

Angel Angst

By Roxanne Smolen

CHAPTER ONE

3/26/2009 Loxahatchee, Florida

Brittany Meyer led her coven members across the rain-washed grass. They each wore their white ceremonial robes, probably looking more like ghosts in the dark than three teenage girls. Sparkie trotted beside them. The sparkling coat of the baby unicorn was somehow even whiter than their robes.

Eileen giggled. "Where are you taking us?"

"Almost there." Brittany glanced back to see that their blindfolds were still in place.

Ravyn said, "You know, I can find the ritual site with my eyes closed."

"We're not going to the ritual site." Brittany led them over the wide lawn, twisting and turning as if they were in a maze. A cool mist clung to her hair and ran down her face. She chuckled. "Eileen, remember the time we were performing a cleansing ritual, and Cody was spying on us from the bushes?"

Eileen huffed out a breath.

Ravyn said, "Gross. Your boyfriend was spying on you?"

"I don't think he expected us to be nude."

"He didn't leave then, did he?" Ravyn muttered.

"Certainly not." Laughing, she took Ravyn's arm. "Okay, step up and over. Careful. Don't fall." She helped each of them into the blow-up pool she'd set in the middle of the yard.

Eileen gasped. "Ooh. The water is warm."

Brittany glanced over at the sodden remains of her campfire where she heated pails of hot water to fill the pool. "Imagine you are standing in a shallow pond in the middle of a silent forest. You are facing north." She went to where she had stashed her backpack and pulled out a smudge stick and some wooden matches. As she lit the smudge stick,

she said, “Your blindfolds represent the new moon. This is a time of release. Of closure. Of allowing things to complete. Think of the things in your life that you are ready to put aside.”

She held the smoking smudge stick overhead. “Lady, please attend us. We ask for openness and for honesty with ourselves and with others.” She wafted the smoke around Ravyn. “May Ravyn be washed clean by the smoke of these fragrant herbs and may that same smoke carry her prayers to the Lady. May her hands be cleansed so that they might create beautiful things. May her feet be cleansed that they might take her where she most needs to be.”

She did the same for Eileen.

When she finished, she said, “You may remove your blindfolds.” She motioned to three folding lawn chairs set half in the pool and half out. “Sit.”

“Wet,” Ravyn grumbled as she chose a seat.

“Sorry about that,” Brittany said. “You should have seen me out here with an umbrella trying to keep the fire burning long enough to heat the water.”

“Well, I love it.” Eileen paddled the water with her bare feet. “It even smells like a forest.”

“That’s the sandalwood. I added a cup of baking soda, a cup of pink Himalayan Sea salt, and a half cup of sandalwood oil to the rite water.” Brittany stepped out of the pool and set the smoldering smudge stick in the grass next to the pair of pillar candles she had left previously. “Lighting candles on the darkest night of the month signifies our desire to bring light into our lives. A white one for new beginnings and a pink one for introspection and self-love.” The candles lit obediently and cast light over the three of them. Sparkie stood a few feet away nuzzling the wet grass as if she knew how to graze.

Brittany rummaged through her backpack and removed two small bottles. “I made you each a spell jar to commemorate our first New Moon ceremony together. They hold rose quartz, lavender blooms, sage, and rose petals, and I’ve sealed them with pink candle wax. If you keep them under your pillows, they’ll give you sweet dreams.” She handed the spell jars to her friends.

Eileen said, “Wait. These aren’t the little bottles Queen Imogene was using, are they?”

“No. They’re empty maple syrup bottles I got from Cracker Barrel.”

“I love that place,” Ravyn said.

Brittany handed them small, blank journals with little loops to hold pens. She took out a sandglass and a journal for herself and sat in the remaining chair. Fragrant water swirled around her ankles. “I got this next idea from a New Year’s ritual I took part in. I’ve chosen four topics, and we will free write for five minutes on the topic. Don’t worry about anyone else seeing it. This is only for you. But first, we’ll do some breathwork. Take three deep breaths trying to make the inhale the same length as the exhale. As you exhale, release the old thoughts and ideas that keep you from your greatness.”

They spent the next few minutes breathing.

Brittany turned over the sandglass. “Here’s the first topic. In the next month, I would like more *blank* in my life.”

They wrote in silence until the sandglass emptied.

“The next topic. This month I will *blank* the people around me.”

Eileen giggled. Brittany flipped the sandglass. They wrote for five minutes.

“This month, I need to *blank*.”

Ravyn muttered, “This might take a while.”

“Last one. My wildest dream is to *blank*.” After five minutes, Brittany said, “Now, write this affirmation. I am capable... of becoming anything... I dream to be... I simply... must begin... by believing it.” As she wrote, she realized the misty rain had turned into a drizzle. “Close your journal and take three more cleansing breaths.”

“A little faster this time,” Ravyn said, looking up at the rain.

The drizzle turned into a downpour.

Brittany raised her arms overhead and called, “We thank the Lady and the moon for attending our ceremony. So mote it be. Run!”

Laughing, they splashed through the rain to the house.

The next morning, all was quiet. Brittany sat on the edge of her bed and listened for signs that anyone else was awake. Sparkie, the baby unicorn, lifted her head sleepily from her cardboard box bed. She unfolded her knobby legs and clomped over to nuzzle Brittany’s hands. Sparkie, also known as Sparkles Twilight, was about two feet tall with a frizzy mane and a bump where her horn would be. She was allergic to sadness, an affliction that caused her mother to reject her.

“Sounds like we’re first up,” Brittany told her. “Let’s go make the coffee.”

She dressed and went out into the silent hallway. The other bedroom doors were closed. Disappointment crushed her. She expected her friends to be chatting about what a good job she’d done with the New Moon ritual. She was still learning how to be a coven leader. Her approach might be a little untraditional, but the spirit of the ritual was still there.

She coaxed Sparkie down the stairs and went into the kitchen, the most popular room in the house. Usually, it was bright with sunshine, but today it was as gray as the foggy mist outside. She started the coffee and toasted two slices of bread. She was slathering the toast with peanut butter when a car crackled up the gravel driveway. At the same time, footsteps sounded on the staircase.

“Hey!” Ravyn bounded into the kitchen. “I’m going to spend the day with my dad.” Ravyn had recently reunited with her long-estranged father, an Asian warlock who had inexplicably come into her life.

“Oh. Okay.” Brittany swallowed all the reasons why that wasn’t a good idea.

“Be back around dinner. Thanks.” She snatched up a slice of peanut butter toast and rushed out the front door to the waiting car.

Brittany sighed. “Not the kind of day I hoped for,” she said to Sparkie.

More footsteps came down the stairs. “Morning,” Eileen sang as she breezed into the room. She was naked except for a purse strap over her shoulder. “Yum, toast.”

She picked up Brittany’s remaining slice of toast and took a big bite. Brittany was so glad to see her eat something, she didn’t complain.

Eileen took another bite and said with her mouth full, “I’m going to the Sunspot for a while to visit Meredith. She’s not feeling well.” Eileen’s Aunt Meredith lived at the Sunspot Naturist Resort, a nearby nudist colony where Eileen had lived when her mother was alive.

“Sorry to hear that,” Brittany said. “Tell her I said hello.”

Eileen nodded and, with a flip of her long blonde hair, turned to leave. Eileen maintained that it was perfectly legal to drive naked in the car—as long as she didn’t get pulled over.

“Eileen, wait,” Brittany blurted. “You didn’t tell me what you thought about the New Moon ritual last night.”

She shrugged. "It was fine. Your rituals are a lot more casual than Lynette's."

Brittany felt the words like a slap. "I wanted to find a different way."

"It was fine," she said again. "Gotta go. Bye."

Brittany stood stunned as Eileen hurried out the door. Were they regretting voting her in as coven leader? Well, that was fine by her. She never wanted the job anyway. Still... Couldn't they see she was doing her best? She looked at Sparkie. "I guess we're on our own." Sparkie brayed and headbutted her leg. "Right," Brittany said.

She whisked up a batch of foal replacement milk in the designated mixing bowl and transferred it to a baby bottle. Then she sat at the kitchen table and fed the baby.

When Sparkie finished her breakfast, Brittany popped two more slices of bread into the toaster and poured herself a cup of coffee. As she searched the refrigerator for the cream, she noticed a lot of wilted vegetables about to go bad. She pulled them all out, cleaned them up, and tossed them into the slow cooker set on high.

Grabbing the bag of dog kibble from the pantry, she went outside to look for Haff, her half-breed dog. But Haff didn't answer her call. Probably chasing rabbits. Haff knew the forest around the yard better than anyone. She poured kibble into his bowl and went inside.

After breakfasting on coffee and peanut butter toast, she did a little light housekeeping. Her mother always said *if you do a little every day, it will never become cumbersome*. Then she stirred the vegetables. The bottom of the slow cooker had crusted nicely with the sugars in the veggies. She turned the cooker to low, poured in a large can of tomato juice, and floated basil on top.

Before she knew it, it was lunchtime—and her friends still hadn't come home. Brittany fed the baby and made herself a cheese sandwich. With Sparkie tramping behind her, she went up the stairs to her room and closed the door.

Her laptop sat accusingly on her desk. She should study. She was taking online college courses, aiming for a degree in herbology, and there was always a quiz on Monday mornings. Instead, she popped on her headphones and tossed back in bed. She thought she heard someone moving around in the afternoon, but she didn't get up to check.

At dinnertime, Brittany and Sparkie went downstairs to the kitchen. She made up another baby bottle and fed the baby. With that chore finished, she lifted the lid on the

slow cooker. A cloud of steam billowed out. She discarded the stewed basil, mashed the vegetables with a potato masher, then tasted the broth for seasonings. She sprinkled in a teaspoon each of sugar, salt, and pepper.

She hated her life. How had it come to this? She should still be going to high school and going out on dates with Cody, her ex-boyfriend. Instead, she was playing Cinderella to her coven members.

She went to the base of the stairs. "Dinner is ready," she called. "Come and get it."

At her feet, Sparkie brayed as if adding her opinion. Sparkie often mimicked Brittany's mood. Brittany patted the unicorn's head and returned to the kitchen.

Several moments later, Eileen and Ravyn came in. They had become good friends, even though they were as dissimilar as you could get. Eileen was pale and blonde while Ravyn had dark skin and hair. Eileen was a nudist and preferred to only wear her pink bedroom slippers. Ravyn wore her usual black T-shirt and jeans. Eileen's magical talents ran toward healing while Ravyn preferred to throw energy spikes. And, Eileen was bulimic.

"Yum." Eileen smiled. "Smells good." She would have said that whether she thought so or not.

"Remember, you only have to eat three spoonfuls," Brittany told her. "But you have to sit at the table with us for a full ten minutes." She stirred their dinner. "This is my famous Vegetable Bin Soup. It's what you get when you clean out the vegetable bin, so it's different every time."

Eileen ladled soup into a bowl and sat at the kitchen table. Ravyn took a modest serving and sat beside her.

"Don't you like soup?" Brittany asked as she took a serving for herself.

"I had a big lunch." Ravyn grinned as if she was bursting to tell them something.

Brittany carried her bowl of soup and a basket of bread to the table. "Oh, that's right. You were gone all day."

"My dad took me to New Orleans to this little restaurant he knew about in the French Quarter," Ravyn gushed without taking a breath. "We flew there in his private jet. The plane is named *Opulent*. Do you know what opulent means?"

Eileen said, "Luxurious?"

Brittany said, "Extravagant?"

Ravyn's grin broadened. "All that and more. And I met my dad's older brother. He's like my dad's assistant. Makes sure everything runs smoothly. He's a nice guy."

"He's your uncle." Eileen sipped a spoonful of hot soup.

"Yeah." Ravyn looked distant and whispered, "I have an uncle." Her face blanked as if she were lost in memories.

Brittany squirmed. What was wrong with this picture? Ravyn acted as if she were befuddled. As if she were under some sort of spell. Brittany had met befuddled people before, but then it was due to the influence of a powerful werewolf. Could Ravyn's father be a werewolf or, worse, a vampire?

Gazing at her bowl of soup, Brittany opened her inner eye which allowed her to see the energy auras emanated by living creatures. Auras were as colorful as rainbows, and each color signified a personality trait or emotion. In general, the color red in the aura meant the individual was energetic. Orange meant they were adventurous, while pure yellow meant creative.

She lifted her gaze to look at her friends. Eileen's aura was turquoise, indicating that she had a compassionate nature and was drawn to medicine and healing. The outer edges were streaked with a dark, muddy yellow. Stress marks. She was near a breaking point.

Ravyn also had dark yellow in her aura—but a larger portion was dark green indicating a deep need to be loved and accepted. And there at her core was a smudge of black.

Brittany gasped, then covered it by clearing her throat. She reached for a slice of bread. "You've certainly gotten close to your father in the short time since you met him."

Ravyn blinked as if coming back to herself. "Well, sure. He's my dad." She slurped her soup. "By the way, I'm going to spend Sunday with him. He bought a private island in the Keys. It has a mansion with a helipad in the middle. He plans to make some changes to the mansion and wants my opinion."

Brittany nodded. "But do you remember when you first met? You said you would never accept he was your father and called him a stalker."

"That was before I got to know him."

"But can you get to know him in such a short amount of time? It seems like a quick change of heart."

Ravyn hopped up from the table and, in a shrill voice that sounded almost panicked, shouted, "I've always loved him. He's my dad."

Brittany sat back. "What if he isn't, though? What if he's a spy for that Chord organization who have been hunting you?"

Ravyn shouted, "You're just jealous because your dad sucks, and my dad doesn't. I deserve him. I deserve opulence. Not a vegetable bin." She swiped at the soup but luckily only caught the spoon which did a double flip and clattered to the floor.

Sparkie, distraught by the tension in the room, sneezed out a bouquet of magical daisies. Ravyn kicked the flowers, slammed out of the kitchen, and stomped up the stairs.

Eileen murmured, "I think your vegetable bin tastes fine."

They finished the meal in silence.

That night, Brittany tossed and turned in bed, replaying the argument. Maybe she hadn't handled it right, but she *did* think something was fishy between Ravyn and her father. She wouldn't be much of a friend if she didn't speak out.

A sound came from the stairs. At first, Brittany thought she'd imagined it, but then Sparkie got up from her cardboard box bed and went to the bedroom door much as a dog might. Brittany opened the door and followed the little unicorn to Ravyn's room.

Ravyn was gone. The usual hazard of strewn laundry and open books on the floor had been picked up. The bed was made, and a note was on the pillow.

Brittany winced with premonition. She crossed the room and read the note. Ravyn's scrawled handwriting informed her that she had gone to live with her dad on his new island.

With jerky movements, Brittany folded the note into a small square and shoved it into the pocket of her sleep shirt. "Come on, Sparkie."

She led the unicorn back to her room and closed the door. Then she climbed into bed where she dozed fitfully, hating her life and herself.

She woke to a crash of thunder that pounded her already throbbing head. Her first inclination was to roll over in bed and go back to sleep. But the aroma of coffee wafted up the stairs like a siren's song. She tottered down to the kitchen still dressed in her

sleep shirt and her sleepy hair, as her mother used to call it. Sparkie clomped along behind her.

Brittany poured a cup of coffee and sat with Eileen at the kitchen table. The kitchen was dark with the stormy weather, so Eileen had turned on all the lights. Both the ruffled curtains and the walls were bright yellow—yellow had been Grandma Liz’s favorite color when she was alive. In contrast, gray rain rasped against the window.

After a time, Eileen asked, “Where’s Ravyn? It doesn’t look like her bed has been slept in.”

Brittany took the note from her shirt pocket and handed it to her.

Eileen unfolded the note and stared at it for several minutes. Tears streamed down her face. In a wavering voice, she squeaked, “I was afraid this would happen. Now, we have only two in our coven.”

“Don’t count her out yet,” Brittany told her. “We’ll just treat this as a little vacation.”

Eileen nodded and scrubbed her cheeks with the heels of her hands.

Brittany took a long sip of coffee. “Do you think Ravyn’s dad has brainwashed her?”

Eileen scoffed. “If he’s even capable of such a thing.”

“I don’t know. There’s something fishy about him. Why would Ravyn suddenly move in with him?”

“Sure.” Eileen stood. “Because who would want to live in opulence when they could live here?” She fled the kitchen and stomped up the stairs to her room, leaving her empty coffee cup on the table.

Brittany slumped in her chair and covered her face. Everybody hated her. Everything she did was wrong.

She didn’t know how long she sat there like that, but after a while, Sparkie bawled and headbutted her leg. Brittany stroked the frizzy mane. It was a good thing Sparkie’s horn hadn’t grown in yet. What on Earth would she do with a full-grown unicorn?

She sighed and carried the coffee cups to the sink. Then she made a fresh batch of foal replacement milk, filled a baby bottle, and sat again at the table. Sparkie drank enthusiastically. Brittany had to hold the bottle with both hands to keep from having it knocked to the floor. No wonder her mother didn’t want to feed her.

When the bottle was empty, Brittany set it on the kitchen counter and led the unicorn upstairs to her room. Sparkie stepped into her bed, folded her knobby legs beneath her, and fell asleep.

Brittany took Ravyn's note from her pocket and tossed it on her bed. She changed her nightclothes to jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, chilled by the sound of rain on the roof. Then she sank onto the edge of the bed. She carefully unfolded Ravyn's note and looked at it. She didn't reread it, there was no sense in that, just stared at Ravyn's scrawling handwriting. Black ink on white paper.

Her phone dinged, announcing a text. She wanted to ignore the summons, but it would just keep dinging every few minutes until she acknowledged it. She crossed the room to her desk and looked at her phone. Aunt Lynette and Myra planned to be home sometime tomorrow.

Aunt Lynette was an ordained Wiccan priestess. She and Myra, her life partner, had taken up the job of visiting the lone witches in South Florida, the *lost ones* as her aunt called them, and encouraging them to meet and make covens of their own. Because of her time spent away, Aunt Lynette had relinquished leadership of her coven and pressed it upon Brittany. Hopefully, she would take that leadership back when she got home.

Brittany set the phone and the note beside her on the bed. She listened to the pouring rain. Vaguely, she wondered what Cody was doing at that moment. Was it raining where he was, too?

Perhaps she dozed because the rain had slowed and the sky had lightened when Brittany heard a key in the lock. Was that Ravyn? She rushed out of her room leaving the door open and bolted down the stairs.

It wasn't Ravyn. It was her aunt.

"Glory be, what a day," Aunt Lynette muttered as she struggled to get two suitcases on wheels over the threshold.

Behind her, Myra shook out an umbrella and left it on the enclosed porch.

Brittany hurried to help her aunt with the suitcases. "Your text said you wouldn't be back until tomorrow."

"We left early on account of the wet." Aunt Lynette glanced around, sniffing. "Speaking of wet, it smells like a wet animal in here."

Just then, Eileen came down the stairs with Sparkie clomping close behind. The unicorn's little hooves made the usual racket on the wooden steps. Eileen smiled. "Hi, you two. Are you back for good?"

Sparkie said, "Bleh."

Aunt Lynette pointed. "What is that goat doing in the house?"

"Sparkie isn't a goat," Brittany said. "She's a baby unicorn. Remember when the Queen of Fairies gifted me with a unicorn for rescuing her mother? This is the one."

Aunt Lynette puffed up. "That don't explain what it's doing in the house."

"A real unicorn?" Myra crouched and cooed. "Oh, how cute."

Aunt Lynette said, "Yes, she's adorable. But she don't belong in the house. Keep her in the garage."

Brittany spread her hands and stammered, "B-but..."

Sparkie backed away from Myra and gave a tremendous sneeze, peppering the floor with magical flowers. Both Myra and Aunt Lynette leaped back in alarm.

"I was trying to tell you," Brittany said. "Sparkie is allergic to sadness. You're upsetting her."

Eileen knelt to hug the unicorn. "I thought we had her over this."

"She needs to be around us," Brittany said. "We can't lock her in the garage."

"Then you can stay in there with her." Aunt Lynette looked around. "Where's Ravyn?"

Brittany sighed. "Ravyn moved out. She's kind of mad at me."

"What? Glory be, girl. I left this coven in your charge to keep it together, not to tear it apart."

"I didn't... I wouldn't..." Brittany took a step back. "It's a long story."

"You'll have time enough to explain yourself over dinner," Aunt Lynette said.

Eileen stood. "It's *so* good to have you back."

"We're just back long enough to pick up fresh clothing," Aunt Lynette told her. Then Sparkie sneezed again, and she shouted, "Take that animal to the garage."

Brittany and Eileen coaxed Sparkie into the dark and dank garage. Even when Grandpa Earle had been alive, the garage had never housed a car. It was like a warehouse, filled with row after row of metal storage shelves.

Brittany sat on Grandpa's *yeti freezer*. "She's always like that. Always judging. Me. Sparkie. Remember how mean she was to Cody when they first met? And all he was trying to do was save her life."

Eileen sniffed, not looking at her.

"Cody has the patience of a saint. He could have just got up and—"

"Would you please stop talking about Cody?" Eileen snapped. "It makes me remember *he who shall not be named*." She stormed back into the house.

Brittany blinked in surprise. She didn't talk about Cody that much. Did she? Maybe once or twice. Although she thought about him all the time. Cody and Eileen's ex were best friends. It was difficult to think of one without the other. Maybe she overdid the reminiscing. But it was different for Eileen. She was the one who did the leaving. Brittany never wanted to break up with Cody.

She sat on the floor and hugged Sparkie. "Looks like we're in the doghouse together."

Several hours later, Eileen opened the door and informed Brittany that dinner was ready. Brittany left Sparkie in the garage, washed her hands, and took her place at the dining room table. Her aunt had whipped up a small banquet of roast pork, scalloped potatoes, and the last bag of green beans from the freezer.

As they sat, Brittany blurted, "Did Eileen tell you she's bulimic now?"

Eileen shot her an angry look.

"Oh, honey," Myra said to Eileen. "No wonder you're looking a little peaky."

"I'm doing much better," Eileen said stiffly. "*Ravyn* was helping me."

She's not helping you anymore, is she? Brittany put her napkin on her lap.

"Join hands." Aunt Lynette reached for Brittany's hand on her right and Myra's hand on her left. She bowed her head. "Loving Goddess, we thank you for this home that keeps us warm and dry in times of storm and this family which keeps us safe in times of trouble. As we partake of the bounty of Earth's bosom, we remember our blessings with gratitude. Blessed be."

"Blessed be." Myra smiled. "Eileen, the salad is small. There wasn't much left in the fridge. I guess you haven't gotten around to shopping."

Brittany murmured, "The Farmer's Market doesn't open in the rain."

"And rain we have." Aunt Lynette took a fresh roll and passed the basket. "Looks like the whole of South Florida is under that stalled cold front."

“It’s the season,” Myra said.

“Eileen told us about your Ostara celebration for the spring equinox,” Aunt Lynette said to Brittany. “Sounds like you did a bang-up job.”

Myra said, “I especially liked the part where you used black bed sheets to suggest being born into the light. It would have been nice, however, if you had washed the sheets afterward instead of leaving them in the hamper.”

“I would have gotten around to it,” Brittany said. “I didn’t know to expect you so soon.”

“Whether or not we were coming home is not the issue,” Myra said.

“Eileen also told us about Ravyn meeting her long-lost daddy,” Aunt Lynette said. “It may have been a bit harsh to say she’d been brainwashed, but you were right to be concerned. We all know the dangers of being bamboozled by a charismatic man.”

“Yes, we do.” Myra blushed and looked down at her plate.

Myra had once been brainwashed into being a thrall for a powerful werewolf. Cody had helped free her. Brittany shook her head. *Stop thinking about him.*

Aunt Lynette sighed. “All we can do now is leave the door open and keep a light in the window.”

They ate in silence for a time.

Eileen reached for the *too-small* salad and took a second helping. “So, how was your trip? Did you find many secret witches?”

“Indeed, we did,” Aunt Lynette said. “We drove as far west as Fort Meyers and as far south as Homestead. Met a lot of lovely women and a few men. Most treated us graciously and seemed eager to *come out of the closet* as it were. Only one group met us with hostility and open distrust.”

“They live in Tamarac,” Myra said. “They insist that they aren’t a coven, they are a club. Queen Imogene gave them a lot of trouble about it, but since they weren’t a coven, she couldn’t collect dues from them under her rule.”

“Smart,” Brittany said.

“Not so much,” Aunt Lynette told her. “What they have now don’t amount to more than a social club, so they ain’t learning as they should be. No rituals. No spell work. But they wouldn’t listen to us.”

Myra giggled. “They said they don’t trust old people.”

“How old are *they*?” Eileen asked.

Aunt Lynette shrugged. “Eighteen. Nineteen.”

“Your age.” Myra nodded.

“In fact,” Aunt Lynette said, “we intended to pick up the three of you and take you back with us. I thought they might feel differently once they met you. But now Ravyn’s gone and you two are babysitting that little critter.”

“Then just take me,” Eileen said. “I’d love to meet them. I can tell them all about the joys of living in a coven.” She added for only Brittany to hear, “And get away from you and your reminiscing.”

“No, no.” Aunt Lynette waved a hand. “We can’t leave Brittany here all on her lonesome. No telling how long we’ll be gone.”

“I’ll be fine.” Brittany forced a smile. “You three go ahead. Don’t worry about me.” *I don’t want to talk to any of you anyway.*

“It’s settled then,” Aunt Lynette said. “We’ll leave in the morning.”

Eileen grinned and tucked into her salad. Brittany set down her fork—she had lost her appetite.

When dinner was done and the dirty dishes cleared away, Brittany made a batch of foal formula and carried the warm bottle to the garage. The floor was covered in spring flowers—crocuses, pansies, daffodils. For the first time, Brittany noticed that Sparkie’s magical flowers had no fragrance.

She sat on the floor and pulled Sparkie onto her lap. The *little critter* had bawled herself hoarse. How could Aunt Lynette be so mean to her?

When Sparkie finished her bottle, Brittany searched the storage shelves for her sleeping bag. She spread it out atop the blooms. She should clean up the flowers, but why bother? They were magical constructs and would disappear by morning anyway. She crawled into her makeshift bed. The last time she’d used the sleeping bag, she was in Norway with Cody. They’d cuddled together and watched the Northern Lights.

Sparkie sneezed a few more times then settled in beside her. Brittany closed her eyes. Outside, rain struck the metal garage door melodically, like a song she couldn’t quite remember.