**Carol's Coffee Shop**

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"Carol's Coffee Caress" boasted the best coffee this side of Grayson's Gorge, located in the village on the east side of Skypierce Peak. The cafe had been decked out for weeks with colored Christmas lights, tinsel, a seven-foot tree, and ornaments hung from the walls and ceiling. Holiday music played softly in the background. Peppermint, eggnog, cinnamon, and other holiday spices found their way to the coffee bar. Customers were drawn to the warm aroma of fresh coffee, the friendly atmosphere, and the sweet pastries, but returned because of Carol. The "caress" name stuck because Carol hugged her customers when they arrived. She was everyone's favorite barista.

Carol's beautiful shape inspired more than thoughts of hugs. She had light brown hair like cafe au lait and dark brown eyes like espresso. She had a smile for all of her patrons, dark eyelashes above wide cheekbones. She could be found near a table or booth holding a pot of steaming coffee for refills. In the winter months she favored brown sweaters that subtly accentuated her breasts. Carol didn't mind the attention. Today, her sweater's v-neck dipped to show just the round tops of her breasts. She permitted her best customers to drape their arms around her narrow waist, just above her tight jeans. She enforced her limits, gently removing eager hands that tended to drift to her shapely ass without unduly embarrassing her patron. Her enviable hour-glass figure hadn't changed much during the seven years she owned the place.

The door bell jingled as Carol's best friend Jorie entered the shop. Blond Jorie was slim as a pencil and muscle trim, despite having given birth to four children. Jorie and Carol grew up on the Peak, went to the university together, and both returned after college. Jorie exercised and trained anyone with money to pay her fees but didn't really need the work. Her father was Magus Grayson, who owned Skypierce Peak and Grayson Gorge, and her husband Hervé successfully represented the mountain folk in their disputes at the county courthouse.

They embraced and traded air kisses. High-maintenance Jorie sluffed off her jacket and sat at a table near the window where she could be seen from the street. She wore jean shorts over lavender tights, tossed her blond hair, and bobbed her leg to draw attention to its slimness. Carol brought her a cup of green tea and an almond cookie, her traditional fare.

"Sit down, Carol." Jorie placed her hand on Carol's arm.

Carol checked around the shop and decided she could afford a few minutes before her next round. She slid her round ass onto the chair and placed the coffee pot on the table.

Jorie took out a six-inch handcrafted doll made of sticks, pine cones, and ribbons. Its most prominent features were two large breasts and a pentagram on its front. Jorie smiled when she gave it to Carol.

"Oh, no. What is this, the tenth time you've invited me to your Wiccan party? I'm not interested. I love you, Jorie, but it's not for me. I'm not that girl any more."

Jorie shook her head. "You can't goose a girl for trying. My father has wanted you at his annual party for longer than ten years. He thinks you would be a perfect Ice Queen, our own Freyja. What am I supposed to tell him? You don't want to party with him?"

"Your father gives me the creeps, so no, I don't want to party with him. I'm surprised you still do."

Jorie smiled like a cat on the back of a sofa. "Of course I like it. It's a celebration of the Natural. Just like you, Carol. You are naturally beautiful. You should come, one time before you get married."

"I'm sure that Derwin would certainly not approve."

Jorie puffed her lips. "Derwin. You can have your pick of any man on the mountain and you're stuck with Derwin the drip."

"He's fine." Carol's attention was caught by an arm waving at the other end of the cafe. "Be right there," she called.

"Please, Carol. Just this once. You're going to be married right after Christmas. If you think that Derwin won't let you go now, he'll absolutely forbid it after you're married."

Carol slid off her chair and went to the table that had waved. A group of middle-aged construction men on break were finishing up their coffee. She gave took out their check. While she figured it out, the man closest put his arm around her waist. She leaned into him. It was a nice feeling to have someone want her. What else was a woman's body for if not to be seen, gently touched, and appreciated?

She poured some hot water for the old crone who came daily to her shop. Baba Yomama operated the fortune telling and tarot reading shop at the edge of the village. She came because she liked the "magic" associated with this cafe.

Back with smug Jorie, Carol sighed, awaiting Jorie's lecture. It came immediately.

"I know what you're thinking, girl. You like attention from men. You like to flirt and hug. When men take you out, you have a wonderful time and so do the men. Or they used to, until you agreed to marry Derwin."

"Derwin is fine."

Jorie leaned forward so no one else could hear. "So you're willing to have only one cock in your pussy for the rest of your life?"

Carol shot back. "You do. You're married to Hervé."

"That's why I celebrate the winter solstice each year. It's a chance to be a little crazy, a little wild, and completely natural. It's a celebration of the sun coming back. It's a festival that has been going on for centuries."

"I'm not a witch. I'm not a Wiccan. I think what you do may be a sin."

"Wiccans don't believe in sin. Our creed is Do No Harm. Come on. Don't let your pillowy round thighs go to waste. You need at least one more real man to lie on them, right?"

Carol flushed while listening to Jorie. The image of an excited sex partner, stripped, his long dick bobbing, kneeling between her legs, wanting her, then lying on top of her, brought back a decade of fantasies. Jorie had a vigorous sex life; Carol was lucky to have slim, gentlemanly Derwin as a friend and fiancé. She hoped someday soon he would be her lover.

Then, to add to her discomfort, Derwin's entrance sounded the tinkling bell. Carol beamed a broad smile when she saw him, which quickly died when she saw his brother, Brock, behind him. Brock, who grew up with Jorie and Carol but who left the mountain seven years ago, with not a word since then to Carol. He broke her heart by leaving but she had gotten over it. Really, she had. She told herself this every single day. Now, here was Brock, looking even sturdier, studlier, and more handsome than he had seven years ago.

Damn him.

Carol had a way of sliding off her chair that emphasized her curves, with a sinuous uncoiling. Her hips were wide, it was true, but her waist was so narrow that a man with large hands could encircle her waist completely. Brock had been able to do so. When Brock used to hold her in his arms to dance, he knew the compactness of her ribcage. Then there was her erotic surprise--her full, firm breasts which completed the hourglass figure. She remembered how it felt to be held close by Brock, her boobs squished firmly between them.

Carol took a deep breath, which made her sweater bulge a little more. She smoothed her hands over her hips before taking a step toward Derwin and his brother. The winter air had come into the shop with the brothers. Derwin looked happily into her eyes and smiled. Brock noticed that the cold air turned Carol's nipples into hard little pebbles, and gave her a lecherous smile.

She hugged them both as a welcome. Derwin kissed her cheek. Brock held her a bit too long, then let go. She swallowed hard and tucked at her hair as though he might have mussed it.

"Sit anywhere. Coffee and muffins?"

They both nodded. She turned and gave a little more swing to her ass as she left. Nothing too vulgar, but enough to tease. She filled their order and came back. Derwin looked at her face with a loving smile. Brock's gaze was lower. Lower even than her brown sweater. His eyes watched the way her thighs alternately moved closer to him with each step. When she stopped at the table, Derwin put is arm around her waist. Brock studied the zipper on her very tight jeans.

"So, what finally brings you to town, Brock?" She tried to sound nonchalant as she poured the coffee.

He looked into her brown eyes with his devilish blue ones and flashed a broad smile that surely had a few extra teeth in it. Carol had to remember to stop pouring before she spilled coffee onto his long, muscular thighs. Filling Derwin's mug was much easier. "I had to wish my little brother the best wedding, and perhaps kiss the bride. Show me your ring."

Carol held out her hand so Brock could appraise the diamond. "So, you'll be here for the entire week. How lovely. Not much has changed around here though. A few cell towers, a Dollar Store, but we're pretty stable compared to Chicago."

He took her small hand into his larger paw and held it. "I came exactly for that reason. For some stability. To appreciate my roots. To connect with old friends. I might have to leave before the end of the week, though." His large hand, with tiny blond hairs on it, covered Carol's smaller hand. "I'm so glad to see your coffee shop finally. Derwin's told me all about it."

Carol pulled her hand away, with a polite smile. "Derwin will show you around town. It should take all of an afternoon to see everything."

Derwin laughed. "Brock and I plan to shake things up a bit."

Jorie eased over to their table to say hello. She looked even blonder and more trim than she had in college, her eyes sparkled bluer. "I'd say you've already shaken things up." She held out both arms for a hug from Brock, then from Derwin.

Brock hesitated, then stood up. He leaned in and gave her a quick hug with two pats on the back, although Jorie burrowed into him like a badger to a tree trunk. Brock sat down, watching Carol's reaction to the greeting.

Carol played it cool. She excused herself to wait on other customers. The morning rush was over and the place had pretty much emptied out. This was the time Carol used to prepare for the lunch hour crowd--not huge but still profitable. While Carol worked, Jorie sat down with Derwin and Brock to catch up. Carol glanced at the table occasionally, wondering what in the world they found so darn funny. She'd have to ask Derwin later. Alone.

The place cleaned up pretty well with the help of her three employees. There was one woman still squatting at a table to write the Great American Novel, another man reading the Wall Street Journal, and a two-some involved in a job interview. And Baba Yomama, of course. No one needed her assistance. She drifted back to her friends.

Jorie beamed as she saw Carol. "Guess what?" Without waiting for an answer, she continued. "I've invited Brock and Derwin to the Winter Solstice Celebration. And they're coming! Isn't that great! First time for both." She leaned across the table and put her hand on Brock's arm. She didn't seem to notice that the brothers were both blushing. "I hope it won't be the last time they decide to come. It'll be a night that they will never forget."

"Will your husband be there, Jorie?" Carol asked, oh so innocently.

"Gosh, no! He can't stand those things. It makes him intensely jealous for some reason."

Derwin leaned closer, conspiratorially. "Is it true the witches go naked there? Sorry, Carol, I just wondered. That's been the rumor forever!"

"Gosh, no! First, this is a Wiccan party to celebrate the winter solstice and the return of the sun. Second, it's winter and cold outside, right? Third, why not just come and be surprised? Okay? Carol always turns down my father's invitation, but I've invited her again anyway. I think she may come this year."

Derwin and Brock both looked surprised and studied her. Carol didn't know how to react to their scrutiny.

"You, Carol?" Derwin said.

"Well, why not?" she said defiantly.

Brock smiled at her, appraising her from head to toe. "I, for one, hope you'll be there."

"Well, I haven't decided."

Carol left her friends discussing the party while she prepared for the lunch crowd. She occasionally glanced their way, just to make sure they didn't need anything. Each time she did, she saw Derwin and Jorie head to head jabbering away. Brock sat back and watched her from his tilted back chair. It was a little disconcerting, but Carol's shop was a welcoming place, so she shouldn't really complain. Despite the warmth in the kitchen area, her breasts still showed the hard little pebbles where her nipples should be. Brock noticed, she was sure.

The lunch crowd started to arrive. It gave her something to do. She no longer studied Brock's broad shoulders, his blond hair, his large hands, and his thighs--oh, those thighs! The brothers got up to leave to give over the table to the lunch crowd.

"Oh, you can stay," Carol said. "It won't be that crowded."

Derwin leaned to kiss her cheek again and she blushed. She tried to kiss his cheek but missed. Then Brock stepped forward. He wanted a hug. Again. Her breasts ached already from their tautness but she opened wide her arms and allowed him another hug. His arms encompassed her as he kissed her neck. Not her cheek, her neck? Was that his leg finding space between her legs, pressing closer? Was she pressing closer to him at the same time? Damn, her breasts ached!

Then the brothers were gone. The air seemed to have been sucked from the room. Carol shuddered a bit. She smoothed her sweater and the sides of her jeans. She readjusted her v-neck so her mounds barely peeked out. She pasted on a smile for the lunch crowd. "Frosty the Snowman" played over the speakers.

The pebbles on her breasts had left when Brock did. Thank God, she thought. She filled a lifted mug for a customer.

After the lunch crowd ate and left, the cafe settled down to a relaxing hum. A few loyal customers spread around the shop. Jorie nursed another cup of green tea and an almond cookie. Carol sat down with her and Jorie smiled expectantly.

"So, you're coming to the Winter Solstice Celebration. My dad will be so excited!"

"I haven't said I would, Jorie. I'm still considering."

"Did you see how nervous Derwin seemed about you showing up?" Jorie laughed. "Brock, on the other hand, was drooling to think you'd be at the Celebration."

"Stop."

"Brock has been gone for seven years, hasn't he? Has he been in touch with you during that time?"

Carol shook her head with a sigh. She didn't mean to sigh and it caused Jorie to laugh.

"Do you remember when we all went to the lake together after graduation for that summer solstice? I was celebrating my degree in biology and nutrition."

"Of course I remember. My degree was in Business Administration." Carol waved her arm around the shop. "See what it's gotten me?"

Not a day passed that she didn't think about that summer solstice party.

Jorie sat back, reminiscing. "We were so young."

"And naive. Although I can't say we were innocent." They both laughed.

"My tiniest bikini was hidden from my father among my other decent suits. You had at least five sexy bikinis, didn't you?"

"That should have been enough, don't you think?" Carol laughed.

"Whose idea was it to go skinny dipping anyway? Brock? Derwin? Somebody else?"

"As I recall, the whole thing was your idea, Jorie. That was a Wiccan thing, right? It was the Summer Solstice we were celebrating. I don't think Derwin was even there for some reason."

"Brock was there. He couldn't stop staring at your, Carol."

"It was on the very day of the summer solstice. The sun set and the lake was warm. You, for some crazy reason, started stripping at the end of a pier. I think everyone knew that was your plan all along."

Jorie put her finger to her lips, pretending to remember. "Me? You really think it was my idea?"

"You loved 'communing with nature.' You always had a body to die for, and still do. Once you were naked, the boys followed your lead pretty quickly. Then the girls disrobed, too, but a little more slowly."

"You were the last holdout. Bad idea, because then everyone watched you ease out of your top and your bottoms. You had a pretty nice figure back then, girl."

"You ripped my bikini off me. And gave everyone a sex show when you started in to kiss me and fondle my boobs."

"Grrrr. I remember. You still have a great body." Jorie sat straighter, her hand between her thighs. "That settles it. I'm planning another road trip to the lake this summer for us!"

"What will Hervé say? What about your four kids?"

"He'll watch the four kids. You know how jealous he gets when he sees anyone paying the least bit of attention to me. Don't worry. It'll be all arranged. Now, should I invite Derwin or Brock to come with us this summer?"

"I'm sure I don't really care." Carol tried to sound disinterested, but her tongue played on the edges of her lips.

"Then I'll invite both." Jorie went on talking about her plans for the summer road trip. She seemed to have forgotten about the Winter Solstice Celebration. Which was fine with Carol. Her mind traveled back to that summer when she and Jorie were just twenty-two. Taylor Swift got it right when she sang, "We're happy, free, confused, and lonely at the same time, it's miserable and magical..."

That was before Jorie had kids, although she was dating Hervé. At the lake, Carol had rejoiced that she was through with college, and wished her parents had lived long enough to see her graduation. Their death in an auto accident had been traumatic for her, but their estate and insurance proceeds had funded her coffee shop. Jorie kept everyone busy with calisthenics and challenges until that evening of the solstice. Brock celebrated the sun, the lake, the trees, and pretty girls. He told everyone of his plans to go to Chicago to use his newly minted Architecture degree to reshape the world. In fact, every person at the lake had big dreams at twenty-two.

The final evening had been perfect. They barbecued. They drank beer from long neck bottles. They listened to music played on guitars while most everyone sang. And just as the sun was setting and the sliver of moon was rising, an exciting idea spread among everyone--it would cement their college friendships to go skinny dipping. Sure, there was a healthy curiosity about the other person's body, but the sexual rules had relaxed in college to the point that anyone, except Carol, could bed anyone else for the price of a Marguerita and a nice smile. Sure, Carol had her own questions about the size of various parts of certain particular men's body parts. She was confident that most of them were eager to glimpse her body unclothed, for the first time.

When Jorie removed Carol's top unloosing her plush breasts, Carol glanced around. The horseplay had stopped and the boys were gawking. Then, Jorie slowly pulled down Carol's bottoms. The boys stopped breathing for a magical moment. Carol was bare, naked, exposed, vulnerable, accessible. But she didn't feel weak. Instead, she felt like a warrior queen, like the ones drawn on paperback novels and comic books, women with wildly perfect thighs, dainty ankles, gravity defying breasts supporting tiny metal bras, and Earth Mother hips carrying a golden chain bikini bottom. Her light brown hair was long and windblown. The warrior queen carried sharp dangerous weapons as she crouched, the better to illustrate the muscles of her legs.

Yes that was Carol, a modern Freyja, the Norse goddess of love, war, fertility, magic, and death, with the ability to foresee the future. Carol could pretend to be a powerful woman, in control of her destiny, practicing a form of magic called Seidr, which could change fates and the course of the world. Jorie kissed her mouth, her neck, and her shoulders. Carol was keenly aware that every man at the lake wanted her. When Jorie knelt down to kiss Carol's breasts and nuzzle her muff, Carol was sure that more than a few of the young men used the cover of the lake to explode the sexual tension that had built in their loins.

Carol dove sleekly into the water and swam to the raft about fifty yards out. No one bothered her as she swam. The women had swum next to the raft and surrounded it, not wanting to leave the shelter of the water yet. When Carol reached the ladder, she climbed up, the water streaming off her naked body as she stretched her arms over her head and arched her back. She was alone on the platform, surrounded by the eager men in the water, her acolytes. Eventually they clambered onto the raft, lounging at her feet. None minded displaying their dicks. She had her pick, but the sizes were affected by the lake's coolness. It would take some effort to help them grow to a dangerous length. That was the trouble. Should she give her attention to just one, two, five, or all dozen of them? They had been boys she grew up with on this side of the mountain, but they were no longer kids. They were mature men with intense desires, all directed toward her. The other girls could not have been happy.

The sky was clear, sprinkled with stars, and hosted the wicked smile of a waning crescent moon. A gentle night breeze began to stir and goosebumps dimpled her body. It was time to go back. After a while, led by Jorie, the other young women swam naked back to the pier, picked up their suits. They summoned the men to follow them, waving their hands and their bodies to entice them, but the men waited for Carol.

She executed a perfect dive smoothly breaking the lake's surface. When she came up, she told the men, "Race you!" They accepted her challenge and tore toward the shore and the pier. That way they could see her when she came out of the water, too.

Carol had swum leisurely to the pier. She swept her hair back off her face. Climbing the steel ladder made her hips swing like she was doing a cha-cha. As she stepped onto the pier, she noticed that one man was behind her. A man with a broad smile and muscular shoulders. He climbed up the ladder and stood exposed before her. It was Brock. She had dated him once or twice, but he didn't seem to be that taken with her.

Brock shook and stripped the water off his limbs. He didn't bother with a towel. He said, "You know, Freyja was a statuesque blond. You've got the statuesque part down though."

His comment annoyed her unreasonably. She decided to punish him and turned her back to him. She felt his lovely blond haired paw on her ass, testing its firmness. His other hand came around and cupped her right breast. His thumb found her nipple, and teased it to full attention. Carol caught her breath. She began to realize how intense an erogenous zone her nipples could be. She rolled her head back, offering the sensitive side of her neck. He had to know, she thought, he had to know that if he wanted to take her, he could tonight. His fingers teased her nipple again. The hand on her ass moved around her wide hip until he had his fingers in her wet fur, probing for the warm, slick entrance to her pussy.

Carol groaned. She reached behind and found his prick, hard, thick, longer than a handful, and hot. She longed to turn around and put it into her mouth, but that would mean Brock would quit exploring her valley between her legs and quit teasing the nipple that was aching with desire.

Then one of the men shouted, "They've taken our suits and all the towels!"

The men laughed and shouted, all but Brock. He pulled Carol close to him, and turned her around protectively. She wasn't sure what he was protecting her from, since everyone had seen her body by now. But she was aroused and ready to submit to Brock. Maybe he wanted to protect her excitement. Her cheeks were flushed. She was acutely aware of the warmth of his cock between the two of them.

Brock looked into her eyes, then kissed her full on the lips. She opened her mouth to allow his insistent tongue to probe her. She melted into his chest as she kissed him back. Then, he broke off the kiss, touched her hair, and put his arm around her. He walked her toward the large house where everyone was staying. The lights blazed unmercifully. The men and Carol were in full view of everyone.

"Are you ready?" Brock asked Carol. She nodded, squared her shoulders. She led the procession into the house. Jorie met them, wearing in a beach towel around her hips, but with a handheld video camera to capture every embarrassing moment.

Except that Carol wasn't embarrassed. She was Freyja, Queen of the Gods. She was fearless before all her subjects. Except for Brock. She wanted to please him endlessly. But the general teasing had begun and towels were tossed and snatched away. In the next few minutes everyone was naked, not naked, hugged, kissed, and groped. More long neck beer was brought out.

Carol found a sleeveless coverup that barely covered her ass. She could have worn more, but she wasn't in the mood for modesty. She wished everyone to be exotic, erotic, and ultimately satisfied. She was surprised when Brock waved to the group and said he had to go.

"What?" she said.

Brock blew her a kiss across the room. But Carol could swear that he wanted to say more to her. Perhaps in the morning she could see him again. But he hadn't shown up that next morning. He left the mountain and Carol for the next seven years. The jingle bells over the door to Carol's Coffee Caress tinkled. "I'll Be Home for Christmas" by the Carpenters played softly.

"Carol?" It was Jorie, forcing her to come back to the living. "My dad's here."

"Why did Brock leave our party that night, Jorie?" Carol asked.

Jorie looked at her. "Don't you know? You scared the daylights out of him. He likes to be the one in control, and he was afraid he was losing control to you. He didn't want to be tied up here in Skypierce. He left for Chicago the next day. To escape, I guess."

Carol hung her head. "Why would he want to escape from me?" And what did his return mean?

Jorie's father, a tall, trim man with gray streaked bristles in his jet black shock of hair closed the door behind him. He had beard stubble and intense blue eyes, scarier eyes than Jorie's. He was at the coffee shop to pick up Jorie, but trained those searing blue eyes on Carol, x-raying her from head to toe as though he could see past her warm brown sweater and tight blue jeans. Carol forced herself to give him a smile and stood to offer him her welcoming hug. He stood a little taller than she did. He embraced her with his strong mountain man arms. His hug was like his personality, possessive. He held her close as he continued to study her.

"Cup of coffee?"

Magus Grayson shook his head. "I'm here for my little girl. We're planning the celebration for the 21st, just like every year. You should come, Carol." He leaned forward a little. "You really should. You might be crowned our Festival's Ice Queen."

Carol squirmed away with a laugh. "I'm more the Ice Cream type."

"Carol might come, right Carol?" Jorie put herself between her father and Carol. "Please come, Carol. Derwin and Brock will be there." She shot Carol a knowing look.

"I don't know what to wear."

"Perfect!" Jorie said. "I'll pick you up tomorrow and take you to the hall."

"Our guests wear masks to remain anonymous. It gives one more freedom to be natural and oneself if one doesn't have to explain one's behavior the next day. You understand. So, no identifying scars, no distinctive tattoos, no needle marks, that kind of thing." He narrowed his eyes, smiled a wicked grin and went back to the door. "Coming, Jorie?"

"I'll pick you up tomorrow, Carol. Ten o'clock. Oh, this will be the best Winter Solstice Celebration ever!"

"All right, but you have to promise to come to Midnight Mass with me on Christmas Eve. Okay, Jorie?"

"Sure, sure. Not a problem. Love you. Kiss. Bye."

And Jorie left the warm coffee shop. Carol shivered as she remembered Grayson Garbhon's gaze. Did she really want to put herself into his spider web? On the other hand, where else would she run into Brock?

Carol closed the shop for the day, still unsure of whether to accept Jorie's invitation. Jorie's invitations usually came with ulterior motives. Carol should have learned her lesson after the Summer Solstice celebration. She'd heard rumors and stories about other solstices, both winter and summer. Like Derwin, she had heard that "being natural" entailed nudity, whether one was a witch, wizard, or Wiccan. Carol liked her own figure, Derwin appreciated her figure well enough to marry her, and apparently, Jorie's father Magus Grayson lusted for her figure. But she wasn't twenty-two any longer. In another year, she wouldn't even be in her twenties. If pressed, she had to admit that was one reason she was ready to marry Derwin. She couldn't wait for ever for the right Brock,... er, brother,... er, man to come along.

Walking home on the snow-slickened sidewalks, she slid past other small businesses in the town. Whenever she could, she frequented them, the way she hoped they would patronize her shop. But at the edge of town, she saw one business she had never visited since she had been in college, Baba Yomama's place. It was a small house with a neon sign outside reading "Fortune Telling, Psychic and Tarot Readings--Your Future Revealed." Carol hadn't gone there since college. As a lark she had visited once and was shocked by the vivid, violent cards that had turned up for her. She had planned a warm, loving, generous future for herself, but the cards would not cooperate. Within six months, her parents had died in a frightful auto accident. The cards had predicted sudden change, and they had been proved right.

It was illogical to blame the cards for her parents' deaths, but Carol had been leery of them ever since. It was another reason she was reluctant to submit to Jorie's Wiccan festivals. The celebrations didn't seem to turn out well for Carol. First she lost her parents, then she lost Brock. Her life had been relatively stable for the past seven years. Perhaps too stable. Now, Derwin and Brock wanted to shake things up. So, perhaps it was time for Carol to shake things up as well. She took a deep breath and entered the house.

Remarkably, Baba had not changed since she last visited. She had eyes that might once have been blue but were now the color of ice. They focused somewhere just beyond Carol. The woman's gray hair spread out from her head. She wore a house dress and an apron, sensible dark shoes, and pale make up. She greeted Carol with a smile and a nod, and showed her the table where her future might be told.

"I'm nervous about this."

"We won't go anywhere you aren't prepared to go, my dear."

"Do you want to know anything about me? What I want to do? What my hopes and dreams might be? What brings me here?"

"No. You know why you are here. That is enough." She splayed a deck of Tarot cards on the table.

Carol paid her and the session began. Carol squirmed while the woman composed herself. When she looked at Carol, she asked, "What's bothering you, my dear?"

"Are you a witch?" Carol asked.

She smiled in response. "Everyone on this mountain is a bit of a witch, don't you think, Carol? Ready, my dear?" She shuffled the cards.

Carol nodded. The cards were displayed on the table, some face down, some face up. When Carol peaked through her closed eyes, a shiver ran through her. Some of the cards were the same ones she had seen before her parents' death. She was no expert at reading these things, but she recognized the Nine of Swords, the Ten of Wands, and the Hermit. They had all presaged her parents' disaster.

"They mean death, don't they?"

The woman, hunched over the cards, shook her head and explained. "The Nine of Swords can mean anxiety about death. You certainly seemed to be anxious, my dear. The Ten of Wands is also a card of stress, not death. What is worrying you, dear?"

"Do I have to answer? I just want to hear what the cards say."

"Of course. I understand. The last one is a strange one. The Hermit. A man alone. Do you face some kind of loneliness?"

"Absolutely not! I'm going to be married in another week or so. What do the cards say about that?"

"Well, dearie, let's see." The old woman shuffled the cards easily and three down another three cards. This time, Baba's surprise showed on her face. She recovered though, and cleared her throat.

The cards were the Tower, burning and under attack; the Knight of Swords; and the Death card. Carol searched the woman's eyes for some explanation that didn't involve disaster.

"I need to show you one more card, my dear."

The next card thrown down was the Queen of Swords. At least that card had not shown up with her parents.

"What do you see, Baba?"

"Let me start with the group of three. The last card with the skeleton on it is sometimes called the Death card. It should more properly be called the card of Transformation, of Change. I can tell you there will be a great change in your life."

"Well, I've just told you I'm getting married, so that's not a big revelation."

"Yes, perhaps it presages your coming nuptials. But keep an open mind. Next, the Knight of Swords. He is a creature of aggression, of impulse, and of force. You may experience things beyond your control soon."

Carol didn't know what to make of that one.

"Then we have the Tower. I won't try to kid you. This is not a pleasant card. It heralds destruction."

"Great. This means I'm doomed, right?"

"Oh, no, not necessarily. This destruction may affect you, but it doesn't mean it will be your own destruction. I look at all of these cards, and try to piece them together to tell a possible future for you."

"What's the last card, that Queen one?"

"Interesting. That's the Queen of Swords. She is a troublesome woman. She may be the catalyst for the destruction, the stress, the suddenness, and the transformation you are facing. As a result, someone you love may find themself alone."

Carol felt a tear drop onto her cheek and roll gently down. "I don't know any more than I did before, do I?"

"Yes, my dear. You do. You are entering a time of great and sudden change in your life. You cannot remain static or you will continue to feel stress and anxiety. You must confront the troublesome woman and the aggressive knight if you wish to continue complete your transformation. There is a chance you might fail, that is always a possibility. Someone, you, a loved one, an enemy, might end up alone after your metamorphosis."

"What can I do?"

"You can do nothing, and change will come crashing into your life. Or you can stride purposefully forward and confront the demons that are plotting against you."

"I can't do nothing."

"I can't tell you what to do, my dear."

Carol was dispirited. There was no answer here.

"Thank you. I'll be going now."

Carol left. The tears chapped her cheeks as she walked the last mile to her home. Once there, she called her employees and told them she would be taking two weeks off for the holiday and to prepare for the wedding.

"It's about time you started to think about yourself," one young girl told her. "Of course we'll take care of the store. One favor though?"

"What is it?"

"Can we wear whatever we want while you're away?"

"Well, within reason. No witches' costumes, okay? This is Christmas."

The girl laughed and promised everything would be fine.

Carol wondered what transformation might be waiting for the Coffee Caress.

The night of the 21st, Carol arrived for the party with Jorie and they went to the changing room. More than twenty women were sorting through white gowns, chosing something to wear for the celebration. Jorie had completely disrobed before slipping the white streaming robe over her shoulders and let it drape along her taut muscles. She looked as toned as a cheerleader. The white robe was the only thing she wore aside from her white mask.

"When in Rome..." thought Carol. She selected a white robe that covered her to about mid-thigh, shorter than where Jorie's robe fell. She cinched it with a gold chain. The gown had the kind of deep v-cleavage that Carol liked. Even foregoing a bra, her breasts were enviable mounds of pleasure. She chose a golden mask for herself.

The Magus's mansion was cozy warm, with a crackling fire in the huge fireplace and fragrant pine bough decorations draped on the walls. Rotating pentagrams hung from the ceiling in the great hall where warm beverages, some alcoholic some not, were served by some of the serving women in white robes. A young man, dressed as a satyr with goat legs and a tail, draped colorful flowers around Carol's neck.

The music beat heavily during the evening almost forcing a dance response.

Outside a path lead through the tall trees to an area where a large circle had been cleared. Huge piles of wood surrounded one oversized log in the center.

"The Yule log," Jorie explained. "It's central to the celebration."

Jorie began to dance, freely and expressively. She took giant steps with her legs and arched her back. Overhead, high cirrus clouds dusted the moon, and in return ice crystals glowed in the moonlight. The roaring fire in the center of the circle radiated warmth so that no additional wrap was needed. Jorie was soon joined by the other women who wore white robes and masks. As they danced, their arms swung wildly overhead. A crowd of onlookers gathered, appreciative.

Carol felt drawn into the dancing crowd. Her whole body thrummed with excitement. She jumped toward the yule log and joined the women. The white robes she and the others wore became diaphanous in the moonlight. Her rounded curves were clearly visible, as fully as they had been when she stood stripped of her bathing suit seven years earlier.

She didn't feel seven years older though, and judging by the attention she was garnering, she didn't appear seven years older. She saw Magus Grayson stroking his beard as his narrowed dark eyes studied her. Other men clapped time, breaking into easy applause as she twirled and leaped. At the north end of the circle, she saw the two brothers, Brock and her fiancee, Derwin, staring at her. She felt guilty that Derwin was seeing her this way, exposed before everyone, and she felt wanton that Brock was seeing her so vulnerable.

Carol read the invitation in Brock's eyes. She recognized that invitation from seven years ago. In Derwin's eyes, she saw restraint and some embarrassment. When she met Derwin's eyes, he smiled and nodded his permission. It was all she needed, and she spun even faster so that every facet of her figure was visible at the same time.

Jorie came to her. Carol indicated with her head where Brock and Derwin stood. Jorie smiled and began to dance closer to them. At some point her robe became loose and slipped from her figure. She danced nude, vigorously, displaying her finely toned muscles which were glistening with sweat and emotion. She took Derwin by the arm and pulled him with her towards the darkened woods. Derwin's glance checked with Carol, but she refused to meet his eyes. In a few seconds, Jorie and Derwin had disappeared from the crowd of onlookers.

Brock remained. His gaze was not distracted by the other dancers, many of whom were now naked, too. Their bodies looked as though they had been coated with shimmering oil, reflecting the dancing flames of the yule log. Brock had eyes only for Carol. She danced closer and closer to him, although it took a great deal of courage. To her, approaching him was as dangerous as falling into the yule log itself. She knew the pain that Brock could cause, but she was captured by him. She thought about the marriage to his brother Derwin in a few more days and how she would be Derwin's woman, exclusively. But that time had not come yet. There was still time for one more lover, one more man to lie with her, his male member parting her legs and plunging with vigor and warmth into her throbbing vagina.

Carol stood in front of Brock, her hands lifted high above her head, rocking her hips back and forth, her head tilted skyward. Brock was waiting for Carol at the outskirts of the circle. His mug of winter celebration grog was steaming hot in the cold air. A cinnamon stick was swirling lazily around the edge of the mug. Brock reached out and unloosed her robe. It slid off her shoulders, but was held up by her breasts and her taut nipples. Carol did a slow shimmy and the gown slid down off her tits, past her hips, and grazing her thighs. Except for her mask, she was naked and available for him. She took his arm, and led him into a dark part of the surrounding trees. Over her shoulder she noticed Magus Grayson with his mouth in a firm line, disapproving of her actions.

The yule bonfire cast shadows into the woods that made everything seem darker and more mysterious. The air was a bit cooler here, but not uncomfortable despite being the first official day of winter. Whether the heat generated by the enormous bonfire had been aided by additional magic, Carol could not say. It was her first winter solstice celebration after all. Her mind was turned to her companion, a quiet, brooding, muscular man allowing himself to be led by the arm.

Carol felt some guilt being with Brock, but consoled herself with the idea that Jorie was probably rocking Derwin's world right now. Jorie had the reputation as a skilled and adventurous lover before she was married and had her four kids. There were rumors that she still enjoyed some exciting sexual play. If Carol were lucky, Derwin would pick up some ideas and tricks that he might bring back to their marriage bed.

Carol had no illusions that Brock would stay with her after tonight. He had his life in Chicago, his profession, his reputation. She had her cafe and her patrons here, and soon she would have Derwin. She removed her golden mask, and he gasped.

"You are still beautiful, Carol."

She undressed him slowly, kissing his shoulders, his biceps, and his palms as she removed his shirt. Then she nibbled his nipples as she removed his undershirt. His abdomen quivered with delight. She unloosened his belt and unzipped his jeans. His legs were still strong and the muscles well-defined. Sitting in an office designing buildings had not been his only occupation the past seven years.

He was ready. His penis strained against his undershorts. Carol knelt before him and edged his shorts down until his dick was bobbing eagerly about an inch from her face. His hands were on her shoulders, clutching them, betraying his eagerness. If he expected her to take him in her mouth, he would be disappointed. He didn't try to force the action, and Carol rose up before him. She raised her arms to embrace him, pulling his naked body into hers, and his mouth to her own. He was shaking with excitement and anticipation, but Carol held him close as she kissed him and explored his mouth. Soon his arms were pulling her closer to him and their legs were intertwined while standing. His hands found her fleshy ass and squeezed and released and squeezed again.

His breath was ragged and his chest heaved. She made him lie on his back while she stood over him. His eyes had changed from years before. Then, they had been demanding, hungry, exciting. Now, his eyes were tired, sad, and supplicating. He struggled to find his voice, finally not saying anything. A tear ran down the side of his cheek.

Then she lowered herself down upon him, fitting herself to his throbbing cock. She rocked gently back and forward, tilting her pelvis for greater contact. He was inside her. His penis was still large and dangerous, but she felt in control. Brock turned his head to the side, while she rode him, her arms lifted over her head.

She slowed down, waiting for his ejaculating response. He had been so exuberant the first times. Now, he was rather meek, rather resigned to the lovemaking. She began to think he might have a conscience after all.

She leaned forward, her face near his ear, her breasts grazing across his chest. "Are you feeling bad because of your brother, Derwin?"

He shook his head. "No. This was Derwin's idea. He thought you could help."

Carol snapped back, sat up straight. His response shocked her, and her first inclination was to jump off and run away. But neither she nor he had climaxed yet. His hormonal level might be suboptimal, but her own juices were flowing like a broken levy. She put his words and his tears out of her mind. She lay on him so that their bodies were touching in as many places as possible. He felt strong and warm. She pressed herself onto him and eventually, he wrapped his arms around her. They rocked together, rather gently. It wasn't fucking, like she had expected. It was lovemaking, tender, inclusive, touching, and ultimately exhausting. After several minutes of this intimacy, he came in an explosion of desire, just before she felt her own body tremble with tiny responses to his embrace. She came, too, shaking with exhausted muscles. He slid out of her, followed by his warm jazz, but they lay together.

Gentle snow began to fall lightly around them. Flakes melted when they touched his long blond eyelashes. Snow crystals formed a halo around Carol's brown hair. She felt the snow melting on her back, the back of her legs, and her ass, but she was not cold. Magus Grayson's magic was still powerful and kept them warm.

She and Brock stood up and gathered their clothing. She wrapped herself in her white gown and carried her golden mask. He took the time to dress completely.

"You're leaving again?"

He nodded. Of course he was. He didn't want to be trapped by her now after seven years of independence.

She took his hand and they walked back to the bonfire. It was dying and the falling snow sizzled as it drifted above the lowering flames. Before they got to the mansion, Brock took her in his arms again, and kissed her. She pressed herself against him, but she knew it was hopeless. After the kiss, he stood holding her.

"Hey, Carol!" Jorie waved to her, leading Derwin by the hand. He was disheveled but still wore clothing. Jorie was naked as a newborn and just as free from embarrassment. Brock ended his embrace of Carol, and stood next to her as they approached. He smiled approvingly when he saw Jorie, but refused her offered hug.

"Ready to go?" Derwin studied both his brother and Carol for their response. Brock lowered his head and took a step toward Derwin. He let the fingers of Carol's hand go one at a time as he left.

Carol took a deep breath. Neither brother seemed to want to talk with her, and certainly not to embrace her. Derwin had the same determined look he had worn earlier. She expected that they would have to have long, intense fight about this celebration night. She had a million questions and Derwin was the only brother she could expect would talk about his feelings, and maybe his brother's feelings.

Magus Grayson and the old crone, Baba Yomama, stood together inside the foyer, observing all that went on between the two couples. Grayson's eyes were squinted, perhaps from the wood smoke, perhaps from his anger. Baba Yomama shook occasionally with something like a chuckle. Carol turned to look at her directly in her old eyes. She met Carol's gaze, then shook her head and turned to hobble off on her cane.

"I want to leave, Jorie."

"But the best part is still coming up. There's dancing, feasting, spell-casting, fireworks! Oh, come on. Please stay."

Carol shook her head and started walking away, not waiting for Jorie to join her.

Carol couldn't sleep that night. She dressed early in her usual brown sweater with the v-neck and her hip-hugging jeans. The snow had stopped after dumping about four inches on the streets and sidewalks, so it took her longer to walk to the Cafe. When Carol showed up at the Cafe, her employees did not expect her. They were all wearing elf costumes.

"What? Didn't you trust us?"

"Of course I do. I'm not here to take over. I asked you all to take charge for the next few days, and I mean it. I just needed some place to land. I'll grab the table near the window."

On her way to her window table, she stopped to say hello to several tables of patrons.

"Where's the coffee pot, Carol? Where's the hug?" They laughed as she blushed, but didn't stop. She just wasn't in the mood for schmoozing with her customers this morning.

One other patron caught her attention, the old crone Baba Yomama. She sat agains the side wall the way she always did, covered in a mountain of sweaters, cloaks, and a coat. She stirred her tea slowly, but used the teaspoon to ring the rim of the teacup, trying to catch Carol's attention. Carol refused to look at her, and sat at her own table with her back to Baba. Baba cleared her throat and shuffled her feet, but Carol wouldn't look back at her.

Carol sat at her table observing with pleasure the efficiency and friendliness of her staff. They had learned well from her. She had nothing to be worried about for the next two weeks. The Christmas music was soothing after the wildness of the previous evening, and even "Santa Baby" failed to grate on her nerves.

Near ten o'clock, Carol was still in place. She really had nowhere else to go. The traffic in the cafe was still brisk. It wouldn't slow down until closer to eleven, then would pick up for the lunch crowd.

"Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" played over the speakers. When Carol heard the phrase, "Through the years we'll always be together," she scoffed. Nothing was less true than that sentiment, despite being wholly romantic. The shop bell rang. Derwin walked into the shop. He was alone, of course. His brother Brock was not with him. He stopped and looked around, finding Carol at her table.

Derwin paused, waiting for Carol to acknowledge him. She did even better, smiling and waving him over. She stood to embrace him when he reached the side of her station. It took a while, but Derwin finally hugged her back.

"Do you forgive me?"

Carol was surprised by Derwin's question. She let him sit down, then sat across from him.

"Of course I forgive you, Derwin. Do you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive, Carol. I wanted you to try to use your magic on Brock."

Carol was confused and shook her head to clear it. Behind her, she heard the tinkling of Baba's teaspoon. She really had one question she had to ask, even if it were awkward with Derwin.

"Well, I understood that you might want to be with Jorie. I don't mind. But,where is Brock?"

Derwin's shoulders slumped. He hung his head. "I put him on a plane to Minnesota this morning. He wanted to go alone although I offered to accompany him."

"Minnesota? What's in Minnesota?"

"The Mayo Clinic is in Rochester, Minnesota. That's where he's going for the surgery."

"What surgery? What's going on, Derwin?"

Derwin sighed. "Brock has brain cancer, a very aggressive form. He's chosen to have brain surgery in an attempt to remove it. Depending on the amount of tumor they are able to remove, he'll have to make other decisions about chemo and other treatments."

"Oh, no! I never knew." Carol lifted her hands to her face. "Why didn't he tell me? Why didn't you tell me?"

"He wanted it kept quiet. But he hoped that you might be able to use your magic on him."

"What magic?" Carol was confused. "I don't have magic. If anything I could do would help your brother, you know I would do it. But I don't have any magic."

Behind Carol, Baba coughed and rang the tea cup.

"Would you be quiet back there, Baba! I'm talking to Derwin."

"Even if you wouldn't use your magic, I knew that my brother always treasured the time he spent with you. Especially that summer solstice seven years ago. Before he underwent his treatment, he always wanted to capture some of that time you and he enjoyed."

"But I'm engaged to you, Derwin."

"He's my brother, Carol. And he's dying. I understood his desire for you. Shoot, I've got the same desire. So do over half the men who visit this cafe. It was worth it for me to offer you to him. I hope you'll forgive me."

Carol was appalled at being offered to Derwin's brother, but in fact she had wanted to be with him herself. Would the reaction have been different if she had known he was dying? She wasn't sure.

Baba Yomama appeared at their table, a walking bundle of clothing. "I knew you had the magic, Carol. I was the one who told Derwin."

"Perhaps you should have told me, too, you old crone."

"I tried to when you came to me for a tarot reading. You wouldn't listen. Now, who know? Now, we've lost the opportunity to save Brock."

Baba said no more and walked out of the cafe. She slid a bit on the snowy sidewalks, helped by her cane.

"Carol, there was nothing more you could have done. His fate is not in your hands, but in the hands of God. His last wish was that I go through with marrying you. I just don't know if you will have me."

Carol stood and pulled him towards her. "I don't know what to think about everything. I loved your brother a long while ago. But I love you now. You made a selfless sacrifice last night. I can only imagine what it cost you to watch your brother walk away with me."

"Jorie helped me overcome my sorrow," he said with a sly smile.

"You know I'll always remember Brock. I'll try not to bring him to mind while we are in bed, but who knows?"

"I'll try not to think of Jorie."

At that, Carol had to laugh, although tears were streaming down her face. Overhead, the music played "Merry Christmas, Darling." She had hoped for "I'll Be Home for Christmas." It never came.