

WHICH WITCH

By Roxanne Smolen

(Excerpt from Chapter Two)

Brittany stood at her bedroom window and looked outside. Morning fog hung low over the yard and seeped into the surrounding trees. The sky was a flat, uniform gray. Not stormy, just blah. Like her life.

What would she do with her life now that Cody was gone?

She dressed and went downstairs to the kitchen hoping for a peaceful cup of coffee. Instead, she found bright lights and activity. Myra was making bread dough. Aunt Lynette was taking a pumpkin pie out of the oven and adding it to the cooling rack on the table. There were two pumpkin pies, two mince pies, and two apple pies. The kitchen smelled spicy and sweet.

Myra looked up as she entered. "Good morning. Happy Solstice."

"Good morning," Brittany said. "That's a lot of pie."

Aunt Lynette dabbed her forehead with the back of her hand. "Solstice is all about the feast. I've got a nice turkey in the slow cooker, and I'll put a ham in the oven later. Traditionally, we would roast a boar on a spit. But a nice big ham should suffice."

"All that for fifteen people?" Brittany yelped.

Myra shrugged. "We can freeze the leftovers."

"Are you hungry, Brittany?" Aunt Lynette asked. "I can whip you up something for breakfast."

"No, thank you." Brittany grabbed a cup from the cupboard. "All I want is coffee."

Myra and Aunt Lynette exchanged a look. Steadfastly ignoring them, Brittany poured herself a cup and sat at the table with the pies.

Aunt Lynette wiped her hands on a towel. "After you have your coffee, would you mind going out into the forest and finding me some stones? I want to put them around the bonfire."

"How many?"

"At least a dozen. They need to be larger than your fist."

So, Brittany got the wagon out of the garage and went outside for the first time in days. The world seemed hushed as if it were holding its breath. Even the birds were silent. The air was clammy and cool, and the dew soaked her pantlegs after a few steps.

Half-way across the yard, she stopped and looked back at the house. The old whitewashed home looked gray in the fog. It was big and rambling with a huge screened-in front porch that was filled with wicker furniture. She used to sit there with Cody and drink lemonade.

Her dog, Haff, bounded up to greet her. Haff's dark fur plastered his legs and belly.

"There you are," she cooed. "Look at you." She crouched to embrace him. "You smell like a wet dog, stinky boy. You're supposed to go inside. I left the garage door open for you." With a final pat, she got to her feet. "I'm taking a walk. Want to come?"

She pulled the wagon into the forest, Haff at her side. Acres of land surrounded their home, but most of it was woodland. The wagon rattled over tree roots and twigs, disturbing the morning silence.

Why had Aunt Lynette assigned her this particular chore? To get her out of the house? Perhaps she imagined her traipsing around for hours, head down, searching the forest floor for rocks. If so, she was in for a shock. Brittany had a secret stash of stones from when she'd intended to make her mother a rock garden.

She smiled as she reached the overgrown mound of softball-sized stones. More than a dozen of them. She piled them into the wagon then called Haff to let him know they were leaving. As she dragged the load back to the house, rain fell in soft misty drops like hidden tears.

By early afternoon, it was pouring. Brittany hugged her arms, staring through the kitchen window. Would the rain ruin Aunt Lynette's festivities? Her aunt was so focused on cooking, she might not have even noticed the weather. Likewise, Myra was busy putting the finishing touches on her decorations. Ceramic elves now adorned every open surface in the living room. She placed a popcorn garland on the *tree* and orange

pomander balls in dishes on the end tables. She also found extra chairs for the onslaught of people.

Around five o'clock that evening, two vans pulled up the driveway. The covens had arrived. Aunt Lynette went out to the porch to greet them. Brittany stood stiffly in the living room.

Myra stepped beside her and took her hand. "I haven't met them yet, either."

With a roar of laughter and conversation, the witches filed through the front door. Their ages ranged from their early thirties to mid-forties. Brittany was happy to see they were dressed as casually as she was—jeans and T-shirts.

"Come in," Aunt Lynette called. "Make yourselves at home." She ushered two smiling ladies over to where Brittany and Myra stood. "This is Theodora and Zoe." She nodded to each as she spoke. Theodora had thick, curly red hair and freckles. Zoe's hair was in a brush cut and dyed purple. "This is Myra, the love of my life and my right hand. And this is Brittany, the Queen Potential I told you about."

Brittany blinked and gave her aunt a sharp look.

Theodora crooned, "Ooh, she certainly has the aura for it."

Zoe said, "It's a pleasure, Brittany. I've heard a lot about you."

"Like how you're a whiz at whipping up potions," Theodora said. "Maybe you can give me some pointers. I'm dismal at potion-making."

"Is this the Potential?" another woman asked.

Two more crowded around. Brittany took a step back. She would have escaped up the stairs, but Myra held fast to her hand.

"Let's not spook the filly," Aunt Lynette called over their heads. "Who would like some glogg?"

"I would," said Theodora.

Aunt Lynette draped her arm around Theodora's shoulders and escorted her toward the kitchen. As they walked away, Aunt Lynette said, "You know, I planned to have everyone out in the yard, but the weather wouldn't cooperate."

The crowd eased back, cliques of friends finding their seats, and Brittany took a breath. She didn't want to be a witch queen. She just wanted to be left alone.

Aunt Lynette and Theodora came back from the kitchen with pitchers of glogg and handfuls of stemware. The glogg turned out to be mulled wine. Myra rushed to help

serve their guests. The next hour or so was spent with the witches reconnecting and catching up. Brittany was pulled into two conversations—one about the perils and joys of living with cats, and another about an herb garden that failed despite all attempts to keep it living. Brittany never felt so lonely.

“Who’s hungry?” Aunt Lynette said. “Let me set that feast out.”

Over the resulting cheers and laughter, Theodora said, “I’ll help.”

Soon the living room filled with enticing aromas. The laughter grew even louder, and the party-goers kept glancing toward the kitchen.

At last, Myra appeared in the doorway. “Come in for the blessing.”

Brittany followed the witches into the kitchen where every available space was laden with platters of food. There was turkey, ham, and baked salmon. Potatoes, squash, and slivered green beans. Biscuits, cornbread, and fresh dinner rolls. And, of course, the pies.

Aunt Lynette beamed. “Everyone together.” And the witches intoned with her, “Earth who gives to us this food. Sun who makes it ripe and good. By Earth and Sun. By you, we live. Our loving thanks to you we give. Blessings this day on our meal, our family, our friends, and our world.” She lifted her arms. “Dig in.”

The witches converged on the food. The noise swelled in waves.

“More glogg here,” Myra called over the cacophony. She stood at the stove next to a humongous pot of the mulled wine and waved a ladle.

Brittany chose a few items for her plate and started back toward the living room with everyone else.

But Aunt Lynette called to her. “Come sit in here with us.”

Brittany frowned and glanced around. Myra left to entertain the peons in the living room with its fake stars and fake tree. With a sigh, Brittany carried her plate into the dining room where Aunt Lynette, Theodora, Zoe, and two other women stared up at her.

“This is Carla and Abigail.” Theodora motioned to the two strangers. “They’re our officers.”

“Bright blessings.” Abigail smiled.

Brittany nodded and took her seat. At least, it was quieter in the dining room. The yule log sat on the table as a centerpiece. It was a two-foot chunk of the old orange tree

decorated with holly, moss, and mushrooms. Three holes had been drilled on the top to hold candles—green, white, and red.

“This bird is delicious, Lynette,” Zoe said around a mouthful of turkey. “So moist.”

Theodora grinned. “She gets her cooking skills from her mother. I used to love sleepovers here.”

“What can I say?” Aunt Lynette told them. “It runs in the family.”

“I was surprised to hear you moved back to the area,” Theodora said.

“I was surprised you never left,” Aunt Lynette said. “Weren’t you the one who was dead set to go to California?”

“Well, life gets in the way.”

Zoe giggled. “She married Bruce Jones.”

“What?” Aunt Lynette cried. “That scrawny kid?”

Theodora blushed as red as her hair. “It didn’t last long.”

“So, you’re Theodora Jones now,” Aunt Lynette said. “No wonder I couldn’t find you in the listings. I found Zoe, though.”

Zoe nodded. “I haven’t changed.”

A burst of laughter came from the living room. Voices in the kitchen betrayed people getting second servings.

Aunt Lynette ate a bit of squash. “Brittany here plans to study herbology at South, my alma mater.”

A variety of congratulations rounded the table.

Theodora said, “South U has a good program, but if you want the best you have to go to California.”

Brittany gave her a weak smile. “I don’t have the money to go out to California.”

“But, you know,” Zoe said conspiratorially, taking in the whole table, “you don’t have to go anywhere anymore. A lot of universities these days have classes you can take online.”

The other women spoke at once.

“I didn’t realize that.”

“Praise the Internet.”

“What’s this world coming to?”

Brittany sat back, stunned. Did that include classes in Europe?

“So, you could conceivably go to two universities at once?” Aunt Lynette asked.

“Or more.” Zoe nodded.

They ate in silence for a time, then both Theodora and Zoe got up for seconds.

When they settled down again, Aunt Lynette said, “South Florida is a large area. I’m surprised you don’t have a queen.”

“Oh, ho, ho,” Zoe roared with mock laughter. “We have a queen.”

“Queen Imogene,” Theodora said. “The tyrant.”

Aunt Lynette frowned. “Tyrant?”

“She’s horrible,” Zoe said. “It’s either her way or the door.”

“You have to petition for every ritual,” Theodora said. “Wait. Didn’t you ask for permission to have this little shindig?”

“Didn’t know I was supposed to.”

“I’m surprised she didn’t contact you.”

Zoe said, “Maybe a coven of three is beneath her notice.”

Theodora looked thoughtful. “I doubt that. She knows everything.”

Aunt Lynette laughed. “How?”

“Invisible spies,” Zoe said in a harsh whisper. “They report back to her.”

“At least that’s the rumor,” Theodora said. “One of many.”

“Rumors?” Brittany asked. “Like what?”

“She’s bullied people right out of Florida,” Abigail said. “My friend, Yvonne, just up and left one day. Didn’t even say goodbye. Just vanished.”

“That’s weird,” Brittany said.

“There have been weird occurrences, that’s for sure.” Zoe nodded.

“She puts spells on people. Hexes them. Ruins their lives,” Carla said. “You don’t want to run afoul of Queen Imogene.”

They fell silent for a moment.

Then Zoe looked at Brittany. “Queen Imogene also has a Queen Potential. A real piece of work.”

“Her name is Ravyn Crowe,” Theodora said. “Ravyn with a y.”

Brittany chuckled. “Is that her stage name?”

“She chose that name herself when she was seven years old,” Zoe said. “Shows the darkness in her.”

Just then, there came a knock at the door.

“Who could that be?” Aunt Lynette said.

“I’ll get it.” Brittany stood and picked up her plate. “I’m finished eating.”

She dropped her plate into the sink and went to the front door. Two people stood there—a woman with graying hair wearing a purple robe and a girl about Brittany’s age. The girl looked Asian, with almond eyes and high cheekbones, but her skin was toffee-colored, and her hair was a mass of twisted locs falling to her waist.

“Good evening,” the woman said with a slight smile. “We’ve come to join your Solstice festivities. I’m Queen Imogene.”

End of Excerpt

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About Roxanne Smolen

Roxanne Smolen is the author of the popular Cody Forester Novels and the new Brittany Meyer Novellas. Like many authors, she started writing stories as soon as she learned how to hold a crayon. However, she didn't write professionally until twenty years ago when she lost her eyesight. She has since penned several novels of science fiction, fantasy, and magical realism. Her heroes are often teenagers because she believes that young adults will change the world. She lives in South Florida not far from where the Brittany Meyer Novellas take place.

