

CAULDRON

Book Seven

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CAULDRON
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Author's Notes

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Other Books by Margaret Koch in this series

BLONDE JOKE
CAMP SOUL
SONG OF THE MONSTER
POWER IN THE BLOOD
TO KILL AN ECHO
STARK RAVING

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PROLOGUE

June 5, Five weeks and two days ago at Duncan General Hospital, Duncan, Tennessee

"Does it hurt? What did the surgeon say? Do you need something for pain?"

Walter looked miserable as he asked those questions.

Half asleep, I had watched through almost-closed eyes as he had come into the room and quickly examined the contraption cradling and elevating my left foot above the hospital bed. Then he'd sighed, shaking his head as if he'd found fault with the design. He'd then poked around at the room's telemetry equipment and jumped and frowned at it when it beeped at him. He looked exhausted and he was right on the edge of losing it – he had to keep busy or he would howl like a wolf and start punching walls.

I wasn't hooked up to the room's telemetry, and I didn't think Walter really cared about the equipment, so at that point I'd fully opened an eye and smiled at him. He'd then quickly spun a chair over close to the bedside, sat down, picked up my hand, kissed it, gave me a hollow-eyed stare and asked his questions about my broken foot.

Walter was lost in the wilds of a deep and ugly guilt trip. A professional assassin had slipped by his security arrangements and, among other nasty things, had broken my foot with the butt of her anti-tank rocket launcher.

Walter took these things hard.

I didn't share his belief that he was supposed to keep me safe in an unsafe world. I took personal injury hard, too, but my view of the world and my place in it had changed during my last hectic year. I now suspected – maybe 'hoped' is a better word – that I could survive almost anything. After all, I had eventually taken that professional assassin down like a real sharpshooter, with two well-placed shots to her shoulder and knee. I would never reveal that I had aimed both bullets at her butt, which I had considered to be the easiest target to hit.

"It's not hurting," I answered. "The orthopedic guys are good. Their potions are powerful and their knives are sharp. They lined up all the little bones again. There wasn't a whole lot of displacement. A lot of it is soft tissue injury. They'll cast it as soon as the swelling goes down a little. It's going to be fine. It'll heal quickly."

"You'll be on crutches for a while, Barb, even after the swelling goes down and you get a walking cast. Sometimes soft tissue injury takes longer than broken bones to heal."

Walter hadn't shaved for 24 hours. It made him look volatile -- and a little scary. His eyes had lost their mellow golden flecks. They were acid green.

"Yeah, I know. Probably will require patience. I'll have to reschedule Barton's clients that I'm supposed to see tomorrow. They should not be jerked around like this. I'll be back in the office by Tuesday, though, and I can talk by phone to them, or they can come in and talk to one of the other therapists before they start sessions with me. Maybe they'll think it's part of the transition we have to do when a therapist is murdered. It'll work out. I'll make it work out."

I wasn't nearly as confident as I sounded, but I was determined to make it easy on several of Barton's clients who had chosen to see me as a replacement therapist. Barton Tackett, their psychologist and my business partner, had been murdered less than a week ago. His killer had been arrested after a frantic week ending with my face-off with the professional hit-person. But now that the fireworks were over, we had to do damage control. People don't go to therapy to increase the amount of grief in their lives. Nobody expects their therapist to be gunned down during their course of therapy. Barton's clients had been through too much.

So I would get there ready to work hard even if I had to crawl through the gates of hell to do it. But those clients were going to have strong reactions to Barton's murder, and seeing his replacement come in on crutches was not good. If I looked weak and wounded, they would have every right to be angry.

Even if I came in smiling, looking indestructible, dancing on my crutches and standing strong in the face of tragedy, there was going to be a lot of emotional baggage to handle. But Walter had been up all night working hard on the raid in California. There was no point in hashing out my worries with him. I'd cross that bridge when I came to it. So I changed the subject.

"How did the California raid go?" I asked.

"Wildest dreams. Perfectly."

Walter finally smiled. I loved it when he smiled. His face lit up and he started describing the arrests in California. He'd pulled off a very complicated operation without a hitch and had orchestrated the arrest of a powerful group of sadistic killers and thieves. There would be repercussions, no doubt, because the bad guys had powerful protectors, but right now we didn't care. A predator had killed many women simply for pleasure, and had gotten away with it over a couple of decades. Now that predator and his military theft ring were out of business and in jail. Walter had done his part. Now it was up to the justice system.

I gave Walter a bed-level high-five. What was one beat-up foot in comparison to that?

CHAPTER ONE

Five weeks and two days later: Thursday, July 12, 9:00 a.m., the offices of Psychological Services, Incorporated, Duncan, Tennessee

"I can fix that foot for you," said Kincaid Peck, my new client.

She had listed her occupation on my intake form as "witch". That was a first for me. Now she settled herself in the straight chair that I had intended for myself and she inspected my office curiously. I sank down on my couch and stuck my clumsy left foot cast up on the ottoman between us. Kincaid kept her feet planted solidly on the floor. Okay. So much for positional power dynamics.

She'd recoiled from my couch as if it would bite her. Not many clients chose to stretch out on the couch these days, but Kincaid the Witch didn't even want to get near it, much less sit on it and put her feet up on the ottoman. She'd been diagnosed with and treated for a significant anxiety disorder by my former partner Barton Tackett. She had very severe panic attacks. According to Barton's notes, there had been no improvement.

Kincaid Peck obviously didn't like being in therapy with me, even though she had chosen me when asked if she would like to be referred within our practice. It had taken three cancelled and rescheduled appointments and the very worst panic attack she'd ever been through to get her to keep this appointment. I'd agreed to come in on a Thursday – a day I wasn't supposed to be in my downtown office – just to see her after she had called in desperation. This was to be our first session, if we got all the way through it. She had already eyed the door and assessed the distance for a quick escape.

"Thanks," I said. "I appreciate the offer, but the foot is almost good as new. I'll finally get the cast off tomorrow."

"You don't believe I could fix it," said Kincaid, scowling and looking me straight in the eyes. Her eyes were a startling light gray -- almost white. Pin-point pupils. The light in my office is good, but not that bright. Could be her defenses were at red alert. Could be opiates, organophosphates, antipsychotic meds, some home brewed remedy or a central nervous system disorder, but most likely her pupils looked like that because she was fighting panic. Her breathing was a little fast, and she had paled slightly when she saw me close the door. I needed to be gentle, but I couldn't let her set up an ongoing argument in the first three sentences.

"Well, my belief isn't the point," I said. "You're the expert on what you can do, not me. I'd like to talk about what I can do for you, not put you to work fixing my foot. I've read Barton's notes, and I'd like to be of service to you, not the other way around. This is your hour, not mine."

There. I'd said it four times, in slightly different ways. Would that get us out of the defensive bantering and into her issues?

"You ought to come to one of our coven's meetings. That would make a believer out of you."

I sighed. Guess not. I tried again.

"Tell me about wanting people to believe," I said.

"You know, I could make you come to a coven ritual. All I would have to do is cast a spell."

"Please don't. At least not at our first session. Dr. Tackett was taking an approach called 'systematic desensitization' to your panic attacks. What was that like for you?"

When I'd reviewed the notes, I'd been puzzled at Barton's approach. He kept impeccable notes, but if his notes were complete in Kincaid's case, they had never identified and agreed on specific triggers for her panic attacks. Without that, what had he been desensitizing? She'd had chest pain with some of the attacks, and she hadn't had a physical since childhood. Barton hadn't insisted that she get the chest pains checked out. Kincaid would be 50 years old in a few months. There was a whole universe of content missing from her therapy sessions with Barton. I didn't have a clue why he had been so lax. Except that Barton hadn't been quite himself the last few months of his life.

Kincaid tilted her head, trying to decide whether to trust me. She was a large, robust-looking woman with ruddy cheeks, heavy unruly brows that almost met in the middle and vigorous gray hair that was home-cut at collar length and parted down the middle. Despite the warm day, she wore a hand-knitted gray shawl sprinkled with a considerable amount of yellow animal hair. Cat, probably – too fine for a lab's hair. Her dark dress hit the tops of her shoes, which were Doc Martins right out of the 70's flower culture. She was emotionally responsive, scowling or looking bemused appropriately as our conversation turned to various topics. I had not yet seen what she looked like when she was happy. Maybe she would smile before the session was over. Her striking pale eyes were bright and lively, and I suspected she was quite intelligent, but she was trying hard to look like a witch. And she was succeeding even without accessorizing with a broom and peaked hat.

"Barton was okay," she grated, her voice suddenly hoarse with emotion. "He meant well, but he was on the wrong track. I guess I got angry with him. I wanted to have another therapist, but I only wanted to make him uncomfortable enough to refer me. I did not want him hurt or killed. I did curse him, though. Just once, a little bit of a mild itching curse, and it certainly wasn't intended as a killing curse."

Kincaid's eyes shone now with unshed tears. I didn't speak for a moment while my brain rebooted. I'd started this out all wrong.

"Wait," I said as I handed her the tissue box. "Let's start over. Kincaid, we need to get something straight. Barton's death had nothing to do with your being angry with him or cursing him. I can promise you that. The man who shot Barton almost shot me, too, and you hadn't cursed me – you didn't even know me. Barton's killer had his own motivation. You did not cause anything. You might be a very powerful witch, but you did not cause Barton's death. He might have itched a lot, but he did not die because of your curse. Do you understand that?"

"I hear you," said Kincaid. "You obviously don't understand what a curse does. A curse can leave you dead in a puddle of your own blood while you are sitting in church alone and behaving like a saint. But I will think about what you said."

"Okay. I'll try to understand how curses work. But I'll be ready to talk about Barton's death again and again until you no longer feel guilty. I will do that until I make that one point clear in your mind. It was not your fault. But now I want to start this session over."

"Can we do that?"

"We can do anything we want to do. I want you to know that my intentions toward you are good. I want to help you so that all unnecessary anxiety will go away, and you will only be anxious when it makes sense to be anxious. For example, if you're standing on a railroad track and a train is coming, you'll be anxious enough to get off the tracks, but you won't worry about being hit by a train if you're not on any tracks. If you feel I'm not helping you, you don't have to curse me. Just tell me you want to quit or you want a referral. Do you believe that?"

She tilted her head the other way and peered at me.

"Strangely enough, I do believe that," she said.

"Thank you. Now, since you can do curses, I assume you can also do blessings?"

"Yes, I do both." Kincaid was almost smiling.

"Would you be willing to give our work together your blessing? You can remove it at any time you don't want it to continue, can't you?"

"You want me to bless you?"

"I want you to bless both of us."

Kincaid thought for a moment, nodded solemnly, and slowly closed her eyes. She extended her hands, muttering rhythmic phrases I could not understand. She had work-worn hands, muscular – with callous along the outer edge of her palm like the hands of someone who practices Karate. Her nails were short, buffed and clean.

It didn't take long to be blessed. And she had indeed blessed both of us. Her gestures had gone toward me and toward herself about equally. She opened her eyes after a few minutes. Her pupils were normal, even enlarged a little. I pulled up my mental list and checked off central nervous system disorders and organophosphate poisoning.

"I am going to want to know your story in detail from the beginning -- as far back as you can remember," I said. "But first, we need to talk about general health issues. Do you believe in traditional medicine?"

"Traditional doctors can cure, but they can also kill. I am not ready to go to a traditional doctor."

"Would you be willing to measure your blood pressure down at the drugstore? Just to get an idea of whether it's unusually high or low?"

"I could do that."

"And are you trained in folk medicine?"

"Yes. And I have a friend, Hester, who is quite good. She is not a healer. I usually am the healer. Hester is a smithy, but she is good and knowledgeable when someone is ill."

"Does Hester check you over every now and then?"

"Not that I know of."

"Would you ask her to do that?"

"No."

I waited, but that was all she was going to say.

"Okay. You should know, Kincaid, that I'll keep bringing up what a good idea it would be for you to have a check-up and I'll keep trying to talk you into it. Barton's notes said that you had chest pains with some of the panic attacks. Panic attacks can cause benign chest pains, but they always should be checked out. You can tell me 'no' or 'yes', and you'll do what you decide to do. I just want you to keep considering it."

"Okay. Now you should know, Dr. Stark, that something entirely unrelated to my health will come to kill me before long. No way to get off that track, and the train is coming. A medical check-up would be a waste of time, and I will not worry my friend Hester while I feel healthy. And I have been healthy all my life. Hester will treat me if I survive and ever get ill."

"Call me Barb. Who will try to kill you?"

"I can't tell you that. I just know something or someone has been sent on the way to try to kill me. There's a small chance I might get them first, though."

"How did they threaten you? Do you need protection or a restraining order?"

Kincaid threw back her head and laughed. Throaty and unafraid. She had a good laugh.

"If you want my story, you are going to have to get in my world, Dr. Stark. Restraining orders won't do anything to protect me. The one who is trying to kill me might not even be human."

There's a style that clients use to talk about illusions, delusions and figments of various thought disorders -- those things that create alternate realities for them. When you recognize that style, it's a cue that they're communing with events inside their own mind, not with the outside world. It's hard to describe, but it has to do with pauses, cadence and word choice. They listen to internal voices, see internal visions, correct their story to match the internal events, create an appropriate mood to go with the continually shifting corrections, and they continue their narrative all at the same time. It has a distinctive "feel" to it, because lots of things are going on, and their eyes have a different look.

Kincaid was absolutely not speaking in that style. Not even a little bit. Whatever this was, it was not delusional. Maybe a misunderstanding of something, but not delusional. I felt a chill dance up my spine.

"Call me Barb. Do you have any way to protect yourself?" I asked.

"If I could stop believing in witchcraft," she said, "that might save me. But I don't want to do that. But I seriously need to get rid of the panic attacks. I never know when one will hit, and if one hits at the wrong time and weakens me, it could cause my death."

That made some kind of cockeyed sense to me. If people believe in voodoo, they can be scared to death. If you believe you're a witch, and operate in cahoots with witchcraft and the supernatural, you would also be vulnerable to black magic. Panic attacks would increase that vulnerability.

I could work with that. I knew how to change lifelong assumptions if a client wanted them changed. And maybe we could find a safe path of compromise where she could remain who she wanted to be, and still protect herself. Compromise can solve a lot of problems. All-or-nothing thinking is usually not necessary. But I needed leverage.

"Okay," I said. "Tell me about your family. What were your parents like, and where were you born?"

"I'm a real one, you know, Barb."

"A real what?"

"A seventh daughter of a seventh daughter of a seventh daughter. My family runs to big numbers and female children. I'm the current chosen one from a long line of witches. I am the end of that line. I have not married nor have I children. Neither have any of my sisters. I am the end of this line, but I should be more powerful because of that."

I smiled. I don't know much about end-of-the-line power, but one thing about seventh daughters in big families -- there are lots of older siblings that have access to that seventh baby without supervision from a distracted mother. At least one out of the older six probably had a temper. Maybe several did. In a large family the baby is the target of a lot of interaction with more powerful people. By the time the seventh daughter reaches her teenage rebellious years and can defend herself, she's either a battle-skilled veteran or she has been pounded into submission by six other world views. I suspected that Kincaid was the former.

"We grew up hard-scrabble poor," Kincaid continued. "Daddy was a seasonal worker -- tobacco in the Carolinas, coal mines in Kentucky, cotton in Alabama and Mississippi. He wasn't home much. When I was sixteen, he sort of disappeared. But we did own a few acres and an old house out toward Richardson Mountain and Byrd Mountain, so we stayed there."

"What is your father's name?"

Kincaid paused, surprised. She was not accustomed to thinking about him now. She had grown up in a matriarchy. His legal name might not have been of much importance to the children. But she liked saying the name. Her voice was gentle as she said it.

"Norris. Norris Peck."

"You live on Byrd Mountain?"

"No, just in that direction. We're much closer in to the Duncan's Landing area. We're off to the side of the country road that leads to Byrd Mountain. But we know the Byrds. I know about your conflict with Rev Byrd. I have no trouble with that. He was a very bad man. He reeked of evil. I was pleased that you pushed him off that bluff."

I considered arguing about that distortion, to tell Kincaid that Rev actually fell off that bluff himself while he was trying to bop me in the head with a big club, but decided that it was her hour, not mine. She was continuing her story, anyway.

"Our house is on eighty acres on the slopes this side of Richardson Mountain," she continued. "That's where our family lived. That's where I live alone now, except for my animals and various visitors. My father owned the property. Inherited it from his parents. The old Peck farm. We Pecks have been in this area since the first settlers. My mother did housecleaning and midwifery for women in Duncan, but she also collected herbs and eventually she had a nice business selling them. She made enough money to keep the house up and the lane graveled and she put in a modern bathroom and electricity."

Kincaid paused, thinking and organizing something. The pupils of her steel-gray eyes had become pinpoints. It was hard for her to talk about her mother.

"But she died young, when I was eighteen," she continued. "Since my sisters had all run away by then, I prepared and buried my mother. It was legal and above-board. I paid for the grave diggers myself, and did the required services. Then I stayed at the farm and worked the herb business. I pay the taxes on the farm. I own it, or I own it with any of my sisters who are still alive. My sisters just sort of disappeared too, like my Dad. I hear from one of them now, Leah, the one that's just nine months older than me, and she told me she'd heard that the others had died in a string of car accidents, but she wasn't sure."

I mentally shelved the string of car accidents and her lack of reaction to losing five sisters. We'd come back to that.

"Where is your mother buried?"

"There's a nice little family cemetery on the edge of the farm deep in the forest. It isn't the usual cemetery. My people are buried between huge trees that form a circle around a tiny clearing.

Kincaid smiled. "It's our version of Stonehenge. My mother was a powerful woman. Not a good mother to me, but a very powerful witch. I wanted her body and her powers to stay on the farm. Near me. For the power, you know. She never really loved me, but she would not begrudge me the power. She knew I was the chosen one for this generation. Her burial was according to our traditions, and the ceremony bound her powers over to me, but it was legal. I got all the courthouse signatures on all the right death and burial certificates. My dad's folks have been in this county for a long time. The graves in that cemetery go back to 1799, when Duncan was just a trading post on the river, and the huge trees were saplings."

"Yes. I know. There was just a trading post and a few cabins on a wild river then, and the TVA dams and lakes were years in the future. You were very young to have such sad duties fall to you. I'm sorry you lost your mother and father so young. I wish you could have had someone to help you through it."

I had to be careful here -- too much sympathy, and she'd walk out on me rather than look weak, but to be fair with her, I had to mark the areas I'd come back to when we got down to curing the anxiety attacks. I couldn't act uninterested now and then make a big deal out of it later. Clients don't always remember exactly why, but they know when you have not been open and above-board with them. And it hurts the relationship.

"It wasn't like I was losing someone who loved me," Kincaid said.

The sullen tone of her voice came from a twelve-year-old's world. I wanted to go for the child inside, and let her talk and scream about the pain of being the unloved one, but it was too early. She would be horrified if she did that today. I had to just mark it and give her a couple of things to think about today.

"Some mothers find it hard to love their children for various reasons," I said. "But it is a lack of something in the mother, never the fault of the children. Children should be allowed to be themselves and they should be loved for that, but if their parent can't express love for them, children often think it's their fault. They think they are not lovable. Maybe your sisters felt that, too, so they left. And maybe they did not die in car accidents as Leah told you. Have you tried to find them? And do you have brothers?"

"No. To both questions. I suspect my sisters are either dead or in lives I want no part of. They would only want to use me. You need to understand that my mother did show love for my sisters. Just not for me. That might have been lucky for me, because her love was a controlling love. Maybe she did not try to control me, but just hated me because she knew I would have the power that would eventually outstrip hers, since it tends to accumulate over the generations, and I am also the last of a line. But my mother had no trouble showing love for my sisters, whether they found it pleasant or not. I hope they think I am dead, as I believe they are dead. It would be safer."

"Safer?"

Kincaid smiled.

"I increased the inventory of medicinal and recreational herbs to sell and I made a lot of new business contacts once I came out as a witch. There's interest in the occult, and it's profitable. Teenagers like love potions. It makes them feel like they're not desperate and vulnerable and I'm full of wise advice that maybe keeps them from making big mistakes. I have improved the house and garden, saved a nice nest-egg and I have a nice car. If my sisters saw any of that, they would want it. Leah wants it, even though she has not seen me in years. She smells my success. I can tell. She always was after Mother to give her things. I can feel her envy. She can probably feel my pleasure in my everyday life. We all have some talents. But I should be more than a match for one sister. And my herb business is booming."

Kincaid's smile had a world of secrets behind it. I suddenly realized that for a woman who did not like to go to doctors, and who had likely never seen a dentist, Kincaid had beautiful teeth – white, even, with slightly elongated canines.

"Us witches just got to have our herbs," she added. "Herbs R Us. We'll pay a premium for our herbs and thank the herb merchant for taking our money."

"How did you manage to finish high school with all of that going on?" I asked.

"I just missed being valedictorian. All A's straight through. I have no trouble learning things quickly. I'm a hard worker. My sisters saw to that."

"How did your sisters treat you when you were very young?"

"Like their doll, their toady, and then their workhorse and punching bag. Cinderella without the beauty or the prince. I grew up sturdy. Some of my sisters were beautiful, fragile creatures who needed to be waited on. My mother was usually off in her own world. I did all of the work as soon as I was tall enough to swing a mop. That was when I was about six."

By the time she finished that sentence, her eyes were blazing. This was one angry woman.

Kincaid Peck's history went on. She had been repressing a lot of anger most of her life. Her panic attacks had suddenly appeared a year ago, were severe, and her herbs did not help. I suspected she sold pot, maybe hallucinogenics like shrooms and other relaxants along with the legal forest, meadow and garden herbs, but she either did not use them, or they were not powerful enough to affect her anxiety. She refused to go the benzodiazepine route with Valium, Xanax, Ativan, or any of the other anti-anxiety meds.

I found myself reluctantly admiring her stand on that. Her anxiety disorder was not typical. She had no generalized, free-floating anxiety. The panic attacks came like a tidal wave, surprising and overwhelming her. She suspected that they were part of an extensive campaign of black magic that someone was waging against her. By the time she would have taken her anti-anxiety medication, it would be too late, unless she took it all the time and she did not want to do that.

"My herbs are just as good as the local pharmacy's ground-up herbs, fungi and rocks," she'd said, but her herbs had been useless against this.

We finally got into her psychological history. She'd never had a loving relationship. With anyone. Ever. Or so she said. I suspected that she had loved, but had not been loved in return. Trust was difficult. She never expected kindness from others.

"I've never been depressed," she said, "although I'm not one of those cheerful idiots, either. I make no bones about life being hard."

Kincaid had trusted friends, though, and she said she was reasonably happy, except for the attacks of intense panic. We ran out of time before I got all the information I wanted. That happened often to me. I never could seem to do it check-list style like the more efficient psychologists. I wandered all over the psyche in first sessions, scanning for hot spots.

We agreed on a once-weekly appointment schedule. She would not agree to more often, despite her impending doom. I was going to have to do a lot of research into modern witchcraft, voodoo and stealth panic attacks. It would take time that I didn't have to spare.

I was working on other things, too – curriculum issues for Chandler Security Institute, which also required a lot of research. I couldn't take any more new clients. I'd inherited five, counting Kincaid, from Barton. Many of my past clients also wanted to re-start with me. I'd been out of commission for a few months, and had some heavy making-up to do for the practice. I wanted to get my weekly appointment schedule in my Duncan office down to two-and-a-half very busy days. Then two-and-a-half days for Chandler Security. That work could be very loosely scheduled and some of it would be working from home. Free weekends were also a goal. But those free weekends would be filled with research for a few weeks.

I wrenched my thoughts back to Kincaid. By the time the session was over, I think she was pleased that she had come. I grabbed one handy crutch and we walked out together to the waiting room to find two solemn women waiting for Kincaid. They rose in unison as they sighted her. One was large and very strong-looking, and one was slender and waif-like. They were also trying hard, in different ways, to look like witches.

They inspected me up and down. My blonde hair had not been combed since 6:00 a.m. and it was a little bushy, but the cut was excellent. I didn't wear much make-up, but I had on lipstick. I was dressed in a deep blue silk shirt and gray silk twill slacks, one leg split neatly at the seam so that it could be mended later, then rolled up and pinned to make room for the cast. My gray leather belt matched the slacks exactly. I wore big diamond stud earrings, a single sapphire pendant on a simple gold chain at the open shirt collar and a gold watch. I wore a sapphire and diamond ring on my right hand. My single low-heeled gray leather shoe matched the slacks and belt.

I leaned on my crutch while the two women looked me over carefully. They even did some double-takes, like they found me surprising, and not in a good way. Then they gave me a couple of dark witchy frowns, looked at each other, tightened their lips into wry slits and rolled their eyes. They made it clear that they did not approve of me.

"Barb, this is Hester and Sylph, my friends, and coven sisters," said Kincaid.

I knew immediately which witch was which. Hester was the blacksmith. I nodded and smiled, extending my hand.

"Can she do it?" abruptly asked Hester, the muscular smithy, ignoring my outstretched hand and narrowing her beady little eyes at me.

"I don't know. She's better than the last one," said Kincaid.

"The last one did nothing. And he wasted our time while this challenge approached. This one has to do it. We are running out of time. She does not look strong enough to be the healer for a seventh daughter. You are the chosen one, but you cannot overcome a challenge while you are having a panic attack."

Hester did not mince words.

"Nice to meet you, Hester. And this is Sylph?"

"She's not a believer, and she looks establishment," said Sylph, rapidly blinking large mascara-ringed eyes. If Sylph were not a human, she'd be a small owl. She didn't take my proffered hand either, suddenly putting her own hands behind her back as if I'd grab one and shake it mercilessly.

"No. She doesn't believe," agreed Kincaid. "Not yet. But she's likely smarter than she looks. She might be stronger than she looks, too. No fat on her, but she has muscle."

And then without another word, they turned their backs on me and went out the door.

Nommi, our office manager, looked up from the front desk.

"You know, Barb, just because Kincaid Peck chose you, you don't have to agree to see her," said Nommi. "That was really rude."

"Yeah, but she's pretty interesting. She could teach me a lot. We'll meet once a week. That's twice as often as she was willing to see Barton. I believe we can do some good for her."

Nommi snorted. "Those two women waiting for Kincaid took a handful of your business cards and the practice's brochures – the one with your bio and photo. Then they sat in your waiting room and pointed at your photo and cackled like a couple of crows while they looked you over. They actually cackled."

"See? That's interesting. I wonder what they found funny. I'll eventually figure out what witches find amusing about the rest of us. Maybe Kincaid will tell me."

"Maybe I don't want to know what else Kincaid could teach you. Her friends are downright scary, and there is a weird man down on the plaza waiting for them to come out. He's got on a black hat and I swear, he's wearing a black cat on his shoulder. They think he's following them – they were talking about him like they were worried. Hester was thinking she might have to protect Sylph and Kincaid from him. Let's watch them come out of the building while you tell me what else you think you can learn from her. But don't feel bad if I don't listen."

We walked over to the tall front windows of our second-floor office suite and watched as the three witches walked out. The man, who had ignored the shaded benches to lean against the plate glass of the jewelry store across the plaza, ambled down the plaza behind them as they left. He did, indeed, have a huge black cat half-sitting, half-hanging across his shoulder. The very impressive cat was balancing itself by digging its rear claws into some kind of wide shallow pocket on the back of his leather vest. I looked twice to make sure it was a real live cat, and then again to see if it might even be a small panther. The man wore black cowboy boots that gave him a bow-legged, rolling gait. There was something odd about the way he walked – not just bowed legs. And then there was that long leather vest topped off with the cat. He also wore a black leather explorer's hat. He was clean-shaven and had long light brown hair. Except for the cat, he could be a country-western singer out of Nashville – one of the substance-abusing, strangely shaped ones who wore unusual clothes.

"So can you tell me what you want to learn from her?" asked Nommi. "Fashion tips? Anti-establishment drivel?"

"Not yet," I said. "I don't know yet. But I've never done therapy with someone who thinks she is a witch. I believe in all kinds of strange things, but I've never researched witchcraft. I know people are vulnerable to suggestion and the mind is a

powerful force. There might be real power to curses, spells, and blessings, if you believe that they're real, and the herb business is usually part of it. Some herbs are potent psychotropic medication. Kincaid and her friends obviously believe. And she needs help."

"Many of us have needed help at some time in our lives," said Nommi. "But when we ask for it, we're usually not so rude."

I thought for a moment. Clients know that Nommi is privy to secrets. They know we trust her and we trust Kathy, our other office manager, and it's in our intake forms that Nommi and Kathy have access to our files.

"She believes someone, or something, is out to kill her," I said.

"Oh, shit," said Nommi. "Here we go again."

