I would let him do my throat—that area was very visible and I didn't want the residents of my new town thinking I was a battered woman. But I wasn't going to ask him to heal my thigh. That would be too much—too embarrassing, I decided.

I got out of the shower and dried off with one of the big, puffy lavender towels the cottage had provided. Then I looked around to see what it had gotten me to wear.

I found my new outfit hanging from a golden hook on the back of the bathroom door on a padded hanger. It looked like the cottage had plans for me—the little white slip of a dress was silky and almost see-through. It had spaghetti straps and a V-neck that showed the inner curves of my breasts when I put it on. There was no bra provided, so the dark points of my nipples pressed prominently against the thin, silky fabric.

“I love it but I can't just wear this,” I said aloud to the cottage. “I need something to cover up with.”

I had been looking at myself in the mirror as I talked and I thought I saw a glimmer of light from the corner of my eye. When I turned to look at the back of the bathroom door again, I saw another hanger on the golden hook. It was a robe made of the same thin white silk as the dress. It crossed over in front and had a sash to tie it closed. I felt better with it on—not so exposed.

There were also some cute little ballerina slippers to go with the outfit which fit me perfectly when I slipped them on. Nice! I could definitely get used to letting the cottage dress me, I decided.

I let down my hair and shook it out—my black, wavy waterfall contrasted nicely with

the white silk. And the V-neck of the slip-dress I was wearing showed the marks on my throat—which meant Kael should have an easy time healing me.

Just thinking of my gargoyle protector's hot mouth on the side of my throat sent an erotic shiver through my body. It was strange—I hadn't felt any sexual desire in years. Not since Carlo started hitting me and giving me no choice about whether I wanted to have sex with him or not. Once we were married, he decided my body was his property to use as he wanted.

But Kael wasn't like that. He called me "Mistress," and asked what I wanted. He didn't push or argue or get mad if I decided to do my own thing. I felt safe with him—that was so important.

Fluffing out my hair once more I decided I was ready. Taking a deep breath, I left the bathroom and headed downstairs.

25

KAEL

I heard her coming down the stairs and turned to watch. My eyes widened and my breath caught in my throat when I saw her—Willow nearly took my breath with her beauty.

She was wearing a white robe that clung lovingly to her curves and the sharp points of her nipples were visible beneath the silky fabric. I loved how her heavy breasts and full hips shifted as she came down the stairs. She was so beautiful—a curvy goddess and I wanted to worship her in a way that befitted her glory. But I sensed that I needed to be careful. She had been recently hurt and abused by the male I had killed. She would need all the patience and gentleness I could give her.

I swore I wouldn't fail her—that I would do my best to bring her pleasure.

"Mistress," I murmured as our eyes met. My voice came out hoarse. "You're so beautiful."

She blushed, her pale cheeks going pink.

"Oh, thank you. The cottage picked this outfit out for me," she said, gesturing to the short, silky robe. "I asked it for something nice to hang around the house in and this is what it came up with."

"It has excellent taste," I said. I couldn't keep my eyes off her. She reminded me of

one of the female angels I used to see in Heaven, so many millennia ago, before The Fall.

Miss Sassy, the cat, woke up at that point. She glanced at Willow and then at me before hopping off my lap. Giving the two of us a significant look over one furry shoulder, she went up the stairs, presumably to give us some privacy.

Willow barely noticed. She was already coming to sit beside me on the leather couch in front of the fire.

“I’m, uh, ready for you to heal me now. I mean, if you still want to,” she said softly, looking up at me.

I felt my heart clench in my chest. She was so heartbreakingly vulnerable yet she was baring herself to me.

“Mistress,” I said softly, “Of course I want to heal you.”

I brushed the silky waves of her long black hair out of the way to examine the finger-marks on her throat. Just seeing them made me angry all over again and I wished once more than I had given the human man who hurt her a slower and more agonizing death.

But I knew my anger served no purpose here. I didn’t want to take my demonic form and frighten Willow. Instead, I stroked the marks on her neck gently, assessing the damage.

She shivered under my light touch and I could smell the sweet heat of her feminine desire beginning to perfume the air. She wanted this—she wanted me—but I knew I needed to be careful. I wanted her to know I would never be rough with her—never hurt her or bruise or mark her the way her worthless ex-husband had done.

“May I heal you now, Mistress?” I asked, looking into her lovely green eyes.

“Yes,” she whispered. I could feel the pulse in her throat pounding against my fingertips. “Yes, please Kael—I want you to.”

Bending down, I placed a soft, open-mouthed kiss over one of the marks on the side of her neck. I felt her shiver under my touch, but she didn’t try to pull away. She pressed closer to me and gave a little moan as I kissed her again and then again, making sure to heal all of the marks.

I could tell by her reaction that this was a very sensitive area for her. For some women, their neck is an erogenous zone almost as pleasurable as their breasts and nipples. Willow seemed to be one of those—she moaned again as I switched to the other side of her neck.

I kissed her right under her ear and then continued kissing down the side of her neck and over to the hollow of her throat. She was healed by now, but I could feel her pleasure—(part of my bond with my Mistress was being attuned to both her pain and pleasure)—and I didn’t want to stop. I wanted to make her feel good—to make her moan my name. I was sure that she’d never gotten much enjoyment from her time with the abusive ex-husband I’d killed—I wanted to make up for all her bad experiences by giving her a good one.

At last, when she was nearly panting with need and her scent was extremely hot, I stopped and looked at her.

“Mistress,” I murmured. “May I kiss you someplace else?”

“Where...where do you want to kiss me?” she murmured breathlessly.

“Here.” I cupped one of her breasts through the white gown. Her robe had come

untied and the thin slip-like garment beneath it was almost see-through. “And more specifically, here .” I thumbed the tight bud of her nipple, circling it lightly to tease her.

“ Ohhh...” Willow thrust out her breasts, pushing the one I was holding deeper into my hand. “Yes, please!” she begged softly. “Kiss me there, Kael.”

“With pleasure, Mistress.” I felt my shaft surge in the tight trousers I was wearing. I should have asked the cottage to provide me with something new to wear too—something less constricting, I thought. But for now, I just wanted to concentrate on Willow’s pleasure.

I barely had to tug on the white silk before the top of the little gown came sliding down her shoulders, baring her breasts. I sucked in a breath—she had some stretch marks but they only made her more beautiful to me. They made her human— real . I loved her full globes tipped with wide, dark nipples.

“Gorgeous...” I breathed and then I ducked my head to kiss her right peak.

Willow shifted on the couch and pressed forward, giving me permission to do more than kiss. As I sucked her nipple into my mouth, she threaded her fingers through my hair and pulled me closer.

I loved the feeling of her guiding me. I sucked her tight bud deep and hard and she arched her back and moaned. My shaft was aching . The salty-sweet taste of her skin was addictive and the soft little noises of need and desire she made when I sucked her and circled her nipple with my tongue made me feel like I might burst!

“Oh, Kael...” she moaned as I made my way to the other nipple and began to tease and suck it too. “Oh, that feels so good.”

Her words were exactly what I wanted to hear. It's in my nature to serve—before I was a Protector of Women, I bowed before the Almighty. So I loved giving service in any way my Mistress needed it. Besides, I was attuned to her, so I felt her pleasure as my own.

I had heard human women complaining about human men being “selfish” in bed and only caring about their own pleasure. If only they had my gift—the ability to feel the desire and pleasure of the woman they were with—I doubted such selfishness would be a problem.

I took my time with Willow, switching back and forth, sucking and teasing her tight peaks until she was shifting on the couch and moaning continuously. Then I knew it was time.

“Mistress?” I said, letting her nipple slip from my lips. “You have another place that needs healing.”

“What...what do you mean?” she panted, looking up at me.

“I know your abuser hurt you someplace else.” I laid my hand on the top of her right thigh. “I can feel your pain,” I told her. “I know he hurt you here, too.”

“Oh...” She nibbled her lower lip and her eyes went wide. “Do you...would you really want to heal me there?”

“Of course I do,” I assured her. “I want to heal you anyplace you're hurt.”

“But, well... I...I don't have on any panties,” she confessed.

I couldn't stop the growl of lust that came from my lips.

“Even better,” I told her. “There will be nothing to get in the way of healing you completely.”

Her cheeks were pink in the firelight but I could tell she wanted me to do it. The scent of her desire rose to meet me, acting on my like a drug. God, how I longed to taste her! But I knew I had to take things slowly. I would start by healing her.

I slid to the floor in front of the couch and placed my hands on her knees.

“Open for me, Mistress,” I urged her softly. “Open and let me heal you.”

“If...if you’re sure you want to.” As she spoke, she parted her thighs.

I had to bite back a groan at the sight that greeted me. Her soft little pussy was so beautiful...and so swollen with need. As she opened wider, I could see the way her outer lips were already parting on their own, giving me a glimpse of her plump clit already wet with her juices.

But before I could taste her, I had to heal the ugly bruise on her inner thigh.

“Wider, Mistress,” I urged her as I ducked between her legs. “I need to get to you.”

As I spoke, I helped ease her back against the couch cushions and opened her thighs more, so that her knees were almost resting on the couch. The move opened her pussy as well, showing me her soft pink interior, glistening with her honey.

It was all I could do not to taste her at once but I forced myself to pay attention to the bruise first. Bending low, I kissed the dark spot gently, sending my healing power through her to knit together the battered flesh.

It didn’t take long to heal—it was a simple injury—but I took my time, licking and

sucking the same spot on her inner thigh for quite a while. Meanwhile, my cheek was brushing against her open pussy and Willow was shifting her hips restlessly. I knew she wanted me to taste her as much as I wanted to do it, but I had to get her permission first.

Looking up, I met her eyes. They were wide and dreamy in the firelight—and full of desire.

“Mistress,” I murmured, stroking her inner thighs. “It seems to me that you have another place that needs healing.”

“I...I do?” She frowned uncertainly.

“Yes, a place that’s aching to be healed. Lightly I traced her little pleasure button with a single fingertip.

“Oh!” Willow jumped and moaned. One thing about the female body that has always amazed me is how sensitive it is—how you can bring a woman such intense pleasure with such a light touch— if you know what you’re doing. And after centuries of serving women, I did.

“Do you see what I mean, Mistress?” I asked her. “I think you need healing here. What do you think?”

“I...I think you’re right,” she whispered.

“Then guide me,” I told her, my shaft throbbing with need as I looked into her eyes. “Show me where you want me to heal you the most.”

I didn’t have to ask her again. She reached for me, her fingers slipping into my hair. And then she was guiding me down to her sweetness.

This time I was certain my shaft was going to break through the fabric of my trousers. God, how I loved to be led by my Mistress! How I loved to bend to her will and service her with my tongue—to taste her sweet juices and feel the pleasure coursing through her as I worshiped her!

I gave her a soft kiss at first and then her fingers tightened in my hair, letting me know she needed more. I was more than willing to give it to her.

With a low groan, I tasted her fully, spreading her outer lips with my thumbs so I could slide my tongue into her pussy. Her flavor exploded in my mouth—hot and wet and salty-sweet as I caressed the tight little bud of her clit.

Willow moaned and bucked against my mouth, pulling me closer.

“More!” she moaned. “Oh Goddess, Kael— more... deeper .”

I knew at once what she needed. Carefully, I slid two fingers into the mouth of her pussy and felt her buck again as I filled her.

“Oh... oh!” she gasped. And then she was grinding against me, rubbing shamelessly against my mouth as she sought her pleasure.

I couldn’t hold back any longer. Wrapping my free arm around one of her thighs, I opened her even wider until she was spread like a feast before me. Then I sucked her clit into my mouth and I thrust my fingers in and out of her hungry little pussy.

I lost myself in her completely.

26

WILLOW

I couldn't believe this was happening! I had a fallen angel between my legs, going down on me like his life depended on it. And not only that, he was good at it.

Carlo had gone down on me several times during our relationship— before we got married. It had always been a mediocre experience because I sensed that he really didn't like it and resented me for it. It was hard to relax and enjoy the act while I was worried he would be nasty to me later.

With Kael, it was different. I could tell he loved what he was doing to me. His eyes were lazy with lust when he looked up to see my face as he circled my clit with his tongue and thrust two long fingers deeply into my pussy. And then he spread me wider and began to really lick and suck as though he couldn't get enough.

I couldn't get enough either. There must have been some kind of angelic magic in his tongue—maybe related to his healing ability—but I swear every time he licked me it felt like a million tiny tingles were running through the most sensitive part of my body. It wasn't a vibration exactly...more like a magical electrical tremor that teased my clit in a way I had never felt before.

“Oh... oh!” I moaned and gripped his hair tighter. Part of me pointed out that I was probably holding on too tight. But I couldn't seem to let go—not when he was licking me and thrusting his long fingers deep inside me at the same time. Besides, Kael didn't seem to want me to let go. The more I pulled his hair, the more he loved it. At

least, if the low, hungry growls I could hear coming from his throat were any indication.

His wings were spread now, arching around me in feathering arcs, diffusing the firelight so that it looked like they were outlined in fire. It felt surreal...and yet realer and better than any other sexual experience I'd ever had.

And then I couldn't take it any longer and I started to come.

"Kael! Right there! Don't stop— don't stop!" I moaned, bucking my hips. I was riding his mouth shamelessly and I didn't even care. I just wanted the pleasure to never end!

Kael stayed with me, riding out my orgasm and circling my aching clit with his tongue until I started pulling away because I was so sensitive. But even then, he didn't stop licking me completely. He bathed my pussy with long, loving strokes of his tongue, cleaning away my honey thoroughly before finally looked up at me. I met his eyes which were lazy with lust and saw that his mouth and chin were shiny with my juices.

"Mistress," he growled softly. "Your honey is so sweet. Love to taste your pussy."

"You...you did a really good job of it," I panted. "I...I've never had a guy make me come like that before."

"Because none before me could feel your pleasure," he told me.

I frowned.

"You can...can feel it when I come?"

Kael nodded.

“It’s like waves of pleasure coming from your body and running through mine. I love to feel you come,” he added, his silver eyes blazing.

“Did...did it make you come, too?” I asked, fascinated by this heavenly power of his.

“Not yet.” He rose to sit on the couch by me. I could see the bulge in the front of his black trousers but he made no move to open them. I had the idea that maybe he was waiting for me to ask him to unfasten them. Instead, I leaned across and rested my hand on the thick bulge.

He jumped a little and groaned when I stroked him.

“Mistress...your touch is so soft!”

“I want to see it,” I said. I remembered what he looked like in statue form and how impressive his size had been. Of course, I also remembered his gargoyle form and how he’d had a sharp, scary-looking barb at the end of his cock instead of a crown. How did that work?

Kael spread his hands.

“My body is yours to command, Mistress. Do what you want with me.”

I liked that—liked it a lot. After having no control at all during sex with Carlo, I liked being the one in charge for a change.

“Do you like that?” I asked curiously. “Letting me be in charge?”

His silver eyes went half-lidded.

“I love to serve,” he admitted in a low voice. “It is my pleasure to give you pleasure, Mistress. And yes, to give you control...if you want it.”

“I do,” I said, surprising myself a little. But again, I liked having control of the situation.

“Then do whatever you want to me,” Kael growled softly. “I am yours, Mistress—use me.”

His words sent a shiver of lust straight down my spine.

“All right,” I said. I unfastened his trousers and reached inside to pull out my prize.

It really was huge—even bigger than I’d remembered. But I thought I could take it if I was careful. Still, did I want to go that far? We still hadn’t known each other a whole twenty-four hours yet, I reminded myself. Maybe we ought to wait.

I looked up at him.

“I want to taste you too, but I don’t think we should go any further tonight,” I told him.

Most human men would have thrown a temper tantrum at that point but Kael only nodded.

“Very well—whatever you wish, Mistress.”

“I want you to tell me about this.” I stroked his long thick shaft up and down. He had a spicy, masculine scent that I loved and his skin was like velvet.

“What...what do you want to know?” he panted. He was leaning back against the

couch now, with his arms spread over the back and his wings hanging down over the other side. I liked the way he was so open for me—like I really could do anything I wanted to him. It made me feel powerful and safe and sexy to be in control.

“I want to know why it looks different when you’re in your, uh, other form,” I told him. “Why does it have a kind of stinger instead of a head when you’re a gargoyle?”

He frowned and then groaned as I leaned down and slid my tongue around and around the broad head.

“That...that’s my pleasure barb,” he finally managed. “Mistress, your mouth is so sweet on me!” He started to reach for me but I lifted up and shook my head.

“No, Kael—I like your arms across the back of the couch. Just stay there and let me explore you.”

His eyes were suddenly half-lidded, gleaming silver in the firelight.

“Yes, Mistress,” he growled hoarsely. “I will obey and be still while you touch me.”

“Good.” I bent down to trace the head of his cock again with my tongue. This time I tasted his precum which surprised me. “Oh—it tastes like a cinnamon roll!” I looked up at him again. “Why does your precum taste sweet?”

Kael shrugged.

“I am in my angelic form.” As though that answered everything. In a way, I supposed it did.

“What happens when you’re in your demonic form—when you’re a gargoyle?” I asked, raising my eyebrows as I milked another droplet of the delicious precum from

his thick shaft and licked it up.

“It...it’s hotter—spicier,” he groaned. “Oh Mistress...what you’re doing to me!”

I could see his big hands were clenched into fists but he didn’t move them—he kept his arms stretched out along the back of the couch—kept himself open for me.

“And the barb, I mean, your pleasure barb? Does it hurt?” I asked him.

Kael’s eyes grew serious.

“I would never make love to a woman when I’m in my demonic form, Mistress. My barb gives pleasure but it gives pain too.”

“It does? Tell me more,” I commanded. I was still milking his cock, sliding my fists up and down his heavy length to coax more of the delicious cinnamon precum from his sensitive tip. I wondered what tasting his barb would be like...not that I would ever do it.

“First my pleasure barb stings. The...the venom it delivers is meant to open the mouth of your womb,” Kael panted. He was watching me taste him, his eyes heavy-lidded with desire.

“And then?” I prompted, licking him again.

“And then...ah, Gods! Then the barb slips inside you and the knot at the base of my shaft ties the two of us together,” he groaned.

“The knot?” I looked at the base of his cock but I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.

“It only appears in my demonic form,” Kael told me. “But once it swells inside you, I can pump you full of my seed and there’s nothing you can do to get away.” He shook his head. “But I would never do that to you, Mistress— never. ”

“You wouldn’t?” I couldn’t lie—the idea both fascinated and horrified me at the same time. The idea of being stung inside and then held in place while he filled me was terrifying and arousing at the same time.

“No. Because I cannot...cannot be gentle in my demonic form,” he groaned. “Gods, Mistress—if you keep touching and tasting me like that I’m going to come!”

“Come then,” I told him. I wanted to make him shoot—wanted to have the power over him and make him lose control. I wanted to taste his cum too, and see if it was as good as his precum. Leaning down, I took the head of his cock and as much of the shaft as I could—which wasn’t much because he was so big—into my mouth.

“You...you really want me to...to come in your mouth?” Kael panted, raising his eyebrows. “My old Mistress would never stoop to tasting my seed.”

I pulled off for a minute.

“I don’t care about that—it’s just you and me now. And I want to taste you. So come for me, Kael—come in my mouth.”

I went back to sucking him while I worked his shaft. I could tell by the tension in his big body that he wanted to pump his hips—wanted to fuck my mouth. But he didn’t. Carlo would have—he would have grabbed the back of my head and shoved me down while he gagged me with his cock but Kael wasn’t like that. He held still as I worked him, letting me do what I wanted with his body without demanding anything.

I had never felt so powerful while sucking a guy off before—it was a new feeling and

I thoroughly enjoyed it. I decided I wanted to draw things out—to make it last. So I took my time, teasing my fallen angel as I circled the crown of his cock with my tongue and slowly pumped his shaft. And every time I felt him tense like he was going to come, I pulled off for a moment. When he calmed down, I went back to sucking.

I was thoroughly enjoying myself, but I was pushing Kael to the limit.

“Mistress...Mistress, please,” he groaned when I pulled off the third time.

“Do you want to come now, Kael?” I asked, looking up to meet his eyes.

“Yes, Mistress. If it pleases you.” His voice was low and gravely with need.

“And are you going to come in my mouth?” I asked, raising my eyebrows.

“Yes, Mistress. If...if you want me to, I will shoot my seed in your mouth,” he groaned.

“Then I’ll let you come,” I told him.

And bending my head, I took him in my mouth once more and really began to work him.

It didn’t take long—I had him right on the edge and I knew it. A moment later, with a low groan, he began to come.

“Mistress... Willow!” he gasped.

I felt the first salty-sweet shot hit the back of my throat. It was still cinnamon roll flavored but with a hint of sea-salt as well. Delicious, which wasn’t something I’d

ever thought I would say about cum. But it was true for Kael—probably because he was an angel. Well, a fallen angel, anyway.

He showed superhuman restraint by not grabbing for my head or thrusting up to gag me as he came. I sucked and swallowed, sucked and swallowed and enjoyed every drop—mainly because I wasn't being forced to swallow—I was doing it because I wanted to.

At last the tension left his big body and my fallen angel relaxed back against the couch.

“Ah, Mistress,” he groaned, his eyes fluttering closed for a moment. “No woman has ever done so much for me. You are too kind.”

I pulled off his still hard shaft and straightened up to lean against his side.

“You're the kind one,” I told him. “How did you know I needed to be in charge to enjoy that?”

A smile quirked the corners of his sensuous mouth.

“You're my Mistress—I'm attuned to you.”

“But what happens when I'm not your Mistress anymore?” I asked. “I mean, after I'm out of danger, the key should turn in the lock—right?”

I was still wearing the small gold key on the golden chain around my neck. It hung between my breasts, glimmering in the firelight.

“Technically, I guess it should work now,” I went on. “I mean, I'm in a safe place. Nobody from New Orleans can reach me here in Hidden Hollow.”

I lifted the key and leaned closer to fit it into the lock around his neck.

“Don’t.” Kael put a hand over mine to stop me. “Please don’t, Willow,” he rumbled softly, his silver eyes pleading.

“Why?” I asked. “Don’t you want to be free?”

“I used to,” he said. “But now...I want to get to know you more. I want to stay with you. If you turn the key and open the lock, my time of punishment will be over and I’ll ascend to the Heavens once more. I won’t have a choice.”

“So I would lose you.” I let the key drop to dangle between my breasts again.

“And I would lose you .” He cupped my cheek in one big hand and looked into my eyes. “I don’t want that—I don’t want to lose you, Willow.”

Though we hadn’t known each other long, I felt the same way. In fact, I felt an incredibly strong pull towards my protector, considering the fact that I had vowed never to let a man get near me again. But then, he wasn’t a man—he was a supernatural being—a Creature. So maybe it wasn’t so surprising that I would be drawn to him.

“I thought I’d never be able to trust a man again after Carlo,” I told him. “I’m glad I was wrong.”

Kael stroked my cheek.

“I’m glad too. I’ll work hard to earn your trust, Mistress.”

I thought about telling him again that he didn’t have to call me Mistress...but I was getting used to it. And in fact, I kind of liked it.

“Thank you,” I said. Leaning forward, I kissed him. I could taste my own secret flavor on his lips and I loved it. Moaning softly, I deepened the kiss.

Kael groaned and opened for my tongue. He sucked on it gently, eagerly, sharing my taste with me. Then he pulled me up to straddle his lap and wrapped me in his arms. A moment later, he wrapped his wings around me too, making a private little feathery cocoon for the two of us.

I could feel him getting harder again—his shaft was still out and I rubbed against it eagerly, feeling it part my pussy lips to slide against my aching clit.

Kael’s big hands came down to grip my hips and he ground up into me, sliding the length of his cock against my wet petals as we continued the long, slow, hot kiss. But he didn’t try to enter me—he didn’t take advantage of the situation to get more than I was ready to give. We just kept rubbing against each other, building the delicious friction until at last, I came again.

“Oh... Ahhh!” I gasped, throwing back my head as my orgasm hit me. This one was more intense, maybe because my clit was already sensitive from coming before on his tongue.

Kael watched me as I came, his silver eyes heavy-lidded with lust.

“That’s right, come for me, Willow,” he growled and his deep voice sent shivers through me. “Come on my shaft—love to watch you coming!”

“You...you come too!” I commanded breathlessly and ground myself against him. “I want to feel you shooting while I’m pressed against you! Like this...”

And reaching between us, I took his shaft in one hand and pressed it against my clit.

“As my Mistress wishes,” Kael growled. He gripped my waist even tighter and then, with a low groan, he came for me.

I could feel every pulse against my clit as he shot—even more than the last time, which didn’t seem possible. His cum felt tingly and good as he painted the inside of my pussy with his cream. I moaned and rubbed against him.

It occurred to me that I might be taking a risk—I wasn’t on any kind of birth control, after all. But were we even compatible that way? He was a fallen angel/gargoyle and I was human. I doubted he could get me pregnant and I liked the feeling of him coming against me.

Afterwards we took a shower together to clean up. You wouldn’t think that a seven foot tall fallen angel with huge wings and a curvy girl could fit together in a shower stall, but the cottage made the stall much bigger to accommodate us.

I took the lead again and Kael let me, spreading his arms and standing passively as I soaped and scrubbed and explored his big, muscular body. Then he washed me in turn and knelt in the shower to “clean” my pussy with his tongue because he claimed the scrubbing mitt was too harsh for my most delicate area. I came for the third time, moaning and grinding against his mouth.

It was hands down the best shower I’d ever had.

Following the shower, I was absolutely exhausted. The three intense orgasms might have had something to do with it.

“Oh, I’m so tired!” I yawned as Kael took one of the big, fluffy towels and dried me off.

“Then you should sleep,” he said simply.

“But it’s not even night time yet—is it?” I had honestly lost all track of time—not that I really minded.

“You’ve had a long, exhausting couple of days,” Kael reminded me. “If you’re tired, you should rest. Please don’t worry—I can feed Miss Sassy for you if she gets hungry.”

I gave a sleepy little laugh.

“She’ll let you know if she does. Okay, if you don’t mind I think I’ll take a little nap.”

“Let’s get you to bed then, Mistress.”

He finished drying me and then led me into the bedroom. The cottage had changed the bed, I noticed. It had been Queen sized before—now it was most definitely bigger—big enough for my guardian gargoyle to lie down beside me.

Kael did just that. He lay on his side and pulled me close to him so that we were spooning.

“But I thought...” I yawned again. “Thought you didn’t sleep,” I finished at last.

“I don’t. But I want to hold you until you do,” he said. “Do you mind?”

“No—this is nice.” I snuggled back against him and Kael put one long arm around me and tucked his legs behind mine. It was wonderful but I started to protest that I didn’t have any clothes on and I would get cold. Then he wrapped his right wing around me. As the warm silvery-white feathers caressed my skin, I felt cared for and loved and most of all safe .

With a sigh, I let myself relax fully. I knew I was with someone who wouldn't be randomly cruel in the middle of the night. Kael wouldn't wake me with a pinch or a slap the way Carlo used to do. He would hold me and keep me warm and cherish me as I slept curled against him. For the first time in my life, I could drift off to sleep with a man without fearing that I might be woken by pain.

I never wanted it to end.

But it did, two hours later when I woke up to a horrible nightmare.

WILLOW

It wasn't really a nightmare, but it certainly seemed like one. It started with a deep grinding noise that penetrated my dreams. Then a dull orange glow pressed against my eyelids and I began to get uncomfortably hot.

I woke confused, my eyelids fluttering open. I was alone in the bed and the room was bathed with a reddish-orange light. I was terribly hot—something at the end of the bed was emitting heat like a furnace.

At first, I thought the cottage was on fire—there was a scent like rotten eggs and burning in the air. But then I saw the source of the heat—there was a huge iron door, right at the foot of the bed. It was open and I could see a hellish landscape beyond.

Barren, hard-packed earth crisscrossed with cracks and fissures was lit by burning red light. In the background, a jagged mountain range rose. There was a river running sluggishly through the landscape and at first, I thought the water in it was being turned red by the strange light. Then I realized the truth—the river was filled with bubbling lava!

“Oh my Goddess,” I whispered shakily. “What in the world...?”

And then I saw something moving towards me—some kind of animal. It was coming up fast, approaching the open doorway at a kind of gallop. But despite the reddish-orange light, the land I was seeing was full of shadows. So I didn't recognize it until

it was nearly at the door.

As it got closer, three sets of burning eyes and three slavering mouths came into view. A volley of hoarse, growling barks filled the room as the Hell Hound that had chased me earlier suddenly loomed in the doorway.

I felt helpless and trapped. I scrambled to the back of the bed, my shoulders pressed against the carved wooden headboard, so hard I was sure I would have marks later. I wanted to get off the bed and run but I was frozen to the spot and besides, I wasn't sure I could get around the door. I needed a weapon!

“Cottage—give me a gun!” I begged. “A loaded one!”

A heavy revolver suddenly appeared in my hand. Luckily, Carlo had taught me how to shoot—mainly because he wanted someone at the shooting range with him that he could show off for.

I aimed the gun at the approaching Hell Hound and shot through the open doorway.

But though I saw the bullet fly, I must have missed. Or else maybe Earth weapons couldn't hurt Hell Hounds. Whatever the reason, it only snarled at me with all three heads and kept coming.

I shot again... and again and again and again with the same results.

Then I heard a voice calling from the hallway.

“Willow? What's wrong? What was that noise?”

Kael ran into the bedroom and saw my predicament at once. The Hell Hound was nearly in the doorway by now and I was shivering against the headboard with the gun

held out in front of me with a stiff arm.

“Get out of the way—I’m going to try to shoot it again!” I yelled at him when ran to the door.

“No—you can’t hurt it like that. We must close the door!”

He was already changing, his eyes burning red and his feathers melting into leathery wings. His face grew twisted and ugly and he seemed to get even bigger.

“How can you shut it?” I demanded, putting down the gun. The iron door wasn’t open from my side—it was open in the Hellscape. I could see it outlined against the red glow—it was standing ajar. We would have to reach into that horrible scene to grab the knob and drag it closed. I didn’t see how I could do that—not with the Hell Hound coming.

Kael didn’t answer. He stepped forward, coming right up to the burning doorway. Then he leaned in to grab for the knob.

But he couldn’t reach it and then the Hell Hound was there—trying to get through.

Kael grabbed one of its heads by the throat and punched it, knocking it unconscious. It was the middle head and it sagged in his grip, but there were still two more on either side, slaving and baying for blood.

My guardian gargoyle was holding it back by sheer strength but the thing was huge—as big as a horse! I knew he couldn’t hold it for long.

Kael seemed to know that too.

“Mistress,” he panted, turning his head to look at me. “Run!”

But I couldn't just leave him.

"No—I have to shut the door!" I exclaimed. "I'm the one who opened it in the first place—I have to shut it."

"Then let me get this hound out of the way first!" He punched another head and it slumped, drooling, to one side. But the third head was still howling and I was afraid the middle one might wake up again soon. Its eyelids were already flickering.

Holding the third head on the far left by the throat, Kael put his shoulder against the beast's broad chest and began to push it backwards. It had been trying to get through the doorway at me, but slowly he shoved it back into the Hellscape.

There was just enough room on the right side of my gargoyle protector for me to put one foot over the threshold and reach for the doorknob. I leaned forward, stretching, trying to keep as much of my body in Hidden Hollow as possible while still trying to reach the knob.

At last I grabbed it—but I let it go a moment later with a gasp of pain. It was scorching—I felt like I had laid my bare hand on a red-hot stove burner!

"I can't do it—it's too hot!" I shouted to Kael, who was fighting two heads instead of one since the middle head of the Hell Hound had revived now. If the right-hand head came back, I was going to be in trouble. It was barely twelve inches from my face!

"You have to get back—let me do it!" Kael growled. He was doing his best to shove the Hell Hound backward and had mostly succeeded in getting it through the doorway. The problem was, he had stepped over the threshold. He was standing on the barren, cracked land of the Hellscape as he fought the demonic beast.

"You can't!" I protested again. "It's my fault. I should be the one?—"

And then the words died on my lips, because I saw something even worse than the Hell Hound.

It was Carlo and he was coming for me.

His head was still caved in, his face blackened and his lips dry and cracked. One eye dangled out of its socket like a deflated balloon. But the other eye met my gaze and he smiled at me—a horrible smile. One that said he was going to pay me back for what had happened to him.

“Hey, babe,” he slurred, leering at me. “Look at you—all naked and hot. Come here—we’re gonna have some fun!”

My dead ex reached for me and I couldn’t help it—I jumped back, out of the doorway. It was an instinctive reaction—I couldn’t let him touch me with those dead, swollen fingers—I just couldn’t.

But it seemed this was the opening Kael had been waiting for. With a mighty heave, he shoved the Hell Hound backwards, knocking it off its feet and into the sluggish river of lava flowing nearby.

I heard its agonized howls but before I could reach for the door again, Kael was pushing my ex out of the way and grabbing the doorknob. Despite its scorching heat, he gripped it hard and pulled...but it didn’t even budge.

Kael, come on—come out of there!” I begged him.

He shook his head.

“It won’t close from this side—it has to close from the other side.”

“What? What are you taking about?” I cried. But he didn’t answer. Instead, he ran around to the other side of the door—the Hellscape side. Putting both hands against the heavy iron door, he began to shove it closed.

“Kael, stop! Don’t do that—you’re going to be trapped!” I shouted as panic rushed through me. I had just admitted my feelings for my gargoyle protector—I didn’t want to lose him!

But Kael didn’t pay any attention. Through the crack in the other side of the door where the hinges were, I saw him shoving with single-minded attention. His gargoyle face was a sneering mask of effort—the door must have weighted a thousand pounds!

“No!” I shouted as, inch-by-inch, the door began to close. I wanted to rush in and drag him out, but then Carlo was there again. He was dragging himself off the ground and grinning at me again, the horrible deflated balloon of an eyeball smacking wetly against his sunken cheekbone as he moved.

“Gonna get you, babe,” he croaked, reaching for me. “You sent me here—sent me to Hell. Now you’re gonna come stay with me so we can have fun forever!”

“No... no!” I gasped, backing further away from the doorway. “Kael, please! I need?—”

But just at that moment, the huge gargoyle gave another mighty shove...and the iron door leading into The Pit closed completely.

I stood there, stunned for a moment, unable to believe what had just happened. It all seemed like some kind of crazy, vivid nightmare I would wake up from at any moment.

Only I didn’t wake up.

The iron door stood quietly at the foot of the bed like some kind of strange monolith for about a minute. And then, like a magic trick, it folded itself in half. The top half came down and met the bottom half with a snapping sound. Then it folded again—this time vertically with the right half folding over the left half. Then it folded down again.

By this time it was barely a foot tall. It was happening so fast I couldn't move. I watched in horrified fascination as it just kept folding and folding—like an impossible piece of demonic origami.

And then, with a final snap! it folded one last time so it was no bigger than my palm—and abruptly winked out of existence completely.

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WILLOW

It took me a moment but I finally unfroze.

“What just happened? Where is it?” I exclaimed. I looked around the bed and bent to examine the footboard, but the iron door that had led into The Pit was gone now—it had vanished utterly.

But where was Kael? Was he stuck in the Hellscape I had witnessed through the open doorway?

He must be, I decided and suddenly I felt tears stinging my eyes.

“I don’t want to lose you,” he’d said to me just a few hours before. I felt the same way about him—I couldn’t lose him this way!

“I need to get help,” I said out loud. I started for the bedroom door, only to realize I was stark naked. Rushing to the dresser, I dug for anything to wear but everything was jumbled up—I hadn’t unpacked my duffle very neatly.

I saw a glimmer from the corner of my eye and realized the cottage was trying to help. Rushing over to the bed, I found a complete outfit from underwear to boots including jeans that were just my size and a red sweater that fit me perfectly too.

I pulled it all on as fast as I could and rushed out the doorway. I had to find Goody

Albright—she was the only one I could think of who might be able to help me rescue Kael from The Pit!

29

WILLOW

“ I ’m sorry, my dear—I can’t help you.” Goody Albright shook her head regretfully after I finished explaining the situation. But I think I know someone who might be able to. Come with me.”

She led me down to Goldie’s Diner and I went with her, still on pins and needles. Every minute I left Kael in The Pit was a minute of pure agony. What might be happening to him? Had the Hell Hound regenerated somehow and come for him? Or what if Carlo was trying to take his revenge?

I had to get him out of there—I just didn’t know how.

The minute Goldie saw our faces, she seemed to know something was wrong.

“My goodness—what happened?” she asked me. “You look terrible, sweetie! I mean, not to be rude but?—”

“I feel terrible,” I said, interrupting her. “Kael is gone!”

Her eyes widened.

“Gone? Gone where?”

“We fear he may be trapped in Hell,” Goody Albright said seriously. “And you’re the

only witch in town I know of who has any kind of expertise in that realm. Because of your...well, you know.”

Goldie nodded.

“All right, come in the back,” she said, gesturing to us. “Let’s talk about it.”

She took us to a break room that led off the kitchen where there was a table and three chairs. Before she sat, she took a pot of coffee from the machine set up in the corner and waved a hand, murmuring over it. She poured me a cup and as the steam reached my nose, I realized it was chicory.

The pungent, bitter scent made me think of the last time I’d had it—was it really only that morning that Kael had been sitting safe and sound across from me? The thought made me burst into tears, though I usually try not to cry in front of strangers.

“Oh hey now, it’s okay, sweetie! Everything is going to be okay.” Goldie reached across the table to squeeze my hand. “What happened to Kael?”

“He...he got stuck in The Pit,” I sobbed, my shoulders shaking. “Sh-shutting the door that I left open. He’s stuck in Hell and it’s all muh-my fault!”

“Oh dear...” Goldie gave me a sympathetic look and shook her head. “Is that really what happened?” she asked Goody Albright.

Goody Albright nodded.

“I don’t understand how the door was able to manifest inside the town’s magic shield, but somehow, apparently, it did.”

She went on to describe what had happened and I was glad I’d been able to give her

all the details before breaking down.

“Hmm, that’s bad,” Goldie agreed, nodding when Goody Albright described the iron door folding in on itself until it disappeared. “It sounds like that door is shut for good.”

“Shut for good?” I cried, half rising from my seat. “Are you saying there’s no hope? That he’s gone forever? Trapped in Hell for eternity?”

“No, no, sweetie—that’s not what I’m saying at all!” Goldie put a hand on my arm and urged me gently back down into my seat. “Just because you close one door, doesn’t mean you can’t open another,” she added.

Goody Albright frowned.

“But Goldie dear, I don’t know about the idea of opening another door to The Pit from inside Hidden Hollow.”

“Not a door so much as a portal—a one way portal specifically meant for just one person to come through—Kael,” Goldie said, handing me a napkin.

“What so we could bring him back here without worrying about anything else coming with him?” I asked hopefully, drying my eyes on the napkin she offered me. “Because I saw my ex in there—in Hell. And I don’t want him anywhere near me!”

“It is possible to bring just one person and exclude everyone else—including your ex—but it’s a tricky business and there’s only one way to do it,” Goldie said mysteriously.

“Well, how? Do I have to do a spell?” I asked. I wasn’t a very experienced witch—I’d only found out that I was one earlier that day, (it was almost nighttime

now,) but I was willing to try anything to get Kael back.

“It’s a kind of spell.” Goldie tucked one of her long blonde curls behind her ear and leaned forward. “How much do you know about Sex Magic?”

“Sex Magic?” I frowned and shook my head. “Uh, nothing. Is that even a thing?”

“Oh, it’s a thing, all right,” Goody Albright said, nodding. “But it can easily go bad.” She looked at Goldie. “Are you sure this is a good idea? Willow just learned she has powers a few days ago and aside from the transference spell she helped me with, she really hasn’t used them much at all.”

“Hey, you came to me for help for a reason,” Goldie pointed out. “This is the only way I know of to extract someone from The Pit.”

“All right, my dear—you know I’m not doubting your expertise,” Goody Albright said quickly.

“I don’t understand,” I said, frowning. “What expertise do you have?” Now that I had stopped crying, it occurred to me that asking the owner of the local diner to help rescue someone from Hell might be a strange choice.

Goldie sighed.

“I’ll tell you, but please don’t spread it around. I’m half demon.”

“What?” I stared at her in surprise. She didn’t look like a demon at all—unless she hid it really well. She looked like a pretty, middle aged woman with a full, curvy figure and a mass of golden blonde ringlets

“It’s true.” She nodded briefly. “My mother was a Succubus which makes me half

Succubus. That's also the reason I'm an expert at Sex Magic. It kind of runs in my blood, you know?"

I didn't know, but I wanted to learn more.

"Tell me what to do," I said eagerly, leaning forward. "How do I use Sex Magic to get Kael back?"

"Well first of all, you need the right setting," Goldie told me. "Luckily, I have my Lust Hut—you can use that."

"Uh, Lust Hut?" I raised my eyebrows. "What's that?"

"The place I go to practice my magic, of course," Goldie said patiently. She sighed. "I don't use it much now. I don't have any Heartmates."

"Heartmates? Plural?" I couldn't help asking.

She nodded.

"Look, being half-Succubus means I have some pretty strong drives. One guy just doesn't do it for me. But it's really hard to find two or three guys who are into sharing. They always get jealous of each other at some point. So here I am, on my own." She straightened up. "But that doesn't matter. Right now we're trying to get your Heartmate back."

"Oh, I don't know if Kael is my Heartmate—what is a Heartmate, anyway?" I asked.

"That's your Fated Mate—the one set aside just for you," Goody Albright explained. "It's not easy to find the perfect one for you, but you know when you do."

I thought of how well Kael and I fit together—of how sweet and kind and caring and protective he was and how he'd said he didn't want to lose me—not even to go back to Heaven. Maybe he was my Heartmate.

But how did I get him back?

“I'll explain everything,” Goldie said when I asked. “But I warn you—you're going to have to make a sacrifice if you're going to get him out of Hell—that's a big ask for any kind of magic.”

“A sacrifice?” I felt my stomach lurch. “You mean like...killing an animal or something?”

Both she and Goody Albright laughed.

“No, no, my dear!” Goody Albright said.

“I'm talking about giving up something you really want,” Goldie explained.

“Like what?” I shook my head. I couldn't think of anything I really wanted right now but Kael. I'd already given up my shop in New Orleans—what else would be required of me?

“I can't tell you but you'll know at the right time,” Goldie told me. She raised her eyebrows at me. “Do you want to do this tonight? Because if so, I need to get started brewing a lust potion.”

“A lust potion?” I asked blankly.

“Sure. I don't need one myself, being half Succubus, but most people don't have the same drives I do,” she explained. “If you're going to do successful Sex Magic, you

need to be really horny.”

“Goldie!” Goody Albright looked slightly scandalized.

“Sorry—I should have said you need to be sufficiently aroused,” Goldie said, grinning unrepentantly.

“That’s better,” Goody Albright said primly but a little smile twitched around the corners of her mouth. “Thank you, Goldie. And you’d probably better start on that potion at once. The longer Kael is stuck in The Pit, the harder it’s going to be to extract him.”

“You’re right about that.” Goldie got up and started moving around the small break room. There was a regular sized stove in the corner—not nearly as big as the ones in the kitchen of the diner. She got out a pot and then opened a cabinet and started searching for ingredients.

Before I knew it, the room was filled with the scent of cinnamon and cloves and other warming spices. Goldie kept adding more and more ingredients. Most of them I recognized from my stock in the store, though I had never guessed they could be used for Sex Magic. She added damiana, lemon balm, saffron, nutmeg and of course cinnamon and cloves.

Soon she was pouring the mixture into a mug and placing it in front of me.

“And just a little honey to sweeten and bind it all together,” she murmured, adding a sticky spoonful from a little pot shaped like a bee hive. “Now drink it up,” she told me. “And then we’d better hustle over to the Lust Hut. We need to get you settled before the potion takes effect.”

I still wasn’t completely sure about drinking a strange lust potion, but I was desperate

to get Kael back. So I took a sip—it was really good! Like the best herbal-spice tea I'd ever had. I drank some more and soon finished the whole mug. It warmed me from my head down to my feet and seemed to make my fingers and toes tingle. In fact, it made other parts of me tingle too—my nipples and the spot between my legs were suddenly alive and excited all over again.

“Oh—I think I feel it working already!” I exclaimed.

“Then we need to hurry. Come on!”

Goldie took me by the hand and pulled me to my feet. Goody Albright waved at us as we left the break room.

“Good luck, my dear! Please come see me and give me the news when all this is over.”

I promised I would and then I was following Goldie out the door of the diner and into the chilly Autumn twilight.

30

WILLOW

“So where is this ‘Lust Hut’ anyway?” I asked as I followed Goldie past the lighted town and out into the forest.

“Oh, don’t worry—it’s still inside the Hidden Hollow town limits,” she said over her shoulder as we walked down a narrow dirt path. “So we won’t be suddenly outside in the middle of a New England winter, if that’s what you’re thinking. But we will be out of sight of the more curious townsfolk. I like my privacy, you know?”

“I don’t blame you,” I said—and I didn’t. Especially if she was doing Sex Magic—you really would need privacy for that.

But now I was about to be doing Sex Magic—only I had no idea how to do it. I hoped that Goldie would explain exactly what I was supposed to do and how I was supposed to act. Otherwise this rescue attempt might be a disaster!

Luckily, Goldie seemed to know exactly what I was thinking. When we got to a little wooden cabin nestled in the woods and shaded by a huge oak tree with golden leaves, she turned to me and smiled.

“Look, I can tell you’re nervous, but there’s really nothing to this. I’m going to give you step-by-step instructions. The first thing you need to do is pick three roses.”

“Roses? What roses?” I asked, frowning.

“From my pleasure bush. Here.” She led me around to the side of the cabin and I saw a huge green bush so tall its top fronds were brushing the roof of the cabin. Despite the fact that it was Autumn, the whole bush was in bloom with dozens and dozens of roses in all stages from tightly curled buds to full-blown blooms.

The interesting thing to me was how many different colors of roses the bush grew—and most of them weren’t colors you could find in your local florist’s shop. In addition to traditional colors like pink, white, and red, I saw navy blue, black, purple, orange, and green roses. There were also silver, gold, and bronze ones—their shiny metallic hues winking in the last light of the dying sun through the leaves.

“Does it matter what color I choose?” I asked Goldie.

“Actually, yes.” She nodded. “It depends on the intensity you like. White doesn’t do anything at all. Yellow and pink and all the pastel colors are really mild. The darker the shade, the more intense the sensations.”

“Uh...what sensations?” I asked, frowning.

“You know—the vibrations. Just think of them as magical adult toys,” Goldie told me. She picked a deep red rose in full bloom and handed it to me. “If I’m not mistaken, I think someone in the human world made a mechanical version of these, but of course they’re just a pale imitation of the real thing.”

Mystified about how I would use roses as adult toys, I chose another red one to go with the one she’d given me. I was about to choose a dark blue one as my third, when Goldie stopped me.

“Take this one,” she said and plucked a golden rose that was little more than a bud with the petals just beginning to unfurl. “The gold and silver and bronze are special,” she explained. “They make a kind of balm that helps you open.”

“Open what?” I asked, frowning.

“You know—for when you’re with a really big guy? Especially if you’re with one of the Creatures—they can be kind of overwhelming if you’re not prepared.”

I thought of how huge Kael’s shaft was and nodded.

“Oh, okay. Got it.”

“Good. Just take them and hurry—the potion I gave you is fast acting. We need to get you inside,” she told me.

She opened the door of the unassuming looking cabin but once we were inside I could see why she called it “the Lust Hut.”

I saw a single large room, lit with a dim, golden light that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. The walls and ceiling were painted red but the floor was black and so shiny I could dimly see my reflection in it when I looked down.

In one corner was a large apparatus shaped like an X which Goldie informed me was a St. Andrew’s Cross. In another corner was what appeared to be a padded bench. Hanging on the wall beside it was a rack full of all kinds of floggers, whips, riding crops, and anything else you could imagine to beat someone with.

In the third corner was a cage—an actual, human-sized cage with bars and a lock and everything.

But it was the fourth and final corner of the cabin that Goldie directed my attention to.

“There’s the bed,” she told me, pointing to a black lacquered, four-poster monstrosity

whose mattress was covered in red leather instead of sheets.

“Wow, uh—leather?” I asked. I was beginning to feel more than tingly by now. My nipples were getting tight and my pussy was getting wet. I wondered what in the world I was supposed to do with myself until we could get Kael here.

“Easier cleanup,” Goldie explained. “Though of course we have some softer elements.” She pointed to a soft, fluffy-looking throw folded at the end of the bed. “Even with a magic cleaning spell, leather is less messy,” she added.

I couldn’t help noticing that there were wide silver rings at all four corners of the bed, set into the sturdy, black lacquered bedposts. Each ring had a thick leather cuff with a buckle fastened to it. Goldie saw me examining them and nodded.

“Oh yeah—you won’t need most of the stuff in this place, but you might need those. Especially if Kael is trapped in his demon form. He might get out of hand—you’d do well to cuff him down until you can effect a transformation back to his angelic form.”

“What? But how am I supposed to do that?” I asked.

“With magic and sex, of course.” She laughed. “Don’t look so worried—didn’t I tell you I’d walk you through it? Now look, this is what you have to do...”

She spoke to me for about ten more minutes, making sure I had everything down pat. Then she said,

“Good luck! The potion should be reaching maximum effectiveness any minute so I’ll leave you to begin now.”

“I guess I’ll see you in the morning,” I said. By now I was shifting from foot to foot, unable to keep myself still—the lust potion was really working on me!

“See you in the morning,” she echoed. “Oh, and if you want something sexy to wear—look in there.” She motioned to a black lacquered wardrobe on the wall closest to the bed. “You’re about my size so most of it should fit. And don’t worry—everything in there has been magically cleaned with my cabin cleansing spell so that it’s like brand new again. Ditto with all the toys,” she added, nodding at another rack—this one filled with dildos and vibrators. “Just put them back on the rack when you’re done and the cabin will do the rest.”

Then she left, shutting the door behind her. There was a snick and I saw that the bolt on the inside of the door had clicked shut. So now I was locked in and no one else could get into the Lust Hut to help me.

I really hoped that this was going to go all right. If things got messy, I was going to be all alone and in a lot of trouble.

31

WILLOW

I didn't know how I felt about using someone else's sex toys, even if they were magically cleaned, but I thought I would have a quick look in the wardrobe. I pulled open the black lacquered door and was surprised at the many choices available.

There was a lot of bondage gear—harnesses with black leather straps and dog collars and leashes—but that wasn't what I was looking for. I wanted something a little less BDSM. Yes, I was probably going to wind up tying Kael down—or at least cuffing him to the bed—if he was stuck in his demonic form, but that didn't mean I wanted to dress up like a Domme at the moment.

So instead of all that, I found a sexy little black teddy. It was trimmed in black fur and had slits for my breasts so my nipples could poke through. There was a pair of matching black panties—which were crotchless—that I pulled on as well. Then I went to arrange myself on the bed and begin the spell.

Goldie had assured me there was no need to “call the corners” or cast a magical circle like the one I'd helped Goody Albright make for the transference spell.

“This whole hut is one big magical circle dedicated to sex and pleasure,” she told me. “So just sit on the bed and get started.”

I arranged myself in the center of the bed—the red leather covering the mattress was chilly at first, on my behind—and started the first step.

“To start with, set an intention,” Goldie had told me. “Set it, speak it out loud, and visualize it fully. Visualization is very important in Sex Magic.”

“Goody Albright told me the same thing about regular magic,” I remarked.

“She’s right.” Goldie nodded. “So be sure you put as much detail into your mental picture as possible.”

So that was what I did. I looked at the wall closest to the bed—which was covered in deep red wallpaper decorated in darker red velvet designs—and began to visualize.

“I’m going to form a magic portal,” I said aloud, picturing the portal right there, in the wall beside the bed. “A portal that only Kael can come through. No one else can enter my holy space—no one else is invited into my presence.”

Goldie had impressed on me how extremely important saying this was.

“You don’t want anyone or anything else getting through to you,” she told me. “Say it several times and in several ways—make your meaning for the magic portal really clear.”

“This portal is only for Kael,” I said again, picturing it in my mind. A large, round opening that only my guardian gargoyle could use. “When I form it, he will come through. He will be with me on the bed.” I pictured him sitting beside me, still in his gargoyle form. “He will be here and I will raise the sexual energy to keep him here,” I went on.

Speaking of raising sexual energy, that was my next order of business.

I picked up the three roses Goldie had asked me to pick from the night table beside the bed where I had laid them earlier. I pulled open the slits in the front of my sexy

black teddy and pushed my breasts through. I couldn't help noticing how dark and tight my nipples had become—the lust potion was really working on me.

Taking the first dark red rose, which was in full bloom, I pressed the center of the flower to my right nipple.

Immediately, it started to suck. And it didn't just feel like I was rubbing my nipple against flower petals either—even though that would probably be a nice sensation. No, it felt like an actual mouth—albeit a very small one—sucking on my nipple.

The sensation was intense, but I really liked it. I put the other rose on my left nipple and gave a little moan. I've always had sensitive nipples and the naughty flowers were sending shivers of pleasure straight from my nipples right down to my pussy.

And that was where the last rose was for. Spreading my legs, I raised the furry hem of the black teddy, baring my pussy which was already exposed thanks to the crotchless panties. I took the golden rose bud and pressed the small opening in the center of the tightly furled petals to my aching clit.

I gave another, louder moan as I felt it latch on and begin to suck and tongue me. Because yes, it felt like a tongue and not only that—a vibrating tongue. It began to secrete a slippery substance too—a warm, tingling liquid which ran from its petal mouth down to coat my slippery folds. I could feel it sliding into the mouth of my pussy, making me feel absolutely molten with desire.

The sensations were intense but I didn't come—Goldie had told me that I wouldn't be able to until I had my lover inside me. That would be Kael—if only I could form the portal and bring him to me and then somehow keep him here.

Closing my eyes, I gave in to the delicious pleasure that was building inside me and began to recite the spell Goldie had taught me.

“Spirits Three, I call on Thee:

Cupid, Eros, and Aphrodite

My love is gone, my love has flown

I need your help to bring him home.

Form a portal. Form a gate

Bring him home my lusts to sate.

Bring him here, I beg you must

And then I swear to feed your lust.

All my pleasure, it shall be,

Dedicated all to thee.”

When I finished the spell I felt a tingle of lust rush through me and I heard a kind of deep, gong sound to my right where the wall was. But I didn’t look yet. Instead, I chanted my mantra three times.

“Kael, I call on thee. Come home, come home, come home to me,” I said over and over.

Finally, I dared to open my eyes and look at the wall.

The portal was there and the same barren Hellscape from the iron door met my eyes. I saw many horrible creatures—one looked like an animated skeleton of some

prehistoric creature dragging itself across the cracked ground, another appeared to be a woman who had been literally turned inside out, writhing in torment. I didn't look at those any more than I had to. Instead, I scanned for Kael.

At last, I spotted him. He was wandering in the Hellscape desert, with a wild, desperate look in his red eyes. Because yes, he was still in his demonic form, just as Goldie had thought he might be. I recalled what she had told me before she left.

"He's going to be in a state of mental confusion," she'd explained. "He might not even know you at first but that doesn't matter. The minute you get him through the portal, you've got to lock him down. He'll be stunned at first by the passage—you have to use that time to your advantage. Put the spelled cuffs at the corners of the bed around his wrists and ankles."

"All right—so what do I do once I have him cuffed down?" I asked her.

"Have sex with him, of course," she said. "Sharing pleasure is a powerful thing. You can use Sex Magic to bring a confused or amnesiac person back to themselves, to break a spell, to ward off a curse—all kinds of things. Right now though, you've got to concentrate on bringing Kael back to his angelic form and tying him to the Earthly Realm so he can't be sucked back through the portal to Hell."

"Could that happen?" I asked. "I thought it was going to be a one-way portal?"

"That's your intention, of course," she told me. "But whether you can make it come true or not is up to you—it depends on how strong a pull The Pit has on him and how strong your will to keep him with you is."

"I'll keep him," I swore grimly. "No matter what I have to do, he's not going back to Hell once I get him over here."

“That’s the spirit!” Goldie had nodded approvingly. “Just keep repeating your mantra and keep your intention fixed in your mind. Visualize what you want every step of the way—manifest your will. Humans think they can do that with all their silly ideas about ‘the power of positive thinking.’ But only witches can truly make it happen—we are the only ones who can make our will reality. And I can tell you’ve got a lot of power—both as a Medium and a witch. You can do this!”

“I can do this,” I repeated to myself now. “I can bring Kael back to me—I can bring him through the portal. Kael—come to me,” I called. “Come now to your Mistress—come to the one who loves you!”

A hot, dry wind suddenly rushed out of the large round window I had created between Hidden Hollow and The Pit and sucked my breath away. It carried my words through the portal and I saw Kael’s head jerk up as he looked in my direction.

His burning red eyes focused on me and I saw a long, forked tongue shoot out of his fanged mouth and lick his sneering lips.

A cold chill ran down my spine. Was this really a smart thing to be doing? Goldie had said he probably wouldn’t know me at first and I knew how incredibly strong he was. He could break me in half with one hand if he wanted to.

I forced myself to push those thoughts and doubts away. I knew Kael—he wanted only to love me and pleasure me. He had gone out of his way not to hurt me in the past—I believed that I could bring him over to me. I also believed I could get him back to his angelic form before we consummated our relationship and made the sexual sacrifice I had offered to the three deities I had called on to help me.

This is going to work, I told myself. Remember your Intention—recite your Mantra.

“Kael, I call on thee!” I shouted through the portal to him. “Come home, come home,

come home to me!”

As I called for him, I concentrated on the pleasure the three magical roses were giving me. I pictured myself gathering the pleasure like rose petals in my hands and throwing them outward, making a path that Kael could follow to get home.

Slowly, it began to work and the huge gargoyle came towards me. It seemed to take forever at first—he was leaning forward at an angle—it looked like he was walking against a strong wind that wanted to hold him back. But I kept calling to him and pushing the sexual energy out to make a path. Finally, he reached the portal.

I confess, when I looked into his burning red eyes, I had a moment of doubt. There was no recognition in his gaze—not a single memory of me as his Mistress. Those fiery orbs were blank as he stared at me and I could almost hear him wondering in the bestial part of his brain why I had called him...and what he might like to do to me.

But I had to take this chance—I would never get another. I knew, because Goldie had told me, that if I let him go once, he would be gone for good.

“Hell won’t relinquish its hold on him twice,” she had warned me. “Don’t lose your nerve or you’ll lose your man—that’s a guarantee.”

Keeping that in mind, I continued to call him.

“Kael, I call on thee. Come home, come home, come home to me,” I said, almost singing it now because he was so close I didn’t need to shout. “Come to me and share pleasure,” I added. “Let’s love each other.”

This seemed to decide him. He gave a grunt and stepped through the portal—which widened considerably to let him get through.

Time was now of the essence and I knew it. I had to get him cuffed to the bed as soon as I could. Goldie had said coming from The Pit back to Hidden Hollow would leave him momentarily stunned and it was essential to get him fastened down before the confusion cleared.

“You need to have him in your power so you can bring back his memory—and bring him back to his angelic form,” she had told me. “You don’t want to have sex with him in his demonic form—sex with a demon is no fun unless you really like it rough. Besides, I saw that barb on his cock when he was still a statue,” she added. “I know you don’t want to get stabbed between the legs with that!”

As it happened, she was right—I didn’t want to get stabbed with Kael’s barb. So now I had to work fast to get him on the bed and cuffed down.

“Come here. That’s right—come to me, Kael,” I said softly, beckoning to the stunned gargoyle.

For a moment he just stood there. But when I called his name again, he blinked and started to move.

He climbed onto the high red mattress beside me—though it wasn’t so high for him—and at first I thought it would be no problem. He seemed utterly docile as I got him scooted into position and began to fasten his wrists with the leather straps. As I buckled each one, I was supposed to say a mini spell which Goldie had taught me.

“Prisoner of Love, Gentle as a Dove,” I recited as I fastened his right wrist to the headboard. Then I stopped—I had forgotten the second part! There was a second line I was supposed to say, wasn’t there? I was almost completely sure of it. But it wouldn’t come to my mind.

Still, the spell seemed to be working because Kael wasn’t trying to get away. His

hand hung limp from the leather cuff attached to the bedpost—it must be working.

Maybe I was remembering wrong, I thought. Maybe there wasn't a second verse to the mini-spell.

I went on to his other wrist and then both his ankles. As I fastened each in place, I said the words again. "Prisoner of Love, Gentle as a Dove."

Finally, I had my guardian gargoyle cuffed firmly to the bed—now the real Sex Magic could begin.

I had no idea how wrong things were about to go.

WILLOW

I was ready to do Sex Magic—ready in more than one way. The magical roses and the lust potion Goldie had brewed for me had done their job—I was nearly horny out of my mind! I was so horny, in fact, that even the sight of Kael’s gargoyle form with his burning red eyes and the long, forked tongue that came out like a snake’s couldn’t scare me off.

I climbed on top of him and straddled his hips. He growled at me and tugged against the cuffs, but it was clear he couldn’t get loose.

“Easy, big boy,” I murmured. “Let’s see how you like this.”

Then I reached down between us and unfastened his trousers.

He growled softly as I reached in and grasped his shaft. It was already long and thick and hard when I brought it out. I stroked it up and down, admiring it and noticing that it was hotter than usual—so hot it almost burned me. It also looked bigger than it had when he was in his angelic form, I decided. Maybe that was because of the enormous barb that tipped his cock where the head should be.

It was two inches in length and looked like a long, cruel thorn. It didn’t look fun to get fucked with—which was why I had to call him back to himself and bring him back to his angelic form.

But though I didn't want it inside me, I was still fascinated by the barb. Looking closer, I saw it was like a needle with a beveled edge just below the tip. From the opening, a dark, golden liquid was welling up—that must be his gargoyle form's precum, I decided.

Curiously, I leaned forward and ran my tongue carefully around the barb. The precum tasted like hot cinnamon—the kind of candies that were sweet but burned your tongue.

As I tasted him, my guardian gargoyle growled softly. Looking up, I saw that those burning red eyes were fixed on me as I pleased him. Also, there was a swelling at the base of his shaft—was that the knot he had talked about?

“Kael,” I murmured softly, stroking his thick shaft up and down. “Kael, I know you can hear me—I know you're in there. Come back to me, Kael—come back to your angelic form so we can make love.”

His growl turned into a groan and I swore I could see his eyes turn from burning red to silver...just for a moment. Then they went red again, but that was okay—I'd almost brought him back to his true form, I told myself. I just had to be patient and keep working on him.

Which wasn't easy considering how desperate I was getting. The roses were still teasing me and the lust potion was in full force. My nipples were so tight they hurt and my pussy was so wet, both from the golden rose's secretions and from my own juices, that my inner thighs were completely drenched. I could see now why Goldie preferred to keep her mattress covered in leather rather than any kind of sheets.

“Kael,” I called him again, trying to keep my voice low and coaxing as I stroked his cock. Goddess, if I didn't get him in me soon I felt like I would just die! My pussy felt so empty—so needy! “Kael, come back to me—I need you. Please, I?—”

But my concentration was abruptly broken by a leering face outside the portal.

It was a demon with three heads—each uglier than the last. All three of them were making faces at me—and then the evil thing started trying to crawl through the portal!

I cursed softly—I wished I could have closed the portal right away, but Goldie had told me that would be impossible until after Kael and I made love and sealed our bond as Heartmates. Until then, it would remain open—a constant threat.

I'm proud to say I didn't panic and I didn't freeze. Quickly I went back to my Intention.

“I have opened a portal—a one way portal that only one person can use. This portal is only for my lover—my guardian gargoyle, Kael,” I said firmly. “Anyone else who tries to use this portal will get shocked like they touched an electrical fence with thousands of volts running through it.”

As I spoke, I pictured the ugly, three-headed demon being fried on an electric fence. I went so far as to over-exaggerate it. I imagined him going stiff and turning black and white so that his skeleton stood out in stark relief—just like they showed electrocution in old cartoons.

And as I pictured this and spoke it, I manifested my will, just as Goldie had told me I could. The three-headed demon suddenly went stiff and shrieked in pain. I didn't see its skeleton, but I didn't need to. It screamed and begged until at last it managed to free itself from the portal and scamper off.

Problem finally solved, I turned back to the matter at hand. I still had to bring Kael back to his angelic form so that I could offer the sexual sacrifice I had promised to the three deities of love and lust I had called on.

“Kael,” I began...but then I stopped, the words dying on my lips.

Somehow the big gargoyle—and yes, he was still fully gargoyle—had gotten free of the leather cuffs. They hung empty, swinging from the bedposts on their silver rings.

Kael was now free and he clearly still wasn't in his right mind.

33

KAEL

I did not know the curvy little human who had called me. She seemed vaguely familiar but I had been trapped in my demonic form—trapped in The Pit—too long. An hour there is like a year and I had lost myself as I wandered the barren Hellscape. So I only knew that I felt drawn to her—that she called for me and I came.

My lust rose and my shaft hardened when she leaned down to lick my barb and stroked my shaft. The knot at the base of my cock was aching with desire to swell inside her. I knew what she needed—I could smell her lust perfuming the air. She wanted me to breed her—and I was more than willing.

But first I had to get her into the right position to skewer her on my cock and plant my seed in her belly...

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WILLOW

“O h no,” I whispered, looking up at my guardian gargoyle who was now free of the magical cuffs. “Oh please, no!”

How could this happen, I wondered? How could the cuffs just pop open? I must have done something wrong .

Suddenly, the other part of the mini-binding spell came back to me.

Prisoner of Love. Gentle as a Dove. Be still as can be. You are not free.

That’s what I was supposed to say as I cuffed him up! Only I had left off the important second half of the mini-spell. And now I was screwed .

But I couldn’t give in to the fear—I had to keep my cool, I told myself. I had to carry on with the Sex Magic.

Don’t panic, I told myself. Just move slowly and get him refastened. Put the cuffs on again.

“Kael, hold still, all right?” I said in soft voice that trembled only a little. “Just hold still and let’s just get you fastened up...”

As I spoke, I reached for his right wrist, intending to cuff it to the bedpost again, but

Kael wasn't having it.

With a low growl, he reached for me and grabbed my wrist before I could get hold of his. He twisted my arm behind my back and dragged me close to him, his fiery eyes burning into mine.

"Kael, please!" I begged him breathlessly. "Please, this isn't you! You don't want to hurt me—you love me!"

But even if the angelic part of him loved me, it was clear that the demonic part that lusted for me was even stronger.

He used his free hand to tug the red roses off my nipples, leaving them bare. They were dark and puffy from where the roses had sucked them and Kael seemed to like that. He growled in appreciation as his eyes fastened on my bare breasts. Then his long, forked tongue flickered out and curled around one sensitive nipple, making me moan.

"Oh! Oh Goddess, please!" I begged, though I wasn't sure if I was begging him to let me go...or to keep going.

Kael obviously took it to mean the latter. He flipped up the fur-trimmed skirt of my little black teddy and eyed my bare pussy with a growl of lust.

I gasped and tried to shut my legs but I couldn't—I was still straddling his hips which opened me wide. The position opened my pussy lips too and showed a hint of my tight clit—a fact that Kael soon took advantage of.

His long, forked tongue slid out again and before I could protest, it was caressing my aching button, sliding around and around my clit in a way that sent sparks of pleasure all through my body.

“Oh!” I gasped, thrusting my hips involuntarily. “Oh, Kael—what are you doing?”

He didn’t answer in words—he didn’t have to. His tongue dipped lower and then I felt it sliding inside me. I gave a little cry and bucked my hips again. Wait—was he making his tongue thicker somehow? How was he doing that?

I didn’t know how it was possible, but that was what it felt like. His tongue was getting longer and thicker inside me—filling me up almost like a cock. I could feel it pressing against the end of my channel and I moaned breathlessly as it thrust inside me, as though it was trying to get even deeper.

“Kael, no!” I admonished him breathlessly. “Let me get your hands back in the cuffs and then I’ll let you eat my pussy all you want. But until then...”

He didn’t let me finish. Abruptly, he withdrew his tongue and licked his lips. Then he grabbed me by the waist and spun me around.

Before I knew it, I was on my hands and knees on the bed with my ass in the air. Then Kael flipped up the furry hem of the black teddy and I felt a cool breeze on my bottom.

“Wait, Kael!” I exclaimed, but he only growled and started tugging at my panties. Even though they were crotchless, that clearly wasn’t good enough for the big gargoyle—he wanted me completely bare from the waist down.

I moaned and tried to wiggle away from him, but he was too strong— much too strong. He held me by the back of the neck with one big hand as he dragged the wispy black panties down and off.

I felt a cool breeze on my naked bottom and then he was crowding close behind me.

I began to try to get away in earnest. I didn't want him to stab me between my legs! I didn't want him to breed me with his barb—it was too sharp! He couldn't...

And then it happened—I felt something long and thick and hard entering my naked, open pussy. My inner walls stretched wide to accommodate his thickness and there was a single piercing pain that lasted about two seconds—the longest two seconds of my life.

But even as I threw back my head to cry out in protest, the pain turned abruptly to pleasure—a pleasure so overwhelming I couldn't breathe.

“Oh!” I gasped as what felt like a full-body orgasm rolled through me. My whole body jerked as all my muscles tightened. I could feel my inner walls clamping down hard on the huge cock invading me, caressing it, massaging it, milking it for its seed.

But my guardian gargoyle didn't come in me yet. He only gripped my hips harder and held still—he seemed to be waiting for something. What, though?

I found out a few minutes later when the intense orgasm finally ended. My whole body went limp and I moaned and half collapsed. I had been on my hands and knees, but now I lowered my head to my arms, overwhelmed by the aftershocks of sensation that were still pulsing through me.

The bottom half of me would have collapsed as well, but Kael was holding me in place with his big hands wrapped firmly around my hips.

“Kael?” I murmured, turning my head to look back at him. “Please, I can't take anymore. I can't?—”

And then I realized what he had been waiting for. Because as all of my formerly tight muscles relaxed—including my inner walls—the big gargoyle began easing forward

again.

I didn't feel his barb at all now—but what I did feel was his knot. The swelling at the base of his cock that I had noticed earlier was slowly easing into me.

I moaned and gasped as the thick swelling stretched the mouth of my pussy, easing inside inch by inch. Goddess, how big was it anyway? Would it never end? It seemed to take him forever to get it inside me with that slow, steady motion that strained my inner walls to the limit.

At last he seemed to be satisfied that it was all inside me. But as the gargoyle's forward motion finally stopped, I felt the knotting begin. I moaned softly and scrabbled at the red leather mattress cover, looking for something to hold on to as the enormous knot swelled, stretching me open mercilessly. But the mattress pad was slick—I couldn't find anything to grip so I had to ball my hands into fists until I felt my nails cutting into my palms.

Goddess, so this was what sex with a demon was like—it was both painful and pleasurable but I found that the two sensations were blending into one and I couldn't tell where one began and the other ended.

“Kael,” I moaned as he began to rock his hips against me. He wasn't exactly thrusting because now that the knot had swollen to tie us together, there was no pulling out. But he was pushing deeper and deeper somehow—it was like the end of my channel was opening for him—inviting him inside. So the effect was almost the same.

As he rocked against me, my bare breasts swayed with every motion. At the same time, his heavy balls came up to slap my open pussy, teasing my swollen clit and pushing me closer and closer to the edge. Oh Goddess, I couldn't take much more of this! And yet, I had to. I don't know how long I stayed there on my hands and knees, my breasts swaying with each pump of his hips as I opened myself for him and he

filled me. It seemed to be an eternity and I thought it would never end.

But at last the huge gargoyle growled deep in his throat and began to come.

I cried out as his hard hands gripped my hips and hot pulses of demon cum filled me. Was he planting a baby in my belly? Was that even possible?

I didn't know but I did know that the flood of burning cum made my body react—I started coming again.

“Oh, Kael!” I moaned, my back arching as my inner muscles clamped down on the huge invader. The orgasm was so intense it was painful and I felt my inner walls actually milking him this time—as though I was begging for more of his seed to be planted inside me.

The huge gargoyle was happy to oblige me. He pumped more and more of his burning cum into my pussy...into my womb. I felt it running down my thighs in fiery rivulets that stung and burned but even as I lost some of it, he pumped more and more into me. Goddess, how much longer could he keep on coming? How much seed could he have to fill me with?

The answer seemed to be an infinite supply. I don't know how long I was trapped like that, on my knees with my ass in the air and my breasts hanging down, my pussy spread and skewered by the immense, demonic cock. I don't know how much cum he pumped into me—I only knew that I was coming over and over—each time harder than the last. Somehow this act—the act of being open and being filled to the limit—had triggered something inside me. Some button had been pushed or some switch had been thrown and now I couldn't stop coming!

“Please!” I gasped, writhing weakly, trying to get free of him. “Oh please, Kael—I can't take much more! I can't stand it—please!”

And the growling and thrusting stopped abruptly and I heard a familiar voice.

“Willow?” it said in a low, horrified tone. “Mistress? My God—what have I done to you?”

35

KAEL

I came back to consciousness and the memory of myself at the worst possible time. I felt a tight, pleasurable pressure around my shaft and realized that I was coming—orgasming over and over and flooding the womb of the woman I was buried inside.

Looking down, I found that the woman in question was Willow—my Mistress. The one woman I had sworn to protect and serve.

Well, I was serving her all right, I saw grimly. I was balls deep in her tight pussy and she was moaning and struggling weakly beneath me.

“Kael, please!” she moaned. “Please, it hurts—it’s too much! I can’t take it anymore.”

I felt my heart sink as I realized what I had done. I had hurt the woman I loved—I had violated the Mistress I had sworn to protect.

I deserved to die—to be cast back into The Pit which I now vaguely remembered she had pulled me from.

Thankfully, I had spent the last of my seed in her so my knot was finally going down. I waited until it was sufficiently deflated and then pulled out slowly, so as not to hurt her anymore than I already had.

She cried out weakly as I came free and I winced as I saw the huge gush of seed that came from her pussy and coated her thighs. Gods, I had done my best to breed her, hadn't I? If she didn't have my child taking root in her belly, I would be very surprised.

What a horrible guardian I was—what a horrible male—I had hurt the one I was supposed to protect. She would never trust me again and I didn't blame her—I would never trust myself either.

As soon as I was all the way out of her, Willow moaned and collapsed on her side.

“Mistress,” I said, leaning over her. “Mistress, forgive me. I'm so sorry!”

Her eyelids fluttered and her gaze fixed on me. I saw relief in her beautiful green eyes.

“Kael, you're back,” she whispered. “Thank...thank the Goddess.”

“I didn't mean to hurt you,” I told her. “I didn't know you. But I know that's no excuse. I deserve to be cast back into Hell.”

As I spoke, I felt a hot wind curling around me. Looking to the side, I saw the portal I vaguely remembered coming through. That was the source of the wind—it was curling around me, tugging at me, urging me to return to The Pit, where I belonged.

But my words seemed to upset Willow.

“What? No!” she exclaimed, struggling to sit up. I helped her get to her knees and she winced and scooted away from the puddle of demon seed she had left when I pulled out of her.

I couldn't stop the aching in my heart when I saw how stiffly she moved. Her thighs were coated with my dark gold demon cum but I could see the redness there too—I had burned her when I came in her. I had hurt her when I filled her with my seed. And that didn't even include stabbing her with my barb and letting my knot swell inside her. I had mistreated and used her fragile human body like it was disposable—useful as nothing but a sexual toy.

I couldn't have hated myself more.

But as my self-loathing grew, so did the wind from the portal. I felt it curling around my arms and legs like invisible hands, trying to drag me back.

Willow noticed what was happening—the way I was slowly getting dragged towards the portal.

“Hey, what's going on? Stop it! Stop that!” she exclaimed, grabbing my arm.

I shook my head.

“Just let it take me, Mistress. I deserve my fate. I deserve to go back and be forever bound in The Pit.”

“No, you don't! Kael, please!” she begged and there were tears in her lovely green eyes.

But neither of us could stop the inevitable. I was going to be dragged back through the portal and into Hell, where I belonged.

I didn't even try to fight it.

WILLOW

I was horrified at what was happening. This wasn't right! Goldie had promised me that once Kael and I both came and sealed our Heartmate bond, the portal to The Pit would close on its own and never open again.

Instead, Kael was getting dragged back to the portal and there didn't seem to be anything I could do to stop it!

I could see some invisible presence tugging at him but my fallen angel wasn't even trying to fight it. He was just passively letting it take him because he apparently felt guilty about breeding me in his gargoyle form.

The thing was, I wasn't angry at him. I understood that he'd been out of it—not himself. And the way things had happened was my fault because I had forgotten the second verse of the mini-binding spell when I was cuffing him to the bedposts.

But Kael seemed past caring as I tried to explain this. He was going—getting closer and closer to the ominous portal where evil and eternal damnation waited for him. And I knew if he went through it, I would never have a chance to get him back again.

Then something else that Goldie had said came back to me.

“You'll have to make a sacrifice,” she had told me. And Goody Albright had explained that I would have to give up something I wanted—something dear and

precious to me if I was going to free Kael completely.

Suddenly, I knew what I had to do.

I didn't want to do it—just the thought of it made me heartsick. Because what I was giving up, was Kael himself. Just as I had found a man I could love and trust, I was going to lose him.

But there was no other way.

I reached for the golden key that still hung between my breasts on the long golden chain. Then I climbed on Kael, straddling his waist and sitting down on him hard to keep the invisible presence that was trying to drag him back to Hell at bay.

“Mistress?” His eyes opened wide in surprise. “What are you doing?”

“The only thing I can do,” I said.

With tears in my eyes, I slipped the small golden key into the locket clamped around his throat. And this time, when I twisted it to the right, the key turned and the lock sprang open.

“Kael,” I said to him, trying not to cry. “You have served me well. I set you free of the curse on you. Go back to Heaven where you belong.”

“What?” His eyebrows shot up and he looked almost panicked. “Mistress—Willow—no! I don't deserve?—”

But before he could finish speaking his entire body began to shimmer and glow. I watched through squinted eyes, because it was so bright, as he slowly began to dissolve into sparkling sunbeams of pure white light.

I found I was sitting on nothing but the bed—Kael’s huge frame was completely incorporeal now. For a brief, brilliant moment his light swirled around me like a million stars—almost as though he was saying goodbye.

And then the light beams formed themselves into a single, vertical column and shot upwards, into the air. They went right through the roof of the cabin and I thought I heard the sounds of many voices singing and shouting in joyful unison.

“He has come home!” I heard a loud voice trumpeting from very far away. “Rejoice! For Kael has finally returned to the Heavenly Realm!”

And then whatever thin connection I’d had with my guardian gargoyle was finally severed and the cheering was cut off as total silence fell.

I looked up at the wooden rafters of the roof...and then at the wall where the portal had been. It was gone, too. In fact, all trace of the man I loved was gone—simply vanished out of existence, as though he had never been there in the first place. As though he had never come to life and come down off his stone pedestal to tell me he wanted to protect me. As though he had never shielded me with his wings or wrapped me in his arms or kissed me to heal me and show me what real love could be like.

He was gone...just gone and he was never coming back.

I hung my head and cried.

WILLOW

I can't lie—the next few weeks were some of the hardest of my life. You might think that I would be able to forget a man I'd known for less than a week, but my heart wouldn't let me. I felt tied to Kael—as though there was a golden cord wound around my heart and attached to his somewhere as well. Nothing could break that cord and so I couldn't forget him—even if I had wanted to, which I didn't.

The other thing which reminded me of him were the burns on my inner thighs, where his seed had leaked out and scorched me. For some reason, they wouldn't heal—no matter how much of the special salve that Goody Albright gave me I used.

I was just miserable.

The only bright spot was the fact that my new store was doing extremely well. Apparently a lot of magical practitioners in Hidden Hollow had been waiting for a magical ingredients shop to open. Once I got things organized, I was busy from morning until night.

I threw myself into my work and brought Miss Sassy with me for company. She liked prowling around the new store and investigating the building, which was much larger than the old shop in New Orleans had been. She caught several magical mice, which disappeared with a little poof! the minute she got them by the scruff of the neck, but since they weren't really bothering me and they were keeping her entertained, I didn't mind.

I got to know my new neighbors, and some of them became friends. I already felt close to Goldie and Goody Albright but I also got along well with Sarah and her huge Orc Heartmate, Rath. They even invited me over for dinner one night and I went—mostly so I didn't have to eat alone.

It wasn't until after supper, when Rath was doing the dishes because it was his turn and Sarah and I were sitting on the couch having an after-dinner drink, that things came to a head.

"It's not my place to say this, but you look really sad," she said to me candidly as I sipped the sweet, orange flavored liquor she'd poured me. "Is it because of your gargoyle?"

"Yes." I sighed deeply. "We didn't even know each other for three whole days, you know? But somehow I can't forget him. It's like we're tied together and I can't break the bond."

"That's how I feel about Rath." A smile touched her lips. "But he's my Heartmate. Was Kael yours?"

"I don't know." I shook my head. "I thought he might be but then I had to send him back to Heaven to keep him from getting sucked into Hell. So I guess I'll never know."

"What?" Her eyes grew wide. "I never heard all the details—tell me what happened!"

I explained, while being careful to leave out the owner of the Lust Hut. I just said it was another witch in town—I didn't want to betray Goldie's confidence. When I got to the part about him breeding me in demon form, Sarah's eyes widened again.

"My God—wasn't that painful?"

“It hurt but it felt good at the same time, if that makes any sense,” I said. “It was...intense. Really intense. But I don’t blame him for it—he wasn’t himself when it happened. In fact, he didn’t come back to himself until he, you know, came inside me.”

She frowned.

“Wait—he came inside you?”

I nodded.

“Of course—why?”

“Well, have you considered the fact that you might have sealed your Heartmate bond that night? I mean, that’s generally how it happens, you know.”

“I know, but I don’t know if that’s possible,” I said. “Because sealing the bond was supposed to close the portal to Hell, but it didn’t.”

“Maybe you only formed a partial bond,” she said thoughtfully. “I’ve heard that can happen sometimes. Maybe you couldn’t form a full bond because he wasn’t in his natural form—he was a demon instead of an angel.”

“I don’t know—I only know I had to unlock him and set him free,” I said sadly. “Because he was getting sucked back through the portal and he wasn’t even trying to get away.”

“He probably felt guilty,” Sarah murmured. “I had a similar situation with Rath, you know. He had an evil spirit indwell him and it attacked me using his body. He felt so bad afterwards that he avoided me for ages. I had to go over to his house and make him listen to reason before we could finally get together.”

I sighed longingly.

“If only I could do that. But it’s not like I can go to Heaven and talk to Kael.”

“You can’t yourself, but what if someone you know could go for you?” Sarah was looking thoughtful.

“Someone I know?” I shook my head. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you’re a Medium, aren’t you?” she asked reasonably. “So all you have to do is open a channel of communication with someone dead who you know went to Heaven and ask them to talk to Kael for you.”

“But I don’t know—” I started to say and then cut myself off abruptly. “Pop-pop,” I whispered.

“Who?” Sarah frowned.

“My grandfather—his name was Giovanni but I always called him ‘Pop-pop,’” I explained. “If he’s not in Heaven, I don’t know who is. He gave his life to save me from my abusive ex.”

“He sounds like a wonderful man,” Sarah said softly.

“The best.” I nodded. “He raised me and he loved me so much. I’m sure if I could contact him he would talk to Kael for me.”

“You should do it!” Sarah exclaimed, getting excited. “Do it right now! What do you need for the spell? I’ll get you the ingredients.”

“It’s not like that.” I shook my head. “I don’t really need any ingredients or props—I

just need to open myself to the other side.” And this time I have to be damn careful not to open a door into The Pit, I added silently to myself.

“Then do it!” Sarah urged me. “Unless you’d rather be alone and do it in privacy,” she added, obviously worried she was making me uncomfortable.

She wasn’t, though. And in fact, I would rather have a friend near when I did it—I told her so.

“Okay, good—then I’ll stay and be your witness. But first we have to set the scene.”

She jumped up from the comfy, oversized couch we were sitting on and went to turn off some of the lamps. Soon the only light was the golden glow of the fire across from the couch. One thing I loved about Hidden Hollow was the fact that you could have a fire almost all year long and every house here seemed to have a fireplace.

Sarah sat down beside me again, but gave me a little distance. Then she looked at me expectantly.

“Okay—is there anything else you need?”

“I don’t think so.” I shook my head. “Just let me concentrate...”

I closed my eyes and thought about the spirit realm...then I thought even harder about my Pop-pop. I conjured his kindly, faded blue eyes and his shock of hair which had stayed thick his whole life, gradually turning from black to salt and pepper to pure white. I thought of his booming laugh and his loud, happy voice and his big bear hugs that always made me feel so much better when I was blue. Goddess, I missed him so much! If only I could talk to him again...

And then I heard a familiar voice murmuring in my ear.

“I miss you too, Willow my love. Heaven is wonderful, but I’m still lonely sometimes without you.”

“Pop-pop?” My eyes flew open for a moment, but I realized there was nothing to see. There was no swirling fog this time—just a pure mental and emotional connection. When I closed my eyes, I could actually see him better because of the memories I had stored up.

“Yes, sweetie-pie—it’s me,” he murmured. “I felt you yearning for me and feeling sad—tell me, what’s wrong?”

“Oh Pop-pop—I fell in love with an angel!” I blurted out. “A fallen angel, I mean. He was cursed to come to Earth and serve and protect women and the golden key you gave me fit his lock—the lock around his neck, I mean.”

“Ah yes—the key. That was handed down to me from your great-great-great grandmother, you know,” he remarked. “Never did know exactly what it went to, I just knew it would offer you protection during times of danger.”

“Kael did protect me!” I exclaimed. “But then I had to let him go. Pop-pop, I miss him so much but there’s no way to contact him.”

“You leave that to me, Willow my love,” he said firmly. “But first tell me—was this boy—this angel—good to you?”

“He was my protector, Pop-pop,” I told him. “He killed Carlo to save me.”

“Ah-ha! I like him already!” Pop-pop exclaimed. “You don’t worry about a thing, my sweet. I’m going to talk to him and see if he can contact you.”

I felt tears welling in my eyes.

“Oh, thank you, Pop-pop! I knew I could count on you.”

“Of course you can, Willow my love. You just rest and relax and let Pop-pop handle everything.”

And then he was gone, as suddenly as he had appeared. But maybe that’s not the right word since I never saw him in the flesh—maybe it’s more accurate to say his spirit left and I no longer sensed him or heard his voice.

I opened my eyes to see Sarah staring at me with awe.

“I’ve never seen anyone communicate with the other side before,” she murmured. “That was amazing, Willow!”

“Er, thanks.” I shrugged, feeling suddenly shy. “It’s just a family gift, you know?”

“Well, you’re lucky to have it. From what I heard, it sounds like your grandfather is going to go find Kael and tell him you miss him—right?”

“Right.” I nodded and for the first time in weeks, I began to feel hope. “I wonder if he’s able to come back to Earth for a few minutes? Or even if he could just talk to me like Pop-pop did—I miss hearing his voice so much.”

“Of course you do.” Sara pressed my hand sympathetically. “Do you want to stay for some cake I made? Or would you rather go home and wait to see what happens?”

I felt grateful that she knew I would need privacy to talk to Kael—if he showed up.

“Normally I’d do anything to get a slice of one of your cakes,” I told her. She really was an excellent baker. “But I think for tonight, I just need to get home.”

“Of course. Then I’ll wrap up a slice you can take with you for later,” she said, rising.

A moment later she was seeing me off in the deepening twilight with a container holding a huge slice of chocolate cake. Before I left, she gave me a quick hug.

“I’m so glad you came to settle in Hidden Hollow,” she told me. “And I hope you get your Heartmate back.”

“I hope so too,” I told her.

Then I turned my face towards home, hoping that maybe I might have a chance to see the man I loved one last time.

38

WILLOW

But after waiting around the Flower Bower for two long, silent hours it didn't seem like Kael was going to make an appearance. I had fed Miss Sassy her nightly dinner of wet food and taken a shower. Then I put on a silky red robe the cottage had provided for me and paced around the house for an hour. Finally I parked myself on the couch and I had been sitting by the fire waiting, but I was feeling more and more sure he wasn't going to show.

Maybe he's not allowed to leave Heaven, I thought sadly, as I looked into the crackling flames. I thought about calling Pop-pop again, but I didn't like to bother him twice in one night. I knew he would do his best for me. If he couldn't get Kael to contact me, then it wasn't for lack of trying.

Maybe it just wasn't meant to be...

Then suddenly the golden glow of the fire was eclipsed by a much brighter light. I gasped and threw up a hand to shield my eyes—what was happening?

The brilliant white pillar of light shimmered in front of me for a moment...and then someone came out of it. After a moment of blinking I realized who it was.

"Kael!" I started to jump up to greet him, but he had already gone to his knees before me.

“Willow,” he murmured and his deep voice was filled with pain.

The brilliant column of light that had brought him had disappeared by now, so I was able to see his face without being blinded. My heart nearly stopped in my chest when I saw how unhappy he was. His silvery eyes were filled with sadness and regret and his mouth was set in lines of sorrow.

“Oh no—I shouldn’t have sent my Pop-pop after you, should I?” I blurted, feeling terrible. “You want to stay in Heaven—of course you do. Why would anyone want to come back to a place where they endured years of punishment? Kael, I’m so, so sorry!”

“Willow, please!” Leaning forward, he captured my hands in his. “I am the one who should be saying these things—I am the one who is sorry,” he said, looking at me earnestly.

“Sorry for what?” I asked blankly. “For leaving me? Because you couldn’t help that—I turned the key in the lock and set you free. But I only did it to keep you from getting sucked back through the portal to Hell,” I added quickly.

Kael shook his head.

“Do you really not understand? I am sorry for taking you against your will—for forcing you when I was in my demonic form.”

“But you didn’t do it on purpose,” I pointed out.

“That doesn’t matter. I hurt you.” His eyes were full of regret. “Even now, I can feel your pain. Here...” He laid one big hand flat in my lap, indicating my thighs. “I burned you with my demon seed. For that there can be no forgiveness.”

“Yes, there can!” I exclaimed. “Because I forgive you—Kael, I’ve missed you so much!”

“I have missed you too, Mistress and you’re very kind. But I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness,” he murmured, shaking his head.

I could see that he was really beating himself up and filled with guilt. If I couldn’t find a way around that—a way to help him forgive himself—I would stand no chance of ever getting him to stay with me. If he even could stay, since he technically now belonged in Heaven. Still, I had to try.

“I have an idea,” I said slowly. “What if you healed me—you know, like you did before? Could you forgive yourself then?”

He looked up at me uncertainly.

“You would allow me to heal you? To put my mouth on the places where I hurt you so badly?”

I felt like my heart might burst.

“Yes, Kael,” I said reaching out to stroke my fingers through his hair. “I would—with all my heart, I would.”

“Willow...Mistress...” He leaned forward and I parted my legs so I could wrap myself around him.

Since he was still kneeling and I was sitting on the couch, this worked pretty well. I was about to wrap my legs around his sides and wrap my arms around his neck. For a long moment we clung together. He felt so good in my arms—his muscular body molding to mine and his warm, spicy scent seemed to send my hormones into

overdrive. I wanted him.

I didn't even mind that the silky red robe the cottage had provided had opened and I was naked beneath it. I barely noticed my own state of undress, I was so glad to hug my fallen angel again.

But Kael certainly noticed my near-nakedness.

"Mmm, Mistress," he murmured, pulled back a little to look at me. "You're bare under this little robe."

"The better to let you heal me," I told him. "Which is what I want you to do now."

I was beginning to feel sexy and bossy—just like I had the first time we'd come together. From the way Kael's silver eyes went half-lidded at my tone, he was feeling it too.

"Show me what you would have me do, Mistress," he rumbled. "Show me where to heal you."

"Here," I said, and spread my legs for him.

I wasn't wearing any panties and I saw Kael's eyes go wide as I opened for him. But the next minute, the guilt was back on his face when he saw the faded red marks on my inner thighs.

"Gods, I hurt you so deeply," he murmured, leaning forward to study the marks which wouldn't fade completely.

"No more of that talk!" I exclaimed. "I'll let you heal me but no guilt allowed."

“But I—” he began.

I cut him off by weaving my fingers through his thick black hair and pulling him forward.

Of course he was strong enough to resist me if he didn’t want to do it...but I didn’t feel any push back from him at all. Instead, he let out a low groan that sounded like pure need and murmured,

“Gods, Mistress...”

Then he began kissing and licking my inner thighs.

My heart was pounding and my breath was coming in short little pants as I watched him do it. His healing power made me tingle and all the tingles seemed to be going directly to my pussy, which was getting wetter and hotter and more needy by the second.

But Kael refused to be rushed. He continued to kiss my inner thighs tenderly and bathed them with his tongue until every last red mark was gone. Then he looked up at me, his eyes lazy with lust.

“Mistress,” he growled softly. “May I heal you deeper? I filled your pussy with my seed as well—I know you must need healing there.”

Actually, I wasn’t burned on the inside nearly as badly as I had been on my inner thighs—I don’t know why. But who was I to refuse more “healing?”

“You may,” I said primly and wove my fingers through his hair again. “In fact, I’ll guide you.”

He growled softly and looked up at me.

“Gods, I love it when you guide me, Mistress—when you tell me exactly what you need from me.”

“Right now what I need is for you to lick my pussy,” I said, still feeling bossy.

My words seemed to really affect him because he groaned and shifted some. He was wearing a short white garment, with a golden sash—like something you might see in a film about Ancient Greece. Or about Heaven, I guessed. Looking down, I could see that the thin fabric was tenting in a most suggestive way.

“Service me, Kael,” I told him in my best Mistress voice. “Heal my pussy with your tongue.”

“Yes, Mistress,” he groaned. And then he wound his muscular arms around my thighs and split me even wider. I barely had time to gasp before he leaned over and began to absolutely devour me.

The very first time Kael had gone down on me, he had been gentle and slow—clearly knowing that I wasn’t used to it and that I felt uncertain about myself.

But now that my confidence was on display and I knew exactly what I wanted, he was more than willing to get a little crazy. I moaned and tugged his hair, bucking my hips up to meet his talented tongue. One minute he was lashing my aching clit with the tip of his tongue and the next he was sucking it into his mouth and caressing it.

The back and forth was driving me crazy, but finally he settled down to licking me just the way I loved it, slowly stroking the right side of my clit, which was the most sensitive place.

I moaned and pressed my pussy shamelessly against his mouth, riding his tongue as he teased me slowly to orgasm. This wasn't about healing me anymore—he just wanted to make me come. That was fine with me—I wanted to come, too and I was getting close...so close...I just needed a little something more...

As though he knew exactly what I needed, Kael unwrapped one arm and slipped two long fingers inside me. With slow, deep pressure, he began to massage that secret spot that sent me into the stratosphere.

“Oh... Oh!” I gasped as my orgasm finally overtook me and my back arched. “Kael, I'm coming! You're making me come so hard!”

He didn't answer, but he didn't need to. He just kept licking, riding out my orgasm and rubbing inside me until I started pulling away because of the sensitivity. Finally, he sat back on his heels, licking his lips to get the last of my juices.

“Gods, Mistress—always so delicious,” he growled softly. “Do you feel healed now?”

I started to say yes...and then stopped myself. Even though he had given me an incredible orgasm, I was determined that we weren't done yet. I still needed more from him—a lot more.

“Almost,” I said, leaning forward to kiss him. I loved my flavor on his mouth. “But Kael, I still feel empty inside. I need you to fill me, can you do that for me?”

His silver eyes took on a shadowed look.

“I want to, Mistress but the memory of hurting you the last time I took you is still so fresh.”

I had a sudden inspiration—maybe a way to banish this guilt of his forever. Could I do it? I never had before but I had secretly watched porn that involved what I was thinking of in the past. I was sure I could manage and the cottage would give me everything I needed to pull it off.

Yes, I decided—I was going to do it.

“This you won’t be taking me,” I told him. “I think it’s time that I took you.”

His eyes were suddenly half-lidded again and I could see the lust in his gaze. Oh yes, he was into this. I had thought he might be.

“That sounds like a good idea,” he growled softly. “What exactly do you want to do to me, Mistress? How do you want to use my body for your pleasure?”

“Give me a minute and I’ll show you,” I told him. “Will you promise to stay here and not go back to Heaven?”

“I’ll be here, Mistress,” he murmured.

“Good—come upstairs to the bedroom in ten minutes,” I told him.

Then I hurried upstairs to get ready.

39

KAEL

I didn't know what to expect when Willow told me to wait for her. I only knew I was grateful that she was so willing to forgive me—even if I was having a hard time forgiving myself.

I was glad now that I had listened to the human spirit who came to me earlier.

“Hey, are you the angel who was guarding my granddaughter?” he demanded.

I looked down at him in surprise. He was short for a human but he had a big personality.

“Is your granddaughter named Willow?” I asked.

“Yes, and she misses you! Why did you go off and leave her?” He sounded angry—which is unusual in Heaven. Mostly everyone is happy all the time there. Then again, I had been feeling sad and guilty the whole time I had been back, so it appeared we were both exceptions to the rule.

I couldn't explain what I had done—I was too ashamed. So I only shook my head and mumbled something about how I couldn't stay with Willow.

“That's bullshit!” he said sternly, frowning up at me. “I don't care what your excuse is, she's missing you so much it's making her cry. You go back and do right by her,

right now! I mean it!”

Of course it was laughable to think that a human spirit could direct an angel—even one that was previously fallen. But the fact that he told me Willow was missing me made me want to at least check on her. I had thought to apologize so that maybe she could let me go—I firmly believed I no longer deserved to be with her, no matter how much I longed for her.

But now that I was here, it seemed that she wanted to keep me with her—at least for now. I wasn’t sure about severing my ties with Heaven a second time—would it even be allowed? It didn’t matter if it was or not—I would do anything to be with her.

And now, of course, I was intrigued. I liked it when she took control sexually. That may sound strange, coming from a seven-foot-tall, muscular male who has divine and angelic powers, but it’s true. My years of service to women have been a pleasure and I have never loved serving more than when it was Willow whom I was serving.

So I waited eagerly until the ten minutes she had specified were up and then I went upstairs to find her.

The cottage must have been at work because when I opened the bedroom door, I saw some new accoutrements had been added to the decor. The colors, which had previously been pastel, were darker now—deep purple and black. And the bedposts had something new as well—leather cuffs like the ones at the place where Willow had made the portal.

Willow herself had changed too. She was wearing a kind of black leather bustier that lifted her full breasts without covering them. My mouth watered to see her tight nipples—Gods, how I loved to taste and tease her!

Her soft pussy was on display down below because she wasn’t wearing any panties.

She did, however, have on a pair of thigh-high black hose that framed her neatly trimmed mound of curls. Her long, black hair hung free around her shoulders and she had a stern look on her face.

I thought she had never looked more beautiful.

“Come here, Kael,” she ordered. “But first take off your clothes.”

I did as she asked, shedding my Heavenly garments at once. Her eyes traveled over my body, taking me in from my head to my feet and lingering on my shaft, which was still hard from tasting her.

“Goddess, you’re a beautiful man,” she murmured. “Do you like to show me your body, Kael?”

I felt a little surge of pleasure at her attention.

“Mistress, I like to do whatever you tell me,” I told her.

“And are you ready to be punished?” she asked.

I nodded.

“If it pleases you to punish me then yes, I’m ready.”

“I’m doing this so that we’ll be even,” she told me. “I’m going to take you like you took me, Kael. Are you going to let me?”

I felt a shiver of pure lust rush through me, making my shaft even harder. Gods, I was dripping precum already.

“Yes, Mistress,” I said hoarsely. “How...how are you going to punish me?”

“Come here and I’ll show you,” she said.

I walked over to the bed and she took out something that the cottage must have made for her and showed it to me. It looked like a slim, black wand with a wide base and several bulges up and down its length and it was attached to a kind of leather harness.

“Do you know where this is going to go once I put it on?” she asked, raising her eyebrows at me.

I felt my midsection tighten but not in an unpleasant way. No Mistress had treated me like this before, but I found I liked it— a lot.

“No, Mistress. Where...where does it go?” I asked hoarsely.

“Here.” She reached around and touched the cleft of my buttocks, sliding her fingers between them until her probing fingertip found my rosebud.

“Oh!” I jumped in surprise but didn’t try to pull away.

“Does that bother you, Kael?” she asked me. “If you want me to stop, I will. But I think you deserve this punishment, don’t you?”

Wordlessly, I nodded. I had penetrated her deeply when I was in my demonic form and out of my mind. Now it was her turn to penetrate me—that was fair. And besides, I wanted to let her do it—I wanted to submit to her. My shaft was so hard it ached.

“Good,” Willow said. “But before we start, I have to put something on you. Turn around and let me see your cock.”

I turned for her, presenting my shaft, which was standing at attention for her.

My Mistress seemed to like this sight.

“Good, you’re into it,” I heard her say.

“I’m into whatever you want to do to me, Mistress,” I told her. “What is that?” I added, because she had produced a kind of round black band.

“A cock ring. I can’t have you coming too soon—I want to ride you after...well, after I ride you.” She gave a low, sexy laugh that I could feel deep in my balls.

“Yes, Mistress,” I said obediently, watching as she put the ring on me. It fastened with that stuff that humans call “velcro.”

“So I can take it off, quickly if I want to,” she told me as she placed it.

Then, when I was fully aroused...and unable to come because of the ring at the base of my shaft, she nodded at the mattress.

“Bend over the bed and spread your thighs for me. Don’t worry—I’m going to use some lube,” she added, stroking my bare back. “I won’t hurt you, Kael.”

I turned to look at her once more and sucked in a breath. She had put on the leather harness and the slim black wand was thrusting up from between her thighs. Gods, we were really going to do this. She was going to penetrate me—to fuck me.

Of course I didn’t have to let her do it—she was a tiny human woman. I could have flown away or refused to bend to her will. I could have gone back to Heaven.

Instead, I bent over the bed and spread my legs, opening myself for her—submitting

to the will of my Mistress.

Willow spread my cheeks and I felt something cool and tingly being massaged into my rosebud. I groaned softly as she slowly inserted a single finger...then another. Oh Gods, I couldn't believe I was in this position, being opened and fingered by my Mistress! But I wouldn't have traded places with anyone—I wanted to give myself to her. Wanted to open for her.

Finally she seemed to think I was ready because her fingers withdrew and I felt the blunt head of the black wand pressing against my entrance.

“Just take it easy, Kael,” I heard her murmur. “Be open for me—let me in.”

I tried to do as she said but it wasn't easy—the black wand had looked slim but it was considerably thicker than her small fingers. I bit my lip and clenched my fists in the dark purple coverlet as she entered me. There seemed to be more and more of the black wand—Gods, how much more could I take? I could feel my rosebud opening slowly as she slipped it inside me—there was a little pain but not much—more a sensation of fullness as each bump and curve entered me.

At last, I felt her hips pressing against my ass and knew she was all the way in. My Mistress was inside me, as I had been inside her. She was taking me the way I had taken her. It was only fair. And Gods, it was incredibly hot. I flexed my inner muscles around the base of the wand, getting used to being penetrated—getting used to being opened.

“How does that feel, Kael?” she murmured, running her hands up and down my back. I had my wings spread so that she could reach me and I felt her stroke my feathers too—an indescribably erotic sensation.

“It...it feels good, Mistress,” I admitted, my voice a rough growl.

“And are you ready to be fucked?” she asked, stroking my back and my feathers some more.

“Yes, Mistress,” I groaned and couldn’t help adding, “Please—fuck me!”

“I’m going to give you what you asked for,” she promised me. I felt the black wand pulling almost all the way out of me...and then sliding in again. As it did, I felt the bump at the top of it find a special place inside me—one that made me gasp and jerk with pleasure.

“There it is,” I heard Willow murmur. “I wondered if angels had the same parts as human men.”

“Of course we do,” I gasped. “We are all made...by the same creator.”

“Of course,” she purred.

And then she began to really fuck me.

I groaned and gasped as she pumped inside me, the black wand filling my rosebud and back passage with every deep thrust. I tightened my grip on the coverlet and tried to brace myself but every time the wand hit that spot inside me, I couldn’t help crying out in helpless pleasure. My hard shaft rubbed against the soft mattress, leaking helplessly but unable to come as I submitted fully to her—as I took her pounding thrusts and opened myself for more.

“Good, Kael,” I heard my Mistress purring. “This is good. Open yourself for your punishment. Take what I’m giving you, the same way I took what you gave to me. After this, we’ll be even—you’ll be absolved.”

“Yes Mistress!” I panted, trying to open myself even more for her. “Yes, fuck me!”

Harder— deeper . Punish me as I deserve to be punished!”

That seemed to be exactly what she was intent on doing. But even as my pleasure built, I realized that it had nowhere to go—with the cock ring firmly around the base of my shaft, I still couldn’t come.

The need to release became greater and greater.

“Mistress!” I gasped at last. “Please—I need to come!”

Willow stopped fucking me. Instead, she pushed in deep and laid herself across my bare back, between my open wings. She was breathing hard. I felt her breath against my skin and the black rod still buried inside me.

“Do you feel like you’ve been punished enough now?” she asked me. “Are you going to forgive yourself now that I’ve fucked you the way you fucked me?”

“Yes, Mistress,” I promised. “I will—at least I’ll try.”

“Try hard,” she warned me. “Because if you start feeling guilty again, I’ll have no choice but to strap on this wand and punish you again.”

“As you wish, Mistress,” I groaned softly. “But please—let me come! My shaft feels like it’s going to burst .”

“I’ll let you come,” she promised. “But not until the right time. Which will be soon,” she added.

Then she rose and I felt the black wand pulling slowly out of me. A moment later, I rose myself on shaky legs to tower over her. Looking down at my Mistress, I couldn’t believe that such a small, curvy human could bring me to my knees the way she had.

She was so small—so delicate. And yet I loved submitting to her. So when she ordered me to climb on the bed, I did so at once.

“I want you to sit on the bed with your back against the backboard,” she told me.

This was no punishment since the cottage had changed the backboard. It was no longer carved and wooden—instead it was padded in a deep purple fabric that matched the coverlet. I did as my Mistress said, going to sit there. My bottom was still a little tender, but the mattress was cushioned and it didn’t hurt—it just reminded me that I had been fucked. I furled my wings tightly behind me so they weren’t in the way.

“Very good.” Willow got on the bed beside me, on her knees so that her head was a little higher than mine. She glanced down at me, giving me a stern look. “Put your wrists up so I can cuff you in place,” she told me.

Wordlessly, I obeyed. My hands were quickly manacled to the bedposts on either side. My shaft, still achingly hard, was sticking up from between my thighs, begging for release but the thick black band was firmly fastened around its base, denying me a release.

“Kael, look at me,” Willow demanded, lifting my chin so that our eyes met. “I’m going to ride you until I come. And you’re going to let me—just the same way you let me fuck you.”

I nearly groaned with need. Gods, I loved it when she took control!

“Yes, Mistress,” I said, my voice low and gravelly with lust. “I am yours to do with as you please.”

“I know you are,” she told me. Then she straddled my lap and took my stiff, aching

shaft in one of her soft little hands.

This time I couldn't hold back my groan as she sank down onto me, taking my cock deep into her hot, wet depths. I didn't remember much from our previous encounter when I had been in my demon form but I knew I would never forget this. Her soft little pussy felt like a velvet glove, squeezing me.

Once she was settled fully on top of me with my shaft buried to the hilt inside her, Willow gave me a stern look.

"Now, Kael, I'm going to ride you," she told me. "And you're going to hold perfectly still and let me do it. You're not allowed to thrust until I say so. Understand?"

I was aching to thrust up inside her, but I nodded anyway.

"Yes, Mistress—whatever you say."

"Good, because here we go." She put her arms around my neck and looked into my eyes. Then, slowly, she rose up until only the crown of my cock was inside her sweet, sucking pussy. Just as slowly, she lowered herself back down.

It was a special kind of torture—almost as bad as when she had fucked me so deeply without letting me come. There I was, manacled to the bedposts with my Mistress astride me, caressing and massaging my throbbing shaft with her tight, wet pussy and I couldn't do a thing but sit there and take it!

I clenched my hands into fists, trying to fight the urge to thrust—to pump up into her and fill her with my seed. But even if I had been free to thrust, I still couldn't come—not until she removed the ring. She was in charge and I was helpless as she used me like a plaything—a toy.

I found that I loved it.

“Mistress,” I groaned, looking into her eyes. “Please, how long will you torment me? Your pussy is so soft and hot and wet around me—you’re so tight and my shaft is aching to come!”

“You can come when...when I do,” she panted. “And Goddess, I’m close!” She was grinding against me, taking me as deep as she could every time she came down on me. I could hear how hard her heart was beating and her scent said she was incredibly aroused. But of course, the wetness of her pussy would have told me that, even if I hadn’t been attuned to her.

“Mistress, I need to come inside you!” I growled, meeting her eyes again, which were dilated to black with desire. “I need to flood your womb with my seed!”

“Goddess!” She threw back her head and I could feel her pleasure as my own. She was close, so close. If she would just remove the band at the base of my shaft we could come together.

“Mistress, please!” I begged shamelessly.

“Yes—now!” Willow moaned. Reaching between us, she found the strap that released the ring and pulled it open. “Now fuck me!” she demanded. “Fuck up into me and make me come!”

“Yes, Mistress!” I had never been more glad to obey a command. I thrust upward, filling her tight pussy with my cock, feeling her caress my thickness as we ground together.

Our pleasure peaked almost at the same time, with Willow just a heartbeat ahead of me. I felt her inner walls tighten around me even more, milking me as though

begging for my cream. And I was more than willing to give it to her.

With a low groan, I thrust up into her as deeply as I could. As the head of my shaft kissed the mouth of her womb, I began to come—spurting my seed deep in her tight pussy, giving her what we both needed so badly.

As I spurted—as I came inside her—I felt something happening inside me. In my heart, I mean. It was like a broken connection between us was being mended—like something in both of us was being made whole.

I knew, in that moment, that I would never leave her. She was my Mistress now and forever. I wasn't going back to the Heavenly Realm—not until the day when we both died at the same time. Because Willow was my world now.

And I was never going to let her go.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 6:52 am

WILLOW

“ So it was a partial Heartmate bond—I thought so,” Sarah said, nodding in satisfaction. “And now the two of you are finally fully together.”

“I’ve heard of that happening occasionally,” Goody Albright said. “It’s very rare though. Usually when Heartmates find each other they bond pretty quickly.”

“I know it didn’t take me and Malik long to get together,” Celia said, smiling and taking another sip of her coffee.

“Right—you three go on about your Heartmates,” Goldie said glumly. “Why can’t I find two or three willing men to share my hearth and home?”

The five of us were sitting in Goldie’s diner having coffee and some of the excellent pastries that Celia and Sarah had brought over from The Lost Lamb bakery. I had called on Goody Albright not long after Kael and I got together and she had insisted on a girls’ get-together, “So you can tell everyone at once.”

Outside it was another beautiful Autumn day with a clear blue sky. Through the plate glass windows of the diner, I could see the gold and red and yellow leaves rustling as a crisp wind blew through town. There was a nip in the air too—just enough that I could wear my favorite red sweater and not feel overheated in it. It was lovely.

“I’m sure the right guy or, er, guys are out there for you,” I told Goldie now. “You’re a beautiful, curvy woman.”

“What about Liam?” Sarah nodded out the window where one of our local Creatures was passing. “He’s a Kraken—I’ve heard he has very talented tentacles in his shifted form,” she added, winking. At the moment, he just looked like a human—a big, muscular human with thick blond hair and sea green eyes. I wondered what his Kraken form looked like. Was he all tentacles all over or just from the waist down?

But Goldie was already shaking her head.

“He’s nice but he’s not my type,” she said.

“A Minotaur then?” Celia suggested as another Creature passed by the plate glass windows of the diner. “I’ve heard they’re extremely well endowed— that should satisfy you.”

She nodded at the bulge in the Minotaur’s trousers and giggled. Goldie slapped her arm playfully.

“Very funny. But it doesn’t matter if he’s hung like a bull—I need more than one guy at a time.” She sighed. “You know what I keep thinking about? That hunting lodge in the woods I stopped in after I ate one of your crazy horny pear tarts.”

“Wait— what kind of tarts?” I raised my eyebrows.

“You’ll find out the next time the special singing pears are in season,” Sarah told me with a grin. She turned to Goldie. “So why are you thinking about the hunting lodge?”

Goldie shook her head.

“I honestly don’t know. I think maybe it was the scent in there. I mean, it was like cedar and spice and something else—something masculine. Almost...almost animalistic. It really got me going.”

“Yes, we know,” Celia said dryly. She winked at me. “Goldie had to, uh, take care of herself in some strange hunter’s lodge because she ate two of my tarts and then got stuck in the woods after dark.”

“Wow...so you just snuck in and uh...” I couldn’t find the right words.

“And had a little fun in their beds? Why yes, yes I did.” She grinned at me. “Ever since, I keep having dreams that maybe the residents of the lodge might come find me. Of course, that could be a problem—they might be mad at me.”

“Gee, I wonder why,” I said dryly and we all cracked up.

When we finally stopped laughing, Goody Albright shook her head.

“Don’t you worry, Goldie dear,” she said, smiling. “I know that it’s hard to wait your turn, but I promise you—it’s coming.”

“I hope you’re right.” Goldie sighed and took another bite of donut. “Because I’m really lonely. I need a Heartmate—or Heartmates—too.”

I hoped that she would find what she was looking for and I had a feeling that she would.

Because in Hidden Hollow...anything is possible.