



CASTINGS & CURSES

A LIMITED EDITION COLLECTION OF
MAGICAL PARANORMAL ROMANCE AND
URBAN FANTASY TALES

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A LIMITED EDITION COLLECTION OF MAGICAL
PARANORMAL ROMANCE AND URBAN FANTASY TALES
(CHARMED MAGIC COLLECTIONS)

CHARMED MAGIC COLLECTIONS



COLLECTED AUTHORS

CONTENTS

A Summer of Love & Death

Janna Ruth

A Summer of Love & Death

1. Lucille
2. Fabian
3. Lucille
4. Fabian
5. Lucille
6. Fabian
7. Lucille

About Janna Ruth

Abra-CAT-Abra

Pepper McGraw

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

About Pepper McGraw

Broody and the Beast

Lulu M. Sylvian

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Epilogue

About Author Lulu M. Sylvian

Haunted Holiday

Andra Dill

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

About Andra Dill

Igniting the Witch

Erin Richards

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

About Erin Richards

Immortal Curse

Eden Hart

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[About Eden Hart](#)

[Kiss of the Scorpio Moon](#)

N.D. Testa

[Chapter 1](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[About N.D. Testa](#)

[My Warlock Professor](#)

Cara North

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[About Cara North](#)

[Earth Witch](#)

Gina Kincade & C.D. Gorri

[Earth Witch](#)
[Prologue](#)
[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Epilogue](#)

[Other Titles by C.D. Gorri](#)

[About C.D. Gorri](#)

[More From Gina Kincade](#)

[Connect With Gina](#)

[About Gina Kincade](#)

[Heaven Knows](#)

Ariel Dawn

[Heaven Knows](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Preview](#)

[Find Ariel Dawn](#)

[Also By Ariel Dawn](#)

[About Ariel Dawn](#)

[Curvy and the Cursed](#)

Jude Cocaigne

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[About Jude Cocaigne](#)

[Pitchfork Prep Academy](#)

[P. Mattern](#)

1. [Chapter One-Basic Bitch](#)
 2. [Chapter Two-The Half Light Bonfire Dance](#)
 3. [Chapter Three-Triads And Dryads](#)
 4. [Chapter Four-Flying In Formation](#)
 5. [Chapter Five-Playing Doctor/Homecoming](#)
 6. [Chapter Six-Suspicious](#)
 7. [Chapter Seven-Revelations](#)
 8. [Chapter Eight-Ordeal](#)
- [About P.Mattern](#)

[Red Moon Rising](#)

[Erzabet Bishop & Gina Kincade](#)

[Red Moon Rising](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Preview](#)

[Also By Gina Kincade](#)

[Connect With Gina](#)

[About Gina Kincade](#)

[Connect With Erzabet](#)

[Also By Erzabet Bishop](#)

[About Erzabet Bishop](#)

[Goddess of Mischief](#)

Cailee Francis

[Prologue](#)

[An Unfathomable Crime](#)

[Aurelia](#)

[Melinda](#)

[Aurelia](#)

[Melinda](#)

[Aurelia](#)

[Melinda](#)

[Aurelia](#)

[Melinda](#)

[Aurelia](#)

[Melinda](#)

[Aurelia](#)

[Melinda](#)

[Aurelia](#)

[Melinda](#)

[Aurelia](#)

[Melinda](#)

[Aurelia](#)

[Connections](#)

[About Cailee Francis](#)

[Dear Reader,](#)

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A SUMMER OF LOVE & DEATH



AN ASHUAN LUST BONUS ADVENTURE

JANNA RUTH

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Edited by: Gerd Mittelstädt

A SUMMER OF LOVE & DEATH

An Ashuan Lust Bonus Adventure

Magic, romance, and bone-chilling mystery collide as an adventurous witch and a charming water mage team up to save a star-crossed vampire couple.

Welcome to Greenvalley, the enchanting small town where magic and danger lurk beneath the scorching summer sun. After battling spells and demons, Lucille, the daring witch, yearns for a well-deserved break. However, with her friends away or occupied, fate has paired her with Fabian, the lovable yet dorky water mage.

Their tranquil summer takes a bone-chilling turn when they stumble upon a gruesome discovery—a severed head. Among the suspects are Hanne and Mikaela, a couple they witnessed drinking blood from a bottle. While Hanne admits to being a Verenimijä—a Finnish vampire capable of walking in daylight—she pleads her innocence. She's on the run from her tribe, who disapprove of her relationship with a human. Unbeknownst to Mikaela herself, she is the reincarnation of Hanne's long-lost love, worth any sacrifices. But when Mikaela learns the truth about Hanne, her world shatters.

Inspired by their own burgeoning connection, Lucille and Fabian embark on a mission to reunite the star-crossed lovers. However, a dark and cruel hunter is already closing in, determined to destroy Hanne's chance at happiness.

Prepare to be spellbound by "A Summer of Love & Death", an urban fantasy tale filled with adventure, romance, and unimaginable sacrifice, and find out if love can truly conquer all—even death.

LUCILLE



IF SOMEONE HAD TOLD LUCILLE A YEAR AGO THAT SHE WOULD HAVE TO SPEND two weeks of her summer holiday stuck in Greenvalley, she would've been dismayed. While it was her home, the prospect of having to spend any prolonged time in a backwater small town in the Harz mountains would have filled her with dread. As pretty as it was, it didn't compare to the resort in Bali with its endless beaches, crystal-blue water, and colourful birds. But there was one thing Greenvalley had over Bali, and that was magic. Real magic.

As soon as Lucille stepped foot back into town, she felt the magic wash over her. Her spells had worked fine in the resort—not that she needed to use any—but the presence of the spring of magic in the forest grounded her. This was where she belonged.

She didn't mind spending a summer with magic at her fingertips, but barring any monster attacks, there was nothing to do in town.

Bali had diving spots, parties, and cute boys. Greenvalley had an outdoor pool.

Lucille sighed as she stepped out of her car. An outdoor pool would have to do. At least, by the looks of it, half her class was spending their days there. She was bound to run into at least one of her friends, if not all of them. Unless they were out hunting monsters, but with the sun beating down on Greenvalley and joyfully shrieking children splashing in the pool, it was hard to imagine monsters prowling the area.

Wolf whistles followed Lucille as she strutted past the swimming pool, searching for a familiar face. She was wearing the new bikini she bought in Bali, a bare minimum of burnt orange fabric covering her body. There were a

dozen like her on the beaches there, but Greenvalley was a lot smaller, garnering Lucille enough attention to put a smile on her face.

On the opposite side, she saw Alan, the school hottie, lower his sunglasses to catch a better look, and two guys from her history major were grinning at her as she walked past. In the water, Robert was staring so much he didn't see the ball until it hit him in the head.

“What are you looking at?”

Lucille knew that voice. Sure enough, she spotted the familiar mop of ginger hair. In the shallow end of the pool, the water didn't even cover Fabian's hips. Even though he'd probably spent all summer outside, apart from the sunburn covering his shoulders, his skin was still pale. Only the freckles on his face had darkened.

“Lucille!” His eyes lit up when he saw her. Immediately, he abandoned his game with Robert and a couple of other guys from school and sloshed through the water to where she stood. “You're back.”

She pushed her sunglasses into her hair and smiled at him. “I am. And judging by how everybody is enjoying themselves, Greenvalley is still standing.”

“Barely so,” Fabian joked, then pulled himself out of the pool. “It's good to have you back.” He leaned in for a hug.

“No, no!” Lucille took a step back. “You are wet.”

“You're in a bikini.”

Lucille huffed. “A bikini made for walking. Not swimming.” When Fabian raised his eyebrow, she laughed. “I'm not married to the water like you are.”

After all, Fabian was a water mage. The pool was exactly where she would've expected to find him. She glanced past him trying to find another familiar face—where Fabian was, Samantha and Rachel usually weren't far behind—but came up empty. “Where are the others?”

“Rachel is in LA with her father. Samantha is travelling Canada with her family, and Jan finally got a job.”

“Someone hired him?” After failing most of his courses last year, Jan had decided to abandon school and throw himself into the workforce. It would take a lot to convince Lucille that had been the right decision.

Fabian grinned. “Oh, yeah, he's now a general dogsbody for the youth hostel on the Witch's Hump. They're super busy in summer. He's constantly complaining about the youth groups and families that make his life harder

now.”

Lucille could imagine how Jan would struggle with that. At school, he'd always stood out for tardiness and truancy. “I see. And Matt?”

Instantly, Fabian's face darkened. A couple of weeks of summer hadn't softened his opinion about the half-demon they called a friend. Not after he'd abandoned them in the middle of a fight for their lives. “I haven't heard from him since the beginning of the holidays. The only thing I know is that he visited Samantha, and since then, nada. He's gone.”

“Samantha? Did she say anything?” The two of them had been at odds for most of the year, but when push came to shove, Matt had saved Samantha's life. Hope reared its head that perhaps Samantha had finally forgiven him for his previous failings.

“Nope. Just that she needed time to think.” Fabian pursed his lips, obviously unhappy with this lack of communication from his best friend. A second later, he shook his head and smiled, though. “Doesn't matter. It's summer. The sky is blue, the water is warm. Do you want to give that bikini a try? It might be made for swimming after all.”

Lucille laughed. “I did enough swimming already this summer. In different bikinis.” Despite her words, she sat down on the rim and put her feet into the cold water. With the sun beating down on them, it felt marvellous.

Fabian pulled a face. “Of course, you'd have a variety of them.” He took a seat next to her. “How was your vacation? Or should I say your vacations?”

Her cheeks flushed at the reminder of how much more affluent her family was compared to the rest of them. She refused to feel ashamed because of that, though, and squared her shoulders. “Bali was a dream. I spent most of my days diving, and we saw dolphins. It was amazing.” Almost amazing enough to ignore her father being on his phone all holiday long. “Before that, France was... okay. I broke things off with Dion.”

“Dion?”

“That's right, you weren't involved in the student exchange.” Fabian had met him perhaps once and promptly forgotten about him. “He was Matt's student and an illusionist.”

Recognition dawned on Fabian's face. “Oh, that guy. You kept in touch?”

“More or less. Dion's the reason I could add illusions to my repertoire.” She wriggled her fingers and let the water in front of her rise into a dolphin shape. It jumped into the air and splashed on her knee, not leaving behind a single drop of water.

Fabian whistled, impressed. “Awesome, I can retire then.”

Lucille bumped her shoulder into his with a laugh. “Don’t. It’s not real. Not like your water.” As her thoughts returned to Dion, she took a deep breath. “Anyway, we were trying to make it work despite the distance, and it went all right—until there was no distance.”

“Sounds like a bad ending?” Fabian asked carefully.

“Not exactly bad. We just realised it was nothing more than an illusion after all. Not enough reality underneath it all. We’ll keep in touch, of course. I think.” The lack of sorrow Lucille felt about the end of the relationship told her it had been the right thing to break up with Dion.

“Well, in that bikini, I’m sure you won’t stay alone for long.”

Lucille shaped her mouth in a mock gasp. “Ooh-la-la. Am I hearing a compliment from your mouth, Fabian Bendtfeld?”

He raised his hand, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. It was all the warning Lucille got before cold water splashed her face.

Shrieking, Lucille jumped up. When the surprise faded, she had to fight back a smile. “You’re so going to pay for that!”

Fabian had already jumped back into the pool and put some distance in between them, grinning wildly. “Come and get me then!”

“Ugh, fine!” With a wide smile, Lucille glided into the water.



A LITTLE LATER, Lucille and Fabian took a break from swimming and got in line for ice cream. The little kiosk was making a year's worth of revenue from these sunny days, and the line only moved slowly.

“Malcolm would’ve loved this,” Lucille mused, bringing up the Archdemon of Greed who had given them so much trouble last year.

“Don’t remind me.” Fabian shuddered. “Tell me more about Bali instead.”

Lucille laughed. Leave it to Fabian to avoid all talk of monsters and demons. Graciously, she regaled him with more details. “Well, I ended up loving diving so much, I got my Open Water certification. I might even do the Advanced so I can go down to forty-five metres, but I’m not sure I want to brave German waters for it.”

Fabian glanced at her in surprise. “That’s so cool. I always imagined you

would spend your summer tanning on the beach, flirting with boys.”

That was pretty much everything else she'd done. “Judging by my experience, it's much easier to flirt with boys in the water.”

The innuendo flew right over Fabian's head. “So, you've replaced Dion already?”

Lucille winced. “Just a short fling. Nothing serious.” She didn't like being reminded of how short-lived her romances always seemed. “Anyway, the beach was nice but boring. The world underwater though...” she sighed, “breathtakingly beautiful. And without any marepires.”

In front of them, a girl with a wide-brimmed hat glanced at them, concerned, probably wondering what strange conversation topics they had. She would get used to Greenvalley's quirks soon enough.

“Oh, dear. Vampires above ground are bad enough. I wouldn't want to meet any underwater.”

Lucille shuddered remembering the marepires they'd fought in Marseilles. On her recent trip back, they'd been fortuitously absent. “Same. We had sharks, though. Nice, friendly sharks. And turtles! You can't imagine how beautiful it is to swim with—”

Suddenly, the girl in front of her fainted. Her friend tried to catch her, but it was Fabian who managed to keep her upright. Concerned, he exclaimed, “Woah, careful.” He checked with the other girl. “She needs shade. Let's help her over there.”

Together, they carried the fainting girl to the shade of a bunch of trees. Lucille picked up the hat she'd lost and followed behind, wondering if they should call an ambulance. Without the hat, the girl looked unnaturally pale, even paler than Fabian. Her long blond tresses fell over her shoulder, and her eyes fluttered. She and her short-haired friend were about Fabian and Lucille's age.

“Are you okay?” Lucille handed the hat back to help her shield from the sun.

Fabian let go of the girl. “Probably the heat. I'll get some water.” And with that, he jogged away.

“Does this happen more often to her?” Lucille asked the second girl.

Like her friend, she was blonde, with her hair cut fashionably short. In contrast, her skin was well-tanned from the summer. “Occasionally.” There was a faint accent in her voice that Lucille couldn't place. She caressed her friend's hair, then gently placed the hat back onto her head. “It's... I...

Hanne, I'll be back soon." The short-haired girl got to her feet. "She needs her..."

And off she went as well, leaving Lucille alone with her friend. Fortunately, Hanne was coming to. She opened her eyes, which were as blue as the sky, and took in Lucille. A gasp escaped her, and she swallowed, looking worried.

Lucille smiled. "Don't worry. Your friend will be back soon. And there's Fabian."

Fabian returned with a bottle of water. "There you go." He handed the bottle to Hanne and smiled at her encouragingly. "You need to make sure you drink enough in this heat. A heat stroke is no joking matter. It's best if you keep to the shade for a bit."

"Look at you, Mr Boy Scout," Lucille teased.

Across from her, Fabian blushed.

"Thank you," Hanne said, her voice faint as a wisp.

The other girl returned and handed Hanne an opaque bottle. "Your tomato juice."

Hanne reached for it faster than she had for the water. When she opened it, a metallic smell hit Lucille's nose.

"Tomato juice?" Fabian asked, wrinkling his nose. "Water would be better in this heat."

Contrary to her friend, Hanne's speech was free of any accents. "I don't like drinking water, but thank you." Her voice had gained some strength.

Lucille frowned at the drop of red liquid that had caught on the corner of Hanne's mouth. Self-consciously, Hanne wiped it with her thumb. "I'd like to go back to our blanket, Mika."

The other girl seemed surprised but nodded readily. "Of course."

"You should really rest," Fabian insisted, but Lucille caught his elbow.

"I'm sure it's fine. Her cheeks got colour again."

Hanne nodded, smiling faintly. "Yes, I feel much better. Thank you so much for your help."

Her friend helped her up, and together they walked away, almost as if in a hurry.

Fabian got up to his feet and watched them with a dark look. Lucille leaned against him, dread pooling in her stomach.

"Well, if that was tomato juice, you're a fire mage."

FABIAN



FOR THE LAST HALF HOUR, FABIAN AND LUCILLE HAD WATCHED THE TWO girls from a blanket under a tree. During their observation, they had learned that the two of them were most definitely a couple. Hanne and Mika sat under an umbrella, talking and laughing, and occasionally kissing, oblivious to Fabian and Lucille shadowing them.

“They’re too sweet,” Lucille complained.

“Too sweet to be bloodthirsty monsters?” A bitter taste filled Fabian’s mouth. Summer had gone so well, not a single monster in sight. He wasn’t ready for them to come back.

Lucille sighed, leaning into him. “She definitely drank blood, but what kind of bloodthirsty monsters go for a fun day at the pool?”

“The kind of monster I officially like.”

With a chuckle, Lucille bumped into his shoulder. It was the second time she’d done so today, and every time heat rushed through his stomach, as if it meant anything other than a friendly tease.

“I’ve missed your cowardice.”

Fabian snorted. “Did you? I wasn’t aware of that being one of my better traits.”

“You should have a think about that,” Lucille teased.

He liked this new side of her. Last year, with all the others around, they’d rarely spent time alone together. Sure, they were friends, but they also seemed to live in different spheres. Lucille was all about fashion and luxury, and he was just a regular blue-collar kid who liked to swim and draw.

Lucille’s attention was back on the suspected vampire girls, tensing slightly, when Mika reached into her bag. But the girl only took out a box of

strawberries and started feeding Hanne, alternating each strawberry with a kiss.

With a forlorn sigh, Lucille mused, “Now, I also want a monster girlfriend.”

Fabian raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t know you were into girls.”

Lucille flushed. “What? No, I... they’re just too sweet. I mean, look at them.”

The red juice of a strawberry was flowing down Hanne’s chin, and Mika leaned in to lick it away.

Fabian pulled a face, too occupied with the fact that those were vampires to appreciate the romance. “Remind me to never watch a romantic movie with you.”

“Don’t be like that.” Lucille bopped his shoulder again. “If we did, you’d probably cry more than the whole cinema together.” When Fabian snorted at that, Lucille shrugged. “Whatever. Blood or no blood, these two seem harmless.”

In that, Fabian agreed. “At least, they don’t look as if they’re planning a bloodbath any time soon.” With luck, they would have left Greenvalley far behind before it came to that.

“So, a horror movie then?”

“What?” Fabian swung his head around.

“Nothing.” Lucille batted her eyelashes at him. “Just forget what I said.”

But Fabian couldn’t. Samantha always joked that he was too dense to notice when a girl flirted with him. He certainly hadn’t noticed Rachel’s affection, and she’d been into him for years. But this was Lucille. Lucille, the beautiful witch. The girl who exuded flirtatiousness. The one who could have any guy she wanted in this pool. She was flirting all right, but surely, she wasn’t actually interested in him.

For a moment, Fabian entertained the thought of them hooking up. Stranger things had definitely happened in Greenvalley, and if they did, he would absolutely feed her strawberries and lick the juice from her chin.



THE FOLLOWING DAY, Fabian took Lucille to the summer festival. There wasn’t much else to do in town, which meant everyone who was anyone was

in attendance. The festival took place on the big meadow next to the river. Colourful little booths offered a variety of food and drinks, as well as local crafts, including the witch puppets the region was famous for. There were a few rides, though only one that was fast enough for grown-ups, and a stage, on which a local Harz band played some cover songs. People of all ages danced in front of the stage, while children with painted faces ran through the crowd, squealing.

As usual, Lucille was way too overdressed for the occasion, wearing an enticing black slip dress. In addition, she was wearing her signature heels, which caused her to struggle with the soft ground. Fabian didn't tease her about it since it meant she had to hold onto his arm as they moved along the booths.

"There's Jan!" Lucille exclaimed, pointing ahead.

Their friend stood at a booth, finishing up a joint. When Jan saw them, he raised his hand, took one last puff, and threw the remains on the ground before squashing them into the dirt with his foot. "Look who's back in town."

Lucille laughed and veered from Fabian's arm to hug Jan. "You missed me, didn't you?" The two of them had a weird love-hate relationship that Fabian wouldn't even attempt to understand. It had never bothered him, but today something was different.

"Oh yeah, barely slept at all," Jan boasted.

"Is that from missing her or taking the night shift?" Fabian asked, trying to steer the conversation to safer grounds.

Jan grinned, his attention successfully diverted. "Probably the latter. I've got another one coming up later. How are you guys?"

"Boredom is slowly setting in," Fabian admitted. He loved summer, but this summer had been a lonely one with everyone travelling to exciting places, while he had been stuck in Greenvalley.

"Don't say you're looking forward to school?" Jan was aghast.

"Not everyone breaks out into hives at the thought of school," Lucille joked, poking Jan in the upper arm.

So, the shoulder bumps earlier hadn't meant anything.

"Fabian said, you got a job."

Jan pretended to shudder. "Don't remind me. It's horrible. We currently have some sixth graders who are either training for the hundred-metre sprint or believe our floors are actually trampolines. They start before seven in the morning when they get up hungry. Worse than a plague of locusts. They also

don't believe in taking off their muddy boots after visiting the swamps."

"Be careful. You're gonna turn into a prissy." Lucille laughed.

Jan grinned but continued in the same breath, "Don't get me started on the astronomy club that arrived today. They're all missing a few screws."

Fabian put one arm around Jan and the other around Lucille before he'd be left out. "Let's get some drinks."

"But real drinks," Jan insisted.

Lucille clicked her tongue. "You still got to work later."

"With kids," Fabian joined her.

Jan scowled. "Who's a prissy now?"

Laughing, Fabian guided his friends down the lane and led them to the cocktail booth. Though he had been eighteen for almost a year now, it was still exciting to be able to buy a drink other than beer or wine. There were so many different cocktails to choose from. In the end, he followed Lucille's example and got a Mai Tai, while Jan picked a mojito.

With their drinks in hand, the three of them began walking across the festival.

"There's one thing I really need to tell you," Jan said before taking a big slurp from his drink. "While cleaning out the rooms this morning, I found a head."

The drink in Fabian's mouth turned sour. "I don't like where this is going."

Carefully, Lucille asked, "And by head, you mean..."

"A head," Jan said promptly. "With blood and all the shebang. Alright, the eyes were missing."

Fabian lowered his drink with disgust. He wouldn't be able to take another sip for hours.

"Does this happen often?" Lucille asked softly.

"Yes, Lu. We're actually a demon hostel. On Wednesdays, we hold the black mass in the community room."

Lucille rolled her eyes. "Let me rephrase that. Do you have any idea who might be behind this?"

Jan shook his head. "Not really, but I suppose it's one of our guests. Not the sixth graders. They might all be little demons, but not that kind of demon. The astronomy club, perhaps. They're weird and... they're really weird." By the sounds of it, Jan seemed positively traumatised by them. "Or those two, but they're my favourite guests. Clean, quiet, always friendly."

He pointed into the crowd. Fabian had a sinking feeling before he even looked. Sure enough, it was the two girls from the pool. “So, it was blood.”

Next to him, Lucille sighed. “I’m afraid, you have at least one monster at the hostel.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We met those two at the pool yesterday. The one with the long hair drinks blood. The one offers it to her,” Lucille explained.

Sceptically, Jan took another glance. Offers it to her means she offers herself?”

Fabian shuddered. “No, fortunately not. The blood came in a bottle.”

“We were hoping we were misjudging what we saw,” Lucille elaborated, “but your find fits too well.” She took a deep breath. “Oh well, it would’ve been too nice if they were only a bit eccentric. Let’s talk to them.”

It wasn’t something Fabian relished, but after the year they’d had, he knew better than to run from a monster.

They approached the girls and watched their eyes light up at the sight of them. Definitely not what he expected from a pair of monsters in hiding.

Hanne smiled at them. “Hey. That’s a nice surprise.”

“Such a small city,” Lucille said through a forced smile of her own.

“You’re the guy from the hostel, aren’t you?” Mika asked Jan. She seemed a bit more reserved than her girlfriend.

Jan nodded. “Yes, Jan. Not Hosty.”

“Hosty?” Fabian asked, but Jan waved him off.

“Thank you so much for helping me yesterday. I had a little too much sun, but thanks to you, I avoided a ride in the ambulance,” Hanne said.

“Do you mind if we have a quick chat?” Lucille asked, always getting straight to the point.

Hanne seemed surprised, then pointed at an empty set of benches. “Sure. Do you want to sit?”

Mika rubbed Hanne’s shoulder. “I’ll get us something to drink, okay?” She kissed her girlfriend on the cheek and wandered off.

Lucille poked Fabian’s ribs and gave him a pointed look. With a sigh, he handed her his Mai Tai and followed Mika. “I’ll help you carry them.”

The girl frowned. “Do I look that weak to you?” When he shrugged, lost for a clever reply, she snorted. “Whatever.”

“I’m Fabian, by the way,” he introduced himself as they walked over to the booths. It always paid to be nice to a potential monster, right?

Mika smiled faintly. “Mikaela.”

“What are you getting for drinks?” Please don’t let it be blood.

“Uhm, coke.”

Coke sounded nice and normal. “Cool. I thought your friend was only into... tomato juice.” Why couldn’t it have been tomato juice?

Mikaela chuckled softly. “Not only, no.”

“What do you drink?”

“It’s going to be two glasses of coke.” Her voice started to sound strained.

“Good to know.”

“Small talk really isn’t your thing, is it?”

It truly wasn’t. Fabian cleared his throat. “Yeah, I only wanted...” Lucille would be so disappointed with him if he didn’t get at least some information out of Mikaela. Nervously, he tried to be a bit more forward. “Well, you could’ve been drinking blood or something crazy like that.”

Mikaela scowled. “I may be from Finland, but we’re not all serial killers.”

“Oh, I wasn’t going... You’re from Finland? That’s cool.” Greenvalley was such a small city that they didn’t get international visitors often. “What brings you to Greenvalley?”

“It was Hanne’s idea. She wanted to travel Europe while we’re still young. Not the big cities, but the secret places. Like Greenvalley.”

“Have you been together for long?” Fabian knew he was supposed to push for more supernatural intel, but he found himself strangely invested now.

Especially since those kinds of questions brought a smile to Mikaela’s lips. “Four years soon. I’m actually planning to ask her if she wants to marry me.”

“Marry? Aren’t you still young?” If they were human, they would be at least.

“We’re twenty. And yes, that’s young, but I love her more than anyone in the whole wide world, and it feels right. As if we belong together.”

Fabian held back a sigh. The two were sweet. Too bad he couldn’t just roll with it and leave them be. “I suppose you don’t know anything about the severed head, then?”

LUCILLE



THE BENCH HANNE HAD POINTED AT WAS ALMOST STOLEN FROM THEM, BUT Jan rushed forwards and blocked it in an astounding act of callousness, causing the other festival-goers to back away. Sometimes, it was good to be friends with an asshole. It would definitely come in handy when dealing with a vampire.

“So, Hanne, was it? Where are you from?” Lucille asked with fake cheerfulness as she sat down. If Jan was volunteering for the bad cop, she’d gladly take the good cop role.

“Finland,” Hanne replied, her eyes downcast.

“That makes sense,” Jan said with a prominent side-eye. “It’s dark there.”

Hanne frowned slightly. “Not in summer. Why?”

“Ignore Jan.” Lucille realised that he wasn’t so much a bad cop rather than a stupid cop. “We wanted to talk to you about your tomato juice. Or rather that it wasn’t really tomato juice.”

Instead of protesting, Hanne simply folded. Meekly, she whispered, “So, you smelled it.”

Irritated, Lucille checked with Jan. She hadn’t expected Hanne to outright admit to it. “Yes, I also saw it. Blood and tomato juice are quite different in consistency.”

“Mikaela doesn’t know,” Hanne said with a wistful smile, which seemed a bit out of place. “She’s a little naive in that regard.”

“Sooooo...” Lucille needed a moment to sort her thoughts. With Mikaela being potentially innocent, she decided to focus on Hanne. “Does that mean you’re some kind of vampire? Don’t worry, we know our way around supernatural creatures. There’s always some vampire, werewolf, or demon in

Greenvalley.”

Next to her, Jan had folded his arms. “It’s still light outside, Lu.”

“A friend of ours is a half-demon,” Lucille said in the hopes of gaining Hanne’s trust. So far, the girl didn’t seem much of a danger, but it could all be an act.

Jan signalled air quotes. “Friend.”

Lucille sighed. If Matt returned for the last year of school, he would have a lot of amends to make.

“I’m a Verenimijä, yes,” Hanne said, taking Lucille’s advice of ignoring Jan.

“A Vere-what?” Jan asked promptly.

“Verenimijä, it basically means bloodsucker in Finnish. My kind live in very remote areas, and since Finland has such long summers, we got used to the daylight a long time ago.”

Lucille needed to be careful not to get too excited about this new information. “What brings you to Greenvalley?” Hopefully, not another ritual of everlasting night.

Hanne sighed. “I told Mikaela that I wanted to travel with her, but—”

“Wait,” Jan interrupted. “The other girl knows nothing about this?”

“You only got that now?” Lucille asked, barely containing her sarcasm.

“She doesn’t.” Hanne’s voice almost broke, as if she was close to tears. “I know I need to tell her, but I’m too afraid of what she’ll think of me.”

“Of you drinking blood?” Lucille asked not without compassion.

“It’s not human blood. We usually feed off animals, only using human blood in emergencies.”

Jan still had his arms crossed, glowering at Hanne. “Wonder what emergencies that could be.”

Lucille ignored him. “Why? If I may ask?”

“Because of our way of life. There are only a few large settlements in Finland, and the smaller the settlement, the more likely they’re armed. It’s much easier to stay away from humans altogether.”

“So, why travel then?”

Hanne squirmed under the question, her eyes glancing at the crowd, likely searching for Mikaela. “My people don’t tolerate relationships with humans. It is...” She struggled with speaking. “A betrayal to the community. I didn’t want them to go after Mikaela, so I suggested travelling.”

“And now others have to pay for it,” Jan said darkly.

“What do you mean?” Hanne asked in confusion.

Jan finally loosened his stance. “I found the severed head in the bushes behind the hostel today. Under your window.”

Hanne paled. “Oh.”

“I suppose that one belongs to you then.”

The Verenimijä shook her head. “No, yes... it’s not mine.” When Jan only snorted, Hanne got up. “I need to...”

“Stay!” Jan’s hand shot forwards to grab her wrist. “You’re not going anywhere.”

Lucille sighed. “Jan’s right. We can’t let you go until we’ve figured out what’s going on here.” As nice as Hanne seemed, the severed head spoke a different language. “Heads don’t just turn up, and if Mikaela doesn’t know anything about this, I want to know why you’re dragging that poor girl across Europe.” Unless Mikaela was involved, she was at risk of losing her head next.

Hanne whimpered, but she sat back down. “I’ve loved her for so long.” With a heavy sigh, she continued, “Mikaela is the reincarnation of the love of my life, Aleksis.”

“I am what?”

Lucille closed her eyes, letting the moment pass. Of course, Fabian and Mikaela would choose to return this very minute with their drinks. Though on a second look, neither of them had a cup in their hands.

She met Fabian’s eyes, and he raised his shoulders in a desperate manner, clearly out of his depth. Lucille sighed, then nodded at Hanne. “We’ll give you some space.”

“Why would we—” Jan complained when she dragged him off the bench. As soon as they were out of earshot, he hissed, “Are we just letting her get away with that?”

“Does she look like she’s on the run?” Lucille asked, clicking her tongue.

Jan snorted. “Uh, duh, she just told us that she’s on the run.”

Lucille rolled her eyes. “But not from us. Yet.” While Hanne and Mikaela had a heated argument in Finnish, she filled in Fabian. “I personally don’t think she’s dangerous. Unless you count her potential obsession with Mikaela. Do you believe it’s real love?”

“Mikaela loves her,” Fabian admitted. “She was planning to propose.”

“Not anymore,” Jan said, a little too gleefully.

Sure enough, Mikaela stormed off. Hanne stared after her, but seemingly

decided to give her space and returned to the group instead. Tears stood in her eyes. “That didn’t go very well. Understandably, she’s freaking out.”

Lucille couldn’t hold it against Mikaela. All of them had freaked when Matt’s demon heritage had come to light. And he’d done worse than drink a little bit of blood. Though severing a head came close.

The reminder of Matt and what they’d all gone through with him inspired Lucille to offer Hanne some grace. “You should have told her the truth from the beginning. Is she really your lost love’s reincarnation?” That would put Hanne at more than five hundred years of age, the standard life cycle of a soul.

The Verenimijä nodded. “I waited half a millennium for her.” A forlorn smile appeared on her face. “She’s so much like him.”

“Woah, I thought we were the only ones reincarnated!” Jan exclaimed.

Lucille almost groaned, but fortunately, Fabian saved her from having to correct Jan. “I don’t think we’re that special.” If Lucille knew anything about Fabian, he was still grappling with the fact that they’d all been reborn to fulfil some big prophecy. Even though the prophecy had come to pass and they still lived.

“All souls are being reborn every five hundred years,” she explained for Jan’s benefit, then addressed Hanne again. “It’s a long time to wait. You must’ve loved her... or him a lot.”

“Knowing that he’d be reborn one day was the only glimmer of hope on my horizon.” The fervour that had taken her for a moment quickly ebbed away again. “But that’s too heavy a burden for her to bear.” She looked up at Jan. “I’ll empty my room at the hostel.”

Jan cleared his throat. “That’s nice, but we can’t let you go. Sorry.”

“The head,” Hanne mused. “It was a message from the community for me. I freaked, so I threw it out the window. What it really means is, though, that I should leave Greenvalley immediately.”

“What about Mikaela?” Fabian asked.

“I don’t think she wants anything to do with me after this.” Hanne’s voice grew firmer. “I promise, you won’t find any more heads.” She nodded sharply at them, then turned and walked away.

Jan stormed after her but realised quickly that Lucille and Fabian weren’t following him. “Uhm, guys. Are we just going to let her go?”

“Of course not.” Lucille hugged herself, torn between her duty as one of the town’s magic users and the compassion she felt for Hanne, who’d waited

all this time only to have her love slip through her fingers. “We can’t exactly assault her in front of everybody. Any idea what we should do?”

To her surprise, Fabian spoke up. He usually only wanted to stay as far away from monsters as he could. “She’s a vampire who drinks animal blood. That’s not too bad, is it? I believe her.” When both Jan and Lucille stared at him, he elaborated, “She and Mikaela have been together for four years. They’re so much in love that Mikaela wanted to propose. That’s at least four years in which Hanne didn’t rip off her head.”

“But others lost their head,” Jan said, unimpressed.

Fabian had a point. If Hanne was such a bloodthirsty monster, she wouldn’t have been able to keep up the act with someone she’d been intimate with for such a long time. “She looked afraid to me,” Lucille admitted. “I believe her that it wasn’t hers.”

“Heads don’t just turn up like that, Lu.” Jan was slowly losing his patience. “If it wasn’t her, then I want to know who else is running around, ripping people’s heads off. Yes, yes, the community.” He rolled his eyes before barging on. “How sure can we be that a) she wasn’t lying about that, and b) that the other vampire will simply stop? And also, do we really know Mikaela is an innocent in all of this? It might all just be their go-to act.”

“Mikaela didn’t know anything. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have freaked out like this.” Fabian shook his head. “Why look for trouble when there isn’t any?”

“Uhm, head?”

Fabian paled a little. “Do we know if it’s a human head? If monsters kill monsters, then I’d say let them.”

Lucille stepped in between them, her hands raised. “That’s enough, boys. We all want the same thing here: make sure Greenvalley is safe. That means we can’t just let them go like this. We can check the news to see if someone has been decapitated in the area, but right now, we have no lead on this mysterious community. Our only way is through Hanne, and that means we need to make sure she stays around.” A plan was slowly forming in her mind. “And there’s only one person who can get her to stay. Mikaela.”

“But Mikaela stormed off,” Fabian protested.

“Yes, but you said she wanted to marry Hanne. Would she really give up this easily?”

Slowly, Fabian started smiling. “Are you thinking of meddling with them?”

Lucille grinned. He understood her. There was hope for Fabian yet. “That’s exactly what I’m planning to do. If Mikaela can convince Hanne to stay, we might uncover Hanne’s secret before she’s gone, never to be seen again. Plus, Mikaela will keep her accountable. It’s a win-win situation. So, are you with me?”

“Making a match between a human and a monster?” Fabian shrugged. “Sure, why not?”

“Have you guys lost your mind?” Jan thundered, drawing quite a few glances.

Fabian smiled innocently. “I rather pair them up than kill them.”

For once, Lucille was totally enamoured with his hesitance in hunting a monster. She hooked her arm into his and grinned at Jan. “That’s my kind of plan.”

“Without me.” Jan crossed his arms. “This is a dumb plan, even for you two.” He huffed. “Well, have fun playing Amor. I have to go back to work. Just in case there are any more lost heads or the sixth graders make me lose mine.” Hands in his pockets, he stalked off.

Lucille pouted. In her mind, the plan was brilliant. “It’s not a stupid idea, is it?” She was well aware that she used to stubbornly rush into things, but for once, she wasn’t rushing. Hanne had moved her with her story.

Fabian shrugged just a little bit, as if afraid to accidentally shake her off. “I think it’s worth a shot. I mean, if the whole fiasco with Matt taught us anything, it’s that monsters are capable of love. Even if they’re too stubborn to accept it.”

It felt weird to call their friend a monster, but Lucille understood what he meant. “I’m glad you’re not still mad at him.”

“Oh, I’m plenty mad at him,” Fabian assured her. “But Hanne seems a lot more in touch with her feelings, so I’m willing to give her the benefit of a doubt if it saves us some bloodshed.”

It wasn’t as romantic as Lucille had hoped, but she would take what she got.

FABIAN



IT TOOK FABIAN AND LUCILLE A FEW MINUTES TO FIND MIKAELA. AS suspected, she hadn't returned to the hostel but stayed around. If Fabian had to guess, she was hoping for Hanne to come for her, which in turn gave him hope that not all was lost.

"You go to her," Lucille whispered.

"Alone?"

Lucille scoffed at him. "She's human, just like us. You already talked to her before, so she's more familiar with you."

Begrudgingly, Fabian let go of Lucille's arm and made his way down the riverbank, where Mikaela's lonely figure sat. "Hey, Mika," he said softly as he approached.

Mikaela's head whirled around. "Oh, it's you."

"Can I sit?"

"Sure," Mikaela said, her voice lacking substance. Her gaze had already returned to the dark river.

Fabian crouched down beside her and put his arms around his knees. The sight of running water always calmed him as well. "That was a lot, wasn't it?"

Mikaela snorted. "You mean finding out your girlfriend is a bloodsucker and didn't mention that in four years? Or that she's only with me because I'm the reincarnation of the person she actually loves?" When Fabian didn't reply, she looked him up and down. "What's up with you and your friends? You're not surprised in the slightest."

"We assumed as much."

"You assumed my girlfriend was a vampire?"

Fabian winced. "I know exactly how you feel, Mika."

She shook her head with a scoff. "Let me guess, your friends are also vampires?"

"No, but one of my friends is a half-demon, and the rest... well, the rest have magical powers."

"You're joking, aren't you?"

"Sadly not." Sometimes, Fabian wished he was only joking, but that dream had died last year. "A year ago, I felt the same as you when I found out that monsters were a part of the world. Or worse, that I had magical powers."

Mikaela raised one of her eyebrows. "You've got magic?"

"I can control water. More or less." To prove his words, Fabian raised a ball of water from the river and let it splash down again. His control didn't allow him to shape dolphins, but he'd improved a lot since the early days.

"Wow." Mikaela appeared stunned.

"I was horrified," Fabian admitted.

"What changed?" Mikaela asked, now curious despite herself.

Fabian pulled up his shoulders. "Mainly, that I couldn't change it. The water belongs to me, and my friends need me. That was the most important thing. They need me."

Mikaela took a deep breath. "And you believe Hanne needs me?"

"She wouldn't have waited for five hundred years if she didn't."

"That's madness!" Mikaela huffed, shook her head, and huffed again. "I'm me. Not somebody else."

Her distress mirrored Fabian's own reaction when he found out reincarnation was true, making him wince. "Honestly, I have no idea if that's true. I mean, in what way we're truly unique or if our souls just repeat themselves." He shook his head to clear it from those way too heavy thoughts. "I think what I really want to say is that a few hours ago, you wanted to marry Hanne."

"That was before I knew who she was. Or who I was."

Fabian nodded thoughtfully. "True. But don't you think that, at the very least, she deserves a chance?" Mikaela looked utterly miserable, but Fabian had to try. "Do you really want her to vanish from your life tonight? Without having any of your questions answered?"

Mikaela turned to him, horrified. "No! But she's a vampire. What if she... I just don't know anything anymore."

Fabian felt the strong urge to take Mikaela in his arms, but that would have been too forward. “Here’s an idea. You call Hanne and tell her you want to talk on neutral ground. Meet her for breakfast at...” Where did they serve breakfast in Greenvalley? “At the Richards Pension. You two, Lucille and I. If something happens, we’ll be there to jump in. You won’t be alone.”

“You’re going to come?”

“I promise.”

A tentative smile crossed Mikaela’s face. “All right. Thank you.”

“Anytime.” Fabian got up, only then noticing how wet his bum had become from sitting on the wet grass.

“Water mage, are you?” Mikaela teased him.

Fabian felt himself blushing. “I’m working on it.” Chuckling, he walked up the hill. When he saw Lucille hovering there, he gave her two thumbs up. The ensuing smile on her face told him it had all been worth it.



THE NEXT MORNING, they all met in the sunny breakfast room of the Richards Pension. The pension belonged to the parents of a classmate. Shayna wasn’t exactly a friend of Fabian’s, but she was tolerable without the rest of her friend circle around. At the moment, she was serving a couple in the back, blissfully leaving them alone.

“Were you able to talk it out last night?” Lucille asked.

Mikaela pursed her lips, to which Hanne explained, “Mika spent the night here. I... I stayed somewhere else.” She forced a smile. “I’m very happy she’s willing to give me a chance to explain.”

At the moment, Mikaela didn’t look like she wanted to hear anything. Fabian hoped she was still willing now that she’d had a chance to sleep on it.

“You didn’t drink anything?” he asked Hanne instead.

The Verenimijä flashed them a tired smile. “I’m sticking to my own provisions.”

“I’m sorry we can’t just ignore the whole thing,” Lucille said. “Our experiences with vampires aren’t very good, I’m afraid.”

Hanne nodded. “I haven’t drunk human blood in five hundred years. I’m not going to start again now.”

“Can we not talk about that?” Mikaela asked, annoyed. “I was planning to

eat my bread roll.” So far, she’s only been tearing it to pieces, white crumbs covering her plate and the tablecloth underneath it.

“Of course. How did you two meet?” Leave it to Lucille to turn the conversation into relationship talk.

“The first time or the second time?” Mikaela snapped.

Hanne put a hand on her wrist. “If you have any questions, ask them.”

Judging by Mikaela’s brusque behaviour, all the questions she might have had should’ve been answered long before now. She leaned to the side and waved at Shayna. “Could I have some more coffee, please?”

Shayna approached them with a coffee pot, the cheery smile of hospitality plastered on her face. “Of course.” When she recognised Fabian and Lucille, her eyebrows crept upwards. “Three women, all for you, Bendtfeld?”

“Of course,” Lucille said without missing a beat. Her arm snaked around Fabian’s hip, setting his body on fire. “Fabian can handle it.” She winked at Shayna, who simply seemed amused.

Meanwhile, Fabian knew he’d turned beet-red. “What was that?” he asked the minute Shayna left their table.

Lucille grinned. “Just having some fun. Imagine the face Cheryl will make when she hears the gossip.”

Fabian pulled a face. He doubted Shayna would make him look as good as Lucille had in front of the Queen Bee.

“Cheryl?” Hanne asked.

“Someone better forgotten.” Lucille shuddered, reminding Fabian of her ongoing rivalry with the popular girl. “But, if Mikaela doesn’t want to ask, I’ll do it. Are she and Alekski alike?”

Mikaela looked as if she wanted to strangle Lucille but took it out on the bread roll instead.

Hanne glanced at her before answering. “It’s the same soul, so of course, they’re similar. Well, obviously, he was a man and lived five hundred years ago. He came from the area of Turku, pretty much the only bigger settlement in the area back then. His ancestors were Swedes who had got some land from the Dominicans, but Alekski had a big fight with his father and moved further inland, trying to make a living there. I found him half-frozen in the forest.”

Her attention was on Mikaela, her gaze a little dreamy. “He had the same kind of hair as you. Sandy blond, almost white in summer. His eyes...”

“You were with a dude?”

“I love you no matter what shape your body takes.”

Mikaela scoffed and turned away, desperate for something else to look at.

In an effort to keep the conversation going, Fabian asked, “Did you ever try to... turn him? It must have been heartbreaking to see him grow old and... well, die.” Just the idea of it made Fabian’s stomach turn.

“Aleksi never grew old,” Hanne said, her voice almost a whisper. “But no, I would’ve never suggested it. To turn him would have meant making him a Vampyyri. Only the born Verenimijä can walk under the sun. Aleksi would’ve had to forsake the day, and that’s a sacrifice I could never ask of him. Or you.”

For the first time at this breakfast table, Mikaela’s eyes softened as she regarded Hanne.

“I can’t imagine losing the love of my life and... keep going. Forever alone.” When Fabian ever found the one to spend his life with, he selfishly hoped he’d go before her, but only after a long, long life together.

“I guess now we know why Matt struggles with his feelings so much,” Lucille mused.

Fabian snorted at that, his sentimentality fading quickly. “Matt’s got a whole barrel of other problems.” But the thought stuck with him. Growing up among demons, the idea of forever love hit a little different. It probably explained why Matt favoured casual relationships over meaningful connections. Until the connection had struck him regardless.

“It wasn’t easy,” Hanne admitted. “To be honest, I had many dark years.” Her gaze trailed to the window. “I wanted to leave the world with him.”

“But you waited,” Mikaela said softly. Carefully, she extended her hand.

Hanne watched the fingers with bated breath until they settled on her hand and caressed her knuckles. Only then, she allowed herself a small smile. “Because you’re worth it.”

Next to Fabian, Lucille sighed, a wistful smile on her lips. Fabian held in an entirely different sigh. As successful as their meddling appeared to be going, they weren’t a single step further in making a decision about Hanne.

They sat with Hanne and Mikaela for a little bit longer before excusing themselves. Outside, Fabian took a big breath of fresh air. He wanted to believe in them, but was that his natural cowardice or true faith?

“Wasn’t this the most romantic thing you’ve ever heard?” Lucille was clearly still enamoured with Hanne and Mikaela.

Fabian held back his doubts and agreed. “They’re cute, sure, but we

didn't find out a whole lot. Only that I can't imagine Hanne ever ripping off heads."

Lucille pulled a face. "Don't remind me. Perhaps we can invite them to watch a movie tomorrow."

"Or maybe you could organise their wedding while you're at it."

"Don't be like that. It's all part of the plan, remember? At least they're staying for now." Lucille hooked her arm into his and smiled up at him. "So, what's the plan for us two today? You want to go to the pool again?"

Fabian sighed. "I promised Dad to help him in the workshop since Ben is away. It's all a big mess at the moment."

"Everyone's working these holidays," Lucille complained.

"That's life when you haven't been born in golden nappies."

Lucille chuckled. "But they looked good on me."

The gloom lifted off Fabian as he burst out laughing. "Probably."

"Can't you come up with an excuse? It's summer!"

He wished he could. Hanging out with Lucille sounded a lot more fun than fixing cars in this heat. "It's really not going well at the moment. Do you remember how Greenvalley almost got sucked into Hell?"

"How could I forget that?"

"Most of the people in town have." Though how, Fabian couldn't fathom. He still had nightmares of the city sinking around him.

Lucille clicked her tongue. "True."

"Well, Dad and Ben lost a whole lot of their tools during the attack, but even worse, one of the cars slid into Hell. Now, how do you explain to the insurance that a car just vanished from your workshop? Especially because Dad has no clue about the real reason."

"Oh dear, did the police knock on their door?"

Fabian shook his head. "No. I mean, yes, but since so many tools went missing as well, they ruled it a break-in. That front is covered, but the insurance isn't too happy. They paid for the car, but they're not forking out for the tools, so Ben and Dad had to invest a whole lot of money, which is now missing elsewhere. They even had to let go of their trainee."

"And that's where you come into play," Lucille mused.

"At least during the summer holidays, yes. We'll have to see what's gonna happen in September." Judging by the tense mood at home, nothing good.

"Well, let me know if I can help."

It sounded sincere but unless Lucille was planning to invest in workshops, Fabian couldn't fathom how. "I suppose you don't want to donate to the Bendtfeld family?"

She laughed at that. "No, that would be weird. But if you need a break, I can shout you some... entertainment, perhaps. You've got my number."

Fabian's mouth felt dry as he thought of the possibilities. Could Lucille be offering more than her friendship to him, or was he imagining things? It was a bit early in the day for a heatstroke. "You know, if you want, you can join me. You could do some of the admin stuff or keep me entertained." Using the same word felt weirdly suggestive.

Of course, the notion of actual work didn't sit too well with daddy's little princess. "As tempting as the idea of your oil-smearred face and your body in overalls is, I'll have to give it a pass. Let's meet tomorrow for phase two, though."

"Okay." He hadn't truly believed that she would go for it anyway.

To Fabian's surprise, though, Lucille leaned in and kissed his cheek. "See you tomorrow."

Before he could even process what had happened, Lucille had left his arm and got into the car waiting for her at the corner. As her chauffeur drove off, Fabian raised his fingers to his cheek, the imprint of her lips still burning on his skin. That had never happened before.

Was Lucille interested in him? Was he?

LUCILLE



UNFORTUNATELY, PHASE TWO WAS NEVER MEANT TO COMMENCE. BEFORE Lucille had even finished her breakfast the next morning, a message from Jan brought dread to the sun-filled parlour.

Jan: I saw Hanne covered in blood last night. We need to talk now.

With a sigh, Lucille typed her answer, inviting the boys to the Magic Circle for a meet-up. I will ask Hanne to meet us there, she offered, the beginnings of a plan forming in her mind. Fortunately, she and the Verenimijä had exchanged numbers the day before. Lucille only hoped it wasn't a fake number.

She waited with bated breath for Hanne to pick up. After three rings, she heard a sniffled "Yes?"

"Hanne, hey! I hope I haven't woken you." Lucille had no idea if vampires like her even needed sleep.

"You didn't."

Or perhaps, Hanne was still on her blood spree. "Listen, I had a new idea. Could you meet me at the Magic Circle? I'll text you the address."

"I..." On the other end of the line, Hanne didn't seem too keen. Lucille hoped she wasn't suspecting anything. "Sure. I'll be there."

Lucille let out a breath of relief before cheerfully whistling into the phone, "Awesome. I'll meet you there."

That had been the easy part. This time, they would need to have a real talk with Hanne. Hopefully, she would remain as forthcoming as she'd been the last few days. The old romantic inside Lucille really wanted her to be happy with Mikaela. The two of them were relationship goals. That was, if one of them didn't turn out to be a serial killer.



HALF AN HOUR LATER, she met Jan and Fabian at the Magic Circle. To her surprise, the shop was still closed. “Is your mother having a break over summer?”

Fabian had brought the keys with him from home and unlocked the magic shop. “No, just reduced opening hours, so she can help out at the workshop. But she’s happy for us to go in if we close up properly.”

He let them in and locked the door behind them, leaving the key in the lock. They had to push aside the outdoor displays filled with local witch puppets, wooden signs, and wind chimes. The store itself was an illustrious collection of candles, gems, tarot cards, incense bowls, and books. Thin swords and decorated daggers adorned a wall in the back. A shelf near the counter carried potions that promised good health, fewer sorrows, and everlasting love.

In the back, the smell of hundreds of dried herbs hit them as they walked into the room with the actual witch supplies. Exotic ingredients and gems filled the shelves, while a row of unopened boxes covered the back wall. A small selection of weapons—sharp ones, contrary to those in the front—were stored to the side. Caroline’s store supported all the witches of the Harz region while keeping afloat with the tourist items in the showroom.

Lucille, Jan, and Fabian settled around the big table, pushing aside a few books to make space. The last time they’d gathered here, they’d prepared to go into battle against an archdemon. Now the next monster awaited them.

Or they awaited it.

“I talked to Mum,” Fabian started, “and she actually heard about those Finnish vampires. Apparently, there aren’t many sources, but the main gist is that they’re immune to sunlight and can only be killed by cutting off their head.”

A loud ripping sound startled Lucille. She looked to the side where Jan had ripped open one of the long boxes. He pulled a sword from it and threw it on the table. Lucille winced at the rough handling of the weapon.

“We can do that,” Jan said grimly.

“Can’t we call Matt?” Lucille asked, the sight of the sword bringing back bad memories. Matt was the only one who was actually skilled with a sword.

Jan’s face darkened. “Absolutely not. We don’t need him to deal with monsters, remember?”

Lucille sighed. “But I have no idea how to handle a sword.” Those things were heavy and unwieldy.

“You’re not supposed to engage in a sword battle, just cut off someone’s head.”

“As if that’s easy.” Full of distaste, Lucille pushed the sword towards Fabian, who shook his head with wild eyes.

Annoyed, Jan picked up the sword. “Fine, I’ll do it, and you distract her.”

“Can we reverse a little?” Fabian asked. “We don’t need to kill Hanne, do we?”

Jan groaned. “Look, I know you think the two of them are so cute, but just because she’s in love with Mikaela, doesn’t mean she lost her appetite for the rest of humanity. What do you think is in those drink bottles?”

“She said it was animal blood,” Lucille pointed out.

“I saw her with bloodied hands in front of the hostel last night.”

Lucille clicked her tongue. “Yes, but that doesn’t mean she’s homicidal. Animals bleed too. You’d know that if you didn’t quit school.”

“Hey, let’s not fight about this.” Fabian looked from one to the other, seeming miserable. “Hanne is already on the way. I don’t feel comfortable with simply killing her because she’s the only vampire we know.”

“You don’t feel comfortable with killing any monster,” Jan murmured.

“Sure, but this feels more premature than usual. I thought we were going to talk to her.”

Lucille placed her hand on Fabian’s and smiled. “That’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

“Should I call Mikaela too?” Fabian asked. “I don’t like keeping things from her, and she might be able to talk sense into Hanne if something was going on.”

After a nod from Lucille, Fabian took out his phone and typed in the number he’d been given yesterday. For a minute, all three of them waited with bated breath for Mikaela to pick up, but nothing happened.

“Ha!” Smugly, Jan crossed his arms.

Annoyed, Lucille glared at him. “What do you mean, ha?”

“Well, isn’t it obvious? That blood on Hanne’s hands was Mikaela’s. You two brought them together, and now Hanne was able to eat her girlfriend.”

“You’re ridiculous!” There was really no reasoning with Jan. “It’s just like with Matt.” Jan had suspected him of being all kinds of monsters without any kind of tangible proof.

Jan raised an eyebrow. “And I was right.”

“Pure luck.”

“I don’t think so.” Jan snarled at her. “You just want to see some tragic romance à la Twilight in this. I get it when Fabian does it. He’s happy with any excuse that keeps him out of a monster fight.”

“Hey!”

Jan ignored Fabian’s outcry. “But I expected more from you.”

Lucille huffed. Jan’s arguments didn’t leave her completely cold. She was well aware of the risk they were taking, but in her eyes, killing Hanne without hearing her out was just another risk. She might be a vampire, but that didn’t necessarily mean her death was warranted. Especially not when the jury on her perceived crimes was still out.

“Last year, I made a lot of poor, rushed decisions,” Lucille admitted. “That didn’t always work out very well. The sword isn’t going anywhere, and we’ve got Hanne’s trust. You don’t even know whose blood that was. So, excuse me, if I—”

A loud knock interrupted her.

“That must be her.” Fabian got up and crossed the showroom.

Lucille glared at Jan when his hand inched towards the sword, then quickly followed Fabian. The sight of Hanne startled her. Not because she hadn’t expected the Verenimijä this early, but because she looked like someone who hadn’t slept all night. Her eyes were puffy and red, her hair dishevelled. Through the glass, Hanne was pleading with them.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Fabian reached for the key and opened the door. “What happened?”

“Mika got kidnapped.” Hanne’s voice fell apart around those words.

Lucille stepped forwards and put her arm around the girl. “Come on in!”

The Verenimijä leaned into her, fresh tears running down her face. She stumbled along, not even flinching at the sight of Jan and his sword. Lucille doubted Hanne had even noticed him.

“Mikaela has been kidnapped?” she asked once she’d helped Hanne into a chair. While she rubbed Hanne’s back, Fabian came through with tissues.

Hanne grabbed a tissue and cleared her nose before dabbing her cheeks. “Last night, I searched him out and fought him. He fled, and now I can’t reach Mikaela. He won’t let me talk to her.”

“He?” Lucille asked. “Who’s he?”

“The Verenimijä the community sent to find us. I should’ve gone as soon

as I saw the head, but Mika..." New sobs ravaged her throat. "I didn't want to endanger her, but I also didn't want to leave her. When you said, there was a chance..."

"So, this really wasn't your head?" Jan asked, still sceptical about the whole thing.

Hanne shook her head, blinked, and took a few deep breaths. "I told you it was meant as a threat. It was likely the head of another traitor he'd found." Her brief composure crumbled again. "What am I supposed to do? I can't let him hurt Mika."

"We're going to save her, of course!" Fabian promised without hesitation.

Lucille could've kissed him. For all the cowardice he displayed when it came to facing monsters, he was always the first to save a friend.

"What if she just isn't picking up the phone?" Jan asked, not nearly as enthusiastic. "Not everybody is happy to be a vampire's girlfriend."

"But Mika was happy with Hanne," Lucille snapped, having reached the end of her rope with Jan's attitude. "Sure, they have to clear up some things, but that's not such an issue that Mikaela would simply break off all contact with her and us." Unless Mikaela was truly done and no longer appreciated their meddling.

Hanne whimpered but pulled herself together for Mikaela's sake. "It was her blood on the window. I know her smell."

"How romantic," Jan spat.

"We will find her," Lucille promised, ignoring Jan.

Hanne burst into tears. "If he hurts her, she'll never forgive me. I will never forgive myself." She hid her face in her hands and let the sobs ravage her body.

Lucille exchanged a concerned glance with Fabian, feeling nothing but pity for the vampire. Even Jan had given up his aggressive stance and lowered the sword.

After five hundred years, it was all supposed to be over today? No, Lucille wasn't going to allow it. This vampire hunter would have to answer to her.

Just then, a phone rang. Since neither Fabian nor Jan reached for theirs and it wasn't Lucille's phone, it must have been Hanne's. Her eyes widened, and her skin paled. She reached for the phone and took a shaky breath. "It's Mikaela."

"Go, take it!" Lucille urged her.

With shaking hands, Hanne pressed the button. “Mika?”

Whatever reply she received made her swallow heavily, her eyes widening further. Then she whispered, “Aricin.” Unable to support the phone, Hanne let it fall on the table. With a shaking finger, she pushed the loudspeaker.

“Hello, dear,” the voice belonged to a male, the rasp in his voice causing goosebumps on Lucille’s skin. “You took me on quite the journey.”

“What are you planning to do with Mikaela?”

Lucille was proud of Hanne for asking the important questions.

The guy on the other side answered in a slow drawl, “Oh, Mika and I are becoming fast friends.” There was a break. “I think she wants to talk to you in person. Why don’t you come over and we can get it all done with?”

Hanne swallowed again. “Where are you?”

“I’ll text you the address.” And just as suddenly, the call broke off. Hanne shuddered, once more struggling with tears.

The phone buzzed with an incoming text. Jan raised his sword again. “Well, that saves us some time. Let’s chop off one vampire head, at least.”

FABIAN



AS MUCH AS FABIAN HATED HAVING TO FIGHT MONSTERS ONCE MORE, HE wasn't attempting to get out of it. In his heart, he'd already known that summer was about to be over, and other than last year, he didn't actually mind the monsters too much. Or rather, he minded a lot, which was why he would do everything in his power to defend his hometown and the people he cared for.

Fighting monsters was better than the alternative: losing a loved one or your own life to them.

In this case, Mikaela's life was at risk. And even if, technically, Hanne was a monster as well, Fabian was convinced she deserved love as much as any of them.

"So, who's this Aricin guy?" he asked as they power-walked through the streets of Greenvalley. The address he'd given them belonged to a warehouse at the docks.

Hanne had recovered a little, spurred on by the impending rescue. "He's a Verenimijä like me, a little younger. The community must have picked him to hunt and execute me. Probably to make up for the fact I never gave him the promised children."

"Promised children?" Lucille asked.

"The community is very concerned with keeping our race alive. Aricin and I were selected for a union, but I had already fallen in love."

"With Aleksis," Fabian mused.

Meanwhile, Lucille pulled a face. "Just because you don't want to be their brood mare, you need to die?"

Hanne sighed. "No, there's no enforcement other than they expect you to

do your part. What is against the law, though, is leaving the community and living among humans. I broke the law when I searched out Mikaela, and then every day I chose to stay at her side. It's ridiculous. Mika would never rat me out."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," Jan muttered.

But Hanne adamantly shook her head. "I am. That's not the kind of person she is. Which is why I should've told her years ago." Her voice broke at the end.

Lucille reached out, giving Hanne's shoulders a quick rub. "We've got this. Aricin only expects you, not three experienced monster hunters. We've defeated an archdemon. We can deal with one vampire."

The odds certainly sounded in their favour. In fact, Fabian believed the odds were better than ever before. Lucille was an amazing witch, his control over water had become a lot better, and Jan was not just well-versed in martial arts, but a healer. Add in a Verenimijä on their side, and this Arician wouldn't know what hit him. "We'll deal with him. Then you and Mikaela can keep travelling. Perhaps it's time to go overseas." Surely, Hanne's community would give up then.

"That's might be the best we can hope for," Hanne said without much enthusiasm.

Fabian felt for her. If he were forced to leave Greenvalley behind, he would be beside himself. But to keep the love of his life safe, he'd do it in a heartbeat.

"We're here," Jan announced, pointing at the old warehouse that was sometimes used by the loggers upstream.

Hanne took a deep breath. "I will try and talk him out of this. No one needs to get hurt."

Behind her back, the three of them shared a glance. People who left severed heads behind usually weren't big on talking.

"Are you for real?" The voice from the telephone was even sharper in reality. "How many more infractions are you going for?"

Stepping into the warehouse from outside had left them temporarily blind. It took a moment for their eyes to adjust and discover the speaker: a tall, muscular man with light blond hair and smooth, ageless features. Next to him, Mikaela sat bound to a chair. Blood had dried on her head, her eyes wide with panic.

"Does it matter?" Hanne replied, her voice devoid of emotion. "You've

already judged me anyway.”

“Besides, it isn’t Hanne’s fault.” Fabian would have been happy to let Hanne control the conversation, but Lucille couldn’t keep her mouth shut when there was an injustice happening in front of her. It was one of her better qualities. “We already knew about the existence of vampires and demons.”

“Yeah, and we usually kill them,” Jan boasted.

Aricin sneered at them. “Is that supposed to frighten me? Hanne will pay for her crimes, whether she has ensnared one or four humans. If anything, confiding in monster hunters makes this even worse.”

“Look, we have no interest in travelling up to Finland to take it up with a bunch of daywalking vampires,” Fabian said. Saving Mikaela, yes. Looking for trouble, no. “We just want you to reconsider. Hanne did nothing to hurt you.”

“The law is the law. Hanne has to die.” Suddenly, Aricin turned to Mikaela, smiling sweetly. “That’s your opinion too, isn’t it?” To their surprise, Mikaela avoided everybody’s gazes. “I told her how you killed Alekski,” he announced to Hanne.

While Lucille gasped, Fabian closed his eyes. After everything, Jan had been right. It appeared to have been nothing but an act. They had been too trusting of the vampire woman.

“You did what?” Lucille asked, her voice shaky.

Tears filled Hanne’s eyes. “It was an accident. I wanted to be good for him. I wanted to be...” Her voice broke. “Human. I didn’t drink a single drop of blood for months. I ate food and I drank water, but nothing that sustained me. I was so very hungry.” She wiped the tears from her face. “It came over me suddenly. Mika, I’m so sorry. I never wanted that to happen!”

Mikaela kept staring to the side. Then suddenly, her shoulders bunched and her head whipped around, eyes glaring. “You should’ve told me. You should’ve told me everything! From the moment we met!”

“I know,” Hanne said without missing a beat.

“And I’m not Alekski!” Mikaela screamed.

“That’s right. You’re Mikaela. My Mikaela.” The gentleness in Hanne’s voice made Fabian’s heart ache.

Aricin buried his hand in Mikaela’s hair and yanked her head backwards, exposing her throat. As Mikaela screamed, Hanne jumped forwards, but Aricin was quicker. His fingers came to rest on Mikaela’s throat. In front of their eyes, they elongated until they’d turned into razor-sharp claws. Blood

trickled down.

“At the moment, she belongs to me,” Aricin announced gleefully. “Humans die. Always. You think it’s undying love, but there’s nothing you can do to stop her death.” He smiled cruelly. “And it’s all your fault. Again.”

Fabian didn’t dare to breathe. Mikaela whimpered, unable to get away from her abuser.

“You think you’re such a big shot!” Jan stormed forwards, sword raised. “You might be able to kill Mikaela, but you won’t get out of here alive!”

“Jan!” Lucille shouted, while Fabian’s fingers twitched. He wanted nothing more than to slam a stream of water into Aricin’s face, but that would endanger Mikaela even more.

Hanne stepped into Jan’s path before he could reach the two. “Stop! Jan, please!” She cast a pleading glance at Aricin. “I’ll do whatever you want. I’ll be yours for all of eternity.” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “I’ll give you children. I’ll never mention Mika or Aleks or any other human for the rest of my life. Please let her go. Please.”

Fabian watched on, horrified. Hanne couldn’t be serious. Or could she?

Everyone else was just as shaken. Mikaela whimpered, and even Aricin stared, his grip on Mikaela’s throat lessening.

Hanne sank to her knees. “Please let them go.”

“They’re too much of a danger,” Aricin said reflexively.

“Greenvalley is far away. They have no idea where we live or how we live. Whom are they going to tell?” Hanne suddenly sounded too cold.

Once more, Aricin pulled Mikaela’s head backwards. “And what’s with her?”

Hanne glanced at her, and for a moment, she held her breath. “Mikaela won’t talk. She won’t be returning to Finland. If she does, I’ll drink her blood.”

Fabian shuddered, while Mikaela gasped. Aricin, however, smiled. He lowered his head and hissed at Mikaela. “Did you get that? Human?”

“Every word.” Mikaela’s voice was shaky. She searched Hanne’s face, but whatever she saw there made her shudder.

At last, Aricin let go of her. He cut through the bonds with his claws. His fingers clamped around her arm and jerked her out of her chair before throwing her into Jan’s arms.

Jan closed his arm around Mikaela and led her to the exit, where Fabian and Lucille waited for them.

Immediately, Lucille took Mikaela's hand. "I'm so sorry."

Fabian glanced over his shoulder at Hanne, but the Verenimijä was staring straight ahead at Aricin, refusing to watch the woman she claimed to love more than anything go. A heavy feeling settled in Fabian's chest. It was obvious to him that she was sacrificing herself to keep Mikaela safe, but that didn't make him like it one bit. Aricin couldn't win, not like that.

However, in the end, it wasn't his decision. They had promised to get Mikaela out. The rest was between the two Verenimijä.

The sunlight felt cold after what they'd witnessed in the warehouse. Although they'd escaped with their lives, none of them felt victorious. They had only exchanged one life for another. A monster's life, but a life nonetheless.

They got about fifty metres from the warehouse when Mikaela crumpled. Immediately, Fabian and Lucille bent down to help.

"Did he hurt you?" Fabian asked, instantly wanting to slap himself. Aricin had hurt her right in front of them.

"I guess it's the shock of Hanne betraying her," Jan said with a shrug.

Lucille glared at him. "But she didn't." She caressed Mikaela's hair, smiling at her with compassion. "Hanne only said all those things to save your life. She loves only you. She couldn't bear seeing you hurt."

"What about Aleksis?" Mikaela asked through her tears.

"That was an accident." Fabian couldn't believe what he was saying. That accident had caused a young man's death. But when Hanne had told her story, he'd recognised the impossible strain she'd put herself under. As much as he detested it, vampires needed blood, and Hanne had starved herself for love. "I'm sure she suffered for centuries because of that."

Inadvertently, Fabian thought of Matt and his bloody accident. "She was much younger then, inexperienced. She's no longer abstaining completely."

Across from Mikaela, Lucille nodded at him, a soft smile on her lips.

Fabian's resolve hardened. Against all odds, he believed in this unlikely couple. They deserved a happy ending, not another tragedy. "Mika, tell us what you want us to do. If you say so, the three of us will go in there and fight, no matter what Hanne promised him."

"That guy won't leave Greenvalley with his head," Jan added grimly.

Right, the head severing. Fabian swallowed. "It's your decision. We'll understand if you rather want to leave all of this behind you—"

"And leave Hanne in the hands of this stinker?" Mikaela spat. "Did you

hear what she promised him?” She shuddered. “Never.”

Fabian got back to his feet. “All right. It’s settled then. We’re going back inside.”

Mikaela’s eyes widened. “But he’s dangerous.”

Next to her, Lucille smiled. “So are we.” A mischievous glint entered her eyes. “Fabian might be a big old softie, but he’s more powerful than he lets on.” While Fabian blushed, Lucille got to her feet as well. “We won’t let him have your Hanne.”

She opened her hand to Fabian, her eyes locking with his. With a grim smile, Fabian placed his hand in hers.

Behind them, Jan cheered. “Finally. Let’s lop that guy’s head off.”

LUCILLE



LUCILLE'S HEART WAS THUMPING AGAINST HER CHEST AS THEY RAN BACK TO the warehouse. Excitement flooded her, of the kind she hadn't felt since summer started. As crazy as it was, she'd missed this about Greenvalley—the monsters, the hunt, the danger.

After defeating Malcolm, she'd feared that her days as a witch were about to come to an end. With the prophecy fulfilled, what else was awaiting them? As it turned out, a whole lot.

They burst back into the hall, but this time Lucille knew what to expect. "Erit Lux!" she shouted, and brightness flooded the hall. It wouldn't dispel this particular type of vampire, but it evened the battlefield. Now all of them would be blinded for the same precious seconds. The three of them, perhaps even less than Aricin, since their eyes were accustomed to the bright sun outside.

Sure enough, Aricin was still squinting when Lucille's eyes adjusted. He had Hanne bent against a shelf, his hand firmly in the small of her back. At least until a jet stream of water hit him in the chest and pushed him away from Hanne.

"What are you doing?" Hanne cried out, alarmed.

"Saving your life," Jan said as he stormed forwards, sword raised.

In the meantime, Aricin had recovered. He snarled at Jan, but a second, thinner stream of water hit him straight in the eyes. Jan jumped.

Just as he was about to bring down the sword, Aricin's arm shot up. The Verenimijä grabbed Jan's wrist and jerked it to the side. Then he kicked Jan so hard that the boy hit the opposite wall. With a groan, Jan crumpled. The sword had fallen from his fingers.

Meanwhile, Fabian had arrived at Hanne's die and put himself between her and Aricin. "She loves you, Hanne. Mikaela loves you. You owe her a life."

"No!" Aricin snarled. "She owes me a life."

He lunged for Fabian, and for a third time, water hit him in the face.

"Hanne, go!" Fabian shouted. "We fight monsters, and you're not one of them. So, grab Mika and go!"

Lucille was about to cast a shielding spell when she caught sight of Aricin. He snarled like a big cat, and sure enough, his entire body seemed to transform. His fingers and toes elongated into claws. His face distorted, and his teeth grew until he looked half sabre-tooth tiger and half human. With one big jump, he cleared Fabian and Hanne and blocked their path. Then he lunged at Hanne, grabbed her foot, and threw her into the same wall as Jan.

Contrary to Jan, Hanne got back to her feet immediately. She, too, was changing, but Aricin's attention had wavered.

His yellow eyes locked on Lucille, then past her. Startled, Lucille noticed that Mikaela had followed them into the warehouse.

"Stay back!" Lucille shouted. Calmly, she awaited Aricin's attack, the spell already on her lips.

Aricin snarled. On all fours, he bounded through the room.

Lucille counted the seconds in her head. Then, just before he reached her, she shouted, "Sageat negru distrugere!"

The vile words flew from her lips and formed a sizzling black arrow. The destructive magic flew straight at Aricin.

With inhuman reflexes, he threw himself to the side, escaping the arrow by a hair's width. His own power made him flip over twice, but he recovered almost instantly, now on their side.

Lucille was still reeling from using that particular spell. It would take a few moments for the natural rivers to replenish what she'd ripped from them. At this point, she couldn't even cast a shield spell.

Claws extended, Aricin stretched his body, his aim Mikaela, when something hit him in the side—Hanne.

She, too, had taken on her wild form. Her claws sank into the soft skin on his side. Together, the two crashed towards the ground.

"Get back." Lucille pulled Mikaela with her as she stumbled away from the two Verenimijä.

Just then, a boom like from a detonation sounded and shook the

warehouse. Lucille fell to the ground. Stunned, she looked to the side. There, daylight broke through a cloud of dust, black magic crackling around the edges. It took her a moment to realise she was staring at the roof, or the lack of a roof.

“I did that,” she whispered, recognising the fading tendrils of her magic arrow. At the same time, she remembered something else. “Fabian! Jan!”

Back on her feet, she dashed into the dust billows, cold fear gripping her stomach. Half the roof had come down, the corrugated metal panels and wooden steel beams covering the empty shelves, some of which had been knocked over.

“I’m fine.” Jan crawled out from a triangular structure, where the wall had stopped the panel from flattening him. “But I lost the sword.”

“Fabian?” Lucille dove deeper into the dust, climbing over the irregular surfaces. She slipped and cut her shin on one of the panels before she remembered that she was a witch. “Globus Igneus.”

A green fireball ignited in her hand, casting its shimmer across the shelves and a foot. “Jan, get over here.” She herself dashed over as well as she could.

She heard a cough and nearly cried with relief. The dust had cleared by the time she reached the shelf. Lucille spotted the telltale ginger hair on the other side of a metal sheet. A puddle of water had formed underneath.

“Fabian...” She dropped to her knees, suspending her fire, and pulled on the sheet. Unfortunately, the shelf had become lodged with it when it tumbled, and it wouldn’t move a bit. “I’m so sorry.”

“Let me.” Jan stepped over her and jerked the shelf the other way.

As soon as it became dislodged, Lucille was able to lift the metal sheet. Underneath, Fabian groaned, but he managed to turn onto his backside and from there, pull out his legs. As far as Lucille could see, she only spotted a few bruises and minor cuts.

“You’re okay. How are you okay?”

“Water,” Fabian croaked, then coughed again. “I used water to shield myself. It didn’t stop it much.”

“It stopped it enough.” Lucille threw her arms around his neck. “I’m so sorry.” She would’ve never forgiven herself if her magic had caused harm to him.

Fabian cleared his throat. “What about Hanne and Mika?”

With Jan’s help, Lucille pulled Fabian out from his trap and steadied him.

On the other side of the hall, the two Verenimijä were still entangled with each other. Blood was flowing from numerous wounds, but neither of them showed any signs of slowing down.

Just then, Aricin managed to tear free. He lunged for a shelf and brought it down on Hanne. A scream alerted him to where Mikaela was standing, her only exit blocked by the chaos that had ensued following the vampire fights and Lucille's black magic arrow. In three bounds, he was at her side and slammed her into the ground. With his claws pinning her down, Aricin bent down to bite her neck.

"Proturgo!" Lucille slammed her hand forwards, and a blue shield covered Mikaela's body moments before Aricin bit down.

He snarled when the shield repelled him, but no matter how much he tried, he couldn't break through. With a hiss, he let go of Mikaela and lunged for Lucille instead.

Panicked, she threw her fireball at him, but the Verenimijä only snarled as the flames engulfed him and extinguished. Another leap brought him right in front of her.

"Watch out!" Fabian pushed her to the side, throwing them both onto the metal panels. Aricin flew over their heads, his claws screeching and throwing out sparks as he slid over the metal. Then Hanne was there and engaged him again, looking a little worse for the wear.

Lucille's heart felt as if it would burst from her chest. Aricin had almost hit her. She'd seen the claws glinting in the sun. But she was alive, safe for the moment in Fabian's arms. "Thank you."

"Anytime." He was breathing just as hard as she was.

A terrible scream made them whip their heads around. Somehow, Aricin had got on top of Hanne, his face buried in her side as he tore and ripped through her flesh. Despite being unable to die from it, Hanne screeched in pain.

When her movements slowed, Aricin grabbed her head with both paws, his face momentarily returning to that of a male. "If I can't have you, no one will."

Hanne's eyes widened in shock. She tried to shake her head, but it was too late.

A silver gleam was all the warning they had before the sword came down on Aricin's neck. He moaned, his head still very much attached, and tried to straighten himself, but Mikaela raised the sword once more and brought it

down again and again and again until his head finally rolled from his neck.

Sobbing, Mikaela let go of the sword and fell to her knees, blood splattering her face and clothes.

Instantly, Hanne was there and wrapped her in her arms, her wounds still bleeding but healing. “He’s dead, Mika. Everything’s all right. Hush now, you did well.”

Mikaela clawed at her back as if she couldn’t hold Hanne close enough, ravaged by sobs as she was.

When the remains of Aricin began to hiss and shrink in the sun, Lucille had to turn away. Fabian was turning green in his face as well. Only Jan kept staring and muttered, “Well, that one’s a goner.”

“Jan, please,” Lucille whispered.

In the meantime, Mikaela had calmed a little. She let go of Hanne and glared at her instead. “Don’t. Do this. Ever. Again. Understood?”

Hanne smiled weakly. “Which one of my many mistakes?”

“Giving up on yourself.” Somehow, Mikaela managed to be simultaneously furious and vulnerable. “I don’t want you to die or worse, submit to some asshole like that.”

Gently, Hanne caressed Mikaela’s cheek. “I couldn’t let him hurt you, darling.” Then she scrunched up her nose. “They’ll send others.”

“Because you’re with me. A human,” Mikaela surmised.

“They’ll never tolerate it.”

Mikaela nodded sharply, seemingly having come to a decision. “If that’s their only problem, there’s a solution for that. I just need to become a vampire.”

Lucille gasped. She and Fabian had sat up, watching the two from a safe distance.

Hanne looked absolutely horrified. “Mika, no. You wouldn’t be a Verenimijä. You’d have to forsake the light. I won’t allow you to throw away your life like that.” Her voice started to break. “It’s already so short.”

But Mikaela smiled. “Exactly.” Contrary to Hanne, her voice was calm. “Hanne, before we came here, I was ready to spend the rest of my life with you. But you’re right. That’s not nearly long enough. I also want to spend the rest of your life with you. And I’d rather give up on days of sunlight than spend a single day without you.”

She leaned forwards and kissed a perplexed Hanne to seal her words.

“Ugh. You win.” Jan shook his head. “We’re gonna have a monster love

story.”

Lucille ignored his cynicism and cuddled into Fabian instead. Like her, he had a smile on his face. “We did it.”

He put an arm around her shoulder. “We did. Plus, we only almost died.”



JAN HAD to cover another night shift at the hostel, complaining about having to deal with the astronomy club now. Fabian and Lucille, however, joined Hanne and Mikaela at the Spring of Magic, a magical clearing in the forest where even Lucille could see the rivers of magic springing from the earth.

She and Fabian stood under the trees at the edge of the forest, giving Hanne and Mikaela some privacy. After making her decision, Mikaela hadn't wanted to wait a single day longer. Now they stood under the light of the waxing moon, gazing deep into each other's eyes.

“Are you really sure you want this?” Hanne whispered. When Mikaela nodded, she doubled down. “There's no coming back from it.”

Mikaela cupped Hanne's cheek. “I love you. I won't let you wait another five hundred years alone. Who knows what silly ideas you'd get.”

She laughed softly and Hanne joined her. Then Hanne placed a hand on Mikaela's back. “I love you too. Then, now, and forever.”

As she leaned forwards, Lucille held her breath, but Hanne bit Mikaela almost gently, her eyes never leaving her lover's face. Mikaela gasped, holding on to Hanne, and Lucille had the feeling of witnessing something incredibly intimate. She was just about to turn away when Mikaela's legs buckled, and her eyelids fluttered.

Hanne laid her on the moss, then drank from her own wrist before bending down and kissing Mikaela's dying breath away. When Mikaela went limp, Hanne's blood on her lips, Fabian grabbed Lucille's hand.

Lucille gently squeezed back, unable to look away. In front of them, Hanne lovingly caressed Mikaela's hair.

It took less than a minute before Mikaela's eyes opened again, and she gasped. Fabian's grip tightened for a second, then he relaxed again. Meanwhile, Lucille let out a sigh of relief.

Hanne helped Mikaela sit up, anxiously biting her lip.

Mikaela smiled, her fangs visible in the moonlight. She ran her fingers

through Hanne's long tresses and let them fall across her shoulders. Then she grabbed her and kissed her with a passion that was certainly too intimate.

Gulping, Lucille stepped away, pulling Fabian with her. "Let them have their moment," she whispered. It was probably a good idea not to be too close to a newborn vampire. Hanne had promised to keep Mikaela and herself on an animal diet, but they didn't need to tempt them more than necessary.

When they had walked for a while, Lucille mused, "So, now we watched a romance after all."

"Or a horror movie," Fabian replied, then grinned. "No, you're right. It was a romance." Once again, he slipped his fingers into her hand.

This time, they had no excuse. This was intentional.

Lucille returned the gesture, intertwining her fingers with his. "Would you do it? Forsake the day to be with your love?" In her mind, Fabian was very much a day person. Dependable, bright, not a dark secret in sight.

She was surprised when his voice turned husky. "For the love of my life, I would give up anything."

Her heart almost burst at his reply. "Who knew you could be such a romantic?"

He gave her a sheepish shrug. "I guess I can be a lot of things."

"Fabian Bendtfeldt." Playfully, Lucille slapped his chest, then let her hand rest there as she gazed into his eyes. "I like this confident side of you. Along with the sensitive. And the romantic."

His hand slipped into the small of her back and pulled her a little closer. "I thought you only went for the cool guys."

"You're a water mage who goes up against vampires and demons. I think you're pretty cool."

Fabian raised an eyebrow, and Lucille loved it. She snaked her hand further up, resting it on his neck. He let go of her hand and clasped both of his around her back, pulling her even closer. Where their bodies touched, Lucille felt the heat of summer coursing through their veins.

"And you're the girl with the magic flames," Fabian whispered.

Lucille gazed into his eyes. In the darkness, they were like liquid pools. "Shouldn't you be careful about playing with fire?"

He shrugged adorably again. "I think if anyone is equipped to deal with fire, it's me."

Lucille gasped, amused. Who knew Fabian could be such a flirt? She put her arms around his neck and pulled him closer. "We'll see about that."

Then she kissed him. If this summer had one last flirtation in store for Lucille, she was going to take full advantage of it. This one might be the one that would last. And if she'd learned one thing from Hanne and Mikaela, it was not to let the one you loved get away from you.

Thank you for reading!



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ABOUT JANNA RUTH

Once upon a time, Janna Ruth studied the plate boundaries of this world. Now, she's creating her own worlds. Her books take you across Europe in breath-taking adventures with enchanting characters.

Born in Berlin, Germany, Janna currently lives in Wellington, New Zealand where she writes and publishes predominantly fantasy novels in both English and German. She has been nominated for multiple awards and is the winner of the 2018 Seraph Phantastikpreis and the 2022 Skoutz Award for Science Fiction.

When she's not writing, Janna has a plethora of hobbies, such as aerial acrobatics, cake decorating, drawing, reading, and anything crafty you throw her way.

ABRA-CAT-ABRA



PEPPER MCGRAW

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Edited by: JL Troughton

ABRA-CAT-ABRA

Witches and Shifters, Vampires and Chameleons. The matchmaking cats of the goddesses have their work cut out for them in Zero, Kansas.

Corwin is the beta wolf of the Wildfire Pack. His wolf has been riled up from the moment they met the annoying High Witch of the local coven. At first, he just assumed his wolf was aggravated by the power it could sense humming beneath her skin. Now he realizes it's something else entirely. The woman who's like an itch he can't scratch, an irritant under the skin, is his freaking mate.

Natalie is the leader of the Zero Cum Laude Coven and she's got on a lot on her plate considering every single one of its members struggle to control their powers—and she's no exception. Out-of-control weather and armies of the dead are the least of her problems when her own power starts to slip from her grasp. So, she definitely doesn't need to be worrying about pandering to some silly wolf who has it in his head that she's his mate. As if.

Only the matchmaking cats of the goddesses can save this match now.

CHAPTER 1



“I FOUND THE PURRFECT EARTHBOUND CAT FOR OUR WITCHES,” TIVALI announced, her whiskers practically quivering with excitement.

All things considered, Tivali was a fairly decent matchmaker, which meant her definition of purrfect probably wasn’t far off from Bygul’s.

Of course, *he* was still the top matchmaking cat at Pawsitively Purrfect Matches, but Tivali was an acceptable, though rather distant, second.

Honestly, it could be a lot worse.

It could be Soraya standing in front of them, announcing her selection.

The goddesses know they’d be in trouble then.

“Okay,” Bygul said. “Tell us about this cat.”

“Maybe we should go see her instead.”

“Why?” Bygul asked suspiciously.

“Because you’ll never believe me unless you see her in action. Trust me, this cat is one of a kind.”

“Fine,” Bygul sighed. “Where exactly are we going then?”

“The Louisiana Bayou.”

“The Bayou?” Soraya exclaimed. “Do you have any idea what the humidity’s going to do to my fur?”

“Lead the way, Tivali,” Muezza said, his tail twitching in a manner that told Bygul he was thoroughly amused at the thought of Soraya’s imminent bad fur day.



NATALIE ABSOLUTELY ADORED her coven's name.

The name had come about shortly after her coven of five moved to Zero, Kansas. Within a week, Rowan and Jo had walked into town, bringing their total members to seven, a number historically accepted as the minimum required to be listed on the Association of Witches membership roster.

Not that any of them cared about joining some fuddy-duddy witches' association, especially when most of them, at one point in time or another, had been exiled from a coven listed on that roster.

Regardless of their feelings about the association, though, all of them agreed they needed a name for their newly formed, newly settled coven.

They also agreed it should start with Zero (for obvious—and hilarious—reasons), but could not agree upon the exact name.

Therefore, one evening several weeks after arriving in Zero, the coven gathered around the fire pit behind their coven house with the express purpose of coming to a consensus.

While plowing through several bottles of wine, they tossed out increasingly ridiculous ideas.

Things began innocently enough with The Zero Coven being suggested—"It's simple and to the point," Jo explained, but things deteriorated fairly quickly from there as the ideas became more and more outrageous.

"How about The Zero Control Coven?" Tempest suggested a couple hours and a number of bottles into the conversation.

"Okay, now, let's not exaggerate," Natalie said. "We have more control than *zero*."

"Speak for yourself," Morana said.

"Well, then, if we're going for honesty," Pippa said, "I vote for The Zero Orgasms Coven. After all, we've pretty much doomed ourselves by moving to this town of no eligible men—or women," she added hastily when it appeared Jo and Rowan might both protest. "Honestly, the involuntary abstinence might soon have permanent effects on my libido."

Rowan snorted. "I'll have you know that I've found plenty of eligible women to play with."

"Sure, after driving a couple hours away," Tempest said.

"I'm not really in favor of all that driving," Morana said glumly. "Seems the drive back would ruin all the positive effects of any orgasms gained."

Amari giggled, but as usual, didn't contribute to the conversation.

"And all of *that* is why The Zero Orgasms Coven is really the perfect

name for us,” Pippa said. “Because this town is literally two steps away from becoming a ghost town!”

While the Coven began to argue about the state of the town and its potential for attracting new residents, Natalie pondered the question of their coven’s name.

The truth was she rather liked Pippa’s suggestion, though it was perhaps a bit too on-the-nose. While the debate turned to the question of whether moving to Zero had enhanced the appeal of the town, Natalie considered and discarded a number of other possibilities.

She was ready to give up when it came to her.

“The Zero Cum Laude Coven.” She announced the name seriously, with perfect Latin pronunciation.

The rest of the coven fell silent.

“What’s that?” Pippa asked.

“The Zero Cum Laude Coven,” Natalie repeated. “No one has to know that in our heads, we’re saying cum in an entirely non-Latin, let’s-get-it-on kind of way... or that we’re basically identifying as the coven of zero orgasms, like Pippa suggested.”

Months later, Natalie still grinned at the memory of her coven’s hilarity and the gales of laughter that had followed.

From that moment on, they were known as the Zero Cum Laude Coven.

They always said it properly, even amongst themselves, because somehow in the light of day, saying the name with proper pronunciation seemed even funnier.

Natalie, in particular, found the name to be hilarious, especially after they cast their first spell as a coven.

It had been a rather complicated and ambitious spell, so all things considered, Natalie was pretty impressed with what they’d accomplished.

In this matter, their coven was definitely worthy of the designation *cum laude*, for their casting was truly worthy of the Nobel Prize of Spells, even *with* the miscommunication that had Jo screwing them all by casting for their fated mates, rather than simply *bedmates*.

Within a few short weeks of their exceptional casting, their town had gained a wolf pack, a chameleon coalition and a coven of vampires and Natalie had thoroughly enjoyed introducing the Coven with its new name to the representatives of each.

Unfortunately, the first representative to arrive had been that idiot wolf,

Corwin.

She'd led the negotiations for the town as he'd set out to buy as much of it as he could and he was still holding a grudge.

After negotiations had ended, he'd even tried arguing with her about her coven's name.

"It makes no sense," he'd sneered at her. "Do you even know what *cum laude* means?"

"Of course, I do," she'd snapped. How rude! Just because she'd mentioned to the town council that selling *all* the available land to just one entity might be a mistake.

Corwin had taken offense, but who wanted a wolf pack running around everywhere? Twenty-five percent of Zero was land enough for them!

It was more land than even Natalie's coven had, simply because *they* hadn't been interested in any of the buildings downtown.

So why the wolf felt slighted, she had *no* idea. After all, the coven had arrived first, no matter what he seemed to think, so if anyone deserved the most land, it was them!

Or the humans—the few of them who had stayed throughout the generations, thus managing to keep the town, if not thriving, at least not completely dying either.

After all, it *was* their town first.

"What does it mean then?" he demanded.

"What is this—a test?"

"Yes."

Natalie rolled her eyes.

"You don't know, do you?"

"It *means* with distinction."

"Like I said. That doesn't make any sense at all. How can *Zero* have any kind of distinction?"

She just stared at him and waited.

"Mathematically, it's impossible."

She continued to stare.

"*What?*" He finally exploded.

"It's *ironic*." She'd taken great joy in dragging the word out, imbuing it with a wealth of meaning, all of which labeled him a moron.

From that moment on, he glared at her anytime their paths crossed and she gave him a look filled with superiority.

It was so much *fun* to needle the wolf.

Bad luck for him that Pippa turned out to be the mate of his alpha.

Even worse luck that Corwin was the beta, right-hand man *and* best friend of said alpha.

This meant their paths crossed an awful lot.

Including at the coven house upon occasion.

Pippa had moved into the wolf den, to be with her mate, but they joined the coven for dinner several times a week and every once in a while, Corwin came with them.

Natalie supposed it was inevitable that the true meaning behind their coven name would eventually get out once they mated outsiders, but still, she would have preferred Corwin to *never* know.

But then Pippa never did have much of a filter.

“Every once in a while,” she announced out of the blue at dinner one evening, just after they’d all begun eating, “when Jared makes me scream, it occurs to me our name should be The Cum Loudly in Zero Coven.” This time, she did *not* use the Latin pronunciation for cum.

Jared choked and started coughing, while Corwin just stared at Pippa for a long moment before turning his eyes toward Natalie and raising an eyebrow.

“You know,” Jo said. “I like that idea. Annika definitely makes me scream, *especially* when she does that biting thing.”

The shy vampiress turned bright red.

“Maybe once everyone’s mates have arrived, we should officially update our name,” Pippa said with a grin.

“Forget it,” Rowan said. “I’m never mating, so you’re out of luck if you’re waiting on that. But hey, it’s not like I’ve been riding the abstinence train, so I’m not necessarily opposed to a name change, though generally, *I’m* the one causing the screaming.”

The other witches groaned.

“Now you’re just bragging,” Tempest snarled. “Have some respect for those of us who haven’t seen any action in far too long.”

“It’s quite depressing, actually,” Morana said. “Our spell *worked* and the result is a town full of eligible wolves, chameleons *and* vampires, but no one has inspired me yet.”

“What about Blade?” Natalie asked slyly.

“Yeah, he got you so hot and bothered, I was sure you’d have jumped his

bones by now,” Pippa said.

“He runs every time he sees me.” Morana pouted. “I can’t understand why.”

The rest of the coven burst into laughter.

Even Corwin and Jared were grinning, Natalie noticed.

“You raised an army of spiders the first time you met him,” Rowan pointed out.

“I’d run too if I were him,” Amari whispered.

“He’s a vampire,” Morana exclaimed. “I had no idea a couple spiders would freak him out.”

As if she’d raised the spiders on purpose. More likely, Morana had simply lost control of her powers due to the hot-and-bothered situation.

“It was way more than a couple,” Jo said dryly.

“And they all happened to be dead,” Annika said with a giggle.

Jo beamed at her, no doubt thrilled her mate was fitting in so well with the rest of the coven.

“So your coven name has *nothing* to do with distinction,” Corwin said, grinning at Natalie.

She just rolled her eyes. “Have you been pondering that all this time? Just now figured it out, did you? Well, good for you. And let’s be clear— we do *everything* with distinction.”

“Even cum,” Pippa said cheerfully.



“OH, NO!” Soraya wailed. “Someone save the kitty fast!”

While Bygul wasn’t prone to panic attacks, he had to admit he agreed with Soraya. They needed a hero or this cat Tivali swore was purrfect for their witches was going to end up a very scary-looking alligator’s lunch.

“I can’t watch,” Soraya moaned, slapping a paw over her eyes.

It happened so fast, Bygul almost missed it.

“Did—did that cat just *swat* the alligator?” Muezza asked.

“Twice!” Tivali said smugly.

“I must be seeing things,” Bygul said, “because I *swear* the gator’s backing away!”

And it was.

The massive alligator slithered backwards into the water, watching the cat the entire time, as if it feared another attack.

“You’re right,” Bygul said abruptly. “The cat’s purrfect. Are you sure none of the humans around here are taking care of it?”

“Pretty sure,” Tivali said.

“And who cares if they are?” Soraya demanded hotly. “Who lets a cat roam around gator territory? As if it could ever win those fights!”

“Uh, it pretty much just did,” Muezza pointed out.

“Not the point,” Soraya growled.

In this case, Bygul happened to agree.

To the others’ surprise, it wasn’t easy to convince the cat Bygul had mentally dubbed Gator-Baiter to come with them.

Apparently, Gator-Baiter enjoyed going head to snout with the alligator population and wasn’t much looking forward to leaving that little hobby behind.

It was only the promise of becoming the familiar of a very powerful witch—and the chance to wield some of her magic—that convinced Gator-Baiter to relocate a thousand miles from the Louisiana bayou.



AFTER PIPPA’S claim about cumming with distinction, hilarity ensued.

Into that hilarity came Pippa’s kitten and the very first familiar of the Zero Cum Laude Coven, Hocus Purrcus.

The kitten leapt onto the table and was immediately followed by a huge white cat with gray tail and paws.

Hocus Purrcus always seemed to show up wherever Pippa was, even if Pippa swore the kitten had been curled up in the pack den when she left it hours before.

Such was the mystery of the bond between a powerful witch and her familiar. Even when apart, they were often drawn together.

The most interesting thing about the bond Hocus Purrcus had forged with Pippa was that he also seemed to have forged a similar bond with Chester, the cat Pippa’s mate had adopted for inexplicable reasons around the same time Pippa and Hocus Purrcus bonded.

The result was that Hocus Purrcus often dragged Chester with him when

his bond with Pippa pulled him to her.

However, the white cat currently making a beeline for Natalie, was *not* Chester.



“Aw, look, she’s chosen her witch,” Soraya said.

“I was sure she’d go for the necromancer,” Muezza said, “given she’s a volcano of power.”

“Nah,” Bygul said. “The necromancer may be powerful, but the coven leader—*she’s* off the charts.”

“How do you know that?” Tivali asked. “I can’t even sense her power.”

“I recognize the staff,” Bygul said. “It’s famous among witches. A truly powerful artifact that can only be wielded by a descendent of the Witch Queen herself. It’s critical in helping her descendants control their inherited power, so trust me, for Natalie to be in possession of that staff, all the power of the most powerful line of witches ever born is seething inside her somewhere. Talk about a volcano waiting to explode. It’s enough power to have a witch skirting the edge of madness. Frankly, it’s a miracle she hasn’t leveled a city yet.”

“In that case,” Muezza said, “I’m not surprised the cat chose her. She must have sensed her power.”

“Let’s just hope she’s strong enough to help her control it,” Bygul said.

“She went up against an alligator and won,” Soraya pointed out. “I’m thinking she can probably handle one little witch.”

“Famous last words,” Tivali muttered.



“AND JUST WHERE did you come from, hmm?” Natalie asked as the cat parked herself right in front of her plate and stared at her.

Rowan, who was seated on Natalie’s left, reached out a hand to pet the cat, only to receive a swipe of claws for his effort.

“Most impressive,” Natalie murmured, for the cat had batted Rowan’s hand away without even looking. “Does anyone know where this cat came from?”

The cat continued staring intensely, as if waiting for her to do something.

“Not a clue,” Pippa said.

“Never seen her before,” Tempest said.

Corwin, who had somehow maneuvered himself so that he was seated directly across from Natalie, muttered to his alpha, “You didn’t adopt another cat, did you?”

“Of course not!” Jared exclaimed. “It’s ridiculous enough that we’ve got two cats in the den, we definitely don’t need a third.”

Pippa gasped. “Don’t listen to him, baby,” she crooned as she rubbed noses with Hocus Purrcus. “He doesn’t mean it. He loves you very much.”

Natalie was only peripherally aware of their bantering because her arms were suddenly full with the cat who had just leapt into them.



“I CAN’T BELIEVE you just dumped the cat in the house with Hocus Purrcus,” Tivali said.

“Yeah, that wasn’t suspicious at all,” Muezza agreed.

“They’ve already bonded,” Soraya said. “I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“Really? Because the witches are already questioning how the cat got in,” Tivali said.

“Eh, Hocus Purrcus is always dragging Chester around with him. I’m sure they’ll eventually assume he pulled Gator-Baiter with him instead,” Bygul said.

“Gator-Baiter?” Muezza let out a bark of laughter.

“You can’t say it doesn’t fit,” Bygul said. “Besides, the witches will give her a better name soon enough.”



“WELL, AREN’T YOU SIMPLY BEAUTIFUL?” Natalie crooned as she stroked a hand down the back of the white cat nestled in her arms, making Corwin gulp at the sudden vision of her doing the same to his wolf form.

The cat let out a loud, rumbling purr and Corwin shook off the sensation of Natalie’s hand ruffling his fur.

Damn witch.

She was clearly incapable of controlling even the tiniest bit of her magic if even he was feeling its effects.

“Where did you come from anyway?” she murmured to the cat in her arms, the sexy sound of her voice making Corwin break out into a sweat.

What the hell was happening to him?

Leaping to his feet, he muttered something about having an appointment and bolted for the door.

“We’ll see you at the ceremony tomorrow, Corwin,” Pippa called after him. “Don’t forget. We start at sunrise.”

Corwin’s step faltered for a second, then he shook his head, waved a hand in acknowledgement and hurried outside.

The damn ceremony.

He’d already attended one ceremony, hadn’t he? The entire pack had gathered to celebrate their alpha’s mating. Even the witches had attended, so why they needed a second ceremony, he had no idea.

Wait. Yes, he did.

It was so they could conduct their witchy rituals that he apparently couldn’t escape, given his status as both beta wolf and best friend to the groom.

So fine, he’d show up, act as a witness and try not to let all the witchy abracadabra nonsense get to him.

He just had to get through tomorrow.

Then he could go back to ignoring the woman who had somehow managed to burrow under his skin, where she was currently driving him mad with the itching.

CHAPTER 2



“YES! I KNEW IT HAD TO HAPPEN SOONER OR LATER,” SORAYA SAID.

“What’s going to happen?” Muezza asked.

“A witch ceremony! I hope it involves a spell. I was so disappointed when I realized we missed the one they cast to call their mates to their sides. It almost makes me feel as if we’re not needed.”

“Please,” Bygul said. “Just because the spell called on their mates doesn’t mean they’ll actually recognize them when they appear. Take Natalie, for example. She’s completely oblivious. So is the wolf, by the way.”

“What wolf?” Tivali asked.

“What do you mean what wolf? The one she ate dinner with last night!”

“They weren’t together last night,” Tivali said. “She ate with her coven. It was just coincidence the wolves were there at all.”

“Besides, Jared’s already mated to Pippa,” Soraya said. “Ooooh, are you saying he has two mates? I mean, he *is* the alpha.”

“Not Jared,” Bygul exclaimed exasperatedly. “*Corwin*.”

“The beta wolf?” Muezza exclaimed.

“Of course.”

“Why in the world would you think *they’re* mates?” Tivali asked. “They don’t even like each other.”

“She’s right, Bygul,” Muezza said. “In fact, I’m pretty sure she’s understating the case.”

“Haven’t you ever heard the phrase enemies-to-lovers?” Bygul demanded.

“No,” Tivali, Soraya and Muezza chorused.

“It’s a human thing. Apparently it’s quite common.”

“That can’t be right,” Tivali said.

“And if it is,” Muezza said, “it just proves my point.”

“What point?” Bygul asked.

“Humans are *weird*.”



CORWIN BARELY GOT any sleep the night before, which was why he was incredibly grumpy the next morning when his alarm went off before the sun had even begun to lighten the sky.

The rest of the pack was in good spirits, excited to be invited to a witch’s ceremony on coven land.

Personally, Corwin could have skipped it all, but since that wasn’t an option, he dragged his grumpy ass out of bed and reported for best friend duty once more. “You owe me big,” he informed his alpha as they stood on coven land, waiting for the witches to finish setting up their ‘circle of power.’

Corwin had rolled his eyes when Natalie shooed them back so the witches could begin its construction and now he rolled his eyes again when she pronounced it finished. “Just looks like a bunch of rocks to me,” he muttered.

Natalie glared at him, then clapped her hands. “Pippa and Jared in the center of the circle, facing each other.”

Everyone chuckled as Pippa’s kitten, Hocus Purrcus, pranced beside them into the circle.

Pippa and Jared faced each other and Hocus Purrcus set himself up between Pippa’s legs, staring up at Jared, almost like a guard cat, watching for weaknesses.

“Hmm, that’s fine,” Natalie said, “but step back a bit, both of you. Leave enough space for the power to flow between you.”

Corwin snorted and mouthed the words “Let the power flow between you,” to his alpha, who simply flipped him off behind his mate’s back.

“Corwin,” Natalie snapped, “and witches,” her voice softened when addressing her coven, “form a circle around them, just outside the circle of power.”

Heaving a sigh, Corwin went to stand just outside the circle of rocks at a point where he could continue to make eye contact with his alpha and mock the proceedings at will.

Unfortunately, Natalie immediately ruined his plans by moving everyone around until he stood directly across the circle from her, with the other six witches positioned an equal distance from each other filling out the circle.

The only way he'd be able to make eye contact with Jared now was if Jared managed to take his eyes off his mate and turned his head ninety degrees toward Corwin.

Since that wasn't likely to happen, the only one Corwin was in danger of making eye contact with now was Natalie herself.

"Everyone else," Natalie raised her voice to be heard over the murmurings of the gathered wolves. "Create a second circle of power around the Coven. Come along now, don't be shy."

After a moment's hesitation, Corwin's packmates slowly filled in a secondary circle.

The moment the last person got into place, Natalie raised her arms toward the sky and said, "For Pippa and Jared, standing within this circle of power, we ask for the greatest of blessings."

A couple twitters and shuffling feet told Corwin he wasn't the only one who thought this was nonsense.

Why these witches, who had an incredible amount of power, wasted their time with silly rituals and ceremonies like this, he'd never understand.

"*Silence* is the first requirement for a blessing of this magnitude." Natalie's voice boomed across the clearing, and as if by her will alone, silence fell. "For our sister and her chosen mate, we offer these blessings and these gifts."

"May your mating weather all the storms that come its way," Tempest's voice rose and with it, the air became charged with electricity.

The hair on Corwin's arms rose, then the tension broke with a loud crack of thunder, followed by the snap of a lightning bolt that slammed into the ground barely an inch from where Jared and Pippa stood.

Six more lightning strikes hit the ground in quick succession, creating a circle of scorched earth around the couple.

"May your mating live beyond the scope of death," Morana called out, her voice rising to echo across the field. "May it rise again and again to flourish in lifetime after lifetime. May it knit your souls together as one, so that death is never a true end, but simply a journey into eternal life."

From beneath the charred soil, directly behind where Pippa stood on one side and Jared stood on the other, blackened vines rose, snaking around and

around, creating a small wall around them.

“May your mating be blessed with passion and love,” the voice was barely a whisper, yet Corwin heard it perfectly.

It was the Coven member who rarely spoke. Amari, he thought Pippa called her.

Oh, shit.

Hadn't Jared said the shy witch was the one who had set off that sex magic bomb at the diner a while back?

A strong gust of wind rushed by, sending leaves flying through the air.

Those leaves swept into the space between Jared and Pippa and hovered there, spinning round and round before blowing outward with such force, the couple swayed, though some unknown force kept them upright, while Corwin —

He jerked his head up, heat spiraling through him as a scent like none other barreled past, and Natalie caught his attention.

She stood directly across from him, that stupid staff she always carried gripped in one hand as she whipped it through the air before tossing it to the other hand and continuing the weave.

As she worked her magic, the red jewels at either end of her staff glowed brighter and brighter.

Bright green eyes blinked and that's when Corwin realized a white cat was weaving with the staff, directly under it.

The cat wasn't even looking up at the staff, but was somehow moving with it, as if following a dance routine only it and the staff knew.

He knew Natalie was powerful—of *course*, he did.

He was a beta wolf, after all, trained to recognize any potential threats to the pack.

And regardless of what others might believe, Natalie of no last name, High Witch of the Zero Cum Laude Coven, was a cauldron of power.

He figured it was why she set him on edge every time he was around her. Because he could sense the power boiling beneath her skin and couldn't stand the thought of it so close to the vulnerable of his pack.

Still, knowing she was powerful and seeing it were two different things.

Watching her now, he could feel the rising power of the spell she was weaving with elegance and grace.

He couldn't look away.

Even more disturbing was how riveted his wolf was. Almost as if—

“No fucking way!” His voice shattered the evening air as his wolf finally let slip the truth it had known from the moment they met Natalie for the very first time.

This crazy, powerhouse of a witch, the one who drove him mad with her superior attitude and abundance of arrogance, was his *mate*.



AN HOUR LATER, Natalie was still seething.

Was it too much to ask that the wolf respect their rituals and ceremonies? After all, her coven had been perfectly respectful at the wolves’ den two weekends before when they were celebrating their alpha’s mating wolf-style.

Sure, the witches could have done their ceremony at that time, but waiting gave the ceremony more power, as did holding it on their own lands, for they were imbued with the power of the entire coven and all of Natalie’s line.

“Aw, come on, Natalie, cut the poor wolf a break,” Tempest said. “He apologized, didn’t he?”

Natalie scowled. “Not the point.”

“He said it had nothing to do with the ceremony, he just got an unexpected text, that’s all.”

“He didn’t even have his phone out at the time.”

“You were busy casting the blessing,” Tempest said. “You might have missed it.”

“I didn’t miss anything. He’s a jerk. In fact—” Natalie leaned over and scooped up the cat she’d named Moonbeam. “Sweet love,” she murmured in her ear, “maybe you can go have a little bit of fun with the wolf. You know... vengeful fun.” She set the cat back down and, with a huge grin on her face, watched her dart away.

“Seriously?” Tempest demanded. “Was that really necessary?”

“Hell, yes,” Natalie said. “And you’d think so too if it was one of your father’s minions—or worse, that chameleon who’s been trying to charm you.”

Tempest scowled. “Don’t remind me.”

“Then don’t judge me for seeking a bit of vengeance on the wolf.”

“I’m just saying since Pippa seems to have forgiven him, maybe you

should too.”

“When pigs fly.”



“MAN, that witch is *pissed* at you,” Rocco said.

Corwin winced.

Yeah, he’d seriously fucked everything up and he had no idea how to fix it.

“What the hell’s wrong with you anyway?” Sal demanded. “You’ve been in a terrible mood for more than a month and now you’re cursing in the middle of our alpha’s mate-blessing, witch-thingy?”

Rocco snickered. “Witch-thingy?”

Sal shrugged. “Well, what would you call it?”

Rocco thought about that for a moment, then said, “I guess witch-thingy will do.”

“That’s what I thought,” Sal said. “So come on, fess up. What’s your deal, Corwin?”

Before Corwin could even decide whether he wanted to share, a white blur leapt onto the table and raced past, sending Corwin’s beer flying.

Only his quick reflexes saved him.

He managed to bat the cup away, which sent the beer cascading over the table and onto the empty bench beside him.

Better than his lap, he supposed, except now he had no beer and the pack was showing no signs of letting up on their interrogation.

“Yes, fess up.” Mallory stepped up to the picnic table, eyed the beer that was dripping from the table and bench, then walked around to the opposite side and settled next to her mate, Warren.

This pack had no concept of privacy.

Didn’t they realize Corwin had retreated there to brood? *Alone?*

Of course, they did. Didn’t change a thing, though, considering they were all practically salivating to know what had come over him during the *witch-thingy*.

“Maybe he doesn’t want to share, Mallory,” Warren said, probably just to get on her nerves since for some idiotic reason, they loved giving each other shit.

Mallory's response was simply an elbow to Warren's gut and an expectant look on her face as she faced Corwin. "Well?"

He sighed.

They'd find out about it eventually, so he might as well admit how badly he'd fucked up.

"I found my mate."

Smiles broke out across his fellow packmembers' faces.

"But that's great, Corwin!" Mallory exclaimed.

"Not really," he said glumly.

A flash of white had him dodging to the left and the cat that had been aimed at the back of his head sailed over his shoulder.

Somehow the demon cat twisted her body mid-air and managed to score a line across his right cheek as she landed on the table.

She didn't even hesitate before launching herself again, this time straight at his face, claws fully extended.

Corwin let out a shout and jerked back, falling completely off the bench.

He lay there, stunned, staring up at the white demon-cat who sat smugly on the picnic table, staring down at him.

That's when he realized his entire pack was laughing so hard, some of them were on the ground with him.

"The look on your face," Sal howled, rolling back and forth on the ground. "Tell me someone got that on video."

The worst part wasn't even the fall backwards.

It was that Corwin now lay with his legs over the damn bench and his upper body on the ground, with no way to extricate himself gracefully. "Damn cat." He started to pull himself up, but then froze when he realized exactly which part of him the cat was staring at.

He let out a growl of pure menace. "Don't even think about it, you mangy furball. I'll have you roasted over a fire pit in two point nine seconds."

A loud gasp made him close his eyes in horror.

"What is wrong with you?"

Though he desperately wanted to avoid looking, he slowly opened his eyes to see Natalie standing over him, hands on hips. "You're an ass and a bully." She snatched up her cat and whirled away.

"Hey! Your cat attacked me," Corwin scrambled to his feet, not even worried about the lack of grace involved now that his mate wasn't watching. "And frankly, she was eyeing my balls like they were full of catnip."

Natalie froze mid-step, her shoulders trembling for a moment.

Corwin narrowed his eyes.

Was she crying or was she *laughing*?

“I’m certain Moonbeam would have zero interest in your mangy wolf-balls.”

Oh, yeah, she was laughing, all right.

After delivering that cutting remark, Natalie stalked away, leaving Corwin speechless and aggravated as hell that he’d once again managed to piss off his mate.

“I think I figured out who his mate is,” Rocco said, laughter in his voice.

“Don’t even say it,” Sal said. “*No one* could be that stupid. *Or* that unlucky.”

Corwin groaned and retook his seat at the picnic table. “Apparently, I can.” Seriously. He had the *worst* luck.

“I don’t get it,” Mallory said. “How can finding your mate be unlucky?”

“Because it’s the witch,” Sal said.

Her eyes widened in horror. “Which one? Tell me your mate isn’t the one whose familiar you just threatened.”

“I’m doomed,” Corwin groaned.

“No way!” Clarissa’s voice rang out across the field.

Corwin whirled and glared at his sister. “Rissa, don’t you dare—”

But it was too late.

She was already making a beeline for the nearest group of wolves.

He groaned and banged his head down on the picnic table.

Every single member of the pack would know in about fifteen minutes and then he’d never hear the end of it.

How he’d screwed up his own mating by—

“Corwin Anthony O’Neill!” The shout cut through the evening air and made his shout earlier seem like a whisper.

Corwin groaned and lifted his head just in time to see all his packmates scatter.

“Cowards!” He hissed after them, vowing vengeance the next time he saw them.

Rissa would be the first one to feel his wrath.

He couldn’t *believe* she’d gone to their mother.

“Tell me it isn’t true, young man.” His mother settled across from him and glared.

“What isn’t true?”

“Tell me that you didn’t just ruin your chances with your fated mate!”

Corwin sighed. “First of all, could you please keep your voice down? No sense in making things worse than they already are, is there?”

She stared at him in horror. “How could you be so *stupid*? I thought we raised you better than this.”

“Now, Marjorie.”

Thank the wolf gods, his father was there. Hopefully he could reason with his—

“I’m sure the boy has a perfectly logical explanation for why he would disrespect his fated mate in such a blatant manner.”

Great.

Now his father had joined his mother on the other side of the picnic table and they were *both* glaring at him.

“I didn’t know she was my mate, now did I?” Corwin growled.

“That shouldn’t matter,” his mother snapped. “We raised you to be polite and accepting, not judgmental and rude.”

Corwin sighed and sat back. Might as well get comfortable since this was going to take a while.

An hour later, his ears were ringing from the endless lecturing.

Eventually, his packmates took pity on him and started swinging by the table with entirely made-up reasons for needing his input on this issue or that situation.

Not that Corwin was willing to forgive them their abandonment in the first place, especially since their efforts took entirely too long to make a difference.

In the beginning, his mother just shooed them along, but eventually, she gave up and the lecture portion of the evening was finally over.

With one last admonishment to, “Make things right. Immediately!” his parents left him to his misery.

As soon as they were out of sight, Jared and Pippa, who had stayed far from the drama up until that point, joined him at the table.

“Is it true?” Pippa asked. “Are you Natalie’s mate?”

He nodded glumly. “How bad is it, do you think?”

She winced. “You might want to consider letting go of any hopes or dreams you once had of a happily ever after with your fated mate.”

He groaned.

“Then again,” Pippa said, obviously trying to cheer him up, “even though your chances are pretty close to zero, it could still happen. After all, we live in a town called Zero, so that has to count for something.”



CORWIN STAYED at the picnic table and waited as the party slowly died down.

Of course, his packmates took their own sweet time leaving.

It was as if they knew he was waiting for an opportunity to speak with Natalie in private, so they lingered just to torture him.

More like they were hoping he'd give up on the idea of privacy and grovel in full view of the pack.

Like that would ever happen.

So he waited and snarled every time one of his disrespectful packmates stopped by to smile or snicker at his very obvious impatience.

Eventually—*finally*—they all left.

One by one, even the witches went back inside the coven house and then it was just Natalie and Corwin.

“Finally,” Natalie muttered.

“Exactly what I was thinking,” Corwin said as he stretched to his feet.

Natalie let out a yelp of surprise, then glared at him. “What are you still doing here?”

He grinned at her. “Waiting for an opportunity to speak with you in private.”

“We have nothing to talk about. Now go away, wolf-boy.”

He groaned. “Come on, Natalie. Just let me explain.”

She sniffed in derision. “Explain what? Why you're such a jerk? No one cares, least of all me.” With that, she stormed inside the coven house and slammed the door behind her.

“Damn.”

CHAPTER 3



“THIS MATCH IS DOOMED,” TIVALI SAID. “ARE YOU SURE THEY’RE MATES, Bygul?”

“You heard the wolf. Even *he* thinks they’re mates.”

“But this is going to be *impossible*,” Soraya wailed. “The witch *hates* him.”

“So does Moonbeam,” Muezza pointed out. “Did anyone else notice something familiar about the way she treated the wolf?”

Bygul let out a snort. “She did slap his cheek the same way she smacked that gator’s snout.”

“I just don’t see how we’re going to get them to fall in love,” Tivali said, “especially if he’s going to go around threatening her familiar.”

“Poor Moonbeam.” Soraya licked a paw, then rubbed her ear with it. “I can’t believe how mean he was to her.”

“Oh, yeah,” Muezza said dryly. “*Moonbeam* was the victim.”

“Are you implying somehow that the wolf was the victim instead?” Soraya demanded.

“I’m not implying it. I’m saying it outright.” Muezza lifted his leg and began a thorough cleaning of his backside, a sure sign that he was done with the conversation.

Bygul sighed. Not that Soraya would ever take the hint, of course.

“You’re mean, too,” Soraya said. “Poor Moonbeam was only defending her witch.”

“Yes.” Muezza lifted his head to sneer at Soraya. “I’m sure the witch is supremely grateful since she’s so helpless and all.” He buried his head back between his legs and that was the end of that conversation.

Mostly because Soraya didn't seem to have a comeback for that bit of truth and settled for glaring instead.

Bygul took advantage of the momentary silence to try and get them back on track. "The point is we're going to have to get creative if we want this match to succeed. So who has some ideas to share?"



FOR THE SECOND night in a row, Corwin got very little sleep and what sleep he did get was haunted by dreams of being smothered in his sleep by a giant cat.

When he woke, he discovered it wasn't a dream at all.

There really was a cat and she was sitting on his face!

He gasped for breath, inhaled a bunch of fur and started coughing.

Shoving the cat to the side—what had Jared been feeding the cats anyway—Corwin opened his eyes and saw to his horror that the cat he'd just unceremoniously shoved off his face was not Chester *or* Hocus Purrcus as he'd assumed.

Instead, it was *Natalie's* demon-cat.

"How did you get in here anyway?" he demanded.

The cat ignored him and continued leisurely cleaning her fur.

He groaned, rubbed his hands over his face and climbed from his bed. "This is a sign, isn't it?"

When the cat didn't reply, he just shook his head and headed for the bathroom.

Thirty minutes later, feeling refreshed though still not rested, he left the bathroom and headed downstairs, the cat on his heels.

Walking into the pack dining room, he made a beeline for the coffee and took several large sips, before turning his attention to the food set out buffet style against the back wall.

He built himself a plate, tossed a couple slices of ham to Chester, Hocus Purrcus—and *fine*—the beast from Hell before heading to the table where he plopped down and began to eat.

It took him several bites before he registered the silence in the room.

Glancing up, he realized all conversations had ground to a halt and everyone was staring at him. "What?"

“You stole her cat?” Jared asked incredulously.

“Of course not! The damn thing was sitting on my face when I woke this morning.” Corwin narrowed his eyes at the smirks and snickers that followed this announcement. “Why would you assume that just because her cat is with me that I stole it? Maybe I won over my mate last night, did you ever think of that? Maybe Natalie’s upstairs, waiting for me to bring her breakfast right now.”

At that, the snickers turned into outright laughter.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sal hooted. “That witch was *pissed* last night. There’s no way you won her over that quickly.”

“I might have.” Corwin scowled.

“Not a chance,” Pippa said. “Natalie’s not exactly the forgiving type and you’ve done nothing to endear yourself to her.”

“Well, she’s done nothing to endear herself to me either. Did you ever think of that? Maybe *she* should try to win *me!*”

Pippa snickered. “Yeah, good luck with that.”

“Hey, it could happen!”

“Of course it could,” Mallory said soothingly, reaching over to pat Corwin’s hand. “No one means to imply you’re not a desirable wolf.”

“Hey!” Warren scowled at his mate.

She waved her hand as if to dismiss his protest. “You know what I mean. For someone else. The point is, Corwin, you’re a desirable wolf. To another wolf—*who isn’t me,*” she said in an emphatic aside to Warren.

“The problem is,” she continued. “Natalie’s *not* a wolf. Which means she’s probably not impressed that you’re the beta. Or that you can shift into a wolf faster than any other wolf we know, *including* the alpha.

“She’s also probably not interested in all the things you’ve done to help the pack or that you’re the one who found us new territory after we lost our old pack lands. In fact, I’d be willing to bet your hard-nosed negotiating probably did the opposite of what you could have accomplished had you only known she was your mate at the time.”

“It was probably a good thing I didn’t know,” Corwin muttered. “We might have ended up paying twice as much for half the land.”

Everyone chuckled.

“What I’m sayin, Corwin, is that you can’t approach this whole courtship ritual as if she were another wolf you’re trying to mate.”

“Hold on a second. Who said anything about courtship rituals?”

A hand slapped against the back of Corwin's head, shoving him forward. "Don't be an idiot." Clarissa settled into the seat beside him.

"Hey!" Corwin glared at her.

"I can't believe we're related," Rissa said. "I maintain you must have been switched at the hospital because there's no way someone as stupid as you could be my blood brother."

Corwin let out a low growl.

She just grinned at him. "Look, you idiot, if you want your mate, you're going to have to court her. She's not going to be like all your other women, fawning all over you—'Oh, Corwin, you're so strong.'" She pretended to swoon in her seat. "The truth is you've been spoiled all your life, and for once, you're actually going to have to work for a woman's esteem, and I for one, am thrilled to witness your comeuppance."

"Some sister you are." Corwin scowled at her. "Where's the loyalty?"

"Oh, I've got plenty. It just happens to be reserved for the sisterhood. In other words, I'm on Natalie's side."

"Rude," he muttered.

"So, I think the first thing he needs to do is win over the cat," Mallory announced.

Corwin groaned.

"What cat?" Rissa looked confused.

The other wolves at the table all pointed over her shoulder.

Rissa turned and stared at the white cat who was currently bathing herself on the cat tree, ignoring Chester who was giving her the evil eye from his perch above her and Hocus Purrcus who was on the one below, batting at her tail that swished back and forth above his head.

"You stole your mate's cat?" Rissa exclaimed incredulously.

The other wolves burst into laughter, their hilarity drowning out Corwin's protest.



"HAS ANYONE SEEN MOONBEAM?" Natalie walked into the kitchen, a worried look on her face.

"If she's not in the house, she's probably with Hocus Purrcus," Tempest said.

“At the wolf den?” Natalie exclaimed. “Why would she be there?”

“Because she likes the other kitties?” Jo suggested.

Natalie sighed. “We need more familiars. I can’t believe we got our first familiar as a coven and Pippa immediately moved out, taking Hocus Purrcus with her.”

“Yes, but good news! You just bonded with our second familiar,” Morana said.

“Which does us no good if she prefers the wolf den to our coven house,” Natalie said. “I think I’m insulted.”

Rowan snickered. “Don’t be ridiculous, Natalie. She doesn’t *prefer* the wolf den. Neither does Hocus Purrcus, for that matter. It’s just that they’re cats and they’re doing what cats do best.”

“And what’s that?” Natalie asked sourly.

“Exploring their territory, of course,” Rowan said.

“Whatever.” Natalie snapped a lid on her coffee cup and headed for the door. “I’m going to that den and reclaiming my cat and the goddess help that damn wolf if he gets in my way.” The door slammed behind her.

“So,” Tempest said into the silence that had fallen in Natalie’s wake. “When do you think they’ll figure things out?”

“I’m voting for never,” Morana said.

“Yeah. Never sounds about right,” Rowan agreed.

“Never,” Jo said, Annika nodding at her side.

“Maybe in ten thousand years,” Amari whispered.

Tempest snickered. “Guess we’re all voting for never then.”



“GREAT JOB, GUYS,” Bygul said.

“What are you talking about?” Tivali snapped. “The entire coven is against this match.”

“Even the cheerful witch is convinced it’s doomed,” Soraya agreed.

“Uh, which one’s that again?” Muezza asked.

“Morana, of course,” Soraya said.

“*Morana?*” The other cats chorused.

“She’s a *necromancer*,” Tivali exclaimed.

“Just because she raises the dead doesn’t mean she isn’t cheerful,” Soraya

said stubbornly.

“Right. Anyway, back to the subject at hand,” Bygul said, “yesterday, if you’d asked me, I would have sworn it would take an act of all the goddesses to get the High Witch into wolf territory. And now look at what’s happening. She’s going there voluntarily, and all because of Tivali’s brilliant plan to drop Moonbeam off in the wolf’s room.”

“It *was* rather inspired,” Tivali said.

“And like I always say, what works for one set of matches, *could* work for another,” Bygul said. “Of course, I also say what works for one set, could *destroy* another, but hey, good news. So far, no destruction in sight.”

“Well, let’s not hold our breath on that one,” Muezza said. “After all, we *are* talking about earthbound cats here.”

“And witches,” Tivali said.

“And *wolves*.” Soraya shuddered.



CORWIN HAD JUST STEPPED out of the dining room with a somewhat vague plan to track down his mate and possibly implement a courtship of sorts.

Not that he would be following any of his sister’s suggestions or those her friends had offered, of course.

They had to think he was stupid to fall for their unsolicited advice on courting witches.

He wasn’t exactly sure *what* he was going to do, but under no circumstances would any of it involve crystals or broomsticks or thigh-high socks.

He was pondering this dilemma when a miracle occurred.

The scent of his mate coiled around him seconds before he heard her voice. “Moonbeam. Sweet Moonbeam. Come here, baby.”

He immediately stepped back into the dining room.

And there she was, on her hands and knees, giving Corwin a truly delicious view of her backside as she wiggled her way out from under the dining room table, the white furball in her arms.

“There you are,” she crooned to the cat, who seemed perfectly content to be in her arms. “How’d you get in here anyway?”

“That was my question,” Corwin said dryly.

Natalie jumped and glared at him.

“What is up with your cat anyway?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Can you not see the smug look on her face? She’s literally mocking me for not knowing how the two of you managed to get in here without anyone seeing you.”

“Is she?” Natalie grinned and dropped a kiss on top of the demon-cat’s head, then lifted a hand to grab hold of the table to pull herself to her feet.

Corwin bolted forward and caught her hand in his, slid an arm around her waist and lifted, talking all the while. “In case you were wondering, the cat was in bed with me this morning—”

Natalie gasped.

“Yes,” he murmured into her ear as he set her on her feet. “*Inside* my bedroom with the door closed, *in* my bed, *on* my face.”

Natalie burst into giggles.

She pulled away, lifted the cat high and kissed her several times on the nose, cheeks and forehead. “Such a *brilliant* cat, yes, you are.”

Corwin snorted. “So there you have it. Somehow the cat broke into our pack den without a single wolf noticing. And now here you are, also inside the wolf den without anyone noticing. I literally just left this room. So how in the world did you get inside here without walking past me to do it?”

Natalie just grinned at him. “It’s a mystery, all right.”

“So.” Corwin dragged in a deep breath. “Want to go on a date?”



THIS DAY just kept getting stranger and stranger.

First, she had to track Moonbeam all the way to the wolf den.

She’d hoped to sneak in and out without anyone being the wiser, but instead, the wolf she wanted to run into the least was the one who caught her.

Then, in a shocking moment of chivalry, he actually helped her to her feet.

And what a moment that was!

She’d had no idea wolves were so strong or that her heart would hammer so hard from being so close to one!

Then, when she was still reeling from the rush of heat and desire she’d

experienced from the touch of a wolf—and not just any wolf, but the one she'd made a point to antagonize as often as possible in retaliation for his uptight, obnoxious, arrogant ways—he asked her out on a date.

A date!

With a wolf!

The wolf who hated her, no less.

What was happening here?

Was he messing with her?

She glared at him.

He was!

He was messing with her.

Had to be.

There's no way he was seriously asking her out on a date.

She narrowed her eyes.

“Not funny,” she growled, stamping past him.

“Wait!” The wolf whirled to follow her. “Is that a no?”

“Stop messing with me!” She shouted as she slammed out of the pack house.

Damn that wolf!



HOW THE HELL had everything gone wrong so quickly?

Corwin scowled at the demon-cat who hung over Natalie's shoulder, smirking at him as she walked away.

Walked away!

Rude!



THE SLAM of the coven house door brought her coven on the run.

“What's the matter?” Tempest exclaimed. “What happened?”

Natalie was too busy furiously pacing back and forth to bother answering her. “Damn, mangy wolf,” she muttered. “He's got a lot of nerve, always treating me like public enemy number one, then getting me all hot and bothered, then asking me out. Rude, rude, rude!”

“Uh, hold on,” Jo said. “The wolf asked you out?”

“Surprising,” Rowan said. “I wasn’t sure he had it in him.”

“Wait,” Annika said. “Which wolf are we talking about anyway? The beta, right? It’s the beta?”

“Of course, it’s the beta. No other wolf looks at Natalie like she’s lunch,” Morana said.

Natalie waved her hand in the air. “Don’t be ridiculous. He hates me.”

“And yet, he got you all hot and bothered,” Jo said.

“Not because he was trying or anything. It was just, you know, a side effect of chivalry.”

“*Chivalry?*” Morana echoed. “I didn’t know wolves *had* any chivalry.”

“I know, right?” Natalie cried. “He’s confusing me and I don’t like it. We had a perfectly fine rapport going where I make him miserable and he hates me. But now I don’t know what’s going on because he helped me up when I had my arms full of Moonbeam and he asked me out on a date just to mess with me and—”

“Hold on,” Jo said. “How do you know he wasn’t serious?”

“Of course, he wasn’t serious! Haven’t you been listening to anything I’ve said or paid attention to any of the many interactions I’ve had with the wolf since we moved here? He hates me!”

“Or maybe he secretly likes you,” Pippa suggested as she walked into the coven house, Hocus Purrus in her arms.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Natalie snapped. “I think I would know if the wolf liked me or not.”



“YOU SCREWED UP AGAIN, didn’t you?”

Corwin closed his eyes.

Seriously, of all the people to witness his failure at asking his mate out, it just *had* to be his mother.

“Boy, I have no idea how you could be so incompetent with the ladies.”

And his father.

“I’m telling you, guys, there *had* to be a mix-up at the hospital.”

Okay.

Not fair.

What had he ever done to deserve this?

Corwin whirled and glared at his sister, who stood just behind their parents, smirking at him.

“Well, what are you waiting for, boy?”

“Huh?”

“Go after her, you idiot,” his mother exclaimed.

“I don’t think—”

“Good,” she snapped. “Don’t think, just *do*.”

He groaned. “Fine. I’ll go track her down.” Making a concerted effort not to slam the door behind him, he left the den and headed for the parking lot.

“Not that it’ll do me any good,” he muttered.

By the time he made it off pack lands, he was convinced that approaching his mate right now would be a mistake, so instead, he headed downtown.

He’d see if maybe he could track down some of the other mated wolves in town.

Maybe they could give him some tips on winning over his mate.

Honestly, Jared would be best, seeing as he was mated to a witch already, but he was back at the den and Corwin wasn’t risking running into his parents again.

Or his sister, seeing as she’d just rat him out to their parents.

Maybe he could lure Jared to town though. There was an idea.



“I’M STARVING.” Pippa lunged to her feet and clapped her hands. “I vote for lunch at the diner.”

Natalie just stared at her. “What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing. I’m just super-duper hungry, so let’s go. I’ll have better advice on a full stomach.”

Tempest suddenly lurched forward from where she was sprawled on the couch and just barely managed to catch herself before she face planted on the coffee table. “What the hell?”

“Come on!” Pippa exclaimed. “Let’s go, let’s go.”

Natalie was getting an ominous feeling about Pippa’s over-the-top enthusiasm.

“You know,” Morana said, standing up slowly. “If I didn’t know any

better, I'd think you were preppers or something."

"That is so frigging not funny, Morana," Pippa scowled. "Do *not* put that shit out into the universe or I *will* burn your entire thigh-high collection to ash."

Morana gasped. "How rude!"

Thirty minutes later, the coven walked into the diner and Natalie immediately tried to put the brakes on, but Pippa was right behind her, shoving her forward.

Natalie threw a scowl over her shoulder, threatening death and dismemberment with her eyes.

Pippa just grinned back.

"You did this on purpose," Natalie hissed.

"I've no idea what you're talking about," Pippa said. "But look! Jared's here and so is Corwin. How fortuitous. Now you can find out whether he was serious or not." Hooking her arm around Natalie's, she dragged her toward the wolves' booth, Natalie protesting all the while.

"Pippa!" Jared said jovially even as Corwin exclaimed, "Natalie!"

Both wolves leapt to their feet, the only difference between them was that Jared dragged Pippa into his arms for a heated kiss while Corwin looked at Natalie like he might do the same with even the smallest hint of encouragement.

"Don't even think about it," Natalie said, mentally fanning herself as a wave of heat swept over her, just from picturing that sort of greeting from Corwin.

"Fancy meeting you two here," Jared said when he finally let Pippa come up for air.

"Oh, please." Natalie rolled her eyes. "You're not fooling anyone with your antics." She glanced around, hoping to join the rest of the coven wherever they were sitting, but they were clear across the room at a different table.

Worse, they'd chosen one that was entirely too small, so there was no room for even one more person to join them—it was a conspiracy, she could tell. Traitors!

Before she could come up with an alternate plan, Corwin caught her hand in his and ushered her into the booth, sliding in after her.

She moved as close to the wall as she could, trying to get some distance from the wolf, but he just followed until their thighs were pressed up against

each other, so that every movement had her arm rubbing against his.

Pippa slid into the booth across from them and Jared followed her in, sliding his arm along the booth behind her.

The moment Natalie saw the move, she recognized it.

She glanced over her shoulder and sure enough, Corwin's arm was stretched out behind her.

She sent him a scowl, but he just winked back at her.

Starlight, the diner's main waitress, slid glasses of water onto their table, then took their orders before heading for the kitchen.

She'd just been waylaid by one of the vampires when Pippa yanked Natalie's attention back to their table.

"So, Corwin," Pippa began, "Natalie was wondering—ow!" Pippa let out a yelp and glared at Natalie, who simply glowered back.

"What were you wondering?" Corwin murmured at her side.

"Nothing," she muttered.

"You want to know what *I* wonder, sweet Natalie?" He leaned into her.

She gulped.

What the hell was happening?

Was it hot in here?

It was.

She glared at Pippa, who just grinned back at her. "Stop it, Pippa," she hissed.

Pippa looked surprised. "Stop what?"

Corwin chuckled. "The little firestarter isn't the reason it's so hot in here. At least not today, Natalie love."

Natalie shuddered as his raspy voice sent shivers up her spine.

"Anyway, back to what I wonder." He buried his nose in her neck and inhaled deeply.

Natalie tightened her grip on her staff and gave serious thought to slamming it over the top of the wolf's head.

Only problem was, she didn't really want to hurt him.

"I wonder if you taste as good as you smell." Corwin carefully bit down on the flesh between her neck and shoulder and sucked.

Natalie's head swam. "What is happening?" she whispered.

Pippa giggled. "You've got a wolf nibbling on your neck and you still haven't figured it out?"

Natalie narrowed her eyes at Pippa.

She was still trying to figure out what that meant when she realized—dear goddess—Jared was nibbling at Pippa’s neck in pretty much the exact same way that Corwin was.

Natalie shook her head, or tried to anyway.

Corwin let out a low growl and bit down harder.

Natalie froze.

What the hell was going on?

Before she could come to any kind of conclusion, Corwin let out a yelp, released her neck and lunged away from her.

Natalie was in such a daze, it took her a few moments to realize Corwin was shouting, and a couple more to understand what he was saying.

“Get her off me. Pippa, Jared, help!”

He whirled in a circle, begging other diners to help him, but everyone was laughing too hard to be of any use.

Finally, he turned back to Natalie and begged, “Please, Natalie, please. Just get her off me.”

That’s when she realized Moonbeam was attached to his jeans. Her claws appeared to be embedded in his thighs and her teeth—

Natalie winced.

That just could *not* feel good.

“Moonbeam, sweetheart. Leave the poor wolf alone. Come here, darling.”

Moonbeam let out a growl and—swear to the goddesses above—she actually shook her head a little.

Corwin let out a strangled squeal, which caused more hilarity among the diners. “Get her off me, Natalie, or I swear she’s going to find herself biting into a wild wolf, any minute now!”

Natalie sighed. “All right. Calm down, you big baby.” She reached out and grabbed Moonbeam by the scruff of her neck.

Moonbeam immediately went limp and Natalie simply lifted her away from Corwin, who grabbed his crotch and bolted toward the bathroom, laughter and unsolicited advice following in his wake.

“Better check to make sure it’s still there, Corwin!” one of the wolves shouted.

“Might want to get a rabies shot,” another called out.

“Hey!” Natalie exclaimed. “Moonbeam’s perfectly healthy.”

“Of course, she is, darling,” the offending wolf said. “We’re just messing with Corwin, you know.”

“Oh. Well then, carry on.”

CHAPTER 4



“YOU KNOW, I HATE TO SAY IT, BUT MOONBEAM COULD GIVE CLEOCATRA A run for her money,” Tivali said.

“Sad, but true,” Muezza agreed.

“I don’t know,” Soraya said. “Cleocatra wasn’t *that* vicious.”

Tivali, Bygul and Muezza all stared at her.

“She wasn’t!”

“If you say so,” Muezza said.

“How quickly we forget,” Tivali said.

“She was just a tiny kitten, whereas Moonbeam’s a *monster* cat!”

“True,” Bygul said. “We were just lucky we made those matches *before* Cleocatra fully grew into her claws. Unfortunately, our luck has clearly run out, which means we have to somehow convince Moonbeam to stop torturing the wolf.”

“Impossible,” Tivali said. “I saw the look on Moonbeam’s face and there’s no doubt in my mind. She’s officially claimed that wolf as her new alligator.”



CORWIN SPENT the evening with a bag full of ice on his dick.

Thank all the goddesses in the heavens, he’d been wearing jeans at the time.

If he’d been wearing any other fabric, he was absolutely positive that demon-cat would have drawn blood.

As it was, his dick was feeling mighty abused.

He'd checked it out thoroughly and there wasn't even a bruise, but he blamed that on shifter healing because based on how it felt, his whole dick should have been bright purple by now.

Of course, he wasn't about to admit that he was bruise-free.

Instead, he took advantage of the sympathy all the pack women showered upon him and ignored how the pack men grumbled and glared at him.

They'd be taking advantage too if their dick had been caught in the jaws of that hell-beast.

He hung out in the pack's communal spaces all night long, enjoying the many treats the women brought him, and sulking over the fact that Natalie had called him a big baby and how she'd crooned to her demon-cat, praising her predatory instincts, rather than offering *him* any sympathy.

What kind of mate was she, anyway, to ignore his suffering in favor of the cat who attacked him?

It was shameful, utterly shameful!

Especially since he was convinced she was actually amused at the entire situation.

Rude!

He spent most of the night trying to convince himself that he could live without his mate. Who needed one?

Not him, that's for sure.

Look at all the pack women, fawning all over him.

All he had to do was crook his finger and any one of them—well, the non-mated ones, anyway—would be delighted to fall into bed with him.

Unfortunately, he didn't *want* any of them.

He wanted his mate.

Natalie.

The witch with a demon-cat for a familiar.

Whatever had he done to deserve this?



NATALIE WOKE the next morning with Moonbeam stretched across her chest, purring into her ear.

It was a fabulous way to wake.

She lay in bed for almost an hour, just petting Moonbeam and feeling her purr rumble through her.

Eventually, though, her memories of the day before filtered in and she began to giggle.

Poor Corwin.

She should probably track him down and apologize or at least try to make amends.

Then again, her breath hitched as she remembered the feel of his teeth gripping her neck and the shivers that ran up her spine at the sound of his soft growl and raspy voice murmuring in her ear.

Dear goddess, he was potent!

She had no idea what had gotten into him—or her, for that matter—but Moonbeam had probably done them both a favor.

“Such a smart kitty,” she whispered, then giggled again as she pictured how Corwin had looked with Moonbeam plastered to the front of his trousers. The image reminded her of those ridiculous Halloween decorations of witches on brooms plastered up against a tree.

A knock came at the door. “Um, Natalie? We’ve got a tiny situation out here.”

Fifteen minutes later, Natalie stood, hands on hips, completely stunned at how her coven had managed to understate the situation. “A *tiny* situation? There are plants growing through the floorboards and vines on the walls! How the hell did this happen, Jo?”

Jo winced. “I’m not exactly sure. It was like this when we woke this morning.”

“Uh-huh. And what were you dreaming about last night? Better yet, what were you *doing* before you fell asleep?”

Jo blushed. “Nothing you need to know about.”

“It was probably my fault,” Annika said.

“Really?” Natalie asked dryly. “So you’re also a Garden Witch?”

“Well, no, but…” Her voice trailed off.

“Never mind,” Natalie said. “I’m sure we’re all quite aware of what you two were up to last night. I simply have no idea why it triggered your magic, Jo. It’s not like you haven’t been with Annika for weeks.”

Oh, shit.

A memory slammed into Natalie of the dreams *she’d* had all night long.

Heated dreams filled with writhing limbs and—she slammed the door on

those thoughts and yanked her staff toward her.

A second later, Natalie's staff slammed into her hand, but it was already too late.

The plants and vines all surged upward.

She slammed her staff onto the floor and the foliage quivered to a stop.

Mouths agape, the entire coven stared at Natalie.

"Did *you* just make that happen?" Jo demanded.

Natalie fanned her face. "Maybe. I don't know. This is a mess."

"You *did*," Tempest accused. "How are you doing that? You're not a garden witch. Are you?"

Natalie sighed. "It's the curse of my line."

"What does that mean?" Rowan asked.

"Why do you think I didn't want the role of High Witch? You guys kept insisting and I kept saying no, but apparently the staff doesn't care what I want.

"So now I'm not only struggling with all the powers of my entire line, of which there were legion, but I also get a snippet of your powers as well.

"Basically, I'm—"

"The *Witch Queen*?" Amari exclaimed, her voice the loudest Natalie had ever heard it.

"I thought that was a myth," Jo said.

"There hasn't been a queen in centuries. Right?" Tempest asked.

Natalie sighed. "The line's been dying, it's true. Too much power plays havoc with fertility, which honestly, isn't a bad thing. I expected the line to die with me. That was the plan anyway. I'm the last of my former coven since my grandmother died and I inherited the staff. The problem is the staff has apparently accepted The Zero Cum Laude Coven as a new branch in its line of power."

"What does that mean?" Morana asked.

"It means whoever steps into the role of High Witch after me will inherit the staff, even if they're not my child. The staff's future is now tied to the coven, not to my specific genetic line."

"Oh my good goddess," Amari whispered.

"What is it, Amari?" Tempest gave her a concerned glance.

"That's why she dresses like royalty and carries the staff everywhere. She's not being dramatic or stereotypical. She's the *Witch Queen*."

Natalie rolled her eyes. "Look. I'm the same Natalie you've always

known. I just can't help the way I dress. It's the way my grandmother raised me and it seems disrespectful to stop now, simply because she's gone. I don't care that some people think I'm being dramatic or playing into witchy stereotypes. It's how I honor my grandmother and the entire line of Queens who came before me.

"Now forget about me and the staff. How are we going to clean this shit up?" She glared around her at the foliage that had pretty much taken over the entire first floor of their coven house.

It took her a moment to realize the rest of the coven was just staring at her in silence. "What?"

"Natalie, you've got the *staff*," Jo said, "and you don't know how to fix all this?"

"Hey. It's not like I've had the staff *that* long, you know. And my powers, which were pretty out-of-control *before* I inherited the staff aren't exactly of any help here. I mean, sure the power of foresight helped lead us here, but they're certainly not going to help clean up this mess."

"But you've got the *staff*!" Jo repeated.

"So?"

"So, you've got access to the powers of every witch queen throughout history. Use some of *those* powers."

Natalie groaned. "You have no idea how difficult it is to control someone else's powers. I mean think about it—you guys struggle to control your own powers. Now imagine trying to control the powers of a crazy-powerful queen, then imagine trying to control the powers of every queen in existence!"

"Huh. Never thought about it like that," Jo said. "Still. What's the point of having the staff if you're not going to use it?"

Natalie sighed. "Fine. But don't blame *me* when things go wrong."



WHEN CORWIN, Jared and Pippa arrived at the coven house for breakfast that morning, they found the entire coven standing on the front lawn, staring at the house, which was completely covered in vines.

Corwin sidled up behind Natalie, who stood with the staff in her left hand and the demon-cat winding between her legs. "So. What's going on?"

"Out-of-control magic, that's what's going on," Amari said with a giggle.

Thunder rolled overhead and lightning forked through the sky.

Corwin looked up. “Huh. Today was supposed to be a beautiful day.”

More thunder rolled and a crack of lightning hit not too far away.

“Uh, Tempest, maybe you should tone it down a bit,” Pippa said. “I’m sure we’ll figure out how to get inside eventually.”

“It’s not me,” Tempest said with a grin.

“What do you mean it’s not you?” Pippa demanded. “You’re the only weather witch around and there’s no way this thunderstorm is a natural phenomenon.”

Rowan snickered. “Ask our resident Witch Queen.”

Corwin stiffened. Witches had queens?

“Witch—*what?*” Pippa whirled toward Natalie. “You’re the Witch Queen?” she screeched.

Hold on now.

Corwin took a careful step back from his mate, then turned slightly so he could see her face.

Natalie scowled. “Why do you assume it’s me? It could be any one of us!”

“No one else walks around with a giant staff of power or dresses like royalty,” Pippa accused. “How come you never told us?”

More importantly, how come she’d never told *him*?

And what in the hell had he done to deserve this?

A mate who was *royalty*?

“I’m the last of my line, Pippa. It’s not like I thought I was going to pass the staff on to anyone else. I expected the staff’s power to die with me, not to come alive because some idiot witches decided I should be the leader of their coven.”

“Hold on,” Pippa said. “You mean the staff—”

“I mean it’s been getting weaker, not stronger, through the generations. Yes, more power flowed into it as the generations passed, but without a coven to feed energy to its Queen, not much of that power could be accessed. So like I said, I expected the staff to die with me. Instead, its power is now tied to that of the Zero Cum Laude Coven, so congratulations, witches. You’re now the Queen’s Council and your first task is to help me figure out how to control this damn staff.”

A giant crack rendered the air and a tree at the edge of their property let out a horrendous groan before beginning a slow topple toward the roof of the

coven house.

Natalie whipped the staff up with a jerk and the tree *moved*, rolling to the side and crashing to the ground in such a way that it missed every building on the property.

How the hell did she do that?

Corwin eyed the staff.

The two jewels, one at the top and the other at the bottom, were glowing a brilliant red.

The wind picked all around, them, leaves lifting and swirling through the air, faster and faster.

“Oh, shit,” Tempest exclaimed. She whirled and raced toward Natalie. “You have to pull in the storm. It’s about to take on a life of its own. Natalie, if you don’t pull it in, there are going to be tornadoes in about three minutes. Big ones, ones that will take out the entire town.”

Natalie didn’t seem to hear Tempest. Her hair was lifting off her shoulders and her eyes were blind to anything around her.

Corwin hooked an arm around her waist and dragged her back so that she rested against his chest. “Natalie,” he murmured in her ear. “Pull the storm back.”

When nothing happened, he whipped her around and kissed her. Deep.



ONE MOMENT, Natalie was all storm—inside her, around her, everywhere, thunder, lightning, crashing rain—then it was *all* heat.

Fire sweeping through her and slamming into the ground, over and over again.

Lightning and fire and dear goddess, the wolf could *kiss*.

She raised her arms and wrapped them around his neck.

She slid her fingers deep into his hair, something else slipping from her grasp to thump onto the ground below.

She should maybe figure out what she’d just dropped, pick it up, hold it tight, but the heat from Corwin’s kiss was consuming her thoughts, stealing her breath.

All she knew was the wolf who had her wrapped tight in his embrace and the fire that consumed them both.



THE ENTIRE WORLD had disappeared except for the witch in his arms.

Her scent, everything about her, wrapped itself around him and dragged him deep.

Corwin lifted her closer, reveling in the feel of her nails raking through his scalp.

Something about that should register with him—that both her arms were wrapped around him, that her fingers were plowing through his hair, pulling and tugging—but whatever it was that wanted his attention was so much less important than the feel of the woman in his arms and the rising heat that threatened to consume them both.

A white streak launched up, claws hooking deep in his arm, then the demon-cat was crawling onto his shoulder and from there, to Natalie's where it shoved its nose in her ear and licked her cheek.

Natalie let out a shudder and her fingers slowly unclenched from his hair.

She leaned back, gasping for breath, then reached up and scratched the cat's head.

Damn cat.

Always interfering at the worst of times.

Or in this case, perhaps *just* in time, for Corwin finally noticed the cyclone that spun around them at incredible speeds.

He would have expected it to tear them apart, but it simply wrapped them in a world of their own making, blocking out all sights and sounds of anything but each other.

And that damn cat.

They stood still, plastered together, the cat wrapped around Natalie's shoulders, purring loudly as she pet her in long, soothing strokes.

Corwin shuddered as he once again imagined Natalie's hand petting his wolf's fur in the same slow movements.

The longer they stood there, staring into each other's eyes, the calmer their breathing became, until finally, the wind died down and with it, the foliage covering the house behind Natalie began a slow withdrawal, slithering to the ground and sinking into the soil.

Silence fell.

A quick glance around showed Corwin that his alpha had retreated with the rest of the coven to the other side of the property.

They now slowly moved back toward them, looks of awe on their faces.

“*Dude*, your mate is the freaking queen of witches,” Jared teased, echoing Corwin’s words from the day they witnessed Pippa’s power for the first time.

Corwin was speechless.

That stupid staff—the one he’d thought was a prop from some drama club, the one he now realized she’d dropped when wrapping her arms around his neck—plus the elaborate clothing, even the witch’s hat, all had symbolic, *royal* freaking meaning.

To think he’d laughed at Jared for having a firestarter for a mate.

“Well, that was fun,” Pippa said. “*Not*. I was absolutely certain you were a goner, Natalie.”

“And man, the amount of trees and limbs that fell while you were in your little cyclone of goodness, just wow,” Rowan said. “Glad you’re on our side is really all I can say about that.”

“Yes, but good news,” Jo said cheerfully, “As far as we know, no one’s risen from the dead *and* there haven’t been any fires—though you two *did* scorch the land a bit where you’re standing, but all things considered, I’d say that’s a win, wouldn’t you?”

“Seriously?” Morana exclaimed. “Why would you say that? There’s no point in tempting fate, Jo!”

“I’m just saying, you gotta celebrate the wins, you know?”



“MAYBE I WAS WRONG,” Soraya said.

Bygul and Muezza stared at each other, utterly *amazed*.

No cat worth their salt *ever* admitted when they were wrong. It simply wasn’t done.

There was always a reason for *everything* they did or said.

Humans might not *like* their reasons, but that didn’t mean they were wrong.

“What’s that now?” Tivali asked.

“You know, when I said Morana was the cheerful one. I probably meant Jo. They all look the same to me. Witches, vampires, shifters, what’s the difference, really? They’re all humans.”

Well, that was a good point, Bygul mused.

“So it’s not like you were *wrong* so much as confused,” Muezza said.

“Exactly!” Soraya exclaimed. “And maybe not even so much confused as just not paying attention.”

“Oh, now, that makes total sense,” Tivali said.

“Absolutely,” Bygul said. “We’re cats, after all. We only pay attention when we want to.”



“WHAT A NIGHTMARE,” Natalie muttered.

It was all the wolf’s fault!

She’d had perfect control—well, mostly—and then, he had to kiss her!

What in the world made him think a kiss would help?

For goddess’ sake, that kiss had obliterated her control, and *then*, she’d dropped her staff.

She shuddered to think what might have happened if Moonbeam hadn’t leapt into play.

This was truly terrible.

Because all she could think about now was kissing him.

The wolf!

The aggravating, arrogant, sexy-as-hell *wolf*.

Even worse was knowing she’d have to resist temptation unless she wanted to chance unleashing her powers again.

Dear goddess, she didn’t know which was worse.

Wanting the wolf in the first place.

Or never getting to kiss him again.



ALL CORWIN WANTED WAS to kiss his mate again, then drag her off somewhere private so they could explore each other to their heart’s content.

Unfortunately, there was a lot of clean-up to be done due to the crazed thunderstorm Natalie had sent crashing through their town.

Jared and Corwin headed for pack lands, to help clear paths in the forest and to ensure no-one was hurt.

Meanwhile, the witches headed for town to help out there.

It was late afternoon before Corwin managed to break away from his pack and track down his mate. He found her at the diner, eating with her coven.

He immediately grabbed a chair and shoved his way between Natalie and Rowan, throwing a growl and glare at the male witch for daring to sit so close to his mate.

Rowan chuckled, threw up his hands in surrender, grabbed his plate and moved around to the opposite side of the table.

“What are you doing?” Natalie demanded.

“Joining you for a meal, of course,” Corwin said.

“But why?”

Hmm. Dilemma time.

Should he admit they were mates?

Or just keep playing it by ear?

Probably best not to say anything.

“Because I’m starving and if I eat with you, we can count this as our first date. Or maybe it’s our second, on account of the earlier kiss and all. Or should it be our third? You know, in case kissing is only a second date activity, which would move our lunch yesterday up to first date status. Yeah, that makes total sense. Third date, here we are!”

“Whatever.” She rolled her eyes.

“Where’s Pippa?” Tempest asked.

“She and Jared are hanging out at the den. Some of the pups were frightened by the storm, so they’re sticking close to give them the comfort of the alpha pair.”

Natalie’s right hand clenched into a fist on the table. “Damnit. I can’t believe I lost control like that.”

“Hey, it’s all good.” Corwin settled his hand on top of hers and squeezed gently. “Really. No one blames you. In fact, we’re all pretty impressed. Even though tree limbs were falling everywhere, none of them—not in the town or on pack lands—landed on property, animals *or* people. Literally, *no one* was hurt.”

“I guess.”

“The amount of control that took is off the charts,” Tempest said. “We knew there was no damage in town, but we weren’t sure about the other territories. I can’t even imagine how you kept everything controlled, Natalie. When my storms get that bad, there’s *no* controlling them. They gain a life of

their own and then, it's out of my hands, you know?"

Natalie shrugged. "The staff helped. Moonbeam helped more."

"Moonbeam?" Corwin asked.

"My familiar."

"Ah. The demon-cat."

Natalie snickered. "Only around you. She *loves* me."

CHAPTER 5



“I’VE GOT A BRILLIANT IDEA,” SORAYA ANNOUNCED OUT OF THE BLUE.

Bygul did not like the sound of that.

To be clear, he never liked any of Soraya’s ideas. Mostly because they tended to end in disaster.

Even the ones that worked out went places they never anticipated and never wanted to go again.

“Maybe we should—” he began.

“You don’t even know what it is,” Soraya said. “It’s genius, I tell you.”

He sighed. “Fine. Let’s hear it.”

“Yay! First thing we have to do is recruit Moonbeam to help.”

Muezza and Tivali both groaned.

“Moonbeam isn’t going to help,” Tivali said. “She’ll just make things worse.”

“We’re lucky she didn’t castrate the wolf,” Muezza grumbled.

“Okay, that’s a little extreme,” Tivali said. “But I agree, we’re lucky the wolf wasn’t injured more than he was.”

“We’re lucky he was wearing jeans,” Bygul said.

“You guys aren’t being fair to Moonbeam,” Soraya said. “Bygul, you’re always telling us to use the earthbound cats because it gets them invested in the match. So let’s do it. We haven’t even approached Moonbeam since dropping her off. Let’s get her involved. Make her feel sorry for the wolf.”

“Sorry? For the wolf? In what world makes you think any cat, let alone *that* cat, has empathy?” Bygul shook his head.

If the goddesses could hear Soraya now, they would question whether she was the right cat for this job. After all, an effective matchmaker had to

understand her matches, all the way down to their bean-toes.

“It’s all a game to Moonbeam,” Soraya said. “So we present it to her as a game.”

Huh.

That was surprisingly perceptive.

“What kind of game?” Tivali asked suspiciously.

“A matchmaking game, of course!”



“WELL,” Corwin said. “Speaking of your loving furball, she appears to be stalking you.”

“What are you talking about?”

He leaned into her and nodded toward the space under the table.

It was the only warning Natalie had before Moonbeam leapt into her lap and from there onto her shoulder.

Before Natalie could even pet Moonbeam, the cat had snatched her witch’s hat from her head and lunged to the floor. “Hey!”

Moonbeam bolted for the door.

It was truly unfortunate that one of the chameleons opened the door at that very moment, allowing Moonbeam to drag her prize out of the diner.

Natalie bolted from her chair and raced after the cat.

Corwin shook his head in dismay.

He should probably be following his mate right now, but the thought of being roped into chasing after a cat to recover that ridiculous witch’s hat just made him cringe.

He’d never hear the end of it.

A wolf chasing after a cat like some common *dog*.

It was enough to keep him seated for several moments longer, but eventually, with a frustrated growl, he lunged to his feet and stalked out of the diner, a roar of laughter following in his wake.

It didn’t take him long to track down his mate.

She was across the street in the town square, trying to coax the cat down from a tree she’d somehow managed to climb *with* that stupid witch’s hat.

Moonbeam now sat high above their heads, staring down at them, *smirking*.

She had her paws on top of the hat and didn't appear inclined to move.

"She'll come down eventually," Corwin told Natalie. "Come on. If we ignore her, she'll probably come down faster."

Natalie gasped. "I can't just leave her. She could fall from the tree or get hit by a car. Anything could happen!"

"I thought cats always landed on their feet," Corwin said.

"Propaganda," Natalie scoffed. "If she falls from that height, landing on her feet will not save her."

He sighed. "Well, I'm not climbing the tree, I can tell you that right now."

Natalie glared at him. "Nobody asked you to."

With that, she set her staff against the trunk of the tree and began to climb.

"Now I've seen everything," Sal said with a laugh.

Great.

The entire damn diner had come out to watch.

"Corwin Anthony O'Neill!" His mother's voice cut through the crowd, causing Corwin to cringe.

Seriously?

Was it too much to ask that his mother *not* be around every time he screwed things up?

"You're not seriously making your mate climb that tree, are you?"

Corwin hadn't taken his eyes off his mate, who was pretty high in the tree at this point, so he saw the way she jerked at his mother's admonishment, causing leaves to fall from the branches all around her.

If he wasn't so worried about his mate, Corwin would probably be strangling his mother right about now.



"WELL, that didn't exactly go as planned," Soraya said.

"Ya think?" Bygul asked.

"Oh, come on!" She said. "There's no way I could have possibly predicted that *Natalie* would be the one to climb the tree. I honestly thought Corwin would climb it, recover her hat and become a hero in her eyes."

"Seriously, Soraya?" Tivali demanded. "Did you learn nothing from the

polars?”

“The polars? What polars?”

“The bears!” Muezza exploded. “Don’t you remember the giant thump that bear made on his way down?”

“And he was an instant hero to his mate. Instant! He saved the cat! Besides, he’s a bear. Of *course*, he’s no good at climbing trees.”

Bygul sighed. “Whatever. Moonbeam *did* enjoy stealing her hat, so there’s that, at least.”

“Yes, but if the witch falls, I will *never* forgive you, Soraya,” Tivali said.

“Worse, *Moonbeam* will never forgive you,” Muezza growled.

And there it was—the consequence that actually worried Soraya. “I’m sure the witch will be fine. Right? Bygul, right?”

Bygul just shook his head, unable to offer any platitudes as they watched the witch climb higher and higher.

What had Moonbeam been *thinking* to go so high in that tree?

“It’s the alligator thing again,” Tivali muttered. “I swear, that cat treats every obstacle like it’s an alligator to be smacked around.”



NATALIE WAS TRYING DESPERATELY NOT to think about how high she was off the ground when someone far below screeched at Corwin about letting his mate climb a tree.

The words landed like a bomb and for one interminable minute, Natalie was certain she was going to fall.

At the last second, she managed to catch her balance and then just stood there, frozen on a limb, clutching the one above her for dear life, wondering if she was going mad.

Surely, she hadn’t heard what she thought she had.

It just wasn’t possible.

Was it?

She thought back over the last couple days and how weird Corwin had been acting.

Ever since the ceremony, now that she thought about it.

A ceremony he’d interrupted because of a text she *knew* he’d never gotten.

Holy shit.

Something must have happened during the ceremony that convinced him she was his mate.

That's why he'd been acting so weird ever since.

Silly wolf.

First, she needed to speed up this rescue.

Then she'd set that wolf straight.

Bedmates, maybe.

But fated mates?

No way.

Except.

Oh, dear goddess.

The damn spell.

The spell that Jo had screwed up by casting for their fated mates instead of bedmates.

And who had been the first to walk into town after they cast that spell?

Corwin fucking Anthony fucking O'Neill, who was looking for new territory on behalf of the Wildfire Pack.

What exactly had the coven cast for again?

Oh, right.

Non-witch, eligible paranormals looking for a new start.

Jo just happened to add in the phrase, "fated mates."

Dear goddess.

The wolf might actually *be* her fated mate.

Natalie glanced down, way down, at the crowd of diners, at Corwin who was watching her with fear on his face, at the woman beside him, who was waving her arms and lecturing (probably his mother) and kept searching.

There she was.

"This is all your fault," Natalie shouted.

Jo looked surprised. She glanced around as if to ask whether Natalie was talking to her.

"Of course, I'm talking to you. You screwed up our casting and now I'm mated to a freaking wolf!"

Jo shrugged and cupped a hand around her ear as if she couldn't hear what Natalie was saying.

Well, maybe she couldn't.

Things *were* getting a bit loud.

Natalie glanced around.

What the hell was going on anyway?

She squinted toward the woods that stood in the distance.

Something was crashing and moving in their depths.

Something *big*.

“Okay, Moonbeam, time to get down, darling.” Natalie pulled herself up to the next limb above her and held her arm up toward Moonbeam who was just beyond her reach.

Moonbeam looked at her, then at the hat beneath her paws, then back at Natalie.

“Just leave the hat, baby. It’s not that important. But we do have to get down off this tree.” She glanced over at the woods.

Dear goddess, what *was* that?

“Now, Moonbeam. Now!”

Moonbeam grabbed the hat between her teeth and tossed it down.

By sheer luck or some kind of familiar magic, it landed directly on Natalie’s head.

Moonbeam then shot toward the trunk and raced straight down it.

Natalie rolled her eyes, glanced back toward the woods and felt a chill race down her spine.

Surely, that wasn’t what she thought it was.

Still.

Time to get off this blasted tree.

Trying not to think about how much it would hurt if she fell from this height, she climbed down as quickly as possible, though still significantly more slowly than Moonbeam had.

When she got near the ground, Corwin caught her around the waist and lifted her the rest of the way down.

Natalie immediately whirled to the crowds gathered around. “You should all take cover, especially you,” she said to the woman she was pretty certain was Corwin’s mom.

“Oh, dear, I’m so happy to meet you.” She grabbed Natalie’s hands in hers and squeezed tight. “We’ve waited so long, I’d begun to give up hope.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, nothing. I’m just so happy for you and Corwin.”

Before Natalie could even think of an appropriate response, a loud crashing sound came from down the street and then people began to run.

“What the hell is that?” someone screeched.

Shit.

That sounded like Blade. He already avoided Morana like the plague.

Goddess only knew how he would react if what Natalie had seen coming from the woods was what she thought it was.

“Come on.” Natalie grabbed her stand with one hand and Corwin’s hand with the other and dragged him down the street toward where Blade stood frozen, staring into the distance.

“Shit!” Blade shrieked, whirling and racing toward them.

How a vampire could get his voice that high, Natalie had *no* idea.

“Run for your lives,” he screamed.

“Blade.” Morana seemed to appear out of nowhere and stepped right into his path.

Blade skidded to a halt rather than veering around her.

That was progress, Natalie supposed.

Sort of.

“What’s the matter?” Morana asked.

“I should have known you’re the cause of this!” He glared at her. “*Stop raising the dead!*”

“What are you talking about? I haven’t used my powers at all today.”

“Then why are the trees walking around like extras from *Lord of the Rings* meets *The Walking Dead*?”

“Well, it is one way to clear out the dead limbs from the forest,” Natalie observed as entire trees, root systems, limbs and stumps stumbled down the street toward them.

“And thankfully, they don’t have faces, so they can’t eat our brains,” Tempest said.

“You guys are nuts,” Blade accused. “First spiders, now trees. I don’t even want to know what’s next.”

Morana leaned forward and murmured into his ear, “I can raise a whole lot more than just the dead.” She leaned back and smiled at him. “In case you’d like a demonstration sometime.” She trailed one long, black fingernail down his cheek, then turned and sauntered over to where Natalie and Corwin stood.

Blade, Natalie noticed, just stood there a moment as if stupefied into silence, before meekly following Morana to stand at her side.

Oh, yes.

That was definitely progress.

“So what’s the plan?” Morana asked.

Natalie shook her head. “I have no idea.”

“I do,” Corwin said and he started *stripping*.

Right there, in the middle of the street!

“What are you doing?” Natalie exclaimed.

“Don’t worry, baby, I got this.” He slid a hand around her, dragged her close and kissed her breathless.

She was drowning in heat when he set her back, winked, then lunged away, shifting and landing in his wolf-form in a fraction of an instant before hurtling toward the line of lumbering trees.

He aimed for one that had to be hundreds of years old, it was so huge.

“*What are you doing?*” Natalie shrieked after him.

He leapt up and caught a limb in his teeth and swung around to land on another one. He scrambled all around that tree, leaping from limb to limb, chewing up branches and leaves and generally acting insane.

Natalie stormed forward and shouted up at him. “Would you stop that, you idiot wolf? You can’t win against a frigging tree!”

“Wow. Your mate’s not the brightest wolf in the bunch, now is he?” Morana chuckled.

And that was when the *entire freaking pack* barreled past, all of them in wolf form, howling in glee like—well, a bunch of idiot *wolves*.

Natalie whirled toward Morana. “Okay, at least the trees are slow and lumbering, but there’s no way those wolves are going to take them down.” She winced as one wolf, then another went howling through the air, only to hit the ground, slide for a bit, then lunge to their feet and bolt back into the fray.

“Dear goddess, this is madness. Madness, I tell you.” She glanced around at the rest of the coven, but they just shrugged helplessly. That was when she noticed Pippa had joined them. “Where’s Jared?”

“Where do you think?” Pippa asked dryly, gesturing toward the howling mass of wolves in trees.

“Ugh,” Natalie groaned. “Okay, Morana, come on. You’ve got to have *some* ideas here. How do you stop the dead once they’ve risen?”

Morana shrugged. “Usually I just tell them to rest in peace. Sometimes it works.”

“And when it doesn’t?”

“That’s what fire’s for,” Pippa said.

“All right then.” Natalie lifted her staff and pointed it straight at the army of trees littered with wolves. “Here’s hoping they don’t crush the wolves on their way down.” She dragged in a deep breath, then shouted, “Rest In Peace!”

Red light shot from the staff and barreled through the town, lighting up the dead and dropping them where they stood.

Natalie spent the next several moments, focused on somehow saving the wolves from bone-breaking falls or being crushed by falling trees.

By the time everyone and everything was on the ground, the wolves were all howling in victory as if *they* had somehow defeated the army of trees, and Natalie was utterly exhausted.

“Wow,” Morana said. “I need a staff like that.”

“Yeah. Except now we’ve got a huge mess on our hands,” Tempest said.

Natalie sighed. “This day just keeps getting longer and longer.”

Several hours later, the town square and all the surrounding streets were finally cleared of debris, and everyone was back at the diner, collapsed around another table, eating their weight in food.

“If I never have to face another army of the dead, it will be too soon,” Pippa groaned.

“Sorry,” Morana said. “I mean, I know it wasn’t my fault this time, but since the only reason Natalie can raise the dead is because of my power, I feel kind of responsible.”

“That’s because you are.” Blade glared at her. “*Necromancer.*”

She grinned. “All you’re seeing are the negative sides to my ability. Trust me. There are positives as well.”

“*Yeah, right.*”

“Uh, hello. Have you seen my pickup? It’s the 1973 Chevy C10.” She nodded out the window toward the parking lot. “Still runs like it came off the line yesterday.”

He just looked at her, suspicion written all over his face.

Pippa giggled. “Ever since I met Morana, my watch battery never dies.”

“Forget the watch,” Tempest said. “Ever since *I* met Morana, my vibrators are immortal.”

Everyone at the table burst into laughter.



“I CAN’T BELIEVE you made Corwin go home alone,” Tempest said with a giggle as they entered the coven house later that night.

“Are you kidding me right now? Did you *see* the tornado we generated the first time we kissed? Or how about the army of trees I raised when I realized he believes I’m his mate?”

“*He* believes you’re his mate?” Tempest asked. “Are you sure it didn’t happen when *you* realized he’s *your* mate?”

Natalie groaned. “Maybe, but even if that’s true, how the hell am I supposed to have a mate, if every time we kiss, chaos happens?”

“I’ve got a theory about that,” Jo said.

“What kind of theory?” Natalie asked suspiciously.

“I don’t think it’s the wolf causing your powers to go haywire. I think it’s simply the learning curve that comes with inheriting the power of the staff.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve had the staff the entire time we’ve been a coven. Longer, even. Why would the powers start acting up now?”

“Because *now* is when you’re finally accepting your role as High Witch of our coven,” Jo said.

“Oooh, and *now* is when your familiar came to you and bonded with you,” Tempest said, “which everyone knows is a sign you’re finally coming into your power as a witch.”

Natalie had been prepared to scoff at Jo’s theory, except it actually made sense.

Damnit.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” Amari asked.

“What’s that?” Natalie asked, thrilled Amari was finally coming out of her shell, at least when surrounded by the coven.

“It means, all you really have to do is accept your mate. It’s the final piece to truly controlling your power. At least, that’s what the legend says.”

“What legend?” Rowan asked.

“The legend of the Witch Queen and her mate.”

Oh, dear goddess. “Don’t tell me you actually listened to those silly stories, Amari.”

“Of course, I did! They were so romantic. I used to dream of growing up one day, only to discover I was the Witch Queen with a destined, fated mate and a love that would span the ages.” She sighed, a faraway look in her eyes.

Natalie stared at her.

This was the most she’d ever heard Amari speak at one time and it was to

swoon over stories Natalie's grandmother used to tell her.

Stories of the old Witch Queens and their immortal loves.

She'd always thought it sounded like nonsense.

Then again, she'd absolutely *believed* in the power of the blessing Morana had cast for Pippa and Jared, gifting their love with eternal life, so that even death could not end it.

Was the fairy tale Amari had dreamed about as a child so very different from that blessing?

"Tell us the stories, Amari," Jo said. "Exactly the way you heard them told to you."

And so the evening passed with Amari sharing the stories she'd been told, with Natalie occasionally contributing little details her grandmother had shared that Amari hadn't known.

It was a beautiful way to end a rather hectic, exhausting day.

When they finally stumbled to their beds, Natalie fell asleep with her head full of stories from those long-ago queens and with a tiny spark of hope kindling inside, that perhaps one day soon, she too might find herself blessed with a legendary, immortal love.

CHAPTER 6



“SEE IT KIND OF WORKED!” SORAYA CLAIMED.

“In what world is an army of dead trees a successful mission?” Bygul demanded.

“Well, the wolf got a chance to show off his warrior side, didn’t he?”

“I’m not sure the witch really cares about his warrior side,” Tivali said. “Besides, he looked like an idiot.”

Muezza snorted. “They all did, but you know what? That’s what she gets for mating with a wolf. Might as well learn early on that they’re a bunch of goofy, pseudo-lovable idiots.”

“Pseudo is right,” Bygul said.

“Well, I think he was adorable,” Soraya said.

Bygul didn’t say what he was thinking, which was he wasn’t surprised. At all.

One good idiot loves another, after all.

“So what are we going to do next?” Tivali demanded. “Because I’m beginning to seriously doubt whether these two are a match at all.”

“Beginning to?” Bygul demanded. “You’ve doubted it all along.”

“Well. True. Still. So far, nothing’s changed my mind.”

“We just need to up the stakes of the game,” Soraya said.

“I didn’t know there were any stakes,” Muezza said. “Besides the obvious one of a pawsitively purrfect match. Or not.”

“Of course, there are stakes. There always have to be stakes when you’re dealing with earthbound cats.”

Bygul sighed. “So, what are the stakes, Soraya?”

“I promised Moonbeam she could fly on the witch’s broomstick if she

manages to get Natalie to see Corwin as a hero.”

“Are you serious right now?” Tivali demanded.

“I’m wondering the same thing,” Muezza said. “Isn’t that expecting an awful lot out of the wolf?”

“What?” Tivali shook her head. “No, that’s not what I meant. How could you promise Moonbeam that? She could get hurt, Soraya! What if she falls?”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous,” Bygul said. “Witches don’t really fly on brooms.”

“Of course they do!” Soraya exclaimed hotly.

“Yeah, everyone knows about the brooms,” Tivali said.

Bygul looked at Muezza, who simply twitched his tail and said, “Sorry, boss, but they’re right. Witches. Brooms. It’s kind of a thing.”

Idiots.

He was surrounded by idiots.



CORWIN WOKE the next morning absolutely determined that this would be the day he would finally win over his mate.

Now that the cat was out of the bag, so to speak—thanks to his interfering mother—he didn’t have to worry about how Natalie would react to the news that she was his mate.

The news was already out and since it was out, he figured that meant he could move full-steam ahead.

Up first: time to move in with his mate.

An hour later, Corwin dumped an armload of electronics and video games into the trunk of his car, slammed it closed, then jumped back when he saw Jared standing there. “Uh, what’s up, alpha?”

“With me? Not much. What’s up with you?”

Corwin shrugged. “Nothing. Just putting some stuff in the car. Just in case.”

Jared peered into his backseat, which was piled high with clothes and books and other odds and ends. “That’s a lot of stuff for just in case.”

“Fine. You caught me. I’m moving in with Natalie.”

“Huh. That’s interesting. Does *Natalie* know that you’re moving in with her?”

Corwin shrugged. "I figured I'd tell her when I get there. Besides, it's what mates do, right? They live together."

"Yeah, but usually, they have a conversation about it first." Pippa popped up behind Jared, to offer her opinion. "Take Jared and me. We talked about it and we came to the conclusion that it makes sense for us to live here, since Jared's the alpha of the pack and all."

"Right. And that's why I'm moving in with Natalie. I figure she's the leader of your coven and I'm just the beta of the pack, so I can make the sacrifice and move in with her."

"Whoa." Pippa shook her head. "Look, I'm not telling you how to approach things with Natalie *or* how to handle your mate. I'm just saying you might want to *avoid* the word sacrifice when you have this conversation with her."

"But why? I figured it would work in my favor. You know, because I'm willing to give up my place in the den to be with her."

"Hm. But saying it kind of implies that she might *not* be worth it. The sacrifice, I mean."

"Of course, she's worth it. That's why I'm moving."

"Hopeless. You're utterly hopeless." Pippa threw up her hands and walked away.

"I don't get it."

"Well, don't look at me," Jared said. "We may be mates, but there's no understanding what goes on in her head. I don't know if it's because she's a woman or a witch or both, but all I'm saying is... good luck, man." With a shake of his head, Jared hurried after his mate.

Great. Well, that wasn't discouraging or anything.

Corwin climbed into the car and sat there a moment, contemplating everything Pippa had said, but finally he just shook his head, started the car and headed out of pack territory.

There really was no understanding women.



"So, let's hear it. What are your plans for claiming your mate?" Tempest demanded the next morning.

Natalie almost dropped her cup of coffee, she was so startled by the

question. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, come on, it was perfectly obvious by the time we went to bed last night, that you were ready to leap into the unknown with the crazy, tree-fighting wolf,” Jo said.

Natalie snickered. “I’m going to use that. From now on, I’m going to call him tree-fighter anytime he annoys me. It’ll be a perfect way to remind him that he’s a total moron.”

“Yeah, I doubt that’ll work,” Amari said.

Natalie slowly lowered her cup, shocked that Amari would say such a thing.

One of the other witches, sure, but Amari?

“Why would you say that?” Natalie asked.

“Because,” Amari said, “if you call the wolf tree-fighter, he’ll probably think you’re giving him a compliment.”

Rowan snorted. “Oh, man, you called it, Amari.”

“Yeah, I have to go with Amari on this one too,” Jo said. “Chances are, in wolfy world, tree-fighter is synonymous with virile hunter.”

“Strong warrior,” Morana offered as she entered the kitchen and headed for the coffee maker.

“Alpha King,” Amari giggled.

“*Wielder of the Penis*,” Tempest crowed.

Natalie burst into laughter. “Okay, you’re probably right. Damn it. I’ll have to think of another, better insult.”

“In the meantime?”

“In the meantime, I might possibly consider letting him claim me as his mate. Maybe.” She smirked over her coffee cup. “After I make him grovel and work for it, of course.”

“Oh, of course,” her coven sisters chorused back.

Rowan just shook his head and muttered, “Poor bastard.”

They were just finishing breakfast when the front door opened.

Natalie assumed it was Pippa arriving, so she was utterly shocked when Corwin appeared in the doorway with a backpack and—was that a suitcase?

Corwin strode across the room, abandoning his luggage at the door—it was a suitcase—lifted Natalie from her chair and kissed her.

Whatever questions or thoughts Natalie had upon seeing him this morning were gone in an instant.

All she knew, all she felt, was the heat of her mate against her,

obliterating the rest of the world, erasing everything else but him.

He pulled back just far enough to murmur against her lips, “Ah, sweet Natalie,” before sweeping his tongue back inside for another consuming, heated kiss.

Finally, he pulled back and asked, “So which room is yours? Upstairs, right?” He turned and walked back the way he’d come, grabbing his suitcase and backpack, then disappearing toward the back of the house.

Natalie stood there, stunned a moment, then shaking free of the daze his kiss had put her in, she glanced around at her coven, who were all grinning and staring at her.

She touched her lips. “What just happened?”

“I think your mate just moved in,” Rowan said.

The fuck?

Just like that?

Without even a conversation?

What the—

Natalie stormed from the room and headed up the stairs, vaguely aware of the coven scrambling after her.

Where the hell was he anyway? There’s no way he’d found her room on the third floor, but—

The sound of footsteps overhead told her he had.

Storming down the hall, she flung open the door at the end and raced up those stairs, her coven still following behind.

Natalie loved her attic room with the peaks of the roof and the fabulous dormers that gave a 360 degree view around the house.

But even more than the room, she adored the king-sized bed that took up a good portion of the space, that was spread under huge skylights that looked out on an endless sky.

It was on that bed that Corwin currently sprawled, looking very much like he belonged there.

“Mate!” he exclaimed jovially. “I love the bed and the view is stupendous. It’s like you created it with a wolf mate in mind. So close to nature, even when indoors.”

Well, damn. How was she supposed to respond to that?

“What are you doing here?”

“Moving in, of course. I figured I should be the one to move—you know, since you’re the High Witch of your coven and they probably need you here.”

Well, that was a nice gesture, she supposed.

Still he could have—

“So I said to myself, ‘Corwin, it’s a sacrifice, but someone’s gotta make it,’ so here I am.” He gave her a huge smile.

Natalie just stared at him.

Surely she hadn’t heard what she thought she had.

“Sacrifice?” she whispered.

“Sure. You know. Because someone has to move and it might as well be me.”

“Might as well be you.” She whispered that too, then glanced at her coven. “Am I hallucinating? Did he just say that moving in with me is a *sacrifice*?”



“UH.” Corwin slowly sat up and eyed his mate.

Maybe he should have listened to Pippa, after all.

He’d been so confident he had it all figured out.

After all, who *wouldn’t* see his gesture—the sacrifice he was willing to make for his mate—as something amazing and wonderful?

He’d been sure Natalie would be so grateful, she’d fall all over him and mating would instantly commence.

Somehow, though, based on the look on Natalie’s face, that outcome was unlikely at best.

In fact, her way of thinking seemed to parallel Pippa’s. Somehow, in their weird, womanly, witchy minds, being willing to make a sacrifice was a *bad* thing.

How was this even possible?

“Perhaps it’s too much to ask of you,” Natalie said. The words seemed right, but the bite to her tone told Corwin all was not well in his world.

“In fact,” she went on, “I think perhaps I should not *ask* such a terrible sacrifice of my mate.”

For one moment, Corwin’s heart leapt, thinking maybe he could have it *all*—his mate *and* his apartment at the den.

Then, she shattered that illusion. “*Perhaps*,” she said, “my mate should stay in his den and I will stay here at coven house and neither of us will need

to make *sacrifices* for the other.”

Shit.

He’d somehow messed this up and he had no idea how to fix it.

Wait.

Yes, he did.

“Did I say sacrifice? I meant honor. *Honor*. It is my honor and privilege to move into coven house to be with you, my beautiful, sweet, witchy mate.”

She scowled at him.

“Please? Love of my life?”

She folded her arms and tapped her foot.

He leapt to his feet, then crossed toward her. “Please, sweet mate of mine. Have mercy on your idiot wolf who doesn’t know any better.”

She rolled her eyes.

He was contemplating getting down on one knee—talk about a sacrifice—when a flash of white landed on Natalie’s shoulder, sending her stumbling forward.

Corwin caught her in his arms and immediately took advantage with a kiss.



“IT WORKED!” Soraya cheered. “I told you Moonbeam could do it. Good job, Moonbeam!”

“What are you talking about?” Tivali asked impatiently. “They’ve kissed before. I thought the whole point was to get the wolf to seem like a hero in Natalie’s eyes.”

“She’s kissing him back, isn’t she?”

“She’s *always* kissed him back,” Muezza said. “Kissing has never been the problem!”

“Well, what *is* the problem then?” Soraya demanded.

They fell silent as the coven crept down the stairs toward the second floor, leaving Natalie and her wolf in a clinch that went on and on and on.

The two stumbled toward the bed and fell into it, rolling across it, still kissing.

“Huh,” Muezza said.

“Told you,” Soraya said smugly. “There’s no problem at all, is there?”

“Not anymore,” Bygul said.

It really was strange how one kiss could cause all kinds of confusion or angst in a relationship, while another kiss, between the same couple, could be the one to make everything right again.

“Good job, team,” he said. “We’ll keep an eye on the couple, but I think they’ve finally got it figured out.”

“Just in time, too,” Soraya said. “Because I’ve got a cat in desperate need of a placement and I think he’ll make a pawsitively purrfect addition to this coven.”

Oh, great.



NATALIE HAD ALREADY DECIDED to accept the wolf as her mate before he even arrived at the coven house that day, so even though he was a bit high-handed moving in without even talking to her about it, she definitely appreciated the gesture.

Not that she was going to tell him that or anything.

And not that she didn’t plan on giving him a hard time, pretty much for the rest of his days, about his ‘somebody’s gotta make the sacrifice’ speech.

Yeah, he was never going to live that one down, but the minute Moonbeam landed on her shoulder and shoved her into Corwin’s arms, she decided to let it go, at least for now.

From that moment on, he was hers.

Or she was his.

And somehow, her epic, legendary, immortal love story began with a heated, passionate embrace that sent them rolling across her bed and tearing each other’s clothes off.

The moment they met skin-to-skin, her coven’s powers—*all* of them—surged and raged around the attic room.

Fire that rose and died under a raging thunderstorm.

Flowers that bloomed and long-dead bones that rattled underground.

Items that flew around the room and a thousand possibilities that exploded in her mind’s eye.

The past, the future, the ecstasy of now.

Corwin surged over her, capturing her mouth with his.

His tongue swept inside and all the possibilities floated away in the heat of his kiss.

Everything flying dropped to the floor and the bones fell silent in their graves.

The flowers wilted and the thunderstorm died, the fire dying with it.

Corwin captured her hands with his, wound their fingers together and staring into her eyes, sank deep.

“Corwin,” she gasped, struggling to get closer, breathing him in, desperate for something just out of reach.

Endless moments passed as they moved together, wrapped in their own world, heat rising.

“Natalie,” he groaned. “Sweet Natalie.”

There in the middle of the room, where most of her coven’s magic had already been spent, the last bit left in the staff, the final bit she’d never planned to use rolled through them, Amari’s sex magic exploding outward, making Natalie scream and Corwin roar in ecstasy.

They lay tangled together afterward, gasping for breath, completely destroyed.

“What,” Corwin gasped, “the hell.” He gulped for air. “Was that?”

Natalie wanted to giggle, but all that came out was a gasping puff. “Amari.” And that was pretty much all she had to say.

Corwin chuckled hoarsely. “If that happens every time, I may not survive.”

“Oh, goddess.” Natalie turned her head and kissed the part of him she could reach, which happened to be his chest, and that was fine with her. “But what a way to go.”



MOONBEAM WAS PRETTY sure that Soraya goddess-cat had tricked her.

Which shouldn’t be a thing, right?

Shouldn’t a goddess-cat be more noble or something?

Now she had an attic room that was a little bit wet from all the storming and a wolf in her witch’s bed, which she did *not* approve of at all.

Plus there were dead flowers and all kinds of soggy things all over the floor, including her toys, her cat bed and even her window perch.

Everything was wet.

So was Moonbeam's fur, which was completely unacceptable.

It took her hours of grooming to get her fur back into pristine condition, and by then, her witch and that thieving wolf had fallen asleep.

Without *her*!

Not only that, but the wolf had stolen her spot. He was sprawled across *her* pillow, cuddling *her* witch, and generally taking up entirely too much space.

Moonbeam jumped onto the bed and walked all over it, rubbing her cheeks and face all over every part of the bed she could reach.

She then stood and stared at the wolf and finally decided it was his own fault.

If he was going to sleep on Moonbeam's pillow, well then, his face would have to become *her* pillow.

Served him right.

She walked around him and the pillow several times before she finally decided on an approach.

She started at the top of the bed, first inching from the side, then from the back, until she was perfectly positioned right over his face.

She wiggled a couple moments, then slowly settled down until every part of his wolfy face was covered by her furry backside.

Ahh.

Pawsitively purrfect.

Moonbeam closed her eyes and let out a deep, rumbling purr.

Thank you for reading!



Looking for more Pawsitively Purrfect matches?
Grab your copies of [Tridents & Tails](#) and [Satan's Kitty](#) today.



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The Unveiled
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Wicked:
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ABOUT PEPPER MCGRAW

Pepper McGraw is a USA Today Bestselling Author of paranormal romance. Her life to date has sadly been paranormal-free, but she knows it's simply a matter of time before her fated mate finally appears. Until that glorious day arrives, she keeps herself busy writing (and reading) paranormal romances.

Pepper is a huge fan of all animals, but is especially fond of cats, and spends her free time volunteering at local shelters and for Trap-Neuter-Release programs. She's had the supreme honor of winning occasional head butts and meows from the local ferals in her neighborhood and has even convinced a few to come inside and adopt her as their own.

BROODY AND THE BEAST



LULU M. SYLVIAN

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Edited by: Michelle Cooper

BROODY AND THE BEAST

Magic is the best kept open secret in Belvoir County. Everyone knows it exists, but no one talks about it, they'd much rather talk about their chickens.

Love spells don't work.

They fade and break and shatter. But Paisley had thought she beat the odds with her ex. That is, until the day he snapped, and he didn't love her anymore.

Now hiding out in her grandmother's old home, Paisley is learning her lessons the hard way.

When she meets Eric, she makes it very clear to him and the power behind her magic, she did not wish for him. But she wants him. And he seems to want her. Will he understand her powers? Could he, a fireman, be with her, a fire starter?

It turns out she isn't the only one with a hidden, secret talent.

CHAPTER 1



PAISLEY

The laptop lay in a crumpled heap. The side with the monitor was folded and twisted, mostly separated from the base. Letter keys scattered around, mixed in with fragments of broken plastic and shattered glass. The computer had sailed through the air in a graceful arch before it crashed with a glorious smack against the granite counter and fell to where it currently lay on the tile floor.

The best friend a guy could ask for.

“Fuck!” I shook with rage.

The woman in the picture had a big toothy grin, a pointy little nose, and while she was mostly tan, her nose was pink and peeling from too much time in the sun. Her dark wet hair hung limp to her shoulders. She wore a surfer’s rash guard that exposed her lower abdomen, showing off a six-pack. The tiny string bikini barely covered her pubes. She had to shave her hoo-ha.

She had a surfboard under one arm, and the other around...

The best friend a guy could ask for.

Why did I have to look on social media this morning? Another hour and that stupid picture would have been gone, buried in the constant input of new images. But no, I checked in right now, and there it was: Dylan and that woman. A huge smile slashed across his stupid face. His blond hair stood up in a shaggy mess. He had a dark tan and his arm around the surfer chick. The girlfriend, the not-me.

I didn’t know he liked the beach so much. He complained constantly on one trip we had taken. Now that I thought back on it, he had been complaining about me. My bathing suit, my need for an umbrella, my

constant reminding him to put on sunscreen. And having to beg him to get in the water with me.

But what it all came down to, was me in a bathing suit. I should have recognized the signs.

The best friend a guy could ask for.

Stupid smiling couple, stupid little orange bikini bottoms, stupid surfer girl and her naked pubes.

That should have been me in the picture with Dylan. I had been his best friend once. Hadn't I? I only gave him a little nudge to see that I was the best thing to have ever happened to him. He said he loved me. Said it even after the effects of my little spell had faded away.

He agreed it was time to have kids. Didn't he realize he was agreeing to more than just all of a sudden there would be a baby in their lives, but that I was going to alter my body forever? Not every woman has the genetics that lets her body snap right back into pre-baby shape. And even if I could get back to my pre-baby weight, my hips had been wide even then.

I should have seen this coming the second he complained about stretch marks while I was pregnant. "Those will go away, won't they?"

If Dylan wasn't happy with the changes in my body, he should have gotten inside my head. Every ignorant comment he made had me doubting myself at every turn. I tried to explain that it took almost ten months for my body to change. I wasn't going to walk out of the hospital in pre-baby shape.

He had given me two years to get back into shape.

Two years. God, he was an asshole.

So now he's off traveling internationally to surfing competitions with that woman, and I'm living in Gran's old house with Terri-Ann and her family until I can get back on my feet.

Why did he have to write that? If he needed a best friend, he could have gotten a dog.

"Aunt Paise, you all right?" Twelve-year-old Vidalia slid into the kitchen in her stocking feet. She took a horrified look at the broken computer on the kitchen floor, and then at me. I was still on my ass at the table on the other side of the room. "What happened?"

I shrugged. "There was a spider."

Vida did one of those cartoon runs. Her feet moved, but she didn't go anywhere for a moment before her feet got traction. She crashed out of the kitchen as fast as she could.

“Mama! Aunt Paisley killed a spider with her computer! I think she’s crying.” That child couldn’t be quiet if she tried.

Terri-Ann burst into the kitchen and took one look at me.

“Oh Paisley, sweetie. What did that asshole do this time?”

I gestured at the laptop and tried to say something, but my words got trapped in a sob. I didn’t want to cry over Dylan.

He wasn’t worth it.

The baby thrashed and landed a round-house kick to a rib. I pressed against my distended abdomen, trying to relocate the offending foot.

Dylan was off gallivanting around the globe with his girlfriend who had maybe five percent body fat, and wore the skimpiest bathing suits, and scraps of clothing as cover-ups, and here I was half a globe away, a walking FUPA, and hugely pregnant with his second, and clearly unwanted, child.

Terri-Ann rubbed my back as my crying subsided into a fit of hiccups.

“You want a piece of cake?” she asked.

“Please.” I wanted to cram all the cake into my face. Something good had to have come out of the divorce. Right now, the only thing that seemed to come close to fitting that description was the tr s leche cake we had to celebrate my new-found marital freedom.

Terri-Ann busied herself around the kitchen pulling cake from the fridge and cutting me an obscenely large piece. My sister knew me, she knew I ate my feelings. And right now my feelings needed to be stuffed down with a cake chaser before Liv came back with her other cousin to see what was going on.

I was practically numb as Terri-Ann slid the cake in front of me, and I dug in. The fork slid into the sponge and the slight compression had milky white droplets form on the exposed edge. I should have been moaning in delighted anticipation.

Instead, I shoveled the piece into my mouth. I did pause in momentary admiration of the cake, so good, but my scarf-face needs were greater.

“You feel like talking about it?” Terri-Ann asked as she started to pick up the remains of my flying laptop.

“Uh, uh,” I grunted around the cake in my mouth. I swallowed and had a fork with more cake ready to replace it. “He’s in Australia with her. He posted a picture. Her bikini was like the size of a Band-aid.”

“Did he say something about the divorce being final?”

“No, he called her his best friend. I was his best friend. It’s like he’s

completely forgotten about all those years in college, and the year after graduation when I moved back, and he called me every day to tell me he missed having his best friend around.” I sniffed, and began eating again. “I had been his best friend.” I said around a mouthful of cake.

I had been his best friend, and desperately in love with him.

“When you finish that, why don’t you go wash your face and then take Liv to the park. You can get a little walk in. The fresh air will do you some good.”

I knew Terri-Ann was trying. She didn’t need me weighing her down. She had a family, kids, dogs, husband, chickens, and now she had me and Liv adding to everything. Sending us to the park got us out of her hair for a bit.

I understood. I’d rather make a nest on the couch and watch TV, but a good waddle around the park would probably do more for me than the guilt I would feel after I finished this piece of cake.

CHAPTER 2



LIV WHINED AND FUSSED AS I UNBUCKLED HER. SHE RAN HERSELF OUT AT THE park and struggled against sleep. I, too, felt like whining, but for vastly different reasons. I wasn't so tired that I couldn't stay awake. And that would last well into the wee hours.

Insomnia thought it was my BFF, right alongside heartburn. The two of them kept me up. So yeah, I wanted to whine and be tired. I wanted someone to carry me in from the car. I wanted a nap. I wanted... me, me, me.

Isn't that why Dylan left? My demands on him and his time were too self-centered. I wasn't taking his wants and needs into consideration. He didn't want or need me, how dare I impinge.

A knot formed in my gut. Guilt settled in like a rock, that or the kid was winding up for a roundhouse kick to the bladder.

With a groan, I hefted Liv out of the car. She lay limp as a sodden noodle and heavy as a bag of wet cement across my shoulder.

"Paisley Owens, let me get that for you."

I couldn't exactly spin, but I twisted my head around until I could see Nan Weiss striding firmly, if not a little slowly, in my direction.

"Nan Weiss!" I was pleased to see her still up and about. She had been Gran's neighbor my entire life. "How are you?"

"I'm a sight better than you are, dear."

I stepped back and gave Nan access to the back of the car. She leaned in and picked up my bag, the empty cup that still rattled with ice, and the crumpled up Sonic bag that smelled of old fries.

"Thank you so much," I cooed. "I was going to have to make a second trip once I got Liv inside."

“Terri-Ann told me you were coming for a stay. She mentioned...”

I sighed. Of course, sis would say something to Nan. I bit my lip, I really hoped that didn't mean the entirety of Duchamp and Belvoir County knew why I was home.

Duchamp was barely more than a crossroads. The college was pretty much the only reason there was a solid dot on most maps, and not simply a name identifying an area. There wasn't even a town square. Duchamp had a triangle. The college took up one side, with what was left of town on the other two.

It took the definition of small town to heart. Everyone knew everyone else, and they were all up in each other's business. When I was younger, Nan and Gran would sit out on the porch and drink sweet tea when they visited, and they talked about everyone. I guess it made sense that now Terri-Ann was the lady of the house that she would visit with Nan in a similar fashion.

I couldn't decide if it was better for everyone to already know why I was back, or to have to constantly answer the questions I would get when I finally decided to show my face at more than just the park.

“I'm sure she did,” I said.

“You get that girl settled down, and come on back for a chat,” Nan said as she followed me into the house.

It never occurred to me to tell Nan Weiss no. That would be like saying no to my own Gran, and that simply was never an option.

“Kid, you are going to have to stop growing,” I muttered as I hauled Liv upstairs to the guest room we were sharing.

She flopped back onto the mattress and let out a soft baby snore. The pediatrician was always telling me that babies don't snore when I questioned her about Liv's noises. I don't know what the pediatrician defined as a snore, but the rumbling through that kid's sinus passages was snoring as far as my friends, insomnia and heartburn, were concerned.

Nan had two tall glasses full of iced tea waiting when I returned downstairs. She knew her way around the kitchen as if it were her own. Then again, she had been friends with Gran for a long time before Terri-Ann and I were around.

I sat across the kitchen table from her. It felt odd. I had seen her and Gran in these exact spots so many times during my youth, now to be included. It felt weird.

“Do you get to visit with Terri-Ann much?” I asked.

“Not as much as I would like. She has her family, and I have my little hobbies to keep me busy.”

“You still run the Ladies’ Auxiliary? I remember you and Gran always fussing about one thing or another setting up your festivals and quilt shows.”

“Oh, I still keep my toes in it.” There was something almost mischievous about Nan’s smile. “Terri-Ann failed to tell me how big your little girl was. I was expecting a toddler.”

I snorted softly. “Liv was a toddler the last time Terri-Ann saw her. She probably fixed that image in her head.”

“Even so, she should have made accommodations when that little girl was chasing after her cousins. They are so much older than she is.”

I nodded. Vidalia didn’t have much patience for Liv. And Kurt was a boy, and allowed to get away with far too much damage because of it. I wish Liv had taken to the animals, they would at least return some semblance of affection. She wasn’t getting as much attention as I had hoped for.

“We try to get to the park, so she can have kids her age to play with,” I said. I didn’t want to hurt for my baby, but it was obvious to me that she needed a friend and her cousins were not filling the need.

“How old is she now?”

“Liv is four.”

“And?” Nan nodded at my belly.

I ran my hands over the roundness that was my second child. “Just about six months.”

“And the father?”

I let out a sharp laugh.

“That bad?”

I shook my head. “I was that stupid. He handed me the divorce papers the day I was going to tell him I was pregnant. I decided not to, and then I wouldn’t have to deal with custody issues. At least that’s what I thought. He doesn’t want to be a father, but he fights me over custody visits whenever he feels like it.”

Nan nodded back at my stomach. “That one will need a father, and your other one will too.”

“It’s not like I can go out dating right now. And I don’t want to, even if I wasn’t pregnant.”

Nan took a long sip of her tea. “It’s going to be a hot one tomorrow.”

Relief that the conversation shifted from me to the weather rolled over my

stiff shoulders.

“Kurt is a good boy, but he’s too rough. Instead of having little Liv play in the hose with her cousin and his bunch of rowdy boys, you should take her up to that park up near the Spring Mill.”

“Spring Mill? They have a playground there?” When I was little, we would go out there for field trips. The mill was some kind of ancient historical building, and the spring it was built over was even older. I didn’t remember there ever being a playground. It wasn’t that kind of park.

“They do, they even have one of those splash pads where tiny babies can run around and get wet.”

Terri-Ann hadn’t told me about it, and she had kids. How did Nan know about splash pads?

“My Tyler takes his babies up there.”

“Tyler? He’s got kids?”

Nan looked so proud as she nodded. “He’s got himself a really pretty wife. She raises prize cockerels out past Traitor’s Ridge. They have a nice place. She’s expecting, too, probably about as far along as you are.”

If he was still in town, I would probably run into him sooner than later. Maybe I could meet his wife. Liv wasn’t the only one around here who could use a friend.

“Well, this was lovely. Now that you’re back home, don’t be a stranger.” Nan patted the back of my hand as she pushed up to her feet. “Don’t you get up. I’ll see myself out.”

CHAPTER 3



I LEANED OUT ON THE RAILING AND LOOKED UP AT THE SKY, FRAMED BY THE dark shadows of the trees in Gran’s backyard. Terri-’s yard now. But this felt like a memory and not my here and now. This was exactly like that night when I had been nineteen and home from my first year at college.

I had fallen desperately in love with Dylan. He knew who I was, barely. This was where I hatched the plan and cast my intentions for him to fall in love with me over the next three years, so that by graduation there was no doubt in his mind that we belonged together.

I lowered my gaze toward the back edge of the property. The fire pit was still there. That night all those years ago, I made a mistake out of desperation to belong and to be loved for who I was.

I had suffered culture shock, going from Duchamp to a university outside of Cincinnati. Small town to big city. Okay, medium city, but to me, it had been huge. I had been the pudgy bumpkin from the land of y’all. It hadn’t been the best time of my life. I didn’t have confidence, and so I tried to change everything about me.

Everything.

I starved myself, only to drop ten pounds at most. My genetics have cursed me with a junky trunk and *boobs*—all the Os, they’re sizable and round, but not as round as the in between. So of course I was lured in by rakish good looks and charm. Dylan knew my name, said hi, and even occasionally acknowledged he knew who I was outside of class.

I was never going to be more to Dylan without a boost. And I laid out my plans to the moon and stars.

The fire pit flashed to life. “The fuck? I haven’t said anything.” I looked

up into the sky and flipped off the stars. “Come on! I’m not casting. What, I can’t even think about casting, and you respond like this? So rude.”

I stormed off the deck and picked up the bucket of ash that Terri-Ann’s husband kept next to the grill. At some point Terri Ann would work it into her compost heap, but for now I was going to use it to smother the accidental blaze I started in the back of the yard.

Covering the lower half of my face as a make-shift mask, I held my breath and dumped the bucket on the fire. It wasn’t much of one, fortunately. I guess strong memories jump started small fires. At least it went for something ready to burn, and didn’t begin smoldering in a pile of half dead leaves, making for a bigger problem.

I had been taught that use of magic always came with a cost. And in my case, that payment was exacted immediately in the form of flames. I always thought of it as the universe’s way of slapping my hand for doing something I shouldn’t be.

Terri-Ann would make food spoil, when she could get a casting to work. The magic was leaving our family bit by bit, generation by generation. I didn’t know how or when it would show up in Liv, or if she had magic at all.

Outside blood diluted the magic in our blood. Dylan was not from a place where the mountains were older than the continents. Liv was born away from this place, and distance definitely had an effect on my abilities. I hadn’t sparked a fire for years, and then Dylan told me he didn’t love me anymore.

Something in me broke the night I realized that my life had been nothing but a lie. I had been living the false reality created by a love spell that I had woven, and conveniently forgotten.

I had pulled out a candle, giving my flame a place to go. As hard as I wished and cast, the wick barely smoked. I was far from the source of my talents, I was broken.

“What are you doing out here? The mosquitoes are going to eat you alive?” Terri-Ann stood on the deck, smacking at her arms.

Funny, I didn’t notice any bugs. Maybe they didn’t like the taste of my pregnant blood.

“I was just thinking about crap, and look at me now, I’m back in Belvoir County.”

“I know that wasn’t your plan. But it really isn’t that bad here.” She jogged down the stairs and met me in the yard.

I sort of followed, but not really, as she strode over to her coop and

checked on the latches. There was an almost purring sound from within from the few birds still making noises.

“I used to let them roost outside in the summer until last year.”

“What happened?”

Terri Ann was more comfortable talking about the more immediate things. She steered away from my existential crisis and found a topic that wasn't out of her depth. My divorce left all of us untethered. I think it scared her as much as it did me.

“There were some freak accidents. Raccoons and foxes taking out whole flocks. I got nervous, so now I lock them up at night. I don't necessarily like it, because it means I absolutely have to get up at dawn to let them out before it gets too hot. But I like knowing my chicks are safe.”

She rattled another latch and turned to me with a deep sigh. “I know this isn't your idea of a good life, but I'm glad you came home. I like knowing you're safe, and not out there alone without that man.”

I stepped in close and leaned my shoulder against hers. Home. I wasn't sure if Duchamp was still home, but there was security in familiarity. This was the kind of place I could let Liv ride a bike around— when she was a bit older and could ride a bike. This was the kind of place that still had roaming herds of feral children every summer.

My hand ran over the baby bump. Maybe if I could manage to get a few clients, I could work remotely, allowing me to stick around? I'd have to weigh my options. With a quick glance back at the fire pit as we headed to the house, I realized I'd have to watch my wishful thinking. I shook my head. That hadn't even been a cast, just the memory of one.

CHAPTER 4



THE WATER PARK AT SPRING MILL WAS THE BEST SUGGESTION EVER. LIV squealed and danced and would not leave the water. There were no bigger kids hogging the hose or making her wait for her turn while they purposefully left her out like her cousins did.

I saw a few familiar other moms, and tried to wave. I didn't know why I bothered. I didn't need them to come dancing up to me like the kids did, but a nod or recognition would have been nice.

"Mommy, mommy, mommy!" Liv ran toward me, dragging another little girl along. They were both giggling, so I wasn't going to be too worried about it.

"Mommy!"

"Yes, baby?" I asked as soon as they stopped running. They didn't stop moving, both squirming and giggling with some conspiracy between them.

"We're twins!"

They wore the exact same bathing suit, and they both had their hair in ponytails. Best guess, they were the same age, and roughly the same height. But they were far from twins. Liv had a tan, but it was nothing compared to the brown of the other girl's skin. And she was as skinny as she could be, while Liv was an adorable butter-ball baby.

I put on my shocked face and made a real show of looking at them back and forth.

"But you're the one calling me Mommy, so you're my Liv. Right?"

They danced around and traded places a few times. Liv poked the other girl. "You can't tell now, can you, Mommy?" She hesitated on the name, like it was unfamiliar, or more likely uncomfortable calling someone else

Mommy. But they both giggled.

I pulled her into a wet hug. "I would always know my Livy."

"Mommy!" Liv was affronted, but she continued to smile and giggle. "I'm Liv!"

I looked in shocked horror at the giggling child in my arms. They were four. Of course, I was going to let them think they won this.

"Excuse me?" A deep voice with a firm, hard tone made me flinch a little.

I turned to see a man who looked like he was in daddy-bear mode glower in my direction. He didn't exactly match the girl I was still hugging, but I knew that didn't mean anything. The glower said everything, and the scar across the left side of his face made that glower pretty scary.

The not-Liv child giggled and squealed, "Daddy!" Confirming my suspicions.

"Oh, thank goodness you're here," I started. "Our children are obviously twins, separated at birth. I can't tell the difference between them. Can you?" I bugged my eyes out at him and really hoped he clued in fast.

Tension immediately left his face. He grinned and gave me a wink. In that split second, he transformed from this kid's intimidating father to an extremely good-looking man, ridiculously so. The scar couldn't hide the man's good bone structure. With a strong jaw and one of those clef dimples in his chin, no, this guy was not to be assessed with the lens I was currently looking at him with. Since suddenly becoming single, my personal rule was men who were fathers meant they were married, and therefore they could never be good-looking to me. They weren't for me to think of, ever. I didn't poach other women's men.

His wink made something flutter in my chest that should not have shifted. I set out the hounds of proprietary behavior after that winged flicker to seek and destroy.

"Sarina, which one are you?"

The girls giggled. Sarina danced away from my arms.

"I'm Sarina! Fooled you!"

He clutched his chest. "I'm so shocked, how will we ever tell them apart?"

"Whichever one of you is Liv, come here please," I asked.

Liv danced over to me. I spun her around and pulled her single ponytail out and let her hair hang loose. "I think that will help. Now they don't match exactly."

“Mommy!” Liv whined. “We want to match. Please.”

Both of these children turned to me with the biggest puppy dog sad eyes that ever existed.

“Fine.” I put Liv’s hair back up, and then pulled an extra hairband out of my bag and put it on her wrist. “You have to wear this, so we can tell you apart.”

“I will.” She grabbed her new best friend’s hand, and they ran back into the fountain.

Nan had been right, this was a good park. Plenty of kids for Liv to play with, and she had already made a friend.

“It looks like our girls have decided to be friends. May I?”

I looked up and the man— he was just a man, if I told myself that he was a perfectly generic parent type, and not overly tall, maybe it would be true. He most definitely did not have rakish curls that fell across his brow— gestured at the bench.

“Sure.” I scooted a little closer to the edge, giving him plenty of room.

Did he not understand the etiquette of bench sitting? He sat close to me, as if there was a person on the other side and the only space left was in the middle.

“Eric Dupree.” He stuck his hand out to shake.

The name sounded familiar, then again every other name in this county would be familiar.

“Paisley Taylor— Owens,” I corrected. “Nice to meet you. How old is Sarina?”

“She just turned four in March,” Eric said.

I laughed. “They are even more alike than having the same taste in swimwear. Liv’s birthday is in March.”

“The thirteenth?”

His grin did not show off perfect teeth that had me thinking about playing dentist with my tongue. I was not thinking those thoughts. This was Sarina’s dad, not a man.

“No, Liv’s is the twentieth. That would have been entirely too much of a coincidence.”

I scanned out to where the girls and other kids were playing. There was a small pod of moms that kept glaring in our general direction. When I had arrived at the park, they had already been well established, and did not look very approachable. They were even less welcoming now.

I leaned a bit toward Eric as if I was going to share a secret. “What social faux pas have I done?” I nodded in the direction of the women as they hovered in a pod with their strollers and community snack effort. Maybe they were a mom’s group, and I was simply over tired and reading the whole thing wrong.

But I had seen them before at the other park. I recognized the one with the blue hair. It was a distinctive feature.

“Why do you assume it’s you who has done something wrong?” Eric asked. His voice was just a normal voice. There was nothing special about it, or him.

“Because I tend to do stupid things,” I confessed.

“Yeah? They tend to give me the stink eye, so I’m pretty sure it’s me they’re glaring at.”

“Why would they glare at you?” I managed to shut my mouth, and bite my lips together before I said anything more, like telling him he was gorgeous, and I would want to stare at him for different reasons.

He managed a shrug before Liv and Sarina came running back.

“Daddy, Liv doesn’t have a daddy. You need to be her daddy.”

Eric gulped and looked completely caught off guard. He looked at me with abject panic in his eyes. I was pretty certain I started blushing.

“Um, that’s not how it works, sweetie. But that’s so very kind of you,” I managed to say.

“Sarina is my twin. We’re sisters. She doesn’t have a mommy. See, we’re sisters,” Liv explained with heartfelt intensity.

I blinked a few times. Oh, this changed a few things.

“I don’t think they realize they are setting us up,” Eric chuckled.

“Of course not. Livy, baby, we should probably get dried off and head home.”

“But I wanna stay with my sister!” She wailed.

Sarina started sniffing too. Great, I was the bad guy.

“How about this, why don’t we agree to meet back here again next week?” Eric looked at me with raised brows.

“I think a play date at the park sounds like a very good idea.”



ERIC

The last thing I wanted to do was scare this woman off. So far we had dodged the combined glares of Lana Higgins and her cronies. It was like she still hadn't forgiven me for letting her dump me before she knew who my parents were. But the worst offender was my own daughter.

I closed my eyes and tried not to groan too loudly when Sarina, in all of her innocence, demanded that I now be her friend's father.

I tried hard not to stammer when I invited Paisley and Liv for a picnic in a week. "Same place, same time, next week?"

My heart clenched from the fear and panic I saw on Paisley's face. She was mortified, and there I was, my big bulky self. Not that I noticed, but I towered over her by almost two feet. And with my face the way it was, I knew I didn't exactly have a friendly countenance. I hadn't voluntarily smiled for a few years. Well, unless I was talking to or about my beautiful star, Sarina. So why did I feel like smiling when I found out Paisley was single?

Why did I want to run and play with Sarina in the water like a happy child when she agreed to meet us again next week?

I watched Paisley bundle her daughter, Liv, up and load her into a minivan. I let out a small laugh. We drove the same car. And then it hit. The gut punch was always unexpected. How could I smile at another woman?

Janelle's smile was the definition of beauty. And the day we picked up the new van, she had been nothing but smiles. Her long braids swung over her shoulders. She wore a flaming orange dress, and was round with our child, she was my sun on a dreary late winter afternoon. She was the sun, and I was a rock troll, or maybe an orc.

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather have an Escalade?" I knew I would have rather had an SUV. I fit better in the bigger cars.

"Trust me, you are going to love the minivan. Especially when the kids are old enough to climb in on their own."

She reached out her hand and took mine as we waited for the car dealer to finish getting the vehicle ready. I loved her so much at that moment. We had our whole lives ahead of us. Our family was on the verge of greatness with the anticipated birth of our first, our baby girl Sarina.

Janelle enjoyed driving her van. She only had a few weeks with it, but she had been so happy.

I tightened my jaw and clenched my teeth. I glowered at the back of

Paisley's van as it drove away. How dare I find a moment of joy at discovering I drove the same van. It wasn't my van, it had been Janelle's.

CHAPTER 5



PAISLEY

“Paise!” Ash Weiss came crashing through the back door as if he were ten and just learned I was back from camp. I was so taken aback by the memory, I honestly expected his cousin Tyler to follow him in and bounce off his back.

I couldn’t help but laugh. It was such a sharp memory. Ash bursting in through the door, surprised, shocked, and expectant. I was back, it was time to play.

I found out years later, that was just how he walked into Grandma’s house, bursting in like a mini explosion shocked to see where he was. Gran never seemed to be bothered by it, she never once scolded him or reminded him of his manners to knock. She was glad he and Tyler felt as comfortable in her home as in his home.

“I guess some things never change,” I said through a giggle. Some things had. Ash had grown up quite well from the look of things.

He had been one of those good-looking but slender kids in high school. It didn’t stop the girls from cooing over his muscles, but it looked like in my years away, those muscles had muscles of their own.

“Are you going to just sit there or come give me a hug?” He teased.

I made a production of getting to my feet, making sure to really push the belly out in front of me. I was playing this for sympathy. It was lost on the man. He leaned over and squeezed. It was a great big bear of a hug, but not so much that he got my middle involved.

“You haven’t changed a bit,” he lied.

“Ash Weiss, are you seriously going to look at me in my monstrously

pregnant glory and tell me I haven't changed?"

"You're still short and round." He bopped me on the nose.

I rolled my eyes. "I forgot I hated you," I moaned.

"Yeah, ya do." He crossed the kitchen and opened a cupboard and pulled out a glass before opening the fridge and filling it with lemonade.

"I can't believe you still act like this is your place."

"Your sister doesn't seem to mind. And besides, Nan sent me over." He parked himself across the kitchen table from where I had been sitting moments before.

"Does she need anything?"

"She told me that you needed a job."

I was perplexed. Where had she gotten that idea? She wasn't wrong, but I hadn't mentioned it to anyone. I didn't know if I wanted to stick around here or not. And if I was going to stick around, I definitely needed a job.

I was never good at keeping my emotions off my face. I must have had a blank 'huh?' all over me.

"Don't give me that look. Like you could be a fireman. No. Nan said you used to be some kind of graphics designer, and well, I need help."

"Sure, yeah, I was a designer. I mean, I am a designer. Ah..."

"What?"

"My laptop broke. So unless you have a computer I can use, I'm not going to be much help to you."

A wide grin spread over Ash's face. "I have a computer, I have a color printer. I have a project. And I can pay."

"Well, that's probably a good thing. Why do you need a designer for the fire department?"

Ash leaned back in his chair and took a long sip of lemonade. "Every year we put out a thematic fundraising calendar. The past few years, the printing company provided design services. They charged us a pretty penny. But we more than make up for it in online sales. They no longer are doing the design part, and told me I needed to hire a designer. We have a huge international following, it's crazy. I can't not put out a calendar this year."

That still didn't explain why he was trying to hire me, unless...

"Nan put you up to this, didn't she? She didn't say I was looking for a job just as you happened to need a designer. I bet she said instead of paying the printer, you pay me. Am I right?"

Ash shrugged. "Well, you aren't wrong."

“Tell me about the calendar,” I said with a sigh of resignation. Nan was involved, and that woman always managed to get her way. I didn't have any reason to struggle over it, it would happen either way. Maybe that's how she did it, created a reputation and expectation, and everyone just resigned themselves to it.

“Does that mean you'll do the job?” He asked eagerly.

“As long as you can provide a computer, so I can access my programs in the cloud, then yes, I'll do it.”

“But you don't even know what it's about.”

“Seriously Ash?” It was my turn to cross to the fridge for a drink. This time I didn't play up the barge-ness of my condition. “It's a fireman's calendar. It's all beefcake and muscles halfway in your gear. I'm not dumb. You aren't going to have an international following of your calendar if it was geared toward kids. Pecs and pets are a thing. So do you have a theme for this year? Posing with puppies from an animal shelter?”

He let out a hearty chuckle. “We do that at the annual Chicken Holiday Fest. We have a ninety percent adoption rate.”

“That's really good. So no puppies? Kittens?”

“Paise, how long have you been gone? This is Belvoir County we pose with—”

“With your cocks out.” I couldn't help myself. I dissolved in giggles.

“As you said, pecs and pets, or in this case, chickens and chests. We have a photographer lined up for next week. It would be great if you could be there.”

Seriously, fit firemen all oiled up and cuddling with some of the finest show chickens in the state? “I'm in, I'm so in.”

“Oh, that's just terrific.”

“Could I come by sometime this week to get the computer situated? You could give me details on what you normally do, what you think I might be able to add to this project, you know that kind of thing?”

“Tell you what,” Ash started. “You come by anytime. Bring your little girl. While you and I go over the calendar, the guys can show her the truck. Kids love the trucks. As long as no one tries to set the school gym on fire for a senior prank, or calls us to check out someone's smokehouse, we should be fine.”

“Ash Weiss, I swear you don't have the manners of a prize hog,” Terri-Ann exclaimed as she stepped into the kitchen.

“How's it goin' Terri-Ann?”

“I see you helped yourself to the lemonade,” she snipped.

“Stop your fussing, Nan sent me over to talk to Paisley.”

Terri-Ann immediately turned to me. Her eyebrows were up by her hairline.

“Ash is going to have me working on the calendar this year. Maybe working is what I need to do to keep my mind off everything,” I told her.

She shifted her distrusting gaze to Ash.

“It was Nan's idea,” he said with a shrug.

Terri-Ann grabbed her own glass of lemonade. “It's not a bad idea. Give you a chance to have adult conversations.”

“What do you call this?” I gestured at her and Ash.

“This is a chat, and the neighbor being friendly. Does it count as a conversation?”

I stared at Ash, there was the jerky kid I remembered. Always the smart ass. “Who put you in charge of the fire department?”

I turned my gaze to Terri-Ann. “Seriously, who thought that was a good idea?”

Ash laughed in self-confidence. It was not a quality he was lacking in any quantity.

“Come to the station, talk about something other than chafing nipples and blue dogs. I mean, that's all you talk about with the other mothers down at the park, right?”

I may have pressed my wrists against my boobs. The mention of chafing nipples brought back unpleasant memories.

“Excuse you, how do you know what women at the park talk about? You aren't married, are you?” I would have thought that Nan would have mentioned it if Ash had gotten married.

“Believe it or not, we get quite a few 911 calls about sore nipples. And every generation has a blue cartoon dog. Tyler's kids are obsessed with one right now.”

“And if I come down to the station, how are the conversations different? No chaffed nipples?”

Ash smirked. “Oh, there are plenty of discussions about chafed nipples, but not from breastfeeding.”

He leveled a stare at me, daring me to get him to say more. It was something he used to do to get me into trouble. I couldn't decide if it was

endearing or annoying that Ash was so much the same as he ever was. I must have won the stare-off because he stood with a resigned exhalation. “So you’ll come to the station?”

“Absolutely. I’m in,” I confirmed.

He gave me a killer, dazzling smile, the kind of smile that made me very, very glad I grew up with his shit so that I could never see him as attractive. Because he was heartbreaker attractive, and I knew that smile had landed him in all kinds of trouble over the years.

Terri-Ann watched him leave. She was still and quiet long after the door slammed shut. The smallest sigh left her lips, and then she shook herself.

I did not need to know that my sister still had a crush on him. I didn’t need it, and definitely didn’t want it.

“He’s right, you know. You might even find a man down at the station.”

I looked at her like she sprouted snakes for hair. I was very confused and frozen in place. It took a moment before I shook it all off. “Of course I’d find men at the fire station, they work there.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she hemmed and hawed.

“I know what you meant. Nan said something about getting me a man the other day, and earlier at the park this little girl tried to set me up with her father. Now that was awkward. Why is it that everyone thinks I need a man? Look at me? I’m not in dating condition.”

“Well, you’re not in...” She trailed off. I have no idea what she thought she was going to say.

I was in single-mother condition in a big way.

CHAPTER 6



CHICKENS OF ALL BREEDS AND SIZES CLUCKED AND PECKED AROUND THE station.

“Is this a farm or a fire station?” I asked as I waded through their feathery little bodies.

“Hey Paisley!”

I looked up from my fear of stepping on a chicken to see Claudette waving at me. She lounged in a folding camp chair next to a folding table covered in boxes of doughnuts and coffee.

On the other side of the table was a gray drop screen background that reminded me of picture day from school. There was also a ridiculous amount of photography equipment and lights. A few people dressed in all black were fussing with the equipment.

“What’s going on?” I asked as I pointed to the hay bales stacked in front of the backdrop.

“They’re taking pictures,” Claudette told me. But she said it in a way that dripped with ‘how dumb are you?’

“With that?” I jabbed my finger at the backdrop. It gave off photo portrait studio vibes. There was nothing sexy about it. Nothing, it was negative sexy.

“Sure thing. They use that every year,” she said.

“Wait? Really? Do you have a calendar I can look at?”

“No, but Ash should be in his office.” She hitched her hand over her shoulder and pointed back at the station.

A few men were standing around chatting. One or two were curing heavy barbells to get their arms beefed up for the photos. Well, at least they knew to do that. But this shoot so far looked like a disaster waiting to happen.

I knocked on the door frame to Ash's open office. "Hey, you don't happen to have a copy of last year's calendar, do ya?"

I kept forgetting to ask to look at a previous calendar. I didn't necessarily need to see one, I knew what beefcake calendars tended to look like. But now I was worried about the photos.

"Sure." He wheeled his chair around, opened a drawer, and pulled out a calendar.

I flipped through the months. This was as generic and dull as it could be. The photos really did have that school, yearbook, picture day vibe. There were three different themed background settings, and then a fireman holding a chicken or two. That was it. As far as beefcake went, it was pretty dull.

"You're having the photo shoot here at the station, but there are no pictures of trucks or the station at all," I said as I kept flipping through the calendar.

Ash shrugged. "Never have before."

"And you have an international following with this?" I was now brandishing the calendar like a floppy sword.

"You think you can do better?" he asked.

"That's why you hired me."

"No, I hired you because the printer no longer offers layout services."

I looked back through the calendar again. "Yeah, they weren't doing you any favors there." I turned to walk back outside. "I'm fixing this."

"Don't fa- screw it up!" Ash called out after me.

"I don't think I could make it worse if I tried."

I stormed past the men milling about, a mini ball of indignant designer fury. I stopped, pivoted, and stormed right back up to the guys.

"Hey," I started. "We need the big truck out. You, you, and you"—I pointed to three of the guys—"start pumping, we need your arms and chest swol. The rest of you start washing the truck, we need lots of water buckets, and lots of foamy soap. The more foam, the better."

"Did you just say swol?"

"I did, I need you pumped, and oily." I continued my little designer rampage over at the portrait set up. "Who is in charge here?"

A middle-aged man with snowy white facial hair and a belly like mine swaggered up to me. "I am, how can I help you out, little lady?"

If he hadn't called me little lady, I wouldn't have automatically assumed he was a chauvinist who expected me to sit around in a kitchen all day with

no shoes because I was pregnant. But the old southern pointy beard and twirl-able mustache combined with those words had me bristling in city transplant indignation. It didn't matter if I was born and raised here.

I sucked in a breath and pointed at his set-up with two fingers. "The only pictures happening with this backdrop are of the birds. Find the best looking examples here. I know these are show quality fowl, let's get some good glamour shots of them."

"But this setup is for the men."

"Not anymore. Now who here is your assistant photographer?"

The old guy blinked at me a few times as if he had never encountered a woman who knew how to speak her mind. Or like he didn't have a clue who I was, and I had just come over here and railroaded him, and I was jumping to all kinds of conclusions because of two words.

"Sorry, sorry. I'm Paisley. Ash hired me to do the design work on this calendar. I was an art director before"—I pointed at the pregnant belly. "We are going to level up the photos this year. More action shots."

"Yes!" Claudette cheered behind me.

I turned and gave her a hard look. "Claudette, why are you even here?"

"It's picture day. I'm here for the show."

I shook my head. "Nope, no free show for you."

If there was one thing I knew about Claudette, she was boy crazy. Or at least she had been in high school. A few years older, she was Terri-Ann's age, and one of her friends, so I knew all about her. Well, at least all about her ten years earlier.

"Paisley Owens, I swear, you are no fun." She crossed her arms and seemed to sink deeper into her chair.

Suddenly I had a young man holding a camera standing between me and Colonel Sanders, the photographer. I gazed at the guy, he was holding onto a camera.

"You know how to use that?"

"Yes, ma'am."

I cringed. I wasn't old enough to be ma'am-ed. But I was, I was pregnant, and this young man was definitely younger than me by at least five, if not more, years.

"And you are?"

"This here is Jamie. I think he will be perfect for your action shots. That's what the truck is out for, right?"

I needed to reassess my judgement genes. This photographer knew his business better than I did, and I was... I would blame the hormones if anyone called me on my bullshit. I smiled at the older man, he knew exactly what was going on.

“Claudette, if there is anyone here who understands the female gaze, it's going to be you,” I said.

She gave me one of those up and down assessment looks. “And you don't?”

“I hate all men right now...” I stopped before I could finish my sentence.

Eric Dupree strolled by. He didn't see me, or he was blatantly ignoring me. Okay, maybe I didn't hate all men.

Claudette followed my gaze. “Oh, yeah, you hate all men right now. That Eric Dupree is a beast.” I didn't know if she was aware that she was muttering out loud.

Turning back to me she smirked, sucked her lips into her mouth, and bit her lips shut. Her eyes went big and wide. She totally knew she had said that out loud.

“Okay, maybe not all men,” I softly chuckled. “The point is, you have a very hungry cougar perspective.”

“I'm not that old,” she complained.

I glared at her.

Jamie cleared his throat.

We both looked at him.

“Don't worry, I've got this. I know exactly what vibe you're going for.” He gave us a little half smile.

Claudette sashayed up to him and hooked her arm through his. “Oh are you...?”

“Let's just say we have similar tastes.” He winked at me, and the two of them headed toward the crew that was starting to wash the truck.

“Don't forget to include the chickens,” I called out after them.

“Don't worry, we'll make sure the pictures are full of cocks!”

“What was that all about?” A deep rumble of a voice caught me off guard.

I turned, my heart in my throat, and that stupid flutter of excitement flitting around behind my sternum.

“Eric!” I gasped. “What are you doing here?”

He circled his hands together and pointed back at the truck bay. “Work?”

“You’re a fireman?” Of course, someone built like him would be a fireman. He was large and strong and could probably lift me without breaking a sweat. And now that I was putting two and two together, his scar did look like a burn.

I gulped, which was difficult with my dry throat. “Are you one of the models?”

He laughed. It was a good laugh

“No one wants to—”

“I’m going to stop you right there. If you say no one wants to see you without a shirt on, I am going to tell you, you are wrong. Really wrong. Now, if you don’t feel comfortable taking photos without a shirt, that’s not a problem.” I have no idea where the balls I seemed to suddenly have had come from, but I reached out and rolled up the already tight sleeve on his t-shirt. I patted the bicep I exposed. “That’s all the skin that’s really needed.”

I froze with my hand splayed over his muscled arm. What the hell had just happened?

“My arms aren’t the problem. My face is.”

I stared up at him and had to blink a few times. What? His face was classical, brooding and dark. He was... well, I had to step away from my hormones for a minute and really look at him. Heavy forehead with thick eyebrows, perfect high cheekbones, and a strong hard jaw. Okay, maybe not everyone’s cup of tea, but he was stunningly attractive, with that natural coloring that put high color across his cheeks and made the stubble on his chin look blue. The scar that started on his temple, tilted the corner of his eye down slightly, and cut into his cheek really wasn’t that distracting. At least not to me.

A brilliant plan formed instantly. “Come with me.”

We stopped next to the older photographer. He turned to me with a chicken cradled in one arm, pausing mid-direction to another assistant who was doing her best at getting a fluffy Silkie to focus on her and the fat worn between her fingers.

“I have an idea. How many baby chicks can you get your hands on?”



I don't know how that woman did it, but within minutes of asking the photographer if he could get chicks, I was covered in them.

"What are you doing?" I asked as Paisley pulled the back of my t-shirt tight.

"It's called styling. You are fit, but it's lost under the baggy shirt. And this way people can see that."

"Why don't you just ask me to take the shirt off?"

She twisted around and looked up at me. I had to move my arm to see her clearly.

"You said no one wanted to see you, so I figured that meant you were uncomfortable showing skin." She shook her head at me like I was missing a few brain cells. Around her, I probably was.

I had no compulsion about hiding my body. I had meant my disfigured face. But she had a plan and I really wanted to indulge her.

There was a lingering twinge of guilt as she made me want to smile. Janelle liked it when I smiled, I didn't scare her off. And I think she would have liked Paisley. I wanted to think she would approve.

My shirt jerked and pulled against my torso.

"There. You won't be able to twist around a lot, but that should hold."

"What did you do?"

"I tied your shirt. Now we need a bucket of water."

I didn't want to ask. I had a sneaking suspicion I was about to be the wet t-shirt model. Should I tell her the whole point of a wet t-shirt is that white t-shirts get see-thru? It's not just the cling, it's the cling and peak of skin that really does the trick. My shirt was uniform issue, it was dark blue, getting it wet would only make it darker.

"Hey guys, can we get a hose over here?"

"Shit! No!" I yelled. "Don't ever ask a firefighter for a hose. What we have here are basically large format pressure washers. It hurts."

"Oh, oops." She was too cute. Her mouth pursed together in a little O and her eyes went wide. "I guess that's why they use them during riots?"

"Yeah. You want my shirt wet? Then get a bucket. But I don't think getting my shirt wet will help get it any tighter. You might even stretch it out."

She turned and looked at me. She was trying to be professional, but I saw a blush turn her cheeks pink. Her chest also flushed. How far down did that color go?

“You’re right. But your hair needs some help, and I think... we need it wet, trust me.”

“Fine.” Striding over to where the guys were filling buckets to start washing the truck, I sank my head into one of the buckets. I shook my hair out and slicked it back from my brow before returning to her.

“Better?”

I wanted to laugh when all she did was stare up at me and nod, her mouth slightly open. I hadn’t had anyone look at me with that much appreciation for a very long time. Most women tended to just look nervous when I was around.

Paisley pointed at the hay bales. “You go sit there.” She turned away from me and began yelling. “Hey, Claudette, do you have any hair gel?”

“I’ve got some in my kit,” one of the photographers said.

“Oh, good, can I get some?” Paisley changed direction and walked back to the table covered in photography equipment.

The next thing I knew, she was standing in front of me, her breasts at face level, and she was running her hands through my hair. A moan of pleasure escaped my throat. Shit. Paisley smelled good. I could feel her warmth. It wouldn’t take much for one of those breasts to touch my face.

Damn, that would be a bad idea. I didn’t need to be hitting on a pregnant woman. I didn’t even know if she really was single. All I had was a four-year-old’s word on the situation. What did a four-year-old know? Well, for one, they knew if they did or didn’t have a mommy or a daddy.

“I’m sorry about the awkward comments Sarina made the other day. You know how kids are.” If I didn’t say something to distract me from the proximity of her body, I could very possibly do something stupid.

Her fingers slid through my hair, and she did something that would supposedly make me more attractive. She had a big job on her hands.

“Brutally honest? A little misguided? Completely oblivious to the fact that just because they are in the same bathing suit, they don’t actually look the same?”

“That was pretty damn cute of them,” I said.

“It really was. Liv has been asking about going back to the water park all week.”

“So we’re still on for tomorrow?” I asked.

“Of course we are. We didn’t really set a time,” she pointed out.

“Lunch. I’ll bring the sandwiches if you bring the drinks.”

“That sounds like a plan. So what awkward comments were you referring to?”

She moved my hair around so part of it fell in my face. She was a smart woman. Standing back, she looked at me, but not at me the person, me the work she was sculpting for this calendar. With a twist that somehow put her breasts dangerously close again, she called back at the photographer. “How’s the lighting? Are the chicks ready?”

“I’ve already tested the lighting when we set up. Kayla is bringing the chicks now.”

“What exactly is it you want me to do?” I asked.

“I want you to sit there and hold as many baby chicks as you can.” She approached me again and began rolling up my shirt sleeves.

Damn, she was touching me again.

“Be sure to flex. What were you saying about Sarina?”

I closed my eyes and committed the feel of Paisley’s fingers against my skin to memory.

“That crazy bit where I should be Liv’s father. I’m sure your husband didn’t find that nearly as funny as I think the girls did.”

Paisley cleared her throat and stepped away from me. “Yeah, that was kind of awkward. I don’t think they quite understand that you can’t step outside your relationship to parent another. So that was probably more awkward for you. I’m divorced. Liv’s father has had very little to do with her, and doesn’t even acknowledge this one.”

“Oh, shit, Paisley, that’s rough. I’m sorry for your situation. We lost Sarina’s mother. She’s been obsessed with the idea of having two parents, but she’s never known it. It must be tough to have known it and then to suddenly not have it any longer.”

I caught the sadness in her smile as she blinked back a few tears.

“I’m so sorry for your loss. It sounds like we are both in hard spots. Oh, chickees. Aren’t they sweet?”

The arrival of a box of squeaking fluff distracted Paisley better than anything I could have said. The look of delight as she scooped one small chicken out of the box was magical.

“Here hold this.” She handed me the bird.

And then she and the photographer's assistant, Kayla, began placing chicks all over me like I was some kind of chicken Christmas tree, and they were the ornaments.

“Smile,” the photographer said.

I smiled.

“Maybe, try glaring at the camera instead. You know, be all broody.”

Kayla snorted. “Broody, you made a chicken joke.”

The little birds were moving around and jumping out of the shot. Paisley picked up one escapee and looked deep into its little chicken eyes. “I wish you would behave.”

She must have been some kind of chicken whisperer. Suddenly, all the little birds stayed relatively still.

“Remember to flex,” she told me.

With arm loads of chicks, I flexed and looked angry at the camera. Paisley seemed entertained. She smiled and bit her lower lip.

I caught a whiff of smoke. My head was on a swivel as I gathered up chicks and tossed them into the box.

“Fire! Shit, shit, shit, shit.” Paisley sounded panicked.

A split second later, I was doused with Mono-ammonium phosphate as one of the guys sprayed down the hay bales. White foam covered half of me and the entire setting. I joined the guys in kicking down the bales. A few buckets of water poured over everything ensured whatever little spark had caught was well and truly out.

“Please tell me you caught all of that?” Paisley stared intently at the photographer.

“I sure did. I think we got some good action shots with that one.”

CHAPTER 7



PAISLEY

“Are we there yet?” Liv asked for the ten billionth time since we left the house all of fifteen minutes earlier.

“Almost, stop asking. The more you ask, the longer this is going to take.” The problem was I understood her excitement.

Anticipation was doing springboard, diving board tricks in my middle. Or was that the baby spinning like a dervish? I was antsy. And I knew why. Eric.

Of all the beef cake hunky men that had been walking around with their shirts off, or tantalizingly unbuttoned around me all day, he had been the only one that made thinking difficult. And we were meeting at the splash pad for an early lunch.

Date.

Only I couldn't call it a date. Our kids were playing together, there was nothing else to it. A play date was not the same thing as a date. This wasn't a date.

So then why the hell had I actually spent time curling my hair? Why was I wearing makeup? And why did I have a panic attack when he suggested I bring clothes I could get wet in. He was thinking about wearing his board shorts. “Why should the girls have all the fun? It's hot out. I used to love playing in the hose as a kid”

As a grown up, I cared entirely too much about what other people thought of me. The weight of their judgmental stares had led me to some bad decisions. I didn't want this to end up being another stupid move on my part.

I put on a sundress, and passed on wearing something I could get wet in. As far as anyone was concerned, I was a pregnant lady. I didn't do things like

that. Only I really wanted to.

“We’re here,” I announced as I pulled into the parking lot.

Liv cheered and began kicking her feet. “Do you see her? Are they here yet?”

I was too busy driving through a parking lot with a few too many unattended kids to be worried about anything other than going slow, and keeping my eye out for everyone. I found a spot and pulled in.

Liv began rocking hard in her car seat.

“Hey, Missy, what have I told you about that?”

“I want out,” she wailed.

“I know you do, but banging around like that isn’t going to make me move any faster. What it will do is break your car seat, now, settle down please.”

I got out of my side of the car, and opened the back door next to her. “I’m going to unbuckle you, but you need to stay put while I grab our things. Do you think you can do that?”

“Out!”

I sighed. “Liv, if you don’t think you can handle that, I need to leave you buckled.”

That seemed to work and she settled down. I got her out of the seat, she stood on the car floor and got in the way more than helped, but she was trying really hard to be helpful. She wanted this picnic so badly.

She needed a friend, and she and Sarina had clicked so well. It didn’t hurt that I thought her dad was hot. I needed to slow my roll and put my libido on ice. The man was a widower. That didn’t make him available or interested. Not that I would blame him.

Being pregnant really was not the ideal situation for me, but here I was. I was doing my best to keep on going. Far from living my best life, but at least I wasn’t curled in a ball, wallowing in my feelings over losing Dylan.

I scanned the play area for Eric. He wouldn’t be hard to spot against a field of moms. I fit in here, not quite thirty, average height, hair swept into a ponytail— okay I put effort into my ponytail this morning, so it didn’t look like a rat’s nest on the back of my head, but it was still a standard issue toddler mom hairstyle— pregnant. Only I wasn’t pushing a stroller, and I didn’t know anyone else. All the other moms seemed to be in groups.

What I needed to do was stop pouting about it, and realize that meeting strangers at the park was rare these days. I needed to get online and find a

local mom's group. At least that way I would have an introduction before walking up to them and saying 'hi, want to be friends.'

Kids didn't realize how easy they had it that way.

Liv squealed and began dancing at my side. "I see them!"

I hadn't caught sight of Eric yet, still mired in my hurt feelings over everything from looking like a basic bitch and still not fitting in, to not wanting to fit in, to being pregnant and wondering how I was supposed to date? And, oh my God, why was I thinking about dating?

And then my eyes landed on Eric. He was exactly all the reasons I wanted to date. He was tall and broad and virile. His dark hair was pushed back, and he stood out like a mountain in a sea of homogeneous Pinterest styling. It was more than that, he got my body amped up. He hit all my hormonal buttons, and then some.

Damn, he was wearing shorts. Now I had to accept that, in addition to everything else attractive about him, he had nice legs.

Dylan had great shoulders. Fantastic abs. The man was the poster child of skipping leg day. He had thin thighs and practically non-existent calves. But not Eric. He clearly never missed a leg day in his life. His shorts didn't fit him the way they fit other men. Other men would have extra fabric flapping around their legs. Eric's board shorts caressed his legs. They weren't tight, but they certainly acted like they wanted to be.

Our eyes met, and his dark brow seemed to lift, and the expression on his face was like sunshine breaking through a storm. He smiled.

Sarina started running toward us when he let go of her hand. I let go of Liv, and the two girls ran across the grass and into each other's arms. Yeah, kids had it easy, they didn't have the weight of the world judging them for expressing the emotions they felt. I wanted to run across to Eric and have him spin me around in a hug. But that wasn't going to happen.

"I said I'd bring everything we needed if you brought drinks," he chastised me as soon as we were about two yards apart, and he could see that I was also carrying a small box of cupcakes.

"Liv insisted. After all, it's a reunion."

"It's been a week," he chuckled.

"When you're four, a week is a very long time. Where should we set up?"

Eric pointed to a spot under trees next to the splash pad. "I've had some weeks that felt that long. Cupcakes are a great idea. How's that? Girls!"

We set our things down, and he started to spread out the ground cover he

brought.

“A fitted bed-sheet?” I asked.

“You don’t know this trick? Hand me a tote bag.”

I shook my head, and handed him one of the many bags we had brought between us. “Don’t tell me you got it off Pinterest?”

“As a matter of fact, I probably did. There are some really good ideas and hacks on how to handle parenting situations. This was from a beach outing. Put the coolers and the bags in the corners, and it keeps the dirt out of your area. I haven’t perfected it yet. But it works.”

When he was done, we had a mini corral and our food wouldn’t fall out onto the dirt.

“Are you going to join us in the fountain?” he asked with such eagerness, I felt horrible saying no.

“I didn’t have time to find something I could use as a suit. Next time. You go play with the girls, and I’ll get lunch set up.” I knew I had made a mistake. I should have said screw it, and gotten my clothes wet.

“Next time, then. Come on girls!” He ripped his shirt over his head, and I stopped breathing.

Why the fuck hadn’t I insisted he be shirtless in the calendar. No, I thought he was being modest. Cheese and crackers the man was stacked, and ripped, and buff, and any and all words that referred to an exceptional physique. He deserved them all.

I sat on my fat ass and forgot what I was supposed to be doing. I don’t know how long I sat there, stunned, before remembering I was setting up the picnic. I still didn’t move. Eric towered over all the kids out there, but with our little girls he was a veritable giant. And none of them cared. They were all smiles and giggles and having fun.

I turned when a snort behind me caught my attention. It was the blue-haired mom and the group she hung out with. I identified them by her presence. That hair was undeniable. Thursdays must be Spring Mill splash pad days for their group.

Our eyes met. I smiled and nodded. She sneered and sent death rays in my direction. What the hell was that all about? I had gotten very distinct unfriendly vibes from the whole group before. This had ventured into the realm of out-and-out hostile. Note to self, maybe finding a mom’s group online first wasn’t a good idea. How would I know if the blue-haired harpy would be there?

Opening the ice chest, I unpacked. Eric brought sandwiches cut into four triangles. There were small plastic cups filled with sliced strawberries, blueberries and half grapes. Everything was cut up small for little fingers. And there was an insane amount of everything.

I glanced up at the three playing in the water. Yeah, he would eat a lot. It made sense now.

I set out the towels, and with everything ready, I pulled the plastic wrap off one of the cups of fruit and began eating as I sat back and let myself enjoy the show.

A tickle of guilt hit me and I ignored it. I should have been watching my child out there having the time of her life. Only I couldn't take my eyes from Eric.

His skin was pale with a hint of pink in the shoulders. I hoped he had sunscreen on. He looked like he had the kind of skin that would burn before tanning, if he even tanned at all. As pale as he was, my thoughts leaned toward the doesn't tan option. His wet hair hung in waves to his shoulders.

And then there were the muscles. All of those glorious muscles under waves of wet chest hair.

I was staring when he caught my eyes. With a smile and a wink, he turned his attention back to the girls. Next thing I knew, he had a child under each arm and was carrying them back toward me.

"I'm hungry," he announced, setting them down.

"Towels are there, dry off before you get the sheet all wet. You brought plenty of food."

Wrapped in towels, everyone sat down. I handed out sandwiches and fruit cups, and juice boxes. Eric ate and drank the same thing as the girls. Even though I had brought adult sized drinks of sweet tea and lemonade, he insisted on having a juice box, or three.

"I'm done, can we go back?" Liv announced.

"All done," Sarina added. "Come on Daddy." She pulled on Eric's arm

"You two go play. You wore me out, and I'm still hungry."

Sarina let out a very exaggerated sigh. "You eat too much. Come on Liv."

I couldn't stop the laugh from escaping. "Too much? I'm wondering how you get enough to eat with all this tiny food."

"I get enough. And if not, I'll grab a power bar later. At some point, Sarina refused to eat anything that was different from what I ate. So she will eat vegetables and try new things, but only if I'm eating the same thing. And

that means the same way. I can't bite into a full grape if she only gets sliced up ones."

"I got ya, if they don't look the same, how can they be the same thing," I said.

"That's it exactly. Sometimes my mother doesn't understand. And when that happens, Sarina gets upset and doesn't eat."

"Your mom's around?" I asked.

"Yeah, she takes care of Sarina when I volunteer down at the station. I don't volunteer as much as I used to, being a single parent and all. It's tough."

I stared at him. Calculations zoomed through my head. "Wait, you volunteer? It's not your job?"

He shook his head. The curls bounced behind his ears. If I thought I was done for earlier, I was definitely in trouble now.

He reached across me. I held my breath. He smelled cool and clean, with a hint of sunscreen. Good, he was protecting his skin. He sat back up and pulled the shirt he grabbed on. "I sort of work for my folks. Family business. But I always wanted to be a fireman as a little boy. Since that wasn't exactly an option, this way I get to do both."

I sighed, okay, he wasn't living in his mom's basement. Not that there was anything wrong with that. After all, I was living in my sister's guest room. We all had to get through our problems the best we could.

"I'm in the unique position where I can do all the activities with Sarina so she gets to meet other kids and school won't come as a shock, and do my work in the evenings when she's having some downtime in front of the TV, or after she's gone to bed."

"You let her watch TV?" I asked in a mock shocked tone.

He leaned in close and whispered, "Don't tell on me. Screen time is the devil around here."

"I think anyone with small kids thinks it's the devil, until they don't, you know?"

He rolled onto his back, propping his head on his hands. He looked up into the leaves of the tree and sighed. "This is nice."

Damn, that turned a few of my hormonal knobs.

"Thank you for suggesting a picnic. Right about now, I would be scrambling to find a drive thru with some chicken nuggets. Instead, the kids get to keep playing."

“It’s nice to have another adult around,” he said.

“What? You aren’t in any mom’s group?” I said as if I were.

“That’s not the same. And no, I’m not. I’m not a mom, so I’m not welcome. And there really aren’t many dad’s groups.”

“I find that hard to believe. There are plenty of single dads around.”

“There are.” He rolled back up to a sitting position— which was good because laying there he looked like someone I could snuggle up against. “But they mostly go out on weekends or at night and have drinks. They complain about having to juggle child care and whiny kids, and how they can’t find a girlfriend to take care of their kid.”

“That sounds like a very specific situation.”

“It was. I tried a mom's group, but apparently I made everyone too uncomfortable.” He shrugged. “I understand no one wants to talk about bad period cramps postpartum with a man around.”

“Is that what they talk about?” I asked.

“No mom’s groups for you?”

“Not here at least. I was in one right after Liv was born, but I had to get back to work. And even though I freelanced, it was really hard to find the balance to maintain the new social expectations, keep up with my old friends, keep the husband happy, and work, all while taking care of this new little person.”

Eric huffed. “I can imagine.”

He got quiet,

“I’m sorry. I’m talking like I had this crazy hard time, and it was nothing compared to what you must have gone through. Can I ask, how old was Sarina when you lost her mother?”

Eric reached out and took my hand. I knew it didn’t mean more than him needing support while talking about his wife.

“I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, no. I love telling people about Janelle. It keeps her alive. I wouldn’t have made it without my mother, ya know?”

I didn’t know, but now wasn’t the time.

He squeezed my hand. “We should get the girls back and have those cupcakes.”

I agreed. The heavy stuff had no place here, at least right now.

CHAPTER 8



IF I WAS GOING TO STAY AROUND BELVOIR COUNTY, IT WAS TIME TO ADULT UP and go see the local baby doctor. Part of me didn't want to. I didn't want to face the same glaring stares I received every time I went to the park from the same pregnant women in the waiting room.

I still didn't know what it was I had done that was so wrong.

"We can fit you in at the end of the week, will that work for you?"

The day and time coincided with Liv and Sarina's weekly play date at the splash pad. And my weekly ogle of Eric. I wanted to say no.

But the baby decided at that moment to River Dance on my bladder.

"Yeah, that's good. I don't know if I can get my old doctor to get my files to you by then," I confessed.

"Don't worry about that, we can get your files a little bit later. It's seeing you and listening to the baby that's important. We'll see you soon."

I ended the call and got to my feet. That felt like enough adulting for the day. But I had promised Ash I would stop in and take a look at the initial round of photos.

"Hey Terri-Ann!" I bellowed as soon as I stepped out of the bedroom.

She stepped out of her room, a laundry basket in hand.

"Do you really have to yell?"

I shook my head, probably not. But I wasn't exactly in shape to go on a quest looking for her.

"I have an appointment at Dr. Booth on Thursday. Can I leave Liv with you for the morning?"

"You aren't going to the splash pad?"

"Not on Thursday. I need to get this thing looked after." I poked myself

in the belly a few times.

“Sure, no problem,” she said.

“Good. Can you keep an eye on her this afternoon? I need to head to the station. The photos are in and Ash wants me to take a peek.”

“I thought you worked tomorrow?” she asked.

“I do.” I said.

“So you need me to look after her today, tomorrow, and Thursday?”

I could tell which way this was going. “Never mind. I’ll take Liv with me today, but I’d rather her not be there on Thursday. Will that suit you?”

Wrapping my head around the fact that even if I stayed in Belvoir County, I needed to find my own place to live. And figure out how to balance child care, work, and being a single mom. I hated to think that Liv was going to be the one to miss out when it came right down to it.

I waddled down the stairs. I waddled when I was tired and my joints hadn’t fully warmed up yet. There would come a day in this pregnancy when all I could do was waddle.

“Livvy, time to get your shoes on,” I called out

“Are we going to the park?” She ran over her words in her excitement. What she really said came out more like ‘army going ta park?’

“No, baby, I need to go to the station. The guys there can show you the trucks again. That was fun, wasn’t it?”

She cheered up. She liked the attention she got from all the guys.

“Hey Ash, you’ve got some pictures for me?” I asked, stepping into his office.

With my bag over one shoulder, Liv holding my hand, and my hair in a messy bun, I had foregone all pretense of looking professional today. Ash got the ‘freelancer not planning on seeing clients’ fashion option.

“Everything is in the mess. Bigger table. Let me call the guys, they’ll entertain Liv while you help us decide the top twelve pictures.” He pressed a button, and said there was a kid to play with into the intercom. Within seconds, there was a thundering of running feet as guys rushed to the office. One of the guys swept Liv off her feet and onto his shoulders. “Wanna go see the baby chicks we have out back?”

With a giggle, Liv was happy, and I was free to focus on the work to be done. If looking over a table full of printouts of hot shirtless beefcake was work.

“Did he send over the glamour shots of the chickens too?” I asked.

“Yeah, what are those for?”

“I thought we could put smaller images of just the chickens in the blank areas down on the month page. There’s plenty of room, so we can get in quite a few.”

I stopped in front of the long table with all the prints spread out.

“Oh, wow.” The shots were impressive. As I scanned over them, I realized there was no organization to the way the pictures were displayed.

I started grouping photos by fireman, by action sequence. How else was I supposed to compare the best options?

I stopped and admired an action shot that was taken during the hay bale fire. It was beautiful and amazing. Close to the camera, completely out of focus, a chicken blurred past. Slightly more in focus behind the bird, a lick of flames. White foam arched toward the viewer, and the shirtless fireman had the best look of intense focus and competency. And his arm was so perfectly flexed with foreshortening, it looked like a comic book action shot.

Another chicken was on his shoulder, pirate style. Only this bird had his wings up and was complaining. And in the background, men and chickens. And the perfect framing for a big title block. It couldn’t have been more perfect if we planned it.

I picked it up and drew a star on the back. I held it out to Ash. “This is your cover.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Damn, it’s a good action shot, isn’t it? This is going to go straight to Duke’s ego.”

“Hey, I heard the pictures came in.” Eric’s deep rumble caught me off guard.

“What are you doing here?”

“I work here?” he responded.

“That’s not what I meant.” I shook my head. “So you’re here to look at hot guys with me?”

“In a way. I have some marketing experience.”

Ash snorted behind me.

Twisting, I shot a quick glance at Ash before returning my attention to Eric. “And by some, that sounds like a lot.”

“Or he really likes men without their shirts on,” Ash snickered behind me.

“Weiss, I swear, don’t make me have to hurt you.”

There was a loud squeal from the back of the station.

“You didn’t bring Liv, did you?” Eric asked.

More shrieks followed by laughter.

“I did, I take it Sarina is here?”

He nodded.

“That’s great. They’ll keep each other occupied, and we can make a decision on these pictures,” I said.

“Oh wow, this shot is an action movie all in one.” Eric held up the cover photo I had separated out. He flopped it around. “What’s the star mean?”

Ash snagged it out of Eric’s fingers.

“That is our cover. I think this year is going to be an exceptional one. Let’s hope for a second print run.”

We picked and sorted and narrowed down the calendar options to twenty. Considering there were hundreds of images to start with, I think we had done a good job in an hour’s time.

“Mommy look!” Liv called as she ran into the mess. She was holding a small brown poulet in her hands. Sarina was holding one too.

“Does that chicken have a tutu on?”

“What do you have there?” Eric reached down and took the bird from Sarina.

I just stared at the chicken Liv held out at me. “Isn’t she pretty?” Liv asked. “Can I keep her?”

“Aunt Terri-Ann has chickens. I bet she’ll let you put tutus on them. No, you cannot keep this one.”

“But I love her!” I heard it in her voice, the tired, hungry edge of a whine.

“I bet she loves you too.” Ash reached out and took the bird. “We’ll keep her here for you to visit any time.”

“See, isn’t that nice?” I asked.

“Why don’t you help the guys put these birds back where they belong, and we’ll go get some lunch,” Eric said to Sarina. He turned to me. “Is that okay with you? Lunch?”

He was asking me out again. I gulped. Damn it, Paise, he’s your kid’s friend’s father, and he recognizes a four-year-old impending meltdown if there isn’t some food in the immediate future. That’s not a date.



ERIC

Paisley followed as I drove to the place out by the freeway. We looked like a car commercial, two matching minivans in a row. The girls were tired and hungry, and this was the easiest and closest place I could think of.

There had been some whining when we couldn't put both car seats in one van in a timely fashion.

The reunion between the girls when we reached the restaurant was endearing. They hugged as if they hadn't seen each other for centuries.

I want to wrap Paisley up and hug her like that. Shaking my head, I cleared that thought. No hugging Paisley, yet. I didn't want her to think I was some kind of weirdo.

We placed our orders, and within minutes the whiney tired princesses were back to all giggles all the time.

"Do you think they realize they are eating chicken nuggets?" I asked.

"You mean that their new best friends could end up as dinner someday? No. And I'm not gonna tell them either," Paisley said.

She was cute, and single. How the fuck was I supposed to let her know I was interested? Was I really in the best mental shape to be interested? I was still hung up on Janelle. I would always be hung up on her.

"Are you okay?" Paisley asked. She rested her hand on my arm.

I don't think she realized what that simple touch was doing to me. "Yeah, why?"

"Your expression changed dramatically. Like you thought of something super bad, or started not feeling well."

I let out a heavy breath, and glanced over at Sarina and Liv. They were occupied, they wouldn't hear anything I said, even if I was talking to them.

"I was thinking about my wife."

"Oh." Immediately I understood what Paisley meant when she said my expression changed, because hers did too. Neither of us should ever play poker.

"She was my sunshine. She always wore bright yellows, oranges, and red. The colors suited her. And her smile could light up a room. Remember how Ash was razzing me about looking at shirtless men?"

Paisley nodded.

"I was a model for a bit."

She made a small gasping sound and gave me an eyeball once-over. "I can see it."

“It’s how I met Janelle. She was a photographer’s assistant. We flirted for years. And then I was done with that rebellious phase, as my mother calls it. I called it not getting jobs after an accident left me with this.” I pointed at my face before continuing, “I returned home to work with the product marketing teams for my parent’s business, and didn’t see her for a few years. We were starting a new campaign. I was in the process of reviewing photographers’ portfolios when I saw Janelle’s smiling face.”

“Was she modeling?”

“No, it was a bio card in the back of the portfolio. She was a full-fledged photographer. So I hired her. We fell in love, got married, and then Sarina.” I said the last bit in a rush. It seemed important for Paisley to know, to understand. “The pregnancy was going well until it wasn’t. Preeclampsia came out of nowhere. Suddenly Janelle went toxic. She had an emergency C-section.” I had to pause. “Sorry this is…”

“You don’t have to tell me. I was being nosey last week.”

I shook my head and reached for her hand. “No, I want to tell you. It seems only fair.”

She nodded, and looked at me with soft round eyes. They were pool blue and I could have drowned in them.

“Janelle got to see Sarina, and then the seizures hit. By then I had been a volunteer fireman for a few years. I knew how bad seizures could get. I didn’t understand, I thought I did. She died right in front of me while I held onto our brand new baby girl.”

“Oh Eric.” Paisley got out of her seat and stood next to me. She wrapped her arms around me and pressed my head to her shoulder.

The comfort was appreciated, but it started a war in my gut. I needed the comfort over having lost Janelle. But I shouldn’t have enjoyed Paisley’s touch so much at that moment.

CHAPTER 9



PAISLEY

Grabbing a bunch of candles and carrying them in one arm, I tried to balance a full lemonade in the other hand and walk out to the back porch without dropping anything.

The night air was only slightly cooler than the day had been. Fireflies were coming out for the season. There were more than the last time I had come out here to commune with the moon and the stars. In another hour or so, it would be even cooler and more bugs would come out from their hiding places.

It was a tradeoff, be out early in the evening while it was still warm, but there were fewer bugs, or wait for the temperature to drop and serve myself up as a bug buffet.

I lined the candles up on the railing. They were more of a precaution more than anything else. I wasn't out here to cast. But in case my intentions were misconstrued, I didn't want to have to slog across the yard out to the fire pit.

I took a sip of the lemonade. Terri-Ann always had a pitcher of lemonade and sweet tea in the fridge. I don't know how she did it. Everyone was always drinking something, and those pitchers were always full. It was good lemonade too, just sweet enough, but still crisp and tart. My sister excelled at running her family.

That thought felt like a bit of a slap. Here I was struggling with a broken marriage, and a stupid infatuation. I wasn't managing anything very well. At least I had a freelance project to work on. But if I was going to need to be able to pay rent and cover all of our living expenses, I was going to need

more than a project.

“Okay,” I started. “I want to be perfectly clear, I am not sending out some kind of wish for Eric Dupree to fall in love with me. If he does, and as much as I would really like that to happen, he needs to do it all by himself.”

The first candle lit up. Okay, that was understood.

“Secondly, unless I very specifically announce that I am attempting to cast a spell, I am not. So if I say I wish, or any of the words that preface a spell in your understanding without stating my intentions clearly, do not interpret that as a spell.”

Only one candle stayed lit. Well, I guess I was going to have to work on that one.

“Also, and this is more of a request than anything, let Dylan have the life he deserves. And keep him away from me and Liv.”

I held my breath and stared at the candles. The first one was burning strong. The next two flickered to life, but quickly were left as nothing more than a smoking wick. I didn’t like that outcome. It was unclear. Or maybe whatever power that sparked fire with my magic realized I hadn’t actually called on my powers for that last request.

“Are you out here casting spells again?” Terri-Ann looked from me to the burning candle. “Tell me that’s a citronella candle for the bugs.”

I shook my head.

“Well, I hope you were more practical with your spells this time.”

I sat up a bit straighter. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t waste your powers to get things you can’t control. Look what happened with Dylan.”

She wasn’t wrong. But... “How did you know?”

“Paise, you aren’t exactly subtle. What did you expect to happen with someone like him?”

I shrugged. “That he would realize he really did care for me. I know it was stupid. But we were together for so long, I thought it actually worked.”

“What worked was how strong your little love spell was. But when it broke, it broke hard. So no more wishing for boys.” She pointed a finger at me like I was being naughty, and she was scolding me. She looked at the burning candle. It was going strong. “Do not wish for Ash Weiss.”

“Ew, no,” I said.

“Then what’s that for?” She tilted her head, indicating the candle.

I laughed. “I started a fire at the photoshoot. I said I wished the chickens

would behave and bam, the hay bale one of the guys was sitting on caught fire. I was not meaning to work magic, it just happened. This is my meaningful and specific request to not interpret those thoughts, or me saying 'I wish,' as a spell. From here on out, if I do not state my purpose of spell casting clearly, thoughts and musings are not to be interpreted as magic."

"You set fire to a hay bale at the station?" Terri-Ann shook her head. I couldn't tell if she was amused or disappointed. "Only you."

"We got this awesome action shot out of it. I can't wait for you to see the calendar. It's going to be amazing."

"I'm sure it is." She crossed the porch and looked at the candles. "What happened here? These blow out? Are you sure you aren't out here wishing for boys?"

"They never fully lit. I wasn't casting, but I think the magic thought it was for a second before snuffing them out. And I've learned my lesson, no more wishing for something that interferes with someone's autonomy and self-control."

"Maybe your intentions' thing is working."

I shrugged. "Let's hope."



"LANA," A nurse called out as soon as I stepped into Dr. Booth's office for my appointment.

Looking around, I caught sight of the blue haired lady, the one who always glared at me at the park. Awkwardly, she stood and took her toddler's hand before heading toward the nurse at the door. She hadn't seen me, which was good.

I wasn't in the mood to deal with anybody's judgmental looks. Well, Lana's. So now I had a name to go with the hair and the glare.

I checked in and sat down and started playing with my phone. Uncertainty roiled through my entire body. Was I making the right choice by staying in Belvoir County? This is the right thing to do, right? Or was I questioning my decisions based on the feelings I seemed to have developed for Eric? Would I be sitting here planning on sticking around if I hadn't met him?

I didn't want to have to up heave our lives yet again. Especially not when

I was about to enter my third trimester and the hardest, heaviest, most uncomfortable part of being pregnant.

When the nurse called my name, I followed her into the back room. Got on the scale. Listened to her sigh. Yes, I was overweight, but by whose standards really? Everyone knew that the BMI thing was made up by insurance companies. I didn't have gestational diabetes, and all my other health indicators pointed at me being healthy. I exercised and I ate healthy, balanced meals. Whatever had set my self-doubt spinning was doing a bang up job of it.

They really need to train the nurses not to have any kind of reaction even if they aren't related when somebody is standing on a scale. It was such a defeatist feeling. And then she asked how my weight was compared to the last time.

It took a great deal of will power not to snap. "I haven't been tracking my weight. Otherwise, I get obsessive. And then I either don't eat properly or I eat everything."

"I guess that's a reasonable plan," she said, and then she yawned. "Sorry, I didn't sleep well, and I'm trying not to yawn, and it's not working very well."

Her jaw cracked open in a very large yawn. Instantly I felt guilty for having judged her professionalism about reacting when I got on the scale. She was yawning, not judging.

"I almost can't make it until lunch, work and get a good solid dose of caffeine to get me through the rest of the day."

"I miss caffeine," I said.

"Well, your baby doesn't, so that's a good thing. You not drinking caffeine, I mean."

She led me down the small hallway and into a room. She asked a few more questions and took my vitals. Apparently my records hadn't shown up yet. So they needed to know if there was anything out of the ordinary that I was aware of. My blood pressure had been fine. How was my weight? I reminded her I wasn't tracking, but nobody had ever said anything to me, so I assumed it was fine. Did I have the twenty-week ultrasound yet? Did I know if I'm having a boy or a girl?

I stared blankly at her. "No, not yet. Is it time? I'm sort of running behind on a lot of things these days." I tried to joke.

"That's something that should have happened."

“My divorce got finalized, and I moved back here. So I guess that needs to happen,” I explained.

“Divorced? So there's no father in the picture?” Something about the way she asked rubbed my nerves wrong. I certainly wasn't the first single mother to be seen in this office, so why did she make it sound so mortifying?

She had me lay back, and made a bit of a show about getting a bigger belt for the baby monitor. Maybe that huff I had heard when I was on the scale had been a judgmental commentary. The way she was acting now certainly felt like she did not approve of my choices.

When she came back with a belt that “should go all the way around” me, like I was the globe, I lay back on the bed and adjusted my clothing, so she could strap the monitor on. My future professional soccer player was behaving, and staying in only one place. The nurse found the wish-wish-wish sound of the baby's heartbeat rather quickly.

She left me buckled up and relaxing. So that their equipment could monitor what they needed to see. I closed my eyes and tried not to think about my predicament. Divorced, two children, back home in a small town that I thought I escaped from, only to realize that maybe escaping from here had been the wrong perspective. Duchamp and Belvoir county weren't something to escape from. But there were roots that I could rely on and come back to.

I wasn't certain. All I knew was it was going to be a struggle to find clients as a designer in this small town.

I wasn't particularly thrilled that my only option was a male obstetrician, but I also felt that at the moment, I really couldn't be too picky.

He mostly asked the exact same questions the nurse did, we needed to schedule the ultrasound. And I had to answer the same kind of questions on whether I was married and where my husband was. When I explained that I had just moved back to Belvoir County because my divorce had been finalized the previous month. The doctor paused, and he looked at me with puppy dog eyes and asked me if I was safe now.

I was stunned.

Dylan was a jerk, Dylan was an asshole. Dylan was the world's biggest mistake.

But was I safe now? I know what the doctor meant.

“It wasn't an abusive situation. It almost would have been easier to handle if it had been. But thank you for asking.” I pasted on a fake smile, teeth

together and blinked hard and blinked hard a couple of times, trying to prevent any visible tears from forming.

When I stepped back out into the lobby, the panic and overwhelming misery of being alone and not having Dylan to see me through this took over. He had been all I had wanted for so long. Even if it wasn't real. My breath just left me and all I could do was stand there. I didn't think I could take a step forward without falling over.

My breath hitched in my throat, and then I wasn't standing, I was falling. Suddenly there were women by my side.

“Honey, are you okay?”

“Let's get you into a chair.”

It didn't take much effort to get me up and seated, and they were asking me all kinds of questions.

“Are you okay?”

“Did they give you bad news?”

“I can't believe Dr. Booth would just send her out here. If they had given her bad news.”

“Kolby, is she okay?”

I glanced up at the very familiar voice of Tyler Weiss. He walked into the doctor's office, a baby carrier strapped to his chest and a toddler hanging off his arm.

“Oh, honey, will you get her some water? She just kind of fell in on herself,” Kolby said.

Tyler started to turn, and then he looked at me again. “Paisley, is that you?”

“Tyler,” I managed to say. “I'm okay.”

“You know her?”

“She grew up in the house next to Nan.”

“Well, here, you talk to her, I'll go see if I can get the nurse to help.”

And then Tyler Weiss was sitting next to me and put his big comfortable arm around my shoulders, patting my head telling me everything would be okay. Can't say I ever pictured Tyler as being the Mr. Mom type with a baby in a baby carrier and a toddler sitting on his other side, but it suited him very well.

A different nurse came out and took my blood pressure, which was slightly higher than had been minutes earlier during my appointment. I was handed a cool glass of water to help calm my nerves.

“I'll be fine.” I kept saying. I think it was more to myself than for them. “Reality hit me. I'm pregnant. I'm divorced. And I don't know what I'm doing.”

Tyler patted my knee and said, “Well, you're home and I don't think any of us know what we're doing.”

When Kolby's name was called. I was still leaning against Tyler. She gave him a quick kiss. “You take care of Paisley here, okay?” she said.

“Yes, ma'am.” I could tell by the tone of his voice and the way he looked at her that Tyler adored his wife and was pretty stunned that she was his. I wasn't. He was a sweet guy. She knew she had a good catch with him.

I finally sat up and wiped my face. I finished the cup of water. “Thank you, Tyler. This is embarrassing.”

“There's nothing embarrassing. We all get overwhelmed from time to time, and well, you have extra hormones that kick it all into gear.”

“Yes, I do.” I laughed.

“Where are you staying?”

“I'm back at the house with Terri Ann and I've had a nice visit with Nan, and I'm working for Ash.”

Tyler chuckled. “You don't look like a fireman.”

“I don't feel like much of one, either. No, I'm working on that beefcake calendar the guys put out.”

“They're raking in quite a bit of money. Taking advantage of their physical assets.”

“Well, if you got it, flaunt it, right?”

“I don't know about that,” Tyler hemmed and hawed.

“Sure. It's not everybody's cup of tea,” I had to admit. Why would Tyler be excited about his cousin's pinup calendar?

“Kolby gets it, and she tells me it's for the chickens.”

“Do they pose with chickens every year?” I asked.

“Of course they do, otherwise it's not Belvoir County now, is it?”

“Good point. I understand Kolby has chickens.”

“She has a couple of good prize birds. We lost a big portion of our flock about eight months ago, and that was real hard on her, real hard. She lost one of her show roosters. But the flock is coming back, and we got a couple of cockerels that look like their plumage is coming in real good, and they'll be picture-perfect.”

“You know what Belvoir County needs is a chicken pinup calendar.”

Because, I swear, I've never seen prettier birds. Thank you, Tyler." I said as I pushed up to my feet. "I'm feeling a lot better."

"Go get some food, you might be having some low blood pressure. And you probably just need to eat something. It's awfully close to lunch."

"Good idea. You're coming to the big barbecue, right?" I asked.

"I wouldn't miss it. Nan would have my hide if I did."

Slowly I made my way out of the office before I let the tears come. I was miserable and somehow felt even more alone. I sat in my car and stared out the window for a long time. I don't know what possessed me to call Eric, but I did. Something inside just made me think he would make me feel better.

CHAPTER 10



ERIC

“Hey!” I said a little too loudly as I answered the phone.

I didn’t even bother to play it cool. Paisley was calling and that made me happy. I wasn’t some teenager who needed to play games. I was a widower. As much as I missed Janelle, denying my interest in Paisley was not going to bring her back. And I liked Paisley.

“Eric.” My name was followed by a sniffle.

Damn, I knew that sound. I remembered it all too keenly. Janelle would try to hide when she was crying from me. It took a while before I learned it wasn’t because she didn’t think I could handle it, she wanted to be stronger. That was my job, I was good at being strong. I was there to be strong when Janelle, and now Paisley, couldn’t.

“Paisley, what’s the matter? What’s wrong?” My gut tightened. A moment of panic was replaced by all the levelheaded emergency responder training I’d been through.

“Are you safe? Can you tell me where you are?”

She made more sniffing sounds through the phone.

“I’m in the parking lot at Dr. Booth’s office.”

Fuck. I had forgotten she cancelled because she had an appointment with Duchamp’s only baby doctor.

“Are you and the baby okay?” I asked in a slow, steady voice.

She made a keening cry, and my heart sank. “The baby is fine, and I guess I am too. I just really need a friendly voice who isn’t going to judge me.”

I let out a sigh, good the baby was okay. “Paisley, honey, why would I

judge you?”

“Because I’m six months pregnant and my husband, my ex-husband, can’t stand me. I shouldn’t have called.”

“You absolutely should have called. I’m glad you thought of me as a friendly voice. Stay where you are. Let me get Sarina over to my mom, and I will be right there.”

I started walking toward the playroom.

“You don’t have to. I don’t mean to be a bother.”

She sounded so defeated. “Paisley, you are absolutely allowed to bother me. Give me twenty minutes. Can you do that?”

She sighed. “Yeah, I can do that.”

I ended the call and grabbed Sarina around the middle.

“Daddy!” she giggled, but did not put her dolls down.

“You’re going to Nana’s, I’ve got to go take care of something.” I grabbed her shoes and kept going until we were at the van.

“You got a fire?”

“Not this time, toots. But you can’t come with me.” I finished buckling her in and then called Mom. “I need you to watch Sarina for the afternoon.”

“You know where I live. Send her over.”

My parents lived on the property behind mine. Typically, I would have Sarina run over while I watched from the deck, or walked her part way. Mom would stand out on her patio and catch Sarina as she ran. It was useful, and gave Sarina a sense of being a big girl. She loved it. I think.

“I’ll be in your driveway before you get outside,” I said.

“Why on earth are you going to the front?”

Mom still had her phone to her ear as she walked out the front door. We continued over the phone, as silly as that actually was.

“Someone needs my assistance, no time to let the wandering princess chase butterflies.”

Mom was by my side before she hung up.

“Nana!” Sarina called. She hovered at the edge of the van door before launching herself into the air.

Mom caught her and twirled her around. They acted like they hadn’t seen each other in days. They were each other’s favorite person.

“Go help your friend, and then this evening, you can tell me all about her,” Mom said with a smirk.

“I never said it was a woman.”

“You didn’t have to, Eric. I know you.”

I floored it. My property was north of Belvoir, in Hamilton. Duchamp was the closest town, and not very far away. I left tire tread on the parking lot when I skidded to a halt next to Paisley’s van.

I was out the door and pulling her into my arms moments later. “I’ve got you. Let your demons out. I can take care of them so they don’t bother you any longer.”

She took in a long shaking breath, and held me tight around the middle. I stroked her hair and let her do what she needed to do. I could have, would have stood there in that parking lot holding her for as long as she needed me. We could have stayed there until the sun went down.

Paisley pushed away from me. I wanted to hold her tighter, keep her where she was.

“Thank you. I feel so silly. You came all this way for a hug.” She gave me a weak smile.

“That was a bit more than a hug. You clearly needed one. Are you feeling better?”

She nodded. “Do you have time? I mean, I hope I didn’t interrupt something important in my moment of panic, but I could use an ear.”

I ran my hands over her shoulders and arms. “Paisley, you are important. That’s why I’m here. Have you had food, is your blood sugar crashing?”

“No, I’m not having blood sugar issues, but I could go for a hamburger. Is the Cellar still on the second floor above the hardware store?”

I nodded. The Cellar had been at that location long before I ever was allowed to go there as a teenager. It was a hangout for the local college students. They served cheap beer and greasy hamburgers.

I opened the passenger door to my van, “I’ll drive.”

Paisley tried to protest, but I wasn’t having it. She was emotionally distraught, and was now trying to cover her tracks. “You are not putting anything in my way, Paisley. Let me do this for me. Let me think I’m being some kind of knight in shining armor for you, okay?”

The look she gave me sent a shiver down my spine, a lot of blood to my cock, and a glimmer of hope in my chest.



Paisley

God, I hadn't been to the Cellar since the last time I had come home. The only time I had brought Dylan to Duchamp. He had mocked the place mercilessly, and unfortunately, I came to see my hometown through his eyes.

He was wrong. Duchamp was charming, and the Cellar still had the best hamburgers I had ever eaten. And I have eaten a lot of hamburgers.

Being in Eric's presence, with him so focused on me, made it feel like the baby was doing somersaults. But that was pure nerves. He was so sturdy and strong, and he kept asking me to hand over my burden. Okay, maybe not in those exact terms, but that's what he was doing. He said and did things that I had wished Dylan would have done for me.

I smiled as the waitress delivered our burgers, and a double basket of fries and onion rings.

I moaned with mouth watering memories of this food. "I have missed this place," I confessed as I peeled back the bun, gooey cheese fighting me to keep hold of either the bun or the burger. I stacked onion rings up like a four leaf clover before putting the bun back.

Without waiting for Eric to start, who I figured was waiting for me to start, I picked up the messy burger with both hands and sunk my teeth in. Grease dribbled down my chin.

Eric, ever vigilant, was there with a napkin to catch my mess. Our eyes met.

"I didn't wish for you," I blurted out.

He flinched back and looked hurt.

"Oh, crap, that came out all wrong. I just wanted the universe to know that I didn't wish for you, that you being this nice is all because of who you are." I cast my gaze down at the table and stared hard at the basket of fries. "If I had wished for you, you probably wouldn't be here right now."

Tears of embarrassment stung my eyes. That was the most back-ass-ward compliment I could have made. And I almost just handed him my secret. Hell, this was Belvoir County, it wasn't much of a secret.

He cleared his throat. His big hand entered my field of view as he grabbed some fries. He had really nice fingers. They were tan and long. He had elegant hands for a man of his stature. His knuckles didn't look like they got abused from either dust ups or hard labor.

"Sounds like there might be a bit of a story with that," he said.

I nodded. I still couldn't look at him.

“Does this have anything to do with what happened at the doctor’s office?”

“It has everything to do with what happened at the doctor’s office.”

“Tell me.” It was a demand, but his voice was so gentle I wanted to comply.

After a few more mortifying moments, I met his gaze.

“When I was nineteen, fat, and awkward, I wished for a boy. I wanted him to want me so badly. I weaved a wish so compelling that after four years, even I had forgotten that his attention wasn’t exactly real. And when the threads began to unravel, and the wish finally broke, my world shattered.”

Eric didn’t say anything, but his eyes stayed on me. I took a bite of my food and chewed, mostly to give me some time to find the strength to keep talking, to lay my embarrassments and mistakes out on the table. If Eric was my friend, then he would understand. If he walked away, then this was a cheap therapy session, and I’d simply prove to myself how big of an idiot I really was.

“I thought he was perfect. It turns out he thought I was weird and gross. He doesn’t know why he fell in love with me. In the end, I did confess that I wished for him. But he only laughed at me, as if wishes have power.”

Eric made a choking sound, and took a long drink to clear his throat. Okay, so based on that reaction, he knows wishes have power. So far, so not terrible. I switched gears, hoping the babble coming out of my mouth made sense to him.

“You remember that woman at the park with the blue hair? I keep seeing her everywhere, all she does is glare at me.”

“That’s Lana Higgins. I think those glares are directed at me,” Eric sort of chuckled.

I shook my head. “She’s definitely glaring at me. Has been since before I even met you. Well, she was there at Dr. Booth’s. She was headed in just as I got there. She didn’t see me, so no glaring, but I felt that sense of guilt that I have done something to her.

“What have I done that she hates me?”

Eric shrugged. “Lana hates everybody, well not everybody, but she hates me. The funny thing is she is the one who dumped me.”

“Wait, you dated her?”

“I went out on a date, once. One single date, way back. I was nineteen, twenty tops. She might have been a senior, might have just graduated. I don’t

remember much other than about halfway through the date she said I was boring and that I should take her home. I did. That was the end of that, or so I thought. Ran into her a few weeks later and she said she didn't realize who my folks were, and that I should ask her out again. I declined. She hasn't forgiven me. Maybe you slighted her in high school and she's still holding a grudge."

"I didn't go to high school with her. At least I don't think so. Huh. Well, she put me on edge, and then the nurse kept asking leading questions with a judgy tone. Why hadn't I had my ultrasound yet, where was my husband... shit like that."

"She was out of line. That was unprofessional, you should tell Dr. Booth."

"What? No. She'll be even worse next time if I do that."

"Paisley, she was out of line." His words were clipped.

I nodded. "I'll think about it."

He inhaled sharply and his nostrils flared. Damn, broody was hot on him. "What?"

He shook his head. "I should hold my comments, this is your time to talk."

"Oh no you don't, spill it."

He spilled. "If no one tells Dr. Booth, she'll continue to be out of line. You are an adult, and she hurt your feelings, what happens when she's like that to a scared little girl? You don't have to say anything. I have professional connections. I'll let him know."

"Eric, you can't." I was terrified.

"I can, and I will. There is no way this will get back to you being the source, I promise."

"Pinky swear?"

He reached his hand across the table and extended his little finger. "Pinky swear."

I hooked my little finger with his. A surge of warmth and tingles traveled up my arm and over all of my skin. I didn't want to let go.

"So, yeah, my feelings got hurt."

"I'm sorry, Paisley, I didn't mean to minimize your pain by saying it like that."

I waved him off. "But it's the truth. I got bruised in the feels, and I was feeling all of them. Irresponsible mother for not having the ultrasound yet."

Bad woman for letting someone like Dylan go. Loser for being back in Duchamp with no other place to go.”

His warm hand covered mine. He was still here. I was crying again, and Eric was still here.

“You’re not a loser for coming home. And if Dylan could never see you for who you are on his own without your ‘wish,’ his loss, not yours. And I bet you have already scheduled that ultrasound. Do you need someone to go with you to that appointment? I know it can be a nerve wracking one.”

“Really?” I asked. “You’d do that for me?”

“I would.”

I melted. I hid my fluster and embarrassment in a flurry of eating.

“Eric?” I finally said after a few quiet moments where we stuffed our faces. “Would you like to go on a date with me?”

“Does this count? I mean, yes. Yes, I would.”

I tried not to read anything into how quickly he answered.

“But does this count?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. What would make it a date?”

There was something very sexy the way his lips curved to the side, exposing just the tips of his teeth. Were they more pointy than I had noticed before? He barely licked his upper lip, and then scraped his teeth over the plump lower lip that I had a hard time not staring at.

I think my panties melted. He was freaking sexy, and at that moment, I think he knew it.

“A date should end with a kiss.”

“Oh, I guess we’ll find out when you drop me back at my van,” I teased. I was ready to crawl across the table and taste the barbecue sauce from his lips, but I guess I would have to wait.

“Are you almost done?” He suddenly asked.

“Why, are we in a hurry?” I tried not to read anything into it.

“I’m eager to get you back to your van.”

“You trying to get rid of me?”

He shook his head, that same damned sexy expression on his face. “I want to kiss you.”

I looked at my burger, and I looked at his. Neither of us had eaten more than half, we had spent so much time talking. Then I looked, really looked, into his eyes. “I would like that very much, but I’m also still very hungry.”

Laughter bubbled out of him like he was a kid. “Me too.”

He didn't wait until he dropped me back at my van. He barely waited until we were out of the restaurant and getting into his van before he boxed me in, with the van at my back and his arms caged around me.

"Paisley Owens, I'm going to kiss you now. And then I'm going to drive you back to your car and I will kiss you some more, because I have a feeling that once I get a taste of you, I am not going to want to stop."

Damn, he was tall. I mean tall with a capital T. I had to crane my neck, and he had to lean down. But we managed to meet in the middle. His hands stayed on the van while mine grabbed fist fulls of his shirt. His lips were perfect and soft. It didn't take much before his lips parted and his tongue swiped along my lower lip. It was a request, a search for more.

I slid my tongue along his lips, and then some idiot blasted his horn at us. "Get a room!"

Eric stood up with a growl. I knew exactly how he felt. That kiss felt like just the beginning.

"Let's get you back to your car before Sheriff Addams drives by and arrests us for lewd public acts."

"Are you coming over next week?" I asked as I buckled in for the short ride across town back to the medical center.

"The big cook out at the Weiss place?"

"The Weiss place, and my sister's. We live right between Nan and Ash's parent's old place. The folks who live there now are part of it. All three backyards."

"I'm on call," he said.

"You can be on call from my sister's backyard just as easily as from your own. Bring Sarina. The girls will have a blast. I know Liv would love to have a friend there. I would too." I sounded desperate to my own ears.

"I'm sure you have more friends than you realize. I would be delighted."

"Hey, this isn't the way back to the doctor's office." I pointed out my window as if I were some kind of compass, indicating Eric didn't have a clue where he was going.

"I know, I just wanted to spend a little more time with you."

I bit my lip and blushed. I wanted to spend more time with him too. But I also really wanted to shove my tongue into his face, and I couldn't kiss him while he was driving.

CHAPTER 11



I CARRIED ANOTHER PITCHER OF LEMONADE OUT TO THE PORCH. TERRI-ANN'S yard, Nan's yard, and spilling over into the neighbor's yard on the other side what felt like the population of half of Duchamp.

It very well could have been.

I was starting to recognize some old faces that weren't nearly that old the last time I saw them. And faces that were new to me.

Ash's buddies, otherwise known as the entire fire department, were there. They were recognizable by their blue cargo pants and blue t-shirt non-uniforms. Technically they were all on call, but since they could get to a fire anywhere in Belvoir County just as easily from our backyard as the station, a bunch of them were here.

Later, and I knew this from experience, all the firemen here would head back to the station so the guys holding down the fort could come on over for some neighborly backyard fun. Memorial Day was weeks earlier, and the Fourth of July was weeks away still. There was no other reason than it was June, and the weather was perfect for this.

At least it had been when I was a kid. Every summer seems to be getting hotter and hotter, no thanks to climate change. But that didn't stop us from having fun.

I set the pitcher down on one end of a long line up of picnic tables, picked up another pitcher, and headed back into the kitchen for a refill. I learned the secret to my sister always having drinks ready to go, it was a trick our mother had taught us many a moon ago how to make the perfect party lemonade. The biggest secret was to prepare it by the gallon ahead of time and keep it in the deep freezer until the morning of the big barbecue. The floor behind Terri-

Ann's kitchen table was lined in gallon after gallon of premade lemonade concentrate. All I had to do was pour it in the pitcher, add water and a scoop of ice out of the cooler. If I didn't do it that way, someone— probably me— would have been stuck spending the entire morning, and the duration of the party, making lemonade.

Liv squealed, and I saw her dart across the lawn. I followed her trajectory and saw Eric long before I saw Sarina. Liv was excited to see Sarina, I was excited to see Eric.

He looked good in that fireman's outfit. I swear it was too tight across his ass and thighs, and the shirt was at least a size too small. His hair was slicked back. Damn, he was hot, really hot.

He gave Liv his attention, and then followed her finger when she pointed at me. The smile he gave me when our eyes met absolutely melted body parts and clothing. If all went well, I could sneak him away for some more of those toe curling kisses. There were enough adults around to keep an eye on our kids.

I stood there holding the empty pitcher like a dork as he strode toward me.

"Hey Paisley." He didn't pause, he didn't glance over his shoulder to see if someone was watching, he leaned down and kissed me on the mouth in front of everyone. Not that anyone was actually watching us.

"Was that okay? You look nervous," he chuckled.

"No, that was fine, I just didn't expect it, that's all. I mean"— I turned and started walking back into the kitchen— "that was kind of a kiss in front of everyone, as if you didn't mind if anyone knew you kissed me voluntarily."

He leaned against the door frame and crossed his arms over his chest as I poured more concentrate in, and then added ice, and finally pressed it all against the water dispenser on the fridge door.

"Are we supposed to be a secret?"

"Well, I hadn't thought about it. Do you really want to be seen with me?"

During the time I had allowed myself to forget I had cast a spell wishing for Dylan, public displays of affection didn't bother him. And then as the wish faded and cracked, he stopped kissing me where other people could see. Then eventually he stopped holding my hand. Bit by bit, it all eroded away. This baby I was gestating was the sloppy result of a pity fuck. Only I hadn't realized it at the time. After all, I had still been in love with Dylan.

Eric crossed the kitchen and took the pitcher from my hands and set it on

the table. His hand was cool and damp when he captured my chin and tipped my face up to look at him. “Your ex must have really done a job on you to make you think I wouldn’t want to be seen with you. Now, if this is something we need to keep quiet because of the girls, I will try to be more circumspect. But I’ve dreamed about those lips of yours for the past few days. I am going to kiss you.”

“Yes, please.” I told the voices in my head to shut the fuck up. Why on earth would I have thought he didn’t want to be seen with me? This wasn’t some love spell that was going to break.

His mouth was everything a perfect kiss should be. There was warmth, and softness. He tasted just sweet enough to not be bitter, like salted caramel. His tongue was smooth, and he moved his lips over mine as if he were tasting me, taking delicate nibbles of something fine that deserved to be savored. Kissing Eric was like art. It needed to be appreciated. There needed to be a foundation of understanding and concepts before theories were tested, and rules broken.

I liked his form. I wrapped my arms around his neck. He groaned into my mouth. I took a breath and stopped the kiss. It was not what I wanted. It was the exact opposite of what I wanted, but if we kept kissing that way...

“We need to slow down,” I said between panting breaths.

“Why? I like you, you like me. We are adults.”

“And I’m like ten seconds away from trying to figure out how to climb you and pull your clothes off. We need to slow down, and maybe take a cold shower.”

“Could we take that shower together?”

He stood there tall and smirking at me.

I let my eyes lower down and then back up.

“Did you just check me out for climbing?” He asked.

I shrugged. “Maybe. Come on, we have a party out there that needs lemonade.”

“Yeah, but I think we need to discuss this tree climbing fetish you seem to have.”

I laughed as I pushed back out through the screen door.

“Maybe we should go on an actual date before we explore any of those dangerous pole climbing activities.” I blushed the second the words were out of my mouth. I had been picturing lumberjack competitions, not erotic dancing on his flesh pole. I was just making it all worse in my head.

The pitcher hit the table with a thud and I tried to turn my face toward the house.

Eric wrapped his big hand over the base of my neck and pulled me toward him. My forehead crashed into his chest.

“I don’t know what’s going through that pretty head of yours, but by your blush, I’m guessing it’s dirty. For the record, I’m in.”

Liv and Sarina came running up to us. “Look what we can do!”

I expected them to turn and show off one of those hand slap games, or try picking each other up.

“Mommy, watch!” Liv moved her hands as if she were throwing something. Nothing happened.

“It stopped working.”

“Mine didn’t. Look what I can do,” Sarina said. She opened her mouth, exposing her teeth, and then she hissed like a big cat. And like a big cat, her mouth was full of some seriously long teeth. She bit them together and pulled her puff ball ponytails back. “And look at my ears!”

Her ears had elongated and were tipped with fine dark fur with tufts.

She shook, and smiled. The teeth and the ears were gone.

By now, I was pinching my mouth closed with my lips sucked in and clamped between my perfectly normal teeth. I didn’t look at Eric, but I could hear the breath rushing in and out of his nose. I could only imagine he had the same wide-eyed, oh-shit look on his face.

Liv scrunched up her face and pouted, curling her hands into tiny fists and stomping on the ground. “Not fair, my trick worked. It did.”

“It’s okay,” Sarina said encouragingly. “Try it again.”

“I wish it works this time.” Liv held her breath and tossed her hand again.

Sparkles twinkled and caught the light, or were they sparks and my child had just thrown cinders?

Eric’s hand scooped the air in front of Liv’s magic. He held his large palm open to me.

“Glitter,” he said.

I let out a breath, good, not sparks.

“It’s fairy dust!” Liv explained.

I pressed my face together, trying to hold my composure. “That’s, wow. Okay. Let’s not show these cool new tricks to anyone else today, okay?” I managed to say. I didn’t think I was making the right decision, but sitting down and explaining what was happening in the middle of everyone here

didn't seem like the best timing.

"Yeah, let's keep this a secret. Don't show off for anybody else."

"But I just figured out how to do it," Sarina whined.

"How?" I couldn't stop myself from asking.

"We were playing, and I was a fairy and needed sparkles, and then Sarina was pretending to be a cat, and it happened."

Eric groaned behind me. I glanced back, and he had his hand in his hair, pulling his head back as he walked in a tight circle.

"Yeah, I think, just don't let anyone see you do that."

"Okay guys, this is us. We need to head out." Ash called out from somewhere by the kiddie pool. He had his cell phone in his hand and held it up in the air. "We've got a call, let's go!"

Eric caught my arm.

I turned to look at him. And he kissed me. "I guess we have some things to talk about when I get back."

"We certainly do. Go." I gave him a light shove.

"Be good for Paisley." He grabbed Sarina into a quick hug, and then pulled Liv into the hug too. "Listen to your mom."

As the firefighters left, the backyards seemed to empty out. The girls ran off to splash in the kiddie pool.

"Where are they all going?" Tyler asked as he showed up at the picnic tables. He had a large watermelon in his arms.

"Hey, Tyler, they got a call. You just get here?"

"How are you feeling today?" Kolby placed her hand on my arm. She had her hands full of their children.

"Much better, thank you. I was having an emotional morning, and my blood sugar must have abandoned me. You were so sweet to help me," I said with genuine feeling.

"I was telling Kolby about your calendar idea."

I had to think about what calendar idea. We talked about the firefighter's pinups, but... "Oh right, the chicken pinup calendar."

"Well, I think it would be a fun idea. But what about instead of glamour shots of show birds, I mean those are all over the place, you got people to dress like their chickens." Kolby seemed very invested in this concept, excited even.

"You mean like fashion sense to match the bird, or putting matching outfits on?" I asked.

“Maybe a little of both? It was your idea. I just think it would be a good one,” Kolby said.

I shrugged. “Now's the time to start thinking about it for next year.”

“Aren't you working on the firefighter's calendar for this year? Why would the chicken calendar have to wait?” Tyler asked.

“Mostly because there isn't a strong concept to start working on, nor is there funding in place. The work is mostly done on the other calendar. I will send out the final files to the printer next week. There is a big difference between starting something like this, and working on one that is already on everyone's schedules.”

We chatted a bit longer about not much before Tyler needed to go find Nan and let her love on the baby.

I searched out the girls with my gaze. They seemed happy splashing about. Liv wasn't trying to make sparkles, and Sarina didn't suddenly have a tail.

Amazingly enough, it felt like a weight was off my shoulders. I didn't need to explain a whole lot to Eric. And I wasn't the only one keeping a little something extra in hiding.

It was hours before Eric returned. The backyard party event was going strong. It would probably keep going until the mosquitos started mixing cocktails out of everyone's veins. The light was fading, but the fireflies hadn't shown up yet. I sat on the old glider, gently rocking back and forth.

There was a squeak that sounded every other time, and it blended in with the cicadas. I had missed this, the sweet warm air as it cooled from a hot day. The way the bugs and frogs provided a background chorus to the lowered voices as people sat around the fire pit. This was my home. I was glad I came back.

“Hey.” Eric's voice was gentle, tired.

I patted the seat next to me. He sat with a heavy thump and a groan. Lifting his arms up, he stretched them wide across the back of the glider. I started to lean in, but he reeked of smoke.

“You smell.” I told him. “And you're covered in grime. Was it bad?”

“It could have been worse. Barn down in south county.” He let out a heavy sigh. “Some kids were messing around with fireworks in a hay loft. They got out, they got the animals out. We mostly kept it from spreading. Where are the girls?”

“Inside watching a movie. I wanted to enjoy the night, watch the moon

come up.”

“Make wishes?” He let out a low chuckle.

“I believe I said, I didn’t wish for you.”

“Do your wishes sparkle?” He leaned in, and in the low light he smoldered, in more than one way.

I pressed my palm against his chest. “No, seriously, you smell like smoke. Like all the smoke at once. Which you are going to find highly ironic.”

He leaned back. “Why do you say that?”

As the glider swung forward, I used its momentum on the back slide to hop to my feet. I smiled, happy I could still do that little trick. Grabbing one of the citronella candles off the corner of the porch, I snuffed it out, and held the candle out in my hand. I glanced up at the sky. Stars were just starting to become visible.

“Okay, remember what I said about intentions? This is fully intentional.” I wiggled my hand around, emphasizing that I had a candle on me. I huffed out a breath and closed my eyes.

I wanted something useful, big enough to be noticeable, but not too big for the candle in my hand.

“Eric needs to not smell like an ashtray right now.”

I cracked my lids open and glanced at the candle. Nothing.

“Seriously? Fine, be that way.” I closed my eyes again. “With all intentions, I wish the fireflies would all light up at once, showing off their glory for a single moment in time.”

I heard everyone still in the backyard gasp. “Oh wow, did you see that?”

I opened my eyes. The candle was blazing brightly.

“Seems like a complicated way to light a candle,” Eric said.

I tilted my head toward the candle and it flickered out. Not big magic. But big enough.

“The candle was to catch my backfire, so to speak.”

He stared at me for a minute before leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He contemplated his soot smeared hands before looking up at me again.

“I should go. I’m tired, and I can’t play, I’ll show you mine since you showed me yours right now.”

I stepped back with a small nod. I understood. Now that he knew, he wasn’t interested. It probably would have been best not to say anything, but

what was I supposed to do after Liv's little demonstration? This was Belvoir County, we were all a little special. Some more so than others. Eric pushed to his feet and walked into the house.

I felt more stupid at that moment than I had in weeks. And I was a walking, talking idiot these days.

CHAPTER 12



PAISLEY

I couldn't sleep. Eric had my hormones on edge, and then he left me without even a kiss. I cleaned Terri-Ann's kitchen, trying to wear myself out, nothing worked.

I was still amped, my feelings felt bruised, and the one person who I needed to talk to had walked away.

"Oh my God, you are a moron." I pulled out my phone.

He was tired, I kept pushing him back because he smelled. And now I was trying to figure out what had happened. I literally pushed him away.

I put the dish towel down and pulled my phone out of my back pocket.

'Do you hate me?'

'Hardly.'

I smiled at his response.

'You up? What's your address?'

I checked in the TV room. Everyone was sitting in the dark watching a movie, theater style. Liv was passed out on the floor.

"I need to run an errand, will you get Liv in bed when the movie is over?"

"Yeah, whatever," Terri-Ann said. I doubt she was paying a whole lot of attention.

I left before she could change her mind. Eric lived in Hamilton, just north of Belvoir County, and Duchamp. It took more than a few minutes to get there.

I sucked in air as the doorbell reverberated through the house. House, who was I kidding? This place was freaking huge. And old. So not one of those nouveaux-riche McMansions, this was a real mansion, old money with

a capital O.

Eric hadn't warned me his house was practically an estate. Maybe he was the groundskeeper? Oh, hell, what was I going to do if a maid answered the door?

I was saved that indignity, Eric opened the door.

"Paise?"

I blinked and sucked in another breath. My heart had already been thumping pretty damn hard, this was stupid. But damn if Erik didn't look good. He wasn't wearing anything particularly sexy, just, well, anything he wore was going to be sexy since he was.

Words vomited from my mouth in a rush. "This is going to sound stupid, I know I shouldn't be here. I'm as pregnant and fat as a freaking whale, and these hormones have me all out of whack. And you said yourself you were interested in finding out about this climbing fascination. And I won't take it personally if you say no. My libido is off the charts, and I know as soon as I have this kid I won't be interested in sex for like years, but right now, I could crawl out of my skin—"

Silently, he hooked a hand under my upper arm and dragged me against his chest. I didn't stop talking until his mouth was on mine. Warm lips, wet tongue, I sucked at him as he pressed his lips against mine.

Eric pulled away from the kiss and closed the door behind me. I turned and watched it. It was a big, heavy, old door, and it was closed, with me on the inside. I blinked up at him.

"I can't believe I just came here for a booty call." It was as if I had been possessed. I flushed and covered my mouth.

Eric took a step back, his shoulders slumped. "Are you changing your mind?"

Nervous laughter bubbled out. "You weren't gonna. Were you? I mean, I'm huge. I'm so not sexy. This is embarrassing. I should go."

"Paisley."

Damn, my name on his tongue sent shivers up my spine, down my thighs, and settled right in between at my core.

"What did you think was going to happen? A beautiful woman comes to my house late at night and announces she wants to have sex with me. And while that's not something I'm used to happening, I'm pretty sure I'm not gonna up and say no. But I thought you wanted to go on a date first?"

"So you're willing? Me being huge and everything, not a problem?"

“You’re pregnant. I seem to recall that’s not a condition that makes sex impossible. Well, unless your doc has said no.”

I shook my head. This wasn’t a high-risk pregnancy, and Dr. Booth hadn’t said anything.

“You’re capable, I’m interested. And we can get to interesting positions right away.” That little half grin he gave me made things in my body quiver. I placed a hand against my lower belly. Yep, that was me quivering, not the baby thrashing about.

“So you aren’t repulsed that I came here tonight?” I still wasn’t sure where the chutzpah that got me here came from, or where it had gone to now, that I arrived.

Eric slid his hand into mine. It was warm and large, and damn if he wasn’t leading me upstairs.

And what stairs! This was one of those grand staircases that curved along the round wall of the entry hall. This house was something.

“Hardly. You made the first move. I’m not going to let that slide.” He paused halfway up the stairs. “That sounded creepier than I meant.” He dropped my hand and turned to look down at me. As if he wasn’t already crazy tall, the stairs had him towering over me.

“It was kind of weird of me to make a pass at a pregnant woman to begin with. Even knowing there is no man around, and why. Knowing someone else put that baby in there. But, damn if I don’t want a shot at it too.” He took a step-up, turned around and sat. “That wasn’t much better, was it?”

I climbed a few steps and sat next to him. I leaned into his shoulder. He no longer smelled like the fire. He smelled good, even if his words weren’t exactly working.

“Want to try that again?”

“I’m attracted to you, even if you are pregnant. I don’t want you to think I like you only because you’re pregnant, and it’s some sort of fetish. I like your brain, I like your face, and your smile. I like how you talk to the girls on play dates, and I like how you talk to me. And yeah, I am glad you made this move, because I really had no clue how to ask a pregnant woman out on a date, let alone let her know that I would be interested in sex with her until her condition won’t allow for it.”

“You were actually doing a really good job of it, I thought. At least you kissed me like you did.” I blew out a long, low breath. “So you’re up for more than a few booty calls?”

Eric leaned back on the stairs and reached out to brush my hair from my shoulder. “I’m good for booty calls, dinner dates, play dates with or without the kids. And if you’re willing to be seen with me in public, I would like to be seen with you.”

“That sounds nice. I really like that. I’d love to go out on a date with you without the girls, but right now I’m really horny, Eric.” My laughter felt almost like crying.

He stood up, and then helped me to my feet.

“Then let’s go take care of that, shall we?”

We continued up the winding staircase, and started down a wide hall.

“This house is huge.”

Eric nodded. “Family property. My grandparents lived here when I was a kid. That’s Sarina’s room,” he said, pointing to a closed door. “And this is mine.” He said as he walked through a set of double doors.

I gasped. The room was huge. I was pretty sure my first apartment with Dylan hadn’t been this big. The room was laid out with conversational and functional clusters. Yes, clusters, that’s what they called those little areas on home decorating shows. Most of the clusters looked as if they were barely used. And then there was the functional bedroom cluster with a freaking huge bed, and a side table covered with daddy shit.

I stopped breathing when I saw the photo of the smiling woman next to a baby monitor.

Eric followed my gaze and picked up the framed picture. He handed it to me.

“I think you should meet Janelle.”

I took the frame and gazed at the woman smiling back. She had the warmest brown eyes and dark tan skin. Her hair was in long black braids. She looked so happy, so full of life.

“She’s beautiful. Sarina looks just like her.” I handed the frame back to Eric.

“She does. Some days, I can even hear Janelle in her voice.”

“Does Sarina have her, um, teeth and ears?” I still had no idea what that had completely meant. What morphing skill did Sarina have?

Eric went quiet. He kept his gaze on the photo of his late wife. “That’s all me, I think.” He placed the photo in the top drawer of his bureau.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” I asked.

His voice sounded deeper, stopped up with emotion. “I don’t want you to

feel... I don't know what to do with her. Haven't had a woman up here."

I reached in and picked the photo back up and changed my mind. "Maybe, just for now, I'd rather she not watch. This isn't going to be pretty." I placed the frame face down and pushed the drawer closed.

Eric's mood swung drastically, no longer morose, he pulled me back against his chest. He growled in my ear, "Not pretty? This is going to be phenomenal."

"Yeah, but I still don't want your late wife watching me get my pregnant freak on."

"Understood, but I can't wait for this."

He kissed the side of my neck, and I couldn't help but squirm and giggle. I tilted my head away, giving him more access.

"Okay, some grown up talk. Have you been tested?" I patted his hands and stepped out of his embrace.

"For what? Oh, damn, right. Yeah. Last test was clean, and I haven't been with anyone since. I thought you were going to ask about the ears."

"Yeah, well, this is more pressing. So when were you tested?" I plopped myself down on his bed and began pulling my shoes off.

"I'm a widower, not a monk."

"I'm not gonna judge you. I just want to know if you're clean. Look, I'm pregnant, and according to my tests four months ago I'm good. So if you're good, we don't need a condom. Cause, I can't get more pregnant. But if you aren't one hundred percent sure, I've got a baby here to protect, so you need a condom."

Eric disappeared behind a door. I heard water running. He came back without a shirt on. He dried his hands on a towel. I forgot anything else I was about to say. How could I speak when Adonis himself stood before me. His shoulders had to be twice as wide as his hips. And that chest. I appreciated a nice pair of muscled pecs, the way most guys liked boobs. I wasn't sure how I felt about that chest hair, though. He had more than I typically appreciated, and more than Dylan had, meaning more than I had ever experienced. Hell, if he was willing to bang me while I was pregnant, I could learn to handle chest hair.

"It's been just over six months, so I'm a little horny too. Okay? I am clean, but if you are worried, I do have condoms."

"It wasn't that Lana, was it? That's not why she keeps glaring at us?"

"No, definitely not Lana. Can we not talk about her? I'm about to get

very personal with your body, I'd like to focus."

I tried to swallow, but my throat was dry. "No condom, I'd rather feel all of you."

He stopped next to the bed and looked down at me. I was glad I was already sitting because the molten gaze he gave made my knees stop working.

"Then we had better get started." He reached forward and helped me sit forward on the edge of the bed. Reaching down, he skimmed my t-shirt off over my head. "Your breasts have been very distracting ever since you walked in the front door."

He sucked in a breath. His gaze locked on my full breasts. His hands caressed the sides before cupping each breast.

It was my turn to suck in a breath when his thumbs simultaneously skimmed over the part of my bra immediately over my nipples.

"For the record." Damn, my voice went shaky after just one touch. "You should probably know these aren't mine."

"No?" Eric continued to caress and lightly massage.

"The booby fairy delivered these, and she'll take them away again in a few months."

"No breastfeeding?"

I had to close my eyes against his voice. It was intoxicating.

"Uh uh, didn't work so well last time. Caused problems. So I'm saving everyone the hassle."

The growl sounded like a "good" but I wasn't sure. I could no longer think straight with his mouth sucking me in. He had no problem reaching around my back and unhooking my bra. He dragged a cup down, exposing my breast. His tongue made love to my nipple in a way I couldn't ever remember. Damn if being pregnant didn't make the sensitive bits more sensitive. Or maybe it was Eric. He devoured me. He was a breast man, and clearly enjoying my gifts.

I enjoyed him easily as much, if not more. I stifled a moan, as the pulling on my nipple pulled on other sensitive areas as well. Fisting my hand into his thick curly hair, I held him to me. He released my flesh and I felt a longing as I was alone in my skin.

Eric guided me back against his pillows and lay next to me. Holding himself above me, he proceeded to kiss with as much skill and attention as he paid to my boobs. He was an insanely skilled kisser.

I ran my fingers across his broad chest, and tangled them into his chest hair. He skimmed his chest against my sensitive, hard nipples. Oh, wow, that's what chest hair was all about. I didn't need to be told twice.

I squirmed as his fingers left a ticklish trail down my side until he found the waistband of the oh so sexy maternity pants. Gently he folded the belly panel down and then let his fingers begin exploring inside my pants. I thrust up as he found a sensitive spot.

"Oh yes, that, please." I moaned.

Eric transferred his mouth back to a nipple, and he began stroking the delicate flesh around my sex.

"You really are in need, aren't you." He said around the skin in his mouth. His mouth left me with a pop. "You are wet, I don't need to prime you at all."

"I think I was primed the second you opened the front door. And if that didn't do it, damn the whole nipple thing about finished me off. How are you?"

I finally snaked a hand between our bodies and down his front. My hand floundered around. I heard a zip and then Eric was guiding me to warmth, and hardness. So hard, and girthy, and proportional to his height.

"You're good to go too," I purred.

Eric slid out of bed and pushed his jeans the rest of the way down. He adjusted his cock, it didn't look like it needed any help.

"Are you ready for this?"

I blinked, hell yes, I was ready for that. I kicked my pants off.

"Back that ass over here," he directed.

"I don't like butt stuff."

"Not my favorite either, but you on your hands and knees is going to be just fine."

I backed up until my knees were on the edge of the bed. Eric ran his hands over my thighs. He caressed the sides of my pregnant belly and cupped my breasts. While his hands touched my body, he tickled my clit and entrance with his erection. I sighed with the sensation. His touch eased something in me. I needed this like I needed air. I lifted my ass and pushed back, trying to impale myself on that flesh pole whenever I felt it near.

"Ready?" And he was inside.

I melted. The feel of him inside was better than I could have imagined. And I had imagined many inappropriate things ever since I met him. Better

than anything I imagined on the drive over here tonight. I collapsed onto my forearms and whimpered.

“You okay, Paise?”

“Don’t stop,” I bleated.

Eric held my hips and pulled me back as he thrust forward into me.

My inner walls clenched and began a sucking rhythm that matched his actions. It wasn’t quite an orgasm, but damn if I couldn’t do anything but hang on for the ride. I pressed my face into the mattress, muffling any of the sounds I made. And I couldn’t help it, he made me want to scream, but I couldn’t, knowing Sarina was only a few rooms away.

Eric pushed in and held his hips to me. “Your turn,” he said as he slipped out.

He climbed onto the bed and lay back, holding his hands out to me.

On wobbly legs, I managed to stand in the middle of his huge mattress and stepped over him. Slowly, using my thighs, I sank down to sit on his hips. His cock pulsed against my ass.

“I’m awkward,” I complained.

“It’s okay. Let me.” Eric reached between us with one hand, while steadying me with the other. Once repositioned, I was able to slide back onto him.

The loud moan escaped my mouth before I could stop it. “Sorry,” I squeaked and covered my mouth.

“Don’t worry, the walls here are thick. Besides, the kid sleeps through anything. Just no yodeling.”

I ground my hips against his, and he counter thrust.

“Damn, cause you make me want to yodel. Oh, damn.”

I stopped moving as an orgasm shut down all other muscle function in my body. I let out small squeaks as Eric continued to plunge into me.

“Oh yeah, that’s a good one. Oh, damn, is right.” His face froze on what looked like a grimace, that melted into a huge smile as his body tensed, and then relaxed as he released.

I adjusted and sat back, Eric still deep inside. “Thank you. Oh, thank you.”

“I should thank you. You’re going to date me now, right?” Eric stroked a knuckle over my breast.

“We’re kind of backwards, aren’t we? Sex before dating?” I asked.

Eric’s laugh bounced me a bit. My body twitched with remembered

pulses and tingles.

“I think play dates should count. Even if we were chaperoned by a couple of four-year-olds. I want to keep seeing you like this Paisley. Smiling, naked, in my bed.”

“Yeah, me too. I’m glad I came over.” I stared down at him. His eyes were in the shadows, and I couldn’t read his expression. “Eric, I need some help. I can’t move.”

With a hearty laugh, he sat up and eased my leg over. I was as far from graceful as anything could be. I flopped to the mattress with a giggle. Eric grabbed me and tucked me in against his side and curled around me.

“I know you have to leave in a minute. But let me hold you. We should organize a sleepover for the girls.”

“I think Liv is too young.”

“Not if her mommy is also spending the night.”

“Oh, you are a clever man aren’t you?”

“Let’s just say, you inspire me. I like you. This is nice.”

I twisted so I could look into his eyes. I ran my fingers gently over the pebbled skin of his scar. “I like you too, so teeth and ears? Those come with a tail?”

Suddenly, Eric was scratching his nails up my leg and over my ribs. I twisted. “Hey that tickles.”

I grabbed his hand, because those nails felt very sharp. I looked at his hand. It didn’t suddenly have fur, and there wasn’t much more hair than the last time I really looked at his fingers. They were still long and elegantly tapered, but at the ends were long thick talons.

He sent a shiver through my body when he scraped sharp teeth against the back of my neck.

“Oh.”

“You like that?”

I didn’t know which was hotter, his deep voice right in my ear, or the scrape of teeth.

“Yeah, I think I do. Do it again.”

He gently bit me, and worked his mouth over my shoulder before rolling me to my back. I could see the teeth in the dim light in his room. I cupped his cheek and pulled his lower lip down with my thumb.

He bit me, hard.

“Ow.”

Before I could pull it away and suck on it, he claimed my thumb into his mouth.

“I have teeth and nails. But not the ears. That was unexpected,” he admitted. “And no tail.”

“What are you?” I asked in a whisper.

He shook his head. “Big, scary. I don’t know. It’s not exactly something that was explained to me. And considering the way my parents gave me the birds and bees talk, it’s something I’m sure they would have been mortified to explain. I have no idea whose side of the family it comes from, and I don’t know how my mother will react when Sarina shows off her new trick.”

“My grandmother could do something similar to what I do. Terri-Ann’s skill is a little different. What we have is little, but from what I understand it’s very Duchamp and Belvoir County.”

I sat up and gazed down at him. I could have stayed there and asked him questions all night. “I should get back.”

Eric reached up and dragged me back down for a kiss. Yeah, I needed to leave now, or I was going to stay.

“I’ll walk you to your car.”

CHAPTER 13



“HEY AUNT PAISLEY, THERE'S A GUY AT THE DOOR SAYING HE'S HERE FOR Liv.”

I thought the pounding in the bedroom door was in my head before it registered that Kurt was knocking on the door.

“Gimme a second,” I said.

Liv squirmed. With a few shushing sounds and calming words, she settled back to sleep. Someone had put her in bed while I had been off at Eric's the night before. For such a small person, she took up an awful lot of bed space.

I rubbed my face and opened the door.

“What?”

“Some asshole is demanding to be let in,” he started.

“Oh, Dylan.”

“You expecting him?”

“No, you called him an asshole. It has to be him.”

I followed Kurt downstairs. He kept going into the back of the house, I stopped at the front door and opened it.

“You look like shit,” Dylan smirked. He had one eyebrow cocked up, and his lips were pulled into a half grin. His skin was nut brown with tan, and his hair was blonder from all his time in the sun.

I felt a tug at my heart. When I had been in love with him, it had been very real, very genuine. When that love was broken, shards of it were still left in my body, like slivers of glass impossible to find, but very painful, and festering with infection. It had taken a lot of work on his part to make sure there was no love left for him within me.

The memories were still there. They weren't all cringe yet. I didn't harbor

any hopes of rekindling anything with him. I didn't even want to be friendly co-parents.

"Jesus, were you in a cat fight?" He grabbed my arm and twisted it from side to side.

Long red scratches traveled up my forearm from wrist to elbow.

"Huh," I said as I took them in. And then I smiled. I don't remember Eric's touch being quite that aggressive. But those nails had been sharp.

I snatched my arm away from Dylan's touch.

"What are you doing here?"

"I want to see Liv. I'm here for my time with her."

I blinked and stared. My brain wasn't quite triggering on the words he said. We didn't have a custody arrangement. I had full custody.

"Visits are supposed to be arranged," I snapped.

"Well arrange it. I'm here for a visit," he snarled back.

"No, you need to call ahead of time. Let me know so I can have her ready. Shit like that. You can't just show up and—"

"Daddy!" Liv bolted out of the door and threw herself into Dylan's arms.

"My girl. Go get packed, you're coming with me for a few days." He was all smiles and kisses.

"Really?" She turned her big eyes up at me. "But what about my sister?"

"You can't take Sarina, I'm sorry, sweetie," I said.

She started to whine and fuss.

"What sister? What's going on, Paisley?"

"Her new best friend. They have the same bathing suit, so they decided they were twins, and therefore must be sisters."

"We are, we are twins." Liv huffed and stomped her foot.

"What kind of bullshit is that? You don't have a sister, Liv. Now go get packed, your stepmother wants to meet you." He pushed her toward the door.

"Go inside, baby, I'll be there in a second."

I quietly watched Liv step inside. I flicked my fingers, shooing her away from the door. When I thought she was out of earshot, I turned on Dylan with venom.

"Don't ever push her like that again. She is four, let her have her moment of thinking the same clothes make her and her friend twins. Do you even have a car seat for Liv?"

He gestured dramatically at his car. There was a car seat in the back. But his new wife was not in the passenger seat. Fuck, he was already married, and

I...I... I had long scratches up my arm, and probably across my back, from Eric. I was definitely winning.

I turned to go inside. "Stay here, we'll be back."

Upstairs, I helped Liv put a few things for an overnight into a backpack. With her favorite stuffy in her arms, I followed Liv back downstairs and onto the front porch. I handed Dylan her bag.

"You can have two nights with her. And next time, you have to make arrangements with me more than fourteen days in advance. You're the one who didn't want to get bogged down with a formal agreement. Well, I'm the one being the parent and in charge of her schedule, so two weeks' notice next time and only if convenient for me."

"You used to be so happy to do what I told you to do. You've become one hell of a bitch."

As they started down the stairs, I couldn't stop myself. "Say hi to surfer Suzie for me."

"Her name is Blake, you ignorant cow."

"Before you go, as the primary custodial parent and legal guardian, I do not give permission for Liv, who is not of legal age to consent, to appear in any social media photos. None, you got that? She is not your influencer fodder. And I will pursue it legally if that happens. Be sure to tell your lovely new wife."

Dylan sneered at me. And like the child I was, I stood on the porch and moaned at him. I continued to do so until the car pulled all the way out of the driveway.

I hated that man, and he had my child.

I banged doors on my way back inside and into my bedroom. I scrambled around until I found my phone.

'Dylan in town. Custody issues. Can I see you?'

'Sending Sarina to Mom now.'

I laughed. I didn't care if all we did was sit in the kitchen with cartoons on in the background and talk, I just didn't want to be around anyone right now. Terri-Ann obviously pitied me, I didn't want that. I wanted someone who would be angry for me, with me.

I hadn't even bothered to run a brush through my hair when Dylan was here. I could look as perfect and as beautiful as possible, and he'd still hate me. So why bother? I had a very good feeling that I could look like crap and Eric would still find me beautiful.

In the bathroom, I twisted to see my back in the mirror. I didn't see any scratches, but there might have been a bite mark or two. I got dressed and headed to Eric's, the baby and my nerves dancing. Eric had marked me, now I wanted to know if that had been intentional or not.

This time, when I pulled up in front of Eric's house, I really stared at it. This was grand and old. Not in an old plantation sense of old, but a turn of the last century robber baron kind of old. The door opened and Eric leaned on the frame, his arms crossed. He watched me looking at him and his freaking mansion.

I climbed out of the van. "Who the fuck are you?" I asked as I walked up to him.

He shrugged. "I'm just me, Paisley. What's that supposed to mean?"

He reached out and took my hand. "I'm on call, so I might have to leave."

I sighed. "I know how it works. But you said you also do some marketing for your family business, this house... What is your family's business? Are you one of the big chicken packers around here, and I've missed it somehow?"

He laughed. "You've missed something. I thought you said you grew up around here."

The door closed and he started up the stairs.

"I did, but I have baby brain, oh my God that asshole never even commented on the baby. No snide remarks, nothing. He is fully ignoring the fact that I am pregnant."

"Dylan?"

"Yes, he just showed up on Terri-Ann's porch and demanded time with Liv. Legally, I have to let him. I need to call the lawyer who handled the divorce for me. I need something in there about making arrangements."

"You don't have a custody agreement already?"

I shook my head. "No, Dylan wanted to be spontaneous and not tied to a schedule. I'm changing that. I need planning, a schedule. Because this is ridiculous."

The bed was still unmade from last night. I smiled. Oh, this is what he thought we were going to be doing. He pulled his shirt off as I turned to say something.

Confronted with his broad chest and the way his pecs were covered in chest hair kind of sent all thoughts completely out the nearest window.

I pulled my shirt over my head and tried to put my hand on the part of my

neck where he left teeth marks.

“Did you do this on purpose?”

His hands were gentle as he ran his fingers over the bite marks.

I closed my eyes and leaned onto him. He was warm and had that same clean scent he had last night. I wanted to touch more of him, have more of his skin against mine.

I felt the rumble in his chest before I heard the growl. It sent a shiver dancing across my skin.

“I did.” He nuzzled the side of my neck. His breath tickled, and then I felt the scrape of those teeth again. “Mine.”

I was oddly okay with that.

His large hand spread over my belly. “He doesn’t need to claim this child, I will. From now on, anyone who asks, it’s mine.”

“Eric?”

When he looked down at me, those sharp teeth gleamed in the light, and his eyes blazed with a golden amber glow.

“I’m stupid,” I whispered.

Eric stood up and backed away. His complexion blanched, the teeth and the eyes were gone. He looked... panicked.

I reached out and grabbed his hand back to my belly.

“Not that, Demon Distillery. I’m stupid, not you, not this. Me. You’re a Dupree. The whole fireman thing threw me off completely. I mean, why the hell would a Dupree— a distillery Dupree have a job?”

“I always wanted to be a fireman.”

“Shit.” I lifted his upper lip and stroked his teeth until they elongated.

“Demon Distillery. Huh, there really is a demon. And no one ever told you?”

His mouth hung open, and he stared at me for a while.

“Well, are you going to bite me again or not?”

His laughter filled the room, and it was a big room. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled in tight. His mouth claimed mine, and I forgot that I wanted him to bite me, I wanted him to do all kinds of other things to me as well.

“If you’re stupid, then I’m really fucking dumb. No one ever told me, because they probably didn’t think they needed to. Yes, I’m Dupree of the Demon Distillery. Apparently I’m the demon. My father must have been before me, and it seems that Sarina will follow.”

He lifted me and placed me on the bed before lowering over me. “You still want me, knowing I’m a demon?”

“Do you still want me? And the baby?” I asked. “After all, I hadn’t figured out who exactly you were.”

“Fuck, yes, I still want you. Can we talk about our feelings after? Because my cock is about to explode if I don’t get inside of you soon.”

“I still have leggings on,” I pointed out.

He pulled back to his knees and hooked his fingers into my waistband and pulled the leggings and the panties down my legs all at once. He shoved his jeans down and pulled my legs so that he was between my knees.

“I’m on call. I don’t have the luxury to really take my time with you,” he said.

“I know, and I don’t care. Just take me already.”

He held my gaze as he slid into me. His cock stretched me and stroked me from the inside. He was a big man. I wanted all of him. He was beautiful. I hadn’t gotten to see his face last night. When he closed his eyes and enjoyed my body, I laughed with the joy of it. He thrust into me, and I didn’t care about anything else in the world. Why had I come over here? Right, because Eric would touch me and that would fix everything. And at this moment it did.

He made my body feel amazing. His skin against mine was pure comfort. His cock deep inside was mind-numbing bliss. My eyes rolled back, and I felt the swell and pulse of the orgasm as it swirled around, and grew like a massive storm. The pressure started in my clit, and twisted and grew, and my inner muscles clenched and twitched.

Eric grunted and growled. His eyes took on the amber glow, and damn if that wasn’t the hottest thing I had ever seen. I screamed out his name, or maybe I just called him a demon. My demon.

He spilled into me again. This time he curled around my belly and muttered careful words.

I struggled to push up on my elbows. My entire body was limp and twitching from his touch. “Did you just do magic?”

“I would say that felt pretty magical. We fit together quite well.”

“I meant this.” I spread my hands over the baby belly and jiggled it.

“I told your baby that it was mine, that I was in love with its mother, and therefore I was now the father.”

The noise that came out of my throat was barely human. I sounded like

one of the kids on the playground. There were no words, just loud, unfathomable joy. I managed to sit up and press Eric back as I peppered him with kisses.

“Really? You love me? I thought I was crazy, we barely know each other, but I’m in love with you too.”

Eric let me assault him with kisses and put up with how I rubbed all over him like some kind of cat.

We lay in bed for a long time, finally just talking. Eric skimmed his fingers over my shoulder as I rested my head against his ribs and played with his chest hairs.

“Dylan only came to see Liv because he got married.” I confessed. “At first, I was really angry. I know he’s trying to show me up or something egotistical like that. But then I remembered I had your mark on my body, and I knew without words what it meant. At least I had hoped that it meant something.”

Eric’s voice was deep in his chest. “It means something. It means you are mine now.”

“I think I like you being all possessive.”

“Good. Do you need me to be jealous too? I can do that if you need me to. But I’m not going to tell you what to do. You are a fully grown woman, you can do what you want.”

I laughed softly. “That sounds like you’ve been trained. Should I thank Janelle for that?”

“Janelle and my mother. My natural inclination is to be the brute strength you need. I am your back, your legs, your arms. Tell me what to do, and I will. But I also know how to pay attention and offer support when you can’t or don’t know how to ask. I tried hard to be a partner worthy of my first wife. And I will try equally as hard to be a partner worthy of you.”

“I like that. I like that a lot.” I purred and snuggled in against his firm chest.

There was a muffled phone ringing. Eric sat up, forcing me to sit.

“Where are my pants?” He was out of bed and folded over, looking through our mess of clothes. Finding his phone, he hit the answer button and put it up to his ear. “Yeah? Okay. On my way.”

He ended the call and looked at me with a slightly guilty expression. “I’ve got a call, got to go. Can I see you later?”

“Of course. I mean, we need to do this again at the very least. I’ll be

lonely without Liv, could I come over tonight?”

I watched him get dressed. It was as tantalizing as watching him get undressed. “Can you spend the night?”

“Is that okay? I mean with Sarina and everything.”

Eric stopped with his shirt bunched up, about to pull over his head. “Of course, you can spend the night. I was just thinking we needed to figure out how to tell the girls you're moving in. You're moving in, right? Should we put them in the same room or make them have separate rooms?”

“You want me to move in with you?” I crawled to the end of the bed to be close to him.

Wrapping his arms around me, he stepped in close. My nipples scraped against his shirt. It wasn't scratchy, but it wasn't his skin.

“You're mine, of course I want you living here. I guess we still have a lot to talk about.” His kiss was almost sweet, and might have been if I wasn't naked, and he hadn't begun kneading my breast and rubbing his fingers together over my nipple.

I cupped his cock through his jeans. It only seemed fair.

He stepped back. “I've got to go. Close the door behind you when you leave. I'll call you later.”

I sat back on my haunches as he left. Eric wanted me to move in with him. He loved me. And I was now alone in his house.

Well, if I was going to live here, I might as well figure out where everything was. So far I knew how to get to his bedroom from the front door and that was it. I scrambled off the bed and grabbed my things before heading into the bathroom. I should get dressed before I go exploring, just in case. It would be my luck to be naked in the kitchen and his mother and Sarina would walk in.

My phone rang. I eagerly answered it, expecting it to be Eric.

“Where the fuck have you been?” Dylan yelled.

“I... uh, what? Did you try to call me?” I wasn't about to tell him I had spent a good part of the day in bed with my demon lover.

“Your sister said you weren't at the house, and she didn't know where you were when I tried to go by the house earlier.”

“Yeah, I'm not there. Did you try to call me? Because my phone hasn't rung.” If it had, I totally hadn't heard it.

“You need to come get Liv. Now.”

And that's when I heard Liv crying in the background. I forgot all about

exploring Eric's huge house and ran for the car. "Where are you? Why is Liv crying?"

He was at the Express Inn by the freeway. The one across from the KFC, yes I knew where he was. I was about twenty minutes north, fifteen if I drove too fast. Which I did.

I parked the car and climbed the stairs to the second floor balcony. Dylan had their room door open before I reached it. He had Liv by the arm and was dragging her out of the room.

"Take your brat."

Liv ran to me. I wrapped all of my protective love around her. "Hey, baby, it's okay. I've got you."

Dylan glared at me with the heat of a thousand suns. I had looked into the veritable eyes of the underworld in the man I loved, Dylan's hard stare was nothing.

"Where were you all day, Paisley?"

"You never once tried to call, so can your indignities. What happened?"

"She kept throwing glitter on everything, and thought it was cute. Blake told her to cut it out, and she wouldn't. And when Blake tried to take the glitter from Liv, she hid the shit. She kept saying it was fairy magic."

I put Liv behind me. I glanced up, there was an overhang ceiling between me and the sky, but the concept was there. "With intention." And then I turned back to face Dylan. "Stay away from us. Stay out of our lives. I release you, I admit my mistake. Be free from us, and us of you."

I picked Liv up. She was heavy, but damn it, I was taking her out of here. Fire alarms sounded. Oops.

CHAPTER 14



ERIC

What the fuck was Paisley doing at the hotel? We hadn't even pulled into the station after dealing with a literal dumpster fire out at the strip mall in Kent. At least the driver of the skid was smart enough not to drop his load in the parking lot of the gas station.

Some idiot tossed a cigarette into a potted plant in the lobby, only to find out the hard way the plant was plastic. I let the guys head in to deal with it. I wasn't needed for this. And there was some ferret looking man yelling at my woman.

I jogged over to see what was going on. "Paisley?"

"Eric!" Liv bounced and reached her arms out to me. I lifted her from the car and looked from Paisley to the asshole I assumed was Dylan, and back again. "Did you have something to do with this?"

She shrugged. "Maybe?"

"Jesus, are you still going around telling people you can start fires with magic? No wonder, Liv thinks she has fairy powers. You are fucking nuts!" The weaselly little guy whined. I didn't like him, didn't like the sound of his voice, or how he was talking to Paisley.

"Dylan!" A woman from the second floor of the motel shrieked.

Dylan glanced back at her. So that was the new wife.

Paisley ignored them both and continued speaking. "If this was me, it's not doing a good job. I mean, that's a lot of smoke, and he's still standing here. Everything go okay earlier?" She smiled, it was forced, but she was doing her best to ignore the obvious anger of her ex.

Liv played with my helmet. I took it off and put it on her head. It

swallowed her and she giggled.

“It was a dumpster fire, literally. Guy had to drop a commercial load that combusted. It happens. So you’re the ex. Be a good little ex and leave now.”

“Or what big guy?” Dylan puffed up his chest and squared his shoulders.

It was a pitiful display. If he thought he was intimidating, he was solely mistaken. Maybe he was trying to show off around the women?

“Or I can make things very uncomfortable for you.” I had money I could throw at this problem to make him go away.

“Is that a threat? I’ll sue you, I’ll sue your whole God damned department.”

“It was not a threat. And legal action would be a bad idea.” I tried to stay calm and not show my teeth. But some growl came out in my voice.

Liv went very still. Crap, I didn’t mean to scare her. I wiggled my finger into her tummy to make her giggle. She squirmed and went back to poking at my gear.

The woman from the second floor arrived and began tugging at Dylan. “Dylan, are you listening at all? We need to go. Your kid ruined all of my clothes for this trip. Everything is covered in glitter.”

“You do that?” I asked Liv, remembering her new-found talent for throwing fairy dust.

She nodded.

“High five.” She hit my palm as hard as she could, which wasn’t much at all.

The other woman looked appalled. I guess she didn’t appreciate glitter, even though there was enough of it spilled on her.

“I want you to call our lawyer, this guy can’t threaten me and get away with it.”

“He didn’t threaten you, you fucking moron. Just leave us alone already.” Paisley looked up into the sky. “I thought we had a deal?”

“Dylan!”

“Yes, I hear you, can you wait a fucking minute?” He spun on the woman.

Her eyes went wide and her lower lip quivered.

“You should just leave him. Trust me, he’s not worth it,” Paisley said.

It was a fair enough warning, but the other woman didn’t like it. She went from pouting to seething in the blink of an eye.

“You want me out of the picture? Do you? It’s not like he’ll go back to

you.”

Paisley must have thought this was all some kind of comedy farce, she started laughing. I knew that laughter well, it was full of tension and annoyance. And it pissed the other woman off.

“Why would I want Dylan? I have Eric, and he is so much better in every way.” Her eyes locked with mine and I felt love in that gaze.

She glanced at her ex and his angry new wife before turning back to me. “We should go, this isn’t settling anything. And you should probably get to work before you get into trouble.”

She took Liv from my arms and buckled her into her car seat. She then reached up and put my helmet back onto my head. I had to bend over to assist, but it was worth it to sneak a look down the V of her tunic at her glorious cleavage.

“You two coming over tonight, right?” I asked. “Ready to have a sleepover, Liv?”

“A sleepover with Sarina? Can I Mommy?”

“Absolutely. And we’ll pick up pizza for dinner?”

“Pizza sounds great.” We continued on as if the other two weren’t still standing there. They didn’t matter in our lives.

Paisley leaned out of her van and gave me a quick kiss. I grabbed the back of her neck and deepened the kiss.

“Ew, you smell like smoke. Take a shower before we show up.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

Dylan was still huffing and posturing like an impotent bull. His wife was storming away from us and yelling something about getting in the car, and he needed to get his things before the motel burned down.

“Are you really with her? She’s a freak! She thinks she has magic.” He sounded honestly confused.

I looked over my shoulder at her and smiled. “Yeah, she’s my freak.”

The van started to pull out and then stopped. “Hey demon boy!” Paisley yelled from the open window.

I turned to look at her.

“I love you!”

“I love you too!” I watched as she maneuvered the van around the tail end of the firetruck and drove off. I turned back to Dylan.

“I didn’t want to do this with Liv around. You see, I adore that little girl.” I leaned in close and let my teeth out. “I wouldn’t want to frighten her in any

way, you, however.”

I let the eldritch anger of my ancestors into my voice. My nails grew thick and black. I rest the tip of one nail against Dylan’s chest. “This is a threat. If you so much as come into this part of the state, I will know. When the release of custody papers come, you will sign them immediately. And if you so much as send a lawyer after Paisley, or make the mistake that you think you can come after me, I own half of Hamilton County. I make the kind of money your lawyer has wet dreams about. I can keep you in litigation until you have to file bankruptcy or die. It doesn’t matter which one comes first. Have I made myself clear, Dylan?”

I flicked my nail against the top button of his shirt and sent it flying.

He stood there, staring at me, not one muscle even twitching. I almost thought he hadn’t heard me until I smelled his reaction.

Regaining my posture, I willed my nails and teeth to recede. I gave him another moment to answer. When he didn’t, I turned to leave. It was juvenile of me, but I couldn’t help it. I spun and shouted, “Boo!”

I stood there laughing like some fool idiot as Dylan fell over in his attempt to run away.

“Dupree! Get your ass over here!”

I was still laughing as I jogged back to the truck.



PAISLEY and the girls were all snuggled together on the couch. I felt like I had been ostracized to the far end.

Pizza boxes were open on the table in front of us, and a live action version of a cartoon I had watched when I was their age was on the big screen. It was amazing. It was as close to perfect as I could ever hope for.

“How soon do you think you could pack up and have your things here?” I asked.

“Daddy, hush, movie,” Sarina chastised me.

Paisley glanced at my daughter and then gave me a sympathetic smile and shook her head.

“Or do you want to get married first? You know before you move in?”

“Sh, movie!” Liv added.

Paisley picked up the remote and paused the movie.

Liv turned to whine at Paisley, but she had her hand up and covered all of the girl's face.

"What did you just say?" Paisley asked.

"I wanted to know how soon before you and Liv move in with us, or if you'd rather wait until we get married first?"

The girls erupted in screams. Paisley just stared at me with wide eyes and a trembling chin.

I slid to the floor in front of her and wrapped my arms around her waist.

"I want to get married before the baby comes. We can fly to Vegas tomorrow or call the minister at Duchamp Presbyterian and see how soon he can fit us in."

I held onto her and fell into the pool of her eyes. Sarina and Liv were dancing on the couch.

She just stared at me for the longest time before reaching out and touching my face as if I wasn't really here.

"You really want to marry me?"

"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't. I can't make you say yes, but say yes."

She nodded her head slowly, and then more vigorously, and then her arms were around my neck, and she rained kisses down on my face. "Yes, I will marry you."

EPILOGUE



PAISLEY

Three and a half months later.

My knees were in my face and the obnoxious Dr. Booth was telling me to push. What the hell did he think I had been doing? Eric held one knee up with one arm, and I had a grip on his other hand.

“You’re doing so good, Paise.”

He did the silly breathing exercises with me. Pant, pant, pant, pant, hold, push, let it all out. I couldn’t be mad at him. He wasn’t the one that did this to me.

I groaned and that turned into a scream.

“Well done,” Dr. Booth said. “Try not to push for a bit. I need to adjust the baby.”

“Her head is out Paise. You are doing such a good job.”

“This doesn’t feel like a good job,” I whimpered. “Can I be done now?”

It felt like forever before Dr. Booth said I could push again.

“Okay, let’s see if we can get this little girl out.” He rested his hand on the side of my stomach, it felt like needles sinking into my skin. “Here comes the contraction, big push.”

I gave it everything I could, and then Eric was letting my leg down and the doctor placed my baby girl on my stomach.

I started crying.

“She’s perfect, Paisley, absolutely perfect,” Eric said. He kissed me, and I just kept crying.

My new baby girl had hair thick and black like Eric. Not like anyone in my family, and certainly not like her biological father.

After that, I was kind of zoney and potentially delusional. A nurse helped to wipe the hours of sweat from my body, and Eric followed the newborn to the nursery for all the infant check-up things.

I drifted in and out of sleep. I woke up when I heard Eric's mother come in and argue with him about getting a paternity test.

"Mother, I don't need a paternity test. Drop it."

"Are you at least going to let me see my new grandchild then?" The way she said grandchild was clear that she didn't mean it.

When we first met, right before the wedding in Las Vegas, she had been perfectly sweet to me and Liv. But when she asked who the father of my baby was and Eric said it was him, she bristled. She treated me like I was after her son's money, like I was trapping him.

"You don't have to tell her that. Eric, it's okay that some people know the truth. I love that you want this baby to be ours. I would love that as well, but can we at least let your mother know a sperm donor was involved?" I stopped referring to Dylan as anything other than what he was to me, the provider of the sperm that fertilized my eggs.

"She's mine." Eric's demon voice snuck out during times of high emotion.

I knew he would raise her to be his and never treat her differently than he did Sarina, or even Liv.

This of course meant that his mother always gave me a questioning side eye. And that is why I didn't want either of them to know I was awake.

"Let me hold her. When are you planning on letting the girls come meet their new sister?"

I watched as she swayed gently with the baby, but she didn't look at the baby at all.

"It's late. They'll be here in the morning."

Suddenly, his mother stopped moving. "Oh, Eric," she gasped.

I stopped breathing.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't..."

I bolted into a sitting position, fuck that, pretending I was asleep. "What's wrong with the baby?" Panic flooded my system.

"Nothing, she's precious. I just, I'm sorry I doubted Eric when he said he was the father. I mean, there was no possible way. But look at her. She looks exactly like he did when he was born. That thick hair. She has the same tufts on her ears." She started to unwrap the bundled up blanket until she found a

tiny fist. “And the same pointy fingernails. She is definitely a Dupree baby.”

I stared at Eric, hard. How?

“Don’t worry about those ears. They are as cute as they can be. Eric grew out of his within a few months.”

She walked over to me and handed me the baby. “I owe you an apology, clearly. I should go home and let you rest.”

Eric walked his mother to the door and closed it behind her.

I stared at him as he strode back to us. Looking at my daughter's tiny ears, I didn’t know if I would have called the extra fuzz at the tips tufts, but there was noticeably longer hair there. And her nails were like translucent rice paper, with perfect pointy tips.

“How?” I asked. “How did you do this?”

“Maybe I made a wish? Maybe I did a little bit more?” He sat on the bed and wrapped an arm over my shoulder. I leaned into him.

“You did do something all those times you would wrap around my belly and whisper things to her, didn’t you? Didn’t you?”

He shrugged. “Are you mad at me? All I did was tell her she was my child. I guess it worked.”

“Mad? No, this is wonderful. This is amazing. I love you.”

He kissed me on the temple and held us close.

“What are we going to name her?”

We had been wondering what her name would be as soon as we found out she was a girl. Knowing for three months before she was born did not make the decision any easier. There were so many amazing names out here, but we hadn’t been able to settle on one. The girls were mad that we wouldn’t name her Elsa.

I stared into her perfect little face. She did kind of look like Eric. It was truly astounding.

“Mara,” I said. “Let’s name her Mara.”

“That’s a good name. How did you pick it?”

“It’s a variation on Amara, it means love. I mean, our other kids are named for life and laughter, why not just embrace the ridiculousness of it and wrap it up with love?”

Eric’s brow twisted up as I wasn’t making sense to him.

“Live, laugh, love. Let’s just accept the inevitable and name her for love.”

“Mara Dupree, sounds nice. But I refuse to admit our girls are named live, laugh, love. I don’t care if it is a coincidence.”

“I won’t tell anyone if you won’t. Pinky promise.”
He hooked his pinky finger with mine, and then kissed me.

Thank you for reading!



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ABOUT AUTHOR LULU M. SYLVIAN

Lulu writes hot paranormal romance and ridiculous stripper rom-com. Her background is rooted in visual arts and making pictures. Encouraged to make those pictures out of words Lulu began writing just to see what would happen. Never expecting to be a writer, she was surprised to find that words were easy.

Lulu feels that “aliens” may actually be the best answer for a lifetime of being asked, “Where did you get that red hair from?” She embraces the crazy that comes with that one little genetic mutation, and attempts to live up to the reputation that precedes her as a redhead. Lulu would like to apologize for her contribution to the hole in the ozone layer from her use of hairspray in the 1980’s.

HAUNTED HOLIDAY



ANDRA DILL

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Edited by: Casey Harris-Parks

HOLIDAY HAUNTING

It's not good for a witch's reputation when she contacts the wrong ghost.

A simple job takes a complicated turn for Priya Carmichael when the wrong ghost shows up—a murder victim. A small child who says Santa did it.

Dismissed and ignored by the police, she strikes out on her own to solve the mystery.

Priya bumps (quite literally) into a handsome vampire who insists on helping her. Can these two find the person responsible for hurting children and stop him for good? Or will the holiday cheer be over for everyone?

Trigger warning—This story is about the ghosts of murdered children. However, no acts of violence nor details of their deaths are described.

CHAPTER 1



USUALLY, PRIYA CARMICHAEL AVOIDED FUNERAL HOMES. SOME GHOSTS WERE extremely persistent and in her experience, people freaked out when she started talking to their dearly departed. Today someone wanted to pay her for that experience. However, she had reservations about the rushed communication job and serious concerns about Belinda Hawthorne's expectations.

Other witches shied away from spirit communicators like Priya, fearing she was actually a black-magic necromancer eager to control the recently deceased. Nothing could be further from the truth. All Priya wanted to do was help the spirits find peace.

The majority of her clients were non-magics like Mrs. Hawthorne, with unrealistic notions about Priya's ability.

"Thank you for meeting me here." Belinda extended a slender hand drenched in sapphire and emerald rings. The widow either purchased illusion spells or used Botox and fillers to achieve her dewy, smooth complexion. Priya couldn't find a hint of gray in her chestnut bob.

Belinda wore a black sheath dress that showed off thin yet toned arms and calves. The dress was lovely, but seeing it made Priya chilly. Beneath her wool peacoat, she wore a camel-colored cable-knit sweater and silk-lined slacks in chocolate brown.

A basset-hound-faced man in a dark charcoal suit stood a few feet behind her client. Given his parade rest stance and sympathetic expression, Priya pegged him as the funeral director.

She gingerly shook Belinda's jeweled hand.

Belinda turned to the director. "Well, don't just stand there. We have

things to discuss.”

Inclining his head slightly in acknowledgment, he ushered them into a Serenity room. Before closing the door, he discretely mouthed, “Good luck,” to Priya.

Pewter sconces on the walls emitted a soft glow of light. The majority of the cozy, windowless room’s illumination came from a large backlit stained glass mosaic in tones of blue and green. A piano rendition of Silent Night played softly in the background.

Belinda sat as Priya shrugged out of her toasty warm coat. Static electricity sent the purple-toned ends of her long hair flying. She smoothed it down, then draped the coat across the back of the chair, and took her seat.

Belinda folded her hands in her lap. “I understand your hesitation to perform your ... ritual without any preparation, but I have to speak with Zeke before our children get here. Give me the contract and I’ll sign it.”

“As I told you before, Mrs. Hawthorne, communicating with spirits isn’t like talking on a telephone. I want to make sure you fully understand I make no guarantees. Your husband’s spirit may have passed into the next realm.”

Belinda shook her head vehemently. “He wouldn’t do that. He’ll wait for me.”

From her brief experience with the widow, and given the woman’s tone, Priya imagined the unspoken “or else” was implied.

“I’ll pay double your fee.”

“That isn’t necessary, Mrs. Hawthorne.”

“Just do your thing and you’ll see he is still here.”

Smiling patiently, Priya regretted answering the phone this morning. After a mental ten count, she said, “Spirits sometimes attach themselves to the place they died.”

“Yes. Yes. Or to a loved one. Or remain with their body. I’m sixty, Ms. Carmichael, not senile. I understood you perfectly the first time. And I’m telling you, if Zeke isn’t with his body then he is right here with me.” Her hazel eyes blazed in challenge.

Chastened, but unwilling to be rushed through her caveats, Priya forged ahead. “Adjusting to death usually leaves the spirit in a state of shock for four or five days. Communication will be impossible during that time.” She knew full well Belinda Hawthorne would cry ‘foul’ if Zeke didn’t manifest. Which, in Priya’s opinion, was almost a certainty.

“Since he died on that stupid deep-sea fishing trip, they took him to

Anchorage for an autopsy to determine what caused his death. It was his heart. I told them it was his heart.” Belinda pressed her lips into a tight line and shook her head. “They kept him for four days before they released his body to the funeral home. Then because of the airline snafu, it took another three days before he arrived in Kingston. Zeke has had plenty of time to adjust.” She pinned Priya with a weighty scowl. “My oldest daughter will be here tonight. The boys and their wives fly in tomorrow morning. My youngest and her brood get in tomorrow afternoon at four. I need to talk to Zeke today before they get here.”

“Mrs. Hawthorne, even if I can reach him, there’s no guarantee I can talk with him.”

“Ms. Carmichael, nothing in this life is guaranteed. I understand the fee is non-refundable. Believe me, Zeke will talk to me. Give me that contract.”

Fifteen minutes later, Priya centered herself by lighting slender white candles. Poinsettias and dozens of floral arrangements filled the viewing room. A gigantic spray of white lilies, red roses, and sprigs of fragrant evergreen blanketed the coffin. White satin ribbons declared Beloved, Father, Husband, and Grandpa, however Zeke’s ghost was nowhere in sight. Not that she expected him to be, but a girl could hope.

Priya couldn’t brew potions, and her spell-casting ability regularly embarrassed her, but tapping into this magic, her magic, came naturally.

Normally, she walked in circles as part of her meditative process. The flowers proved too much of an obstacle course, so she slowed her breathing, focusing on the flickering flames to clear her mind. When she felt grounded, she swept her hand in an infinity loop and invoked an invitation to Zeke Hawthorne. A familiar thrum of magic filled her. Colors flashed behind her closed eyelids. Surrounded by a mantle of peace, she called again. The words passed through her parted lips, light as a feather floating on the breeze.

A tickling to her right alerted her to a presence. Slowly opening her eyes, she saw the air shimmer. A figure took form. Priya blinked.

Her gaze lowered.

She blinked again.

Where she expected a six-foot-tall, gray-haired man to be, she found a dark-haired boy barely three and a half feet tall. Baby fat rounded his cheeks. Long black eyelashes framed his dark brown eyes. A dimple marked the center of his chin.

“Why are you doing that?” Using his entire arm, he mimicked her infinity

loops.

“I’m trying to contact a spirit with my magic.”

“A spirit?”

“Yes.”

“Who are you talking to?” Belinda demanded.

The child’s elfin-like face scrunched up. Either in concentration or a full-faced frown, Priya couldn’t decide. “Why?”

How had he died? Cancer? An accident? When? He was so small. So young. Tears pricked Priya’s eyes. She wanted to reach out and cuddle him. She knew better than to touch a ghost. The last thing in the world she wanted right now was to frighten him away.

“Because his wife wants to talk to him.”

“Why?”

“Who are you—”

Priya held up a hand and shushed her client. “Because she wants to say goodbye.”

The scrunched-up expression remained as the boy studied Belinda. “She can talk to dead people?” He glanced at the coffin.

“She can’t, but I can. Sometimes.”

“Do ghosts step inside you? Like in that movie my mommy likes?”

“No.” She suppressed a shudder. The idea chilled her to the bone. “That’s only in the movies. They talk to me like you’re doing and I relay their messages.”

His dark eyes widened. A shy smile curved his lips. “Can you talk to my mommy?”



“YOU’RE TELLING me you called the wrong ghost?!” A spidery blue vein pulsed at Belinda’s temple.

“I didn’t call him. I don’t even know his name.”

The boy touched his chest and proudly said, “I’m Levi Ellery Teasdon.”

Biting back a smile, Priya kept her eyes steady on her client. “Sometimes ghosts just show up.”

“Well, I’m the one paying you. Get Zeke here. Right now.”

Levi touched the coffin. “I don’t think he’s here.”

“Not here?” Priya jerked in surprise.

“Nuh uh.”

Abandoning Belinda, she turned and crouched down. A swarm of questions buzzed through her head, all begging to spill out. At ten years old she saw her first ghost. They resorted to playing charades to communicate. In the intervening thirteen years, her conversations with ghosts had been limited to resolving unfinished business so they could move on. She would love to know more about their realm. However, distracting them with questions sometimes enraged them, frightened them into disappearing, or left them confused. She clamped her lips tight. The silent questions gathered speed, whipping around with the violence of a tornado.

“What are you playing at?” Belinda demanded. “Get up this instant and do your job.”

Teetering on the edge of temptation to pester the child for answers, Priya latched onto the sharply spoken words like a lifesaver.

“I was assured you were the best witch for this.” The widow gripped Priya’s arm and tugged.

“I haven’t seen anyone else like me here,” Levi said. “Can you talk to my mommy? She’s right over there.” He pointed to the sidewall. “Crying. And daddy is too.”

Priya straightened. “Mrs. Hawthorne, I don’t think your husband is here. I need—”

“He is. You just haven’t given him enough time.”

Levi walked to the wall and passed through it.

“Do your spell thing again.”

“I’m sorry.” Priya hurried to the door, stopping only long enough to scoop up her coat and bag. She turned, nearly colliding with Belinda. She didn’t have time to argue with this woman. Even though the contract clearly stated payment was due whether the spirit was reached or not, she knew Mrs. Hawthorne would dig in like a mule. Priya rummaged through the bag, retrieved the check, then handed it to her former client. “I don’t normally do this, but I’m returning your money.”

“I don’t want my money back.”

“I have to go.” Priya hitched the bag onto her shoulder. “Again, I’m sorry.” She rushed to the door, opened it, and headed into the hall. The Serenity room and main entry were to her right. To the left, at the end of the hall, the funeral director and a hulking man in a navy suit spoke in quiet

tones. A set of closed doors lay halfway down the hall. Since Levi went in that direction, she headed for them.

Butterflies swirled in the pit of her stomach. How would she explain herself? She didn't want to traumatize Levi's parents. Would they believe her? Would they listen to her at all?

As she laid her hand on the doorknob a man shouted, "Hey! You can't go in there."

Broad through the chest, belly, and hips, the man moved with surprising swiftness. Priya winced, recognizing the beefy face.

Detective Bauer.

She hoped he was here as a friend of the family and not in his official capacity.

Over the years, Priya helped the Kingston Police Department three times, twice with suspicious deaths and once with a murder. Bauer hadn't been involved with any of the cases. That didn't stop him from loudly and vehemently insisting she was a charlatan. He wore his hostility like a favorite cologne.

He chugged to a stop. "Well. Well. Ms. Carmichael. Why am I not surprised to see you here?"

"Detective. I need to speak with Levi's parents."

"No. Leave them in peace." Bauer rocked forward, looming over her. "They don't need your woo-woo act right now."

Clenching her fist around the strap of her bag, she silently vowed to stay calm. "Levi wants to speak with his parents."

"Does he?" His voice dripped with derision.

"Well, yes," Belinda Hawthorne interjected. "She got the wrong ghost and he interrupted my session to contact my poor Zeke."

Bauer's icy gaze landed on Belinda. "And you are?"

She shrugged it off with a scalding glare. "Mrs. Ezekiel Hawthorne. Now, let her get on with her business. The sooner she relays the message" —she waved a ring-heavy hand— "the sooner we can get back to my husband."

Levi popped his head out through the closed door. "Are you coming?"

"Yes, I am." Priya took hold of the doorknob again.

Bauer slapped his hand against the door, blocking her. "And I said no. I won't have you bothering these people and I won't tolerate you messing with my investigation."

Murdered. Levi had been murdered. Blanketed by sadness, Priya

squeezed her eyes shut, fighting back tears.

Behind her, Levi asked, “Who is the grumpy man?”

Swiveling to him, she blinked furiously, swallowing down the lump in her throat. “Detective Bauer.”

“Leave, Ms. Carmichael. Now.” The detective’s gruff voice nearly eclipsed Levi’s soft, “He’s a policeman?” He stepped through the door to stand in the hall.

Priya nodded. “He is.”

Levi scuffed the toe of one red and white sneaker against the beige carpet. “Will you ask him to find the little girl?”

Priya crouched, resting on her heels. “What little girl?”

“Stop playing games, Carmichael.”

“Will you be quiet?” Belinda propped her hands on her hips. “Can’t you see she’s busy? Let her finish this up. I need to talk to my husband.”

“She’s a con artist, lady.”

“The yellow-haired girl who helped me,” Levi said.

Bauer and Belinda squared off with each other. Priya ignored their verbal volleys as Levi continued. “I shouldn’t have gone with Santa. She tried to warn me, ‘cept she couldn’t talk. She just kept jumping in front of me, waving her hands.” He demonstrated, wildly sweeping his arms as if trying to slow down a speeding car. He lowered his arms, casting a worried glance at the closed doors. “I’m not supposed to talk to strangers, but it was Santa and he wanted to show me the reindeer.”

Priya wrapped her arms around her chest to keep from reaching for the clearly distraught boy.

The funeral director hot-footed it up the hall. “People. Please. Lower your voices.”

“There weren’t any reindeer.” Levi’s lower lip trembled. “But she stayed with me. The policeman should go find her. She might still be there.”

The bickering continued at a lower decibel.

“Where did you go?” Priya asked.

One of the double doors opened. “What’s going on out here?” The man had the same wavy dark brown hair, dark eyes, and dimple as Levi.

“That’s my daddy!”

CHAPTER 2



THICK BANKS OF GLOOMY CLOUDS STRETCHED ACROSS THE SKY. THREE-FOOT-high plastic snowflakes and ornate wreaths decorated the light poles. Half of Kingston seemed to be downtown shopping. With only four days until the Solstice and Christmas on its heels, the late afternoon traffic was a given. Priya swiped away another tear as she hunted for a parking space.

The Teasdon's quick acceptance of her was a welcome surprise. Bauer's mutterings and grumblings during their gut-wrenchingly emotional conversation with Levi, not so much. Knowing all three Teasdon's found peace and that Levi was able to move on made it all worthwhile.

Despite her exhaustion from the experience and Bauer's obvious contempt for her, Priya relayed everything Levi told her about his class trip to the Science Center, Santa Claus, and the yellow-haired girl.

"No one else reported a missing child," he said with a sneer. "Stop spinning ridiculous stories and go back to that little spell shop you work at."

After his dismissal, Priya allowed Belinda to herd her back to Zeke and attempted another calling. She steeled herself for the widow's diatribe when, as expected, she couldn't reach Zeke. Instead, Belinda shocked her.

"Keep the check. Zeke's obviously crossed over. It's reprehensible how that detective dismissed you. Someone" —she narrowed her eyes, hitting Priya with a powerhouse stare— "needs to find that little girl."

Priya swiped away another tear. Parking near the Science Center proved impossible. She circled the downtown area like a vulture, scouring the streets for a coveted parking spot.

Two car lengths ahead, a white SUV pulled out. On a surge of triumph, she gunned the engine and darted into the slot. After successfully parallel

parking without umpteen back and forths, her mood dampened when she realized she didn't recognize any of the surrounding shops. Priya checked her phone to see how far she was from the Science Center.

Only four blocks, not bad, except it closed in forty-five minutes. She tapped the phone's parking app and paid for an hour, hoping it was enough time to find a ghost.

A brutally cold wind slashed at Priya as she exited the car. She tugged on a stocking cap, cinched the belt on her peacoat, then fished gloves out of the pockets. Putting her back to the wind, she navigated around the shoppers darting from store to store.

She could be wrong. Levi's friend might not be a ghost. The yellow-haired girl might have been mute. But Levi said Santa ignored the little girl. Priya found that hard to believe. The man wouldn't want anyone noticing their departure. Chances were good a little girl running around waving her arms would draw unwanted attention. Priya bet the fake Santa never saw her at all. She leaned toward the girl being a spirit who could only communicate with gestures.

That Levi saw a ghost didn't shock her. Children were more open and receptive to supernatural phenomena. There might also be a little witch blood far back in his family tree.

As she hurried down the sidewalk, she glanced at the window displays. A curio shop caught her attention. Priya mentally noted its location so she could come back when she wasn't pressed for time.

Two college-aged girls stood in front of a bookshop, ringing bells and wishing people "Happy Holidays!" as passersby stuffed dollar bills into a red kettle. A door opened to her left and the mouth-watering scent of cinnamon rolls assailed her.

Distracted by the luscious aroma, she walked right into someone.

"Sorry!" She looked up to find a young man with a devastating smile. The smile made her stomach rollercoaster-swoop and inspired an answering grin out of Priya. "I, uh, wasn't watching where I was walking."

Tall and lean was her kryptonite.

"Entirely my fault." His cognac-dark eyes held a hint of mischief in them. "I was focused on getting to the bakery and not paying attention."

His brown hair was short on the sides and longer on top. Given the tousled state of the longer locks, she wondered if he habitually ran his hand through it or if the wind had disheveled it. Either way, it was a good look on

him.

The door opened again and more cinnamon goodness rushed out.

She must have moaned, or a rumble from her stomach betrayed her, because he laughed, and said, “They have the best cinnamon rolls in town. Don’t suppose you have time for one? My treat.”

The disarming way he looked at her almost had Priya abandoning her quest. She wondered what time the Science Center opened in the morning.

Meeting his gaze directly, Priya’s grin crumbled. He had a rim of gold around his pupil.

Fear spiked through her. The boy-band handsome guy in front of her was a vampire.

A freaking vampire.

Rumor was the thickness of the gold band indicated their hunger level. It seemed thin, and she doubted he would wander around among the holiday crowd if he were hungry. Right?

Her heart rammed against her ribs like a trapped bird trying to break free from a cage. Could he hear it? Could he sense her fear? Every witch knew vampires found their blood intoxicating. She’d heard even a little sip gave them a power boost.

“I’m sorry.” Priya squeezed the words out of her Sahara-dry throat. “I’m on a bit of a deadline.” She managed a semblance of a smile and jerkily edged around him.

Walk. Slow and easy. Don’t run.

The urge to look back and make sure he wasn’t following became an itch at the back of her neck.

At the next corner, a well-padded Santa wore a sandwich board proclaiming sixty-to-seventy percent off at Jones Galleria. There was a traffic snarl and several drivers expressed their frustration by laying on their horns. Priya chanced a glance over her shoulder. She couldn’t see the vampire. A group of teenagers, tired of waiting for the walk signal to change, threaded their way through the stopped cars. Priya hurried after them.

Of course, she knew there were vampires in Kingston. But in her four years of living in the city, she hadn’t encountered one before.

He wasn’t what she expected. Priya imagined vampires as aloof, sophisticated, glamorously attractive, and ethereally pale. He got full marks in the looks category, but the rest? He seemed down-to-earth, extremely friendly, and no paler than the geek boys she knew from college who rarely

went outside.

Priya slowed, her attention snagged by a display of exquisite jewelry nestled amid fake snow. The array of colorful gems would have made Belinda Hawthorne salivate. An older man came out of the shop carrying a small, silvery-blue bag marked with Hollanders Fine Jewelry. Except for his deep tan, he looked almost exactly how Priya expected a vampire to look. He was 1950s Hollywood handsome. His sharply creased black trousers, double-breasted black wool coat, and artfully tied houndstooth cashmere winter scarf were undoubtedly expensive. And he carried himself with an air of arrogance. It might be stereotyping, but he hit every marker she had in her head.

The elegant gentleman nodded at her as he passed. No gold rim around his shockingly blue eyes.

Priya glanced back again, searching for the vampire.

That smile. Her tummy did another rollercoaster swoop.

Maybe she overreacted.

She resumed walking. The streetlights cast warm yellow orbs of light, pushing back the gray gloom. She dodged around hardcore holiday shoppers on a mission and strolling window shoppers as she watched for the Science Center.

Meeting a vampire caught her off guard. She regretted scurrying away like a mouse.

The guy probably didn't even realize she was a witch. If she had a dollar for every time she'd been pegged for a non-magic human, she would be rich. And it was a little judgmental of her to think all he wanted to do was drink a stranger's blood right out in public. She definitely overreacted.

Caught up in her thoughts, Priya almost went past the Science Center.

Concentrate!

A gust of wind followed her through the glass door, making the garland hanging from a neon blue welcome sign sway.

"We close at five." The gum-chewing woman at the ticket counter pointedly eyed the clock. Her over-the-top holiday sweater sported old-fashioned blinking Christmas lights.

"I'm just looking for someone. I won't be long."

Two boisterous dark-haired boys ran across the tile floor. A weary young woman followed, pushing a sleeping toddler in a stroller.

"Do you work here every day?" It was a long shot, but it wouldn't hurt to ask an employee if a little girl had temporarily been lost and then found on

the same day as Levi.

“Just Tuesdays and Fridays.”

Levi’s group had come on a Thursday.

“Two dollars.” The ticket attendant snapped her gum.

Priya handed over the cash. “Which way to the dinosaur exhibit?” She smiled remembering how Levi got sidetracked talking about his favorite exhibit, insisting she tell every detail to his parents.

“Follow the yellow line.” Another hard stare at the clock. “Remember five o’clock. Happy Holidays.”

“Happy Holidays.” Priya found the yellow line, which headed in the opposite direction of the rowdy boys.

The walls of the dinosaur room were painted to resemble a jungle. She wondered if it was an accurate representation of the period, then scolded herself to focus.

The minutes ticked by alarmingly fast as she searched for Levi’s friend in a high-ceiling room filled with fossils, partial skeletons, and replicas of dinosaurs. If time were on her side, she would call on her magic to make contact with the little girl. Though it wouldn’t work if the ghost wasn’t attached to this building. What was her anchor? Her mortal remains? Priya shivered, disturbed by the thought they might be hidden somewhere close by. If that was the case, why had she been able to follow Levi? He had been vague on details once they left the Science Center. He couldn’t remember his death, for which Priya was grateful.

Could the ghost be attached to the fake Santa? Had he killed her as well?

Priya found the exit door tucked behind a large saltwater aquarium, just as Levi described. Someone had taped a hand-printed sign on it, “NOT An Exit.” A sticker above the panic bar claimed an alarm would sound if opened. It hadn’t sounded on the day of Levi’s abduction. She reached out to touch the panic bar, then hesitated. She could envision the chaotic scene if the alarm sounded. But what if it didn’t? Taking a deep breath, Priya pressed her fingers against the bar, scrunched up her eyes, then pushed.

No blaring alarm.

The door cracked open, letting in an icy swirl of air.

Who knew that the alarm didn’t work? An employee? Or someone who discovered the fact by accident? Did the police know about the non-functioning alarm? Of course, they did. She didn’t doubt they knew every inch of the building now.

Priya stepped back, letting the door shut. It closed with a soft snick. She scanned the corners of the room for cameras and found none. She could just imagine Detective Bauer's reaction to the lack of security.

Where was her ghost? A glance at her watch confirmed she had run out of time.

With more questions than answers racing through her head, she flinched, startled when a tenor voice called out, "You can't go out that way."

Feeling as if she'd been caught with her hand in the cookie jar, she whirled around. A dishwasher blonde-haired man stood next to a replica of a duck-billed dinosaur, smiling at her. Snowmen and reindeer were cross-stitched across his bulky green sweater.

"I, uh, saw it's five and thought I'd leave through the side door here."

He sighed. "I told the Director the sign wouldn't work with regulars. We've let them go out that way too long. There's a hold-up on the parts our maintenance guy ordered. He hoped to get the alarms and cameras installed before the holidays." He scratched his chin. "Don't think that's going to happen though."

So the unalarmed emergency exit door was common knowledge. That answered one of her questions. Hoping to get a little more information from the employee, she asked, "They're adding the security because of the Teasdon abduction?"

"Yeah." Casting his eyes down, he shook his head. "I don't know what this world is coming to."

"Were you working that day?"

"No. I was in Florida, vacationing with my family. Come on." He nodded at the door. "You don't want to go out that way anyhow. It's pretty icy in the alley today. Best to go out the front."

Priya followed him to the main entrance, nodded at the scowling ticket lady, and then tugged her stocking cap down over her ears as she walked out. Foot traffic had lightened and she easily made her way to the end of the block. At the corner, she turned left, determined to check out the alley. Even though every parking space was filled on both sides of the streets, Priya was surprised to find she had the entire stretch of sidewalk to herself. Across the street, small shops attracted a modest flow of people. A sandwich shop seemed quite popular, as did a store called Scribblers.

The alleyway behind the Science Center was wide enough for two cars to squeak past each other. Security lights along the back side of the building

housing the Center and other businesses illuminated generous stretches of cracked asphalt. Some were bright enough to splash light upon the brick building on the opposite side of the alley.

Priya was grateful for the lights. Without them, she would have slipped on the ubiquitous splotches of ice and fallen. As it was, she walked like a drunken sailor trying to avoid the bigger patches of ice. Her eyes were on the ground when she felt a familiar tickling sensation. She glanced up, relieved to see a blonde-haired child wearing pink jeans and a tie-dyed short-sleeved t-shirt. Her form was more translucent than Levi's. Her features were washed out but still discernible, making Priya wonder how long the girl had been a ghost.

"Hello." Priya stopped walking when the girl backed away. "I'm Priya. Levi sent me." The ghost tilted her head. A golden blonde pigtail spilled off her shoulder.

"Do you remember Levi? He told me you tried to help him." Priya pointed behind her. "At the Science Center."

The ghost waved her arms.

"Yes. That was kind of you." Priya chanced a few steps forward.

The girl turned sideways, tilted her nose up in the air, and walked toward the brick building. She stopped and whirled around, waving her arms. Then tilted her nose up in the air, turned again, and made a swishing motion with her hand, as if shooing away flies, as she started walking again.

Not wanting to startle the girl while she reenacted her encounter with Levi, Priya slowly edged around another icy spot. "Levi is sorry he didn't listen to you."

Turning to face Priya, the child spread her arms wide in a What are you going to do? gesture.

"He wanted to thank you for staying with him." Priya edged forward. "Having a friend with him meant a lot." She halted the instant the girl held up a hand, clearly signaling Stop. "Levi wanted me to make sure you were okay."

The ghost's form rippled like rain disturbed by a gust of wind. Crossing her arms over her pink and orange tie-dyed shirt, she pursed her lips and studied Priya.

"I helped Levi talk to his parents so he could move along his path. If you let me, I will try to help you too." Priya wouldn't lie. She learned the hard way that sometimes, no matter how hard she tried, nothing could help.

Seeming to come to a decision, the child uncrossed her arms and crooked her finger at Priya.

“You want me to follow you?”

A nod.

“Don’t go too fast. It’s pretty icy and I don’t want to fall on my butt.”

The ghost silently laughed, then nodded her agreement before making an impatient follow-me gesture.

She allowed Priya to walk alongside her, waiting while Priya dodged more ice. The street they turned onto teed off from the alley. Parked cars lined both sides of the road. There were no security lights or street lights. The ghost looked at her expectantly. She flicked her fingers, then placed her hand over her eyebrows as if shielding her eyes from a bright light. She turned her watery blue-eyed gaze on Priya and waited.

After a moment, she flicked her fingers again and scowled at Priya.

“Oh! You want me to cast an illumination spell.”

The ghost grinned and bobbed her head up and down.

Interesting. Either the child was a witch or grew up around witches and knew about illumination spells.

“My spell work is, uh, shaky,” Priya confessed. “I can see well enough.”

Shrugging, the girl moved to the sidewalk, which someone had sanded, and continued leading the way. A block later, she turned onto another alleyway. In addition to being darker, this one was land mined with ankle-twisting potholes along with icy patches. Several large industrial dumpsters lined the asphalt alley.

A cutting wind whipped between the buildings, slashing at Priya’s face. Hunching against the bone-chilling assault, she wrestled her phone out of her pocket, pulled off her glove, and thumbed on the flashlight app. She quickly stuffed her hand back into the glove.

An inky ball of fur, the size of a small cat or very large rat, darted away from the light and slid beneath a dumpster. A shiver slid down her spine. Priya sped up.

They approached another street that intersected the alley. Priya expected to turn again, but the child continued straight down the alleyway. The potholes became more frequent the farther they went. Before they reached the next cross street, the ghost veered off the poorly maintained asphalt and hurried over to a two-storied gray sandstone building. Snow crunched beneath Priya’s feet. All the windows were dark except the far left one on the

second floor. The ghost crouched down next to a basement window half covered in snow and jabbed her finger at it.

“What’s in there?” Priya asked, immediately regretting it when the little girl rolled her eyes and raspberried her lips. “Oh, sorry.”

The child jabbed her finger at the window again. She turned her hands over, made a gripping movement, and yanked her hands toward herself.

“You want me to open the window and ... go inside?”

Clapping her hands soundlessly, the ghost bobbed her head up and down.

Great. Nothing like a little breaking and entering to end the day. “All right. Let me take a look.” Priya squatted down, brushed away snow, then aimed the flashlight at the window. Someone had painted the rectangle of glass white. She ran her gloved fingers around the edges. “I don’t see a latch.” Going onto one knee, she took a closer look. “It looks like the window is painted shut.”

The girl flicked her fingers at the window.

Priya sighed. “I told you my spell work is iffy and even a simple unlock spell is outside my abilities. What we need is my boss. She can practically unlock everything.” Priya huffed out a laugh. “Although she might question my sanity if I called and asked her to come out here and unlock a window for a ghost.”

She could call Detective Bauer.

Yeah, no. If he even took her call, which she highly doubted, what would she say? Levi’s ghost friend led me to a basement window and I think you should come investigate what’s down there. She rubbed her forehead. He’d probably charge her for “messing” with his investigation.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

Startled, Priya whipped her phone in the direction of the agitated voice. The flashlight grazed over a figure at the corner of the building.

A white-haired man with a gleaming white beard bore down on her. His unbuttoned coat flapped in the wind, exposing a slight beer belly. “Hey!” he bellowed again.

She scrambled up.

Although anger rolled off him, Priya imagined he could pull off a benevolent mien and convince a child to follow him.

The blonde-haired girl opened her mouth in a silent scream and ran at him, flailing her fists. Her small body disappeared as she collided with the sinister Santa.

CHAPTER 3



FEAR CLAMPED PRIYA AS LEVI'S MURDERER DREW NEAR.

"I asked you a question. What are you doing?" His gloveless hands looked like ham hocks.

Heart in her throat, she feigned calm by brushing snow off her pants leg. Priya had no protective magic and the man was seriously big.

"I thought I heard someone calling out. My foot caught on something and I took a tumble." She was fast, but was she fast enough to outrun him? "It was probably a cat yowling." Taking a few retreating steps, she tried a self-deprecating chuckle but a strangled squeak was all that came out.

He kept advancing.

It would take precious seconds to get her glove off, swipe her screen, and punch in 911. She didn't doubt he'd get the phone away from her before the call went through.

"I'm meeting friends," Priya blathered on. Afraid to take her eyes off him, she continued backing up. A mantra of "don't slip don't slip don't slip" rang through her head. "I can't believe I had to park all the way down here. Scarlett's expecting me." Instead of shrieking and bolting away when he drew within striking range of her, she managed a tight-lipped smile. "I better go before they come looking for me."

He raised a clenched fist. "I don't think—"

"There you are."

Both Priya and the false Santa turned toward the cheerful male voice.

Shock slapped her.

Her vampire. What was he doing here?

"Scarlett sent me to find you. She's convinced you slipped on the ice and

twisted an ankle.” The vampire winked at her, then flashed a fanged smile at the Santa look-alike. “And here you are talking with this nice man.”

Under different circumstances, seeing the wicked sharp incisors would have struck fear in Priya. Now she only felt tremendous relief.

The white-bearded man lowered his fist and backpedaled. “I don’t want any trouble.”

“I rarely cause trouble.” As the vampire approached he extended his hand to Priya. She closed the distance in record time.

“Sorry you had to track me down.” Priya grabbed his outstretched hand, squeezing it with the enthusiasm of a drowning victim clutching a life preserver.

“If you’re done chatting we should find the others.”

“All done.” She shot a look over her shoulder. Levi’s murderer continued backing away, all the while flicking his eyes between her and the vampire. “Let’s go.”

The vampire led her up the alley and away from the gray sandstone building. Shivering, not from the piercing cold but from an avalanche of terrifying what-ifs, she appreciated his steadying hand on her low back. The itchy sensation of being watched chased her until they turned onto a through street.

As she walked beneath an oval of light from a street pole, she fumbled her glove off and shut down her flashlight app, then tucked her phone into her pocket. She eased away from the vampire once her feet hit the sidewalk.

With every step, she felt a smidgeon calmer, even though her heart still raced. “Not that I don’t appreciate your help, but what are you doing here?”

“Coming to your rescue. Miles Garner. At your service, milady.”

“Priya Carmichael. Thank you. Were you ... following me?”

“No. Merely going the same direction as you.”

“Really?” She looked up at him and arched a brow. “You were going in the opposite direction of me when I bumped into you.”

“Yes, well.” Miles played with the zipper on his down jacket. “Maybe I followed you for a little while. You’re a beautiful woman and I hoped I’d get a second chance to invite you for a cup of coffee or cocoa and talk.”

Hearing herself described as beautiful sent a giddy thrill through Priya. “Just talk?”

A few blocks ahead of them, she saw a stream of pedestrian traffic. A few minutes ago the bustle of holiday shoppers felt a million miles away. The

sight was both comforting and a tiny bit overwhelming. She drifted closer to Miles.

“Yes, talk,” he said in an aggrieved tone. “Just because I’m a vampire doesn’t mean I drink the blood of every intriguing woman I encounter.”

Although the blood-drinking was unsettling, she found herself blushing at the compliment.

“What were you doing there?” Miles demanded. “On the ground. In front of that window?”

“If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Try me.” He graced her with a fangless smile.

“Trying to help someone. I need to go back there.”

Miles gripped her elbow, propelling her toward the rush of traffic ahead. “That is a bad idea. I don’t think that Santa was about to ask you what you wanted for Christmas.”

The basement window tugged at her. Miles didn’t seem inclined to release her. If she told him exactly why she needed to go back, would he think her mad? Or would he believe her? It would be handy to have him along as reinforcement.

“You were talking with someone,” he said. “At first I thought you were on your phone, then I realized you weren’t. Are you wearing a wire? Are you a private investigator working on a case? Shouldn’t you have backup?”

“No. I’m not a private investigator. Or wearing a wire.” She hesitated, chewing on her lip for a moment before blurting out, “I see ghosts.” Priya steeled herself for his laughter. The muscles in her shoulders and belly tightened as if expecting a blow.

Miles didn’t laugh nor did he loosen his grip, but he did stop walking. “Ghosts. There are actually ghosts?”

“Yes.”

“You were talking with a ghost.” He angled his head, studying her intently.

Did he think she was a necromancer? Most supernaturals held contempt for those black-magic practitioners who controlled the dead. What was she thinking, admitting to a vampire she talked with the dead? A strong current of tension hummed through her. Were vampires dead? Certain religious zealots claimed they were. Plenty of horror movies portrayed them as the undead, rising from their graves after their mortal death, and sleeping in coffins. The truth was no one outside the vampire community knew how they became

vampires. The governing Primes kept their secrets close. Priya swallowed hard, wishing with all her might she could rewind time, and ignored Belinda Hawthorne's call. If Miles thought she could control him, or any vampire, she imagined her life would be forfeit.

"Are you a medium?" he asked. "Like the woman on that television show."

Plenty of non-magics claimed to be mediums. Priya couldn't suppress her shudder of relief. The wind whistled around them. She hoped he'd attribute her reaction to just being cold. "Something like that."

His dark eyes traveled over her face. "You talk to ghosts. Huh. Fascinating."

Not the reaction she expected, typically people scoffed at the suggestion she could communicate with ghosts or were downright afraid of her.

"So you followed a ghost to that building?" Miles asked. "What's so important about it? What did the ghost tell you?"

His ready acceptance of spirits metaphorically swept Priya off her feet.

"She can't talk, actually. She communicates through gestures. I'm making an educated guess but I believe she died in that basement."

"Then who was the angry Santa?"

"I don't have concrete proof, but I believe he's her murderer."

Miles's jaw dropped. "And you want to go back there? Have you lost your mind?" His grip on her elbow tightened painfully.

"Ouch!"

"Sorry." He released his proprietary hold. "You should call the police."

"Sure. No problem. How exactly do you think that conversation will go? Hi, I believe a dude that looks like Kris Kringle killed two children—"

"Two? He killed another little kid?"

Priya shrugged one shoulder. "I don't have proof. I'm just going off what both ghosts told me. The police won't take me seriously."

"I thought the ghost couldn't talk. Wait." Shaking his head, Miles looked up to the starless sky, then down to Priya. "You can explain all of this over a cup of coffee. We can't go back there yet. The killer will probably be lurking about. Let's give him a little time to chill out."

"I don't want to go far." Priya looked in the direction they'd come. "This will sound weird, but I don't want to leave her alone for long."

"Not weird at all. I understand. The amazing cinnamon rolls can wait. Come on. Let's see what's up this way."

Not weird at all. I understand. If she hadn't just met the man, Priya would have hugged him then and there.

Near the end of the next block, they found a small eatery wedged between a closed insurance office and an arts and crafts store. The scent of fried food dominated the narrow space. Nearly all of the tables had single occupants and most of the customers had their heads down, reading from tablets or scrolling on their phones. Priya removed her gloves and stocking cap and then smoothed down her flyaway hair. At the counter, Miles ordered a Dr. Pepper, and Priya asked for hot chocolate. Weaving their way through the close-packed tables, they found a high-top that hadn't been claimed.

Despite the warm room, she kept her coat on, as did Miles. He remained quiet while she gave him the highlights of her appointment with Belinda, Levi's appearance, Detective Bauer, and the yellow-haired ghost. Twice she stumbled, mentioning her use of magic. She watched Miles intently for a reaction, expecting him to pounce on the knowledge she was a witch. Granted not a strong witch, but still. His thoughtful expression didn't waiver.

"The little girl confuses me though," she said. "Every ghost I've encountered was anchored to their body, a significant person in their life, or the place of their death. I don't understand how she covers the distance she does."

"You said Levi's ghost came through the wall at the funeral home."

"He was bound to his body. I don't know the exact radius, but after the shock of death wears off spirits have some mobility. Those bound to a place can move from room to room. Some can even wander around on the grounds of the building."

"A ghost attached to a person can move around wherever that person goes?"

Priya fiddled with her empty mug. "In theory, I suppose. I don't have much experience with those spirits."

"But the little girl could be attached to the creepy Santa?"

"Maybe? I don't know. It would mean he was close to the Science Center when I saw her in the back alley and he was somewhere nearby when she lead me to the basement window." A shiver raced up her spine. "I didn't see him until he came around the corner of the building. But then I didn't see you either."

"I can tell you no one was following you, except for me and I wasn't doing it in a creepy stalker-y way. I swear."

His earnest expression made her smile. Sitting here discussing ghosts with a vampire was surreal. Her best friend would call her insane. History proved time and again the folly of a witch falling for a vampire. In every case, it never ended well for the witch.

Miles hadn't so much as twitched when she'd mentioned her magic earlier. Maybe he hadn't caught her slip and he didn't realize she was a witch. Her knowledge about vampires was based on rumor more than fact. She had no clue if a vampire could smell magic or if they could identify a witch through some other sense. From Miles's non-reaction, she thought she was probably safe. She doubted she had that much magic in her blood anyway.

She wouldn't deny her attraction to him. Whether he went back with her to the sandstone building or they parted company, she sincerely hoped she'd see him again.

Oh yes, her friends would call her certifiable. How could she feel this way about a freaking vampire? Even though she was the equivalent of a gazelle and him a ravenous lion, Priya felt comfortable with Miles. And if he hadn't shown up when he did ... her belly convulsed with fear.

"Believe me. I'm glad you came to my rescue."

Miles leaned forward, forearms braced on the table, his fingers inches from hers. "You said Levi found peace and moved on. Moved on to where?"

"I don't know where." Priya shrugged. "Some call it the beyond. The veil. The next realm. I don't know what it is or where it is, but I do know the majority of people move on shortly after their death. The spirits I've worked with usually need to finish something here. Find something. Tell someone something." Another shrug. "If I can help them, they ... move on."

"No bright light?" He seemed disappointed.

"None that I see. Doesn't mean they don't see it though."

His long fingers restlessly grazed the table's surface. "Have you ever run across a vampire's ghost?"

"I don't think so."

Miles's jaw tightened. Sadness shadowed his cognac-brown eyes.

Priya hurried on. "Not all ghosts speak, so I suppose it's possible one of the nonverbals I've met was a vampire." She knew none of them had a ring of gold around their pupil. Would the ring go away after their death? Or was it technically their second death? More questions crowded into her mind. The temptation to grill him for information thrummed through her. Would he think her questions rude? Probably. "I've never been hired by a vampire to

communicate with a ghost.”

“What were you thinking? Just now? There was a spark in your eyes—” He didn’t finish his sentence.

Embarrassed, she dipped her head. “Nothing. Really.”

“I’d like to know.” His cool fingers brushed across hers.

The gentle caress made her stomach swoop again. Like a pleased cat, her fingers curled reflexively. She yearned for him to repeat the fleeting gesture.

“I ... wondered about.” She cleared the lump in her throat. “The ... ring of gold.”

A soft chuckle brought her head up.

“Yes, the hungrier we are the thicker the ring gets. It’s a commonly asked question.”

“I didn’t mean to be rude.”

Miles grinned. “You aren’t. It’s human nature to be inquisitive. For example, I’d like to know if you’re seeing anyone?” He tapped her ring finger. “I don’t see a ring so that gives me hope.”

Her nerves danced, delighted by his touch.

“No. I’m not dating anyone or in a relationship. You?” Priya tilted her head, returning his beguiling smile.

“Unattached. Although, I’d very much like the chance to date you.”

Shouting out “yes” wouldn’t be dignified. Barely able to contain her excitement, she swept her gaze around the room to calm herself before focusing on Miles. “We could call this a date,” she ventured.

“Ah, then we need to ask get-to-know-you questions if this is an actual date. Otherwise, we’re just hanging out, killing a bit of time.”

The seductive tease in his voice made her toes curl. “All right.” She hooked her feet on the bar stool’s lowest rung to keep herself from leaping off and doing something as ridiculous as a happy dance. “I’ll start. Did you grow up in Kingston?”

“Minneapolis. Let me save a little time. I’m twenty-six.”

“Really twenty-six or perpetually twenty-six? Sorry!” Priya winced. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“No problem. It’s my actual age. I’ve only been a vampire for two years. My parents are divorced. Dad’s in Phoenix now and Mom’s in Tampa. No siblings.” Miles theatrically swept his hand toward Priya. “Your turn.”

“I’m twenty-three. Grew up in Battle Creek, Michigan. My parents never married and my birth dad cut out on us when I was two or so. Mom married

David when I was eight. I have two spoiled” —she wrinkled her nose— “rotten little brothers who missed me terribly when I moved to Kingston for college. I started working at a little spell shop called Besoins my sophomore year and I’m still there.”

“I’ve heard of that shop. Several members of our crew are faithful customers.”

“Your crew?”

He dropped his gaze to the table like a scolded puppy. “The humans who supply blood to Rafi and the senior members of his staff. They’re a good group.” He looked up, locking his gaze on Priya. “They tell me it’s the only spell shop in the state that sells to non-magics.”

“Not to brag, but that was my doing.” Priya beamed. “I pestered Marin relentlessly from day one that we needed to expand our customer base and market to non-magics and shapeshifters. What do you do? Or can I ask? I know Rafi is extremely private.”

“You can ask me anything.” He brushed his fingers across her again, sending shivers racing up her arm. “I’m Rafi’s house manager. It’s a fancy title for the guy who coordinates his home and business schedules, troubleshoots for him, and takes care of the crew’s needs.”

“Prestigious job.”

He dipped his head, mouth twisting wryly. “It’s an honor to work directly with Rafi. The work is challenging and keeps me on my toes. I’ve met most of the Primes.”

While he sounded pleased, she thought she caught an undercurrent of another emotion—perhaps longing, though that didn’t quite seem right. Taking a chance, Priya rested her fingers over his. “But ...”

Miles huffed out a laugh. “Sometimes I miss my old job.”

“What did you do?”

“I managed the IT department for a start-up Silicon Valley company.”

“Wow! That’s a huge responsibility for someone so young.”

While she was impressed by the accomplishment, Priya had no aspirations for tackling a leadership role of any kind. Even though it meant listening to her mother’s lament that she was “wasting her talents” each week, Priya was perfectly content.

He shrugged. “I actually got the position because my boss bailed for more money from a different start-up. Then Rafi lured me away.” He interlaced his fingers with Priya’s. “Not to change the subject, but how are we going to find

your little ghost? Will she just show up again or do you have to use your magic to attract her attention.”

Magic. Priya forgot how to breathe.

Miles tightened his fingers on hers when she jumped, trying to pull away. “I know there’s unpleasant history between witches and vampires but I swear to you I won’t bite you.”

He won’t bite me. Sure. Here I was thinking, “Oh, I feel so comfortable around him” when he knew all along I was a witch. Idiot!

“Whatever you’re thinking. Stop,” Miles pleaded. “I swear your being a witch does not tempt me in the slightest.”

“I bet you say that to all the witches.” Priya jerked her hand free and hopped off the bar stool. “Thanks for saving me, but I have to go.” She strode away, berating herself. Interested in my work? Right. More like he’s interested in a late-night snack.

“Listen.” Miles dogged her trail. “If you’re going home. Fine. I’ll leave you alone.” He grabbed hold of the door and swung it open for her.

Gritting her teeth, she muttered, “Thank you.”

The frigid night air slammed into her, erasing every trace of heat from the restaurant. A teenager rushed past her, heading for the busy main street. Priya looked longingly down the street, away from the safety of the shoppers to where the poorly lit alleyway beckoned. Silently, she cursed, jerking her stocking cap out of her pocket and slamming it onto her head. She couldn’t go back to her ghost and risk being a cute vampire’s evening meal.

It would take longer, but the smarter approach would be heading to the main thoroughfare and the steady stream of people. The blasted vampire wouldn’t dare try anything if she slipped into the crowd.

Turning to the safety of humanity, Priya slipped on her gloves as she race-walked to get away from Miles.

It didn’t work. He easily kept pace with her.

“But if you’re going back to that building, you’re taking me with you.”

“Go away.”

“You can be mad, that’s understandable. However, I am not abandoning you when there is a killer Santa out there.” Miles maneuvered himself to stand in front of her, blocking her way.

CHAPTER 4



OH, HOW SHE WISHED SHE COULD FIRE OFF AN IMMOBILIZATION SPELL RIGHT now. “I’m not going anywhere with you.” Glaring up at him, she planted her hands on her hips. “Go find another dinner date.” She infused every ounce of scorn she had into that one word.

“On my honor, I will not bite you.”

“On my honor,” she mimicked his deep voice. “Nice try. You’ll just mesmerize me into believing you never did anything or whammy me into forgetting you entirely and then sometime tomorrow I’ll wonder how I got these weird puncture marks on my throat.”

“I can’t mesmerize you or anyone.”

“Oh, I believe that.”

He leaned close. Hands still on her hips, Priya rocked back on her heels but held her ground.

His dark brown eyes widened. “Come back inside where it’s warm.” His voice dropped into a dangerously inviting silky tone. “Let’s chat a while longer instead of standing out here in the freezing cold, arguing.”

“What?” If he thought she was going anywhere with him he was a fool. “No.”

Drawing back, he gave her a crooked smile. “See. It doesn’t work. I can’t make you do anything.”

“What? ... Well” She sputtered, still incensed.

“Priya.” Miles held up his gloveless hands in surrender. “I cannot mesmerize or charm or whatever else vampire feat you’ve heard of. Okay, yes, I’m pretty strong, but I’m a new vampire. I have no special talent. In fact, I’m so young I have to take naps during the day.”

“Naps?” Nonplussed, her indignation cooled. Her arms collapsed to her sides. The idea of Miles taking a nap seemed so ordinary and very un-vampire. “So vampires do sleep? Does sunlight bother vampires? I’ve heard rumors—”

“Strong sunlight saps newbies. I’ve been told the first century is the roughest. And yes, most of us sleep. The Primes and those with five or six hundred years under their belts don’t seem to need rest.”

“Primes never sleep?”

Miles executed a one-shoulder shrug. “They can sleep if they want, but it isn’t a necessity. Why don’t you text a friend and tell them you’re with me? Take my picture and send it to them. Give them as many details as you wish.” Slowly, as if expecting her to bolt, he moved around her, opening up an escape route, then took a few hesitant steps away. “But I am going with you.”

She realized he wasn’t going to back down from the argument. Her face felt numb from the cold. If she headed for the shoppers, he would follow. Going the long way around would only earn her frozen fingers and toes.

“Fine,” Priya conceded. Turning, she walked alongside him.

Neither spoke until they reached the end of the block.

Miles broke first. “No picture? No text?”

“No. It’s too cold to take my gloves off again. I’m trusting you.” She shouldn’t. The sane thing to do was take the picture and let Scarlett know what she was doing. The even saner thing would be going home and figuring out a rational plan of attack with her best friend, or even her boss, Marin. Yet the incessant tug to help the little girl kept Priya’s booted feet moving forward.

They waited for a delivery van to pass before crossing the street. Frank Sinatra singing *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* reverberated through its windows.

“If you had sent my picture, would it have been to Scarlett?”

Priya startled. “Are you messing with me? You can read minds. I just thought about Scarlett and now—”

After a heavy sigh, he said, “You told Santa that’s who was waiting for you.”

Feeling foolish for jumping to conclusions, she grimaced. “Oh. Right. Under normal circumstances, I would have sent her all your deets, but she would have blown up my phone and sent a war party out searching me if she knew I was with a vampire.”

“So she’s a witch also?”

“Elemental. I wouldn’t recommend messing with her. She plays it down, but she is one of the most powerful witches I know.”

“Thanks for the heads up. What’s your favorite movie?”

Caught off guard by the abrupt change in conversation, she asked, “Excuse me?”

“Just trying to learn a little more about you.”

“The Matrix.” She crossed her arms, hunching her shoulders against the brisk wind. The sounds of traffic faded behind them.

“Awesome movie!” He made a deft move to her other side, taking the brunt of the wintery blast.

“What’s your favorite?”

“The Fifth Element.”

“I haven’t seen that one.”

Miles clutched his heart, groaning in agony. “Tell me it isn’t so!”

She snickered. “Seriously, I haven’t. What’s it about?”

“We’ll watch it on our next date.”

“Presumptuous much?”

“Optimistic.”

There were no cars parked along the street. All the buildings were dark. They walked past an alleyway. Priya squinted at it.

“Shouldn’t we turn here?” she asked.

“I want to come in from the other side of the building. We’ll take the next one. Are all your friends witches?”

She took the rapid-fire question in stride. “No. What about you?”

“Most of my friends are non-magics.”

Sure she had used up her allocation of rude comments, Priya bit her tongue to hold back an impertinent question.

Another sigh, followed by a roguish chuckle. “Go ahead and ask.”

Shooting him a sideways glance, she teased, “You are a mind reader.”

“I’m not. You’re practically vibrating and I doubt it’s from the cold. Go ahead, ask your question,” he repeated.

“Aren’t they nervous around you?”

“At first some of my friends were, but that wore off quickly. Most are gamers and computer geeks, like me, who are more interested in my skills than my being a vampire. And for your next question, no I don’t have many true friends among the vampires. They are not a chummy lot and competition

is high for Rafi's attention. There's quite a bit of jealousy."

She gasped and elbowed him. "You are a mind reader. I knew it." Then ruined her mock affront by laughing.

"If only." Miles grinned. "I'm curious. Do spirits show up wherever you are?"

"Not as often now that I have better control over my magic. When I was a kid they'd pop up and make pests of themselves. Usually, I have to invite them."

"With your magic?"

"Um hmm."

"I'd love to see that." Miles lowered his voice as they turned to walk down a gloomy alley. "Can others see the ghost once you've called them?"

"No. Unless the person is already predisposed to seeing them, I can't make spirits manifest visually."

Miles offered her a steadying arm. She accepted the help, tucking her arm into his. Having a vampire navigate the poorly lit alleyway had its perks.

"I know there are different types of magic and that witches are born with certain abilities, I hope this isn't a faux pax, but will you tell me a little about your magic?"

She gave him a hard side-eye before answering. "It's hard to explain. Some witches use spells or potions to invoke their magic. For some of us, the magic is just there, waiting for us to call it."

"You must be amazingly strong to tap directly into the source." His voice held a note of awe.

"No. It's a basic ability. Strong witches can do so much more with magic." Priya hated hearing the sharpness in her tone. Her magic hadn't manifested until she was ten. Seeing ghosts at that age terrified her.

Not knowing what to do, her non-magic mother sent her to a psychologist. As an adult Priya could appreciate her mother meant well and only had her child's best interests at heart. As a frightened child, it felt like a betrayal.

Eventually, they learned Priya was a witch and not hallucinating. The local supernatural school had been reticent about enrolling her and suggested several tutors. Slowly, with the help of a cantankerous hex-witch, Priya learned how to control her magic.

"Either through talent or many years of hard training, they give magic direction and purpose with spell work and potions." With a great deal of

pride and a pinch of envy, Priya watched her college friends learn new and more complicated spells each year.

“Ice. Come this way.” Miles gently pulled her towards himself, steering her around the slick patch. “I imagine seeing ghosts isn’t something every witch can do.”

“No,” she admitted.

“You can speak to them. That’s no small thing.”

“I didn’t mean to make it sound like sour grapes. I’m happy with my magic. Would I like to be able to do more? Absolutely.” Feeling a gentle pressure on her arm, she followed his side pass around another icy spot. “It frustrates me that little kids are better practitioners than me, but I wouldn’t trade my ability for anything else.” Priya squeezed his arm. “Now it’s my turn. If you could go anywhere in the world, where would it be?”

“Japan. New Zealand. Egypt. They are all on my bucket list. How about you?”

“If I could go back in time I would love to see the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.”

“Don’t get me started on time travel,” he said wistfully. “Since we can’t, where else would you like to visit?”

“Barcelona. Versailles. New Zealand.” Hearing his quick inhale, she gave his arm another squeeze. “Don’t say it. We are not going to New Zealand on our third date.”

He let out a gusty breath. “You’re right. We should wait until our sixth date before tackling a twenty-some-hour flight together.”

A large black cat leaped out of an open dumpster. It hissed at them and dashed away.

“What’s the plan when we get to the building?” Miles asked.

“We need to get that basement window open. There’s something down there she wants me to see.” Priya prayed the little girl would appear again. She didn’t relish the idea of bumbling around in a basement not knowing what she was looking for, or worse, finding something that might give her nightmares for years.

“Your plan is highly illegal. Are you sure you don’t want to call the police?”

“They’ll laugh it off as a prank. If you can get the window open, I’ll go in, look around, and hopefully find some concrete evidence. You can keep a watch outside for our not-so-friendly Santa. It won’t take long.” She hoped.

“I can get the window open, however, I’m going in with you. No argument.”

The gray stone building came into view. The front side looked identical to the back, except there were no lights on in the windows. Priya scanned the area. Snow drifted into curving banks alongside the two-storied structure. A few cars were parked on the street. The low hum of distant traffic filtered through the cold air. She wondered how sensitive a vampire’s ears were. It would be handy if Miles could hear someone skulking nearby.

“Can you hear heartbeats or anyone breathing besides us?” she whispered.

His dark eyebrows knit together. “What?”

“Do you have super hearing?”

“I’m a vampire, not a shapeshifter.”

“Sorry. I thought vampires had keen senses.”

A lift of his shoulder jostled her arm. “Scent and sight are enhanced but I’d say my hearing is the same as before. The only thing I smell besides your delicate floral perfume is motor oil from that dumpster back there and unfortunately, I don’t have x-ray vision. Any chance your ghost is here?”

“No.” Disappointed, Priya unwrapped her arm from Miles.

Doubt and worry took up residence in her mind. What if the ghost was attached to the old bearded man? What if he took whatever the child thought was valuable down in the basement and fled?

“Maybe she’s waiting by the window.” If she wasn’t, contacting her without a name would be tricky, especially if the ghost wasn’t anchored to this site. Priya’s worry morphed into guilt. Even though she had no choice but to leave earlier, it felt like she’d abandoned the little girl.

“I’ll do a walk around and make sure Santa isn’t hanging around on the other side,” Miles said. “You wait here.”

Guilt pressed hard on Priya. “It would be faster to just go straight back.” She had to know if the ghost was still there.

“Faster, but I don’t want any surprises.”

Feeling edgy, she eyed the dark building. “Do you have a pocket knife?”

“Yes.”

“Can I have it?”

He angled his head. Even with the poor light, she saw suspicion etched on his face. “Why?”

“Safety.”

“Right. What are you really going to do?”

She held out her hand. “Good to know you can’t read minds.”

Miles reached into his pocket and withdrew the nickel-plated knife. “Will you please wait here?”

“I can’t promise anything.” Priya wriggled her gloved fingers in a give-me gesture.

With a heavy sigh, he laid the folded knife in her palm. “I’ll be right back.”

Ten seconds after he walked away, her teeth started to chatter. She waved to Miles when he looked back. A minute passed. Why was he walking so blasted slow? The cold leeches through her layers. She stomped her feet and rubbed her hands up and down her arms.

Waiting here was ridiculous. She had no desire to turn into a popsicle. She despaired over wasting time. She could cover the distance to the window in a few minutes. If she saw the bearded man—and wasn’t it a sad state of affairs that she actually hoped she would see him? Proving he hadn’t run away—roaming around she would retreat and wait for Miles. If the coast was clear, she could get a start jimmying open the window. Gripping the knife, she went in search of her ghost.

Thankfully, the wind diminished once she got alongside the building. Priya followed a sinuous path nearly free of snow carved between the high swirls of banked snow and the building. She reached the corner without slipping once. Her nerves jittered as she pressed her back against the brick. So close. All she had to do was stick her neck out and see if anyone was around the corner.

Her imagination brewed up an image of a slaving, deranged-eyed, machete-wielding Santa.

Her muscles seemed content to remain locked in position.

Maybe she should have waited where Miles left her.

Scaredy-cat. Just take a look. You’re wasting time.

Seconds ticked by. Priya finally gathered her wits and snuck a peek.

No Miles.

No Santa.

No ghost.

Her heart fell.

Remembering the translucent quality of the ghost’s appearance, Priya wondered again how long she had been a ghost. What if the girl was here but

had used up whatever energy it took to manifest when she rushed to attack the Santa lookalike?

“Hello?” Priya whispered. She waited, hoping to catch a faint tingle or buzz of energy announcing the presence of a spirit.

Nothing.

The painted-over basement window beckoned her. Tucking the knife into her front pocket, Priya took out her phone, removed her glove, and swiped on the flashlight. She carefully walked to the window. The wind snapped at her with its winter-sharp teeth.

She played the light over the imprint of where she previously knelt in the snow. Not willing to waste another minute, she dropped to the ground and rested the phone against her leg, angling it to highlight the window. How much time did she have? Probably not enough. Santa or a passerby or, heaven help her, a cop might come by at any moment.

After a reassuring glance around, she tried to open the pocket knife. Twice she fumbled it, dropping it into the snow and wasting precious time retrieving it. Finally giving in, she pulled off both gloves. Even then, the knife proved difficult. She almost broke her thumbnail trying to pry the knife open.

Shivering from the cold, Priya wedged the blade between the window frame and casing. She used both hands to apply pressure and tried wedging the knife deeper into the narrow space by wiggling it.

Concentrating intently on her mission, she nearly jumped out of her skin at a man’s hearty laugh. She shrieked, jerking the blade out, and cutting herself in the process. The laughter abruptly was replaced by the sound of gagging. The flashlight knocked askew, highlighted Miles—doubled over with a hand covering his mouth.

“You scared the living—” she broke off. Her irritation melted into concern when he continued gagging. “Are you okay?”

Drops of scarlet blood littered the ground. Her hand throbbed.

“Sorry.” He tried to straighten but gagged again. “I have trouble with fresh blood. Give me ... a second.” He turned his back to her.

Priya wiped her sliced palm in the snow. Scooping up a handful, she held it against the tender wound.

“Whew.” Miles rolled his neck as he turned to face her. “Fresh blood makes” —he swallowed hard— “me nauseous.”

“How are you a vampire?” she asked, incredulous.

He shuffled from foot to foot, hands jammed in his pockets. “I use bagged blood and mix it into smoothies to disguise the flavor.”

The thought of blood smoothies made Priya slightly nauseous.

She scrounged up a crumpled Kleenex from deep within her coat pocket. She folded it into a small square and pressed it over the cut.

A displeased scowl scrunched up Miles’s face. “I told you to wait.”

Gingerly, she pulled the glove onto her injured hand, trying not to dislodge the Kleenex. “I couldn’t. There’s something in that room she wanted me to see.” Using her uninjured hand, Priya pointed at the opaque window. “I don’t know her name and even if I did, we don’t have the luxury of time to call her and find out what was so important. I have to get in that basement.”

His features smoothed out as she spoke. “Okay. Move. I can get it open easy enough.”

She scuttled back, giving him room.

“I’ll just loosen the paint a bit.” Miles hammered the side of the frame with his fist. The wood creaked. The window pane rattled.

“Don’t break the glass.”

“I won’t.” He struck the opposite side. The lighter blow didn’t rattle the glass this time. He hit the lower edge of the frame. The wood splintered. “Oops. Didn’t mean to do that.” Then he muttered so low she almost missed the words. “That should have popped the latch.”

Priya cast frantic looks about, sure that someone would hear the noise and come investigate.

Another strike and the window popped loose. “There!” The hinges squealed in protest as he pushed the window inward, opening it up.

Priya snatched up her phone and aimed it into the dark. Broken spider webs dangled from the wooden frame.

“What do you see?” Miles asked.

“Cobwebs. Boxes. Blankets and sheets are covering up piles of ... I don’t know what all.”

He swiped away a dense web. “I’ll hold the window up. Go in feet first.”

Hoping a wolf spider didn’t drop down her neck, she shimmied through the rectangular opening.

“Take my hand. I’ll lower you down.”

With her ribs balanced on the jamb, she took Miles’s offered hand. A tremor raced through her as he lowered her. Even though the movement was smooth and steady, a part of her brain insisted he would drop her. Priya

tightened her two-handed grip, making her injured hand throb. Miles wrinkled his nose. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed hard, struggling valiantly not to gag.

The window pane dipped, whacking the back of her skull.

"Sorry!" Muttering a curse, he lifted the window up another few inches.

"No worries." Her feet touched the ground. "I'm in." She rubbed the back of her head, moving aside as Miles came through the window.

Priya located a lightbulb with a string and pulled it. Light filled the musty-smelling room. She estimated the space was twenty by twenty. There were no other windows and only one door on the opposite side of the room. Dead bugs littered the floor.

"Crap!" Miles snarled.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm stuck." He wriggled, long legs swinging about.

"I'll look for a broom or something to prop the window up so you—"

"No. Start looking." He broke off, grumbling incoherent words like a surly bear.

Some of the boxes were sealed with packing tape. A few showed signs of water damage. Unfolding the tucked-in edges of one box, she found some seriously creep dolls. An open box held a toolbox and cleaning supplies.

Dust puffed up from a sheet as she lifted it, making her sneeze. Two dining room chairs piled high with stacks of magazines and old newspapers were beneath the covering.

Behind her, Miles grunted. His shoes scraped against the cinderblock wall.

An oak dresser was under the next sheet. Priya pulled open drawers stuffed full of moth-ball scented clothing.

"What am I even looking for?" she murmured as she pulled another lightbulb string.

Without the little girl's help, it would take days, weeks even, to go through every box, book, and trunk in the room. She wanted to pull her hair out in frustration. What was she supposed to find down here in all this mess? The longer they mucked about in this claustrophobic space the greater the risk of discovery. How many people would want to hire a spirit communicator convicted of a felony? Or was breaking and entering a misdemeanor? It didn't matter. Her mother would kill her if she was arrested. Not to mention that any goodwill cultivated among the few police officers

who believed in her ability would be blown to smithereens.

And what about Miles? What would be the cost to him if they were arrested?

She stared around the room.

Overwhelmed by the daunting task of hunting for a needle in this haystack of stacked boxes and dust-covered sheets, all her previous worries clamored through her brain, jockeying for position. What if Santa fled? What if he took whatever the ghost wanted Priya to see? What if ... What if ...

Something shimmered in her peripheral vision. She swung her head to find the blond-haired girl. Still wearing her pink jeans and tie-dye t-shirt, she sat cross-legged on an old steamer trunk.

“You’re here!” Tears pricked Priya’s eyes in relief.

“Who? The girl?” Miles demanded.

“Yes.”

Wood cracked.

“Ouch! Blast it!” He yipped. “Hang on. I’ve almost—”

Focused entirely on the child, Priya made her way around more boxes and draped furniture. She longed to scoop the girl up in her arms. Reining in the futile urge, Priya crouched in front of her. “What did you want to show me?”

Somber faced, the child hopped off the trunk, sending her pigtails flying. She touched the brass-plated lock.

“Do you know where the key is?”

An up and down nod.

“Is it down here?” Priya asked, already knowing the answer.

Lower lip trembling, the child shook her head ‘No.’

“Of course not. That would be too easy.”

The girl’s eyes widened in alarm.

“What?” Apprehension skittered through Priya’s veins.

The ghost whirled around to face the door.

“Miles!” Priya barely got his name out before the door burst open.

Santa stood there. Fury stamped on his reddened face.

“You!” He charged forward, knocking into a stack of newspapers and sending them sprawling.

With a yelp, Priya sprinted for the window. Miles struggled to free himself.

No magic.

No intimidating vampire to save her.

She needed a weapon.

Behind her came the screech of wood against the concrete floor. She didn't look back to see what her pursuer had crashed into, all her attention was fixed on the cardboard box holding the toolbox.

She skidded to a stop and flung the toolbox lid open. A red-handled hammer lay like a brilliant ruby atop a heap of pirate's gold. Priya reached for it.

Strong hands clamped down on her shoulders, squeezing brutally tight.

Priya cried out in pain.

As she was jerked around to face Levi's abductor she heard Miles roar, then the shattering of glass. Priya jammed the heel of her hand up, smashing into the white-haired man's nose. She kicked out and felt her boot connect with his shin. Snarling, the fake Santa wrapped his hands around her throat. She clawed at his face. He squeezed, choking off her air. She tried to gouge his eyes.

A primal roar shook the room. Priya stumbled forward as Santa was yanked off her. The old man flew through the air and struck a tall bookcase standing against the wall. His head made a sickening thunk as it met a walnut shelf. His skull took another hard knock when he fell to the floor. Books and boxes from the case rained down on him.

Sucking in air, Priya watched for any sign of movement, sure he'd rise up like a horror show villain and attack them once more. He remained crumpled on the concrete floor.

Miles was eerily silent beside her. Slowly, she turned her head. Utterly focused on his prey, Miles somehow looked larger. His down-jacket was in tatters, presumably shredded by shards of glass. His pupils were black as tar, making the gold rim shine like the sun. His lips were peeled back, fangs out and on full display.

Any sane person would back away. Priya reached out and laid a hand on his arm, feeling the tight muscles there, coiled and ready to spring into action. She croaked out, "Is he dead?"

His hot gaze landed on her. Priya didn't flinch away.

The tension in the air dissipated. Miles rolled his shoulders. His rigid posture eased.

"No. More's the pity." He patted his back pocket, then pulled out his phone.

"What are you doing?"

“Calling the police.”

“We’ll get arrested.” Voice rough, she coughed, then massaged her throat. “Breaking and entering. Plus he’s unconscious.” Another cough. “They’ll say we attacked him.”

He blinked at her. The darkness faded from his eyes, returning to warm cognac brown.

“He’s a murderer.”

“No ...” She cleared her throat. “Proof.”

The ghost appeared beside the inert body. She pointed at him.

Frowning, Priya asked, “What?”

“What?” Miles echoed.

Priya held up her hand. “My ghost. She’s pointing at ... his neck? Is it broken?” She glanced up at Miles.

He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

The girl waved her arms and then pointed again. Stabbing her fingers emphatically.

Priya walked over, skirting around boxes and debris. Miles followed.

The ghost touched a thin chain around the old man’s neck. Watching for any sign the geezer was faking, Priya crouched, then lifted it up. A silver key dangled from the links. The child touched the key and pointed over to the trunk.

Elbows braced on his thighs, Miles rested in a half-squat. “What’s that too?”

“The steamer trunk.”

The little girl clapped her hands together, grinning delightedly.

“Let’s go find out what’s inside there,” Priya said.

All three made their way to the trunk.

The key turned easily in the lock. Priya flipped the draw-bolt latches and Miles raised the lid.

More boxes—velvet-covered jewelry boxes, shoe boxes, and pristine white cardboard in varying sizes. Priya took a gray jewelry box off the top of the pile and opened it. A delicate gold heart hung from a child’s necklace.

Miles opened a white cardboard box. “A kid’s ball cap.”

The ghost leaned in, so close that Priya held her breath, afraid the slightest touch would frighten the child away. She pointed to a shoe box and then looked expectantly at Priya.

Obedying the implicit command, Priya picked it up and removed the lid to

find a red and white sneaker inside. Tears clouded her vision. “Is this Levi’s shoe?”

The little girl’s smile vanished. She nodded, running her fingers over the sneaker. After a moment, she glanced up, catching Priya’s eye, then pointed to the trunk again.

Priya picked up another box.

The ghost emphatically shook her head and jabbed her finger at the trunk.

Carefully setting the unopened box aside, Priya removed another one. Miles helped.

Two-thirds of the way down, she came across a blue velvet jewelry box.

Small fingers brushed over the velvet as she lifted it out of the trunk.

Dreading what was inside, Priya asked, “Would you like me to open it?”

Miles paused in the act of removing a box.

Even as the child’s smile broadened, her eyes looked sad to Priya. The ghost nodded.

The hinges squeaked softly as the lid opened. A locket embedded with an opaque pink stone lay on a bed of batted cotton.

“What kind of stone is that?” Miles asked.

“A pink opal. It’s a stone of love and gentleness.” Priya opened the locket and gasped. A picture was tucked inside of a young woman holding the pig-tailed girl. “Your mom?”

Hands curled over her heart, the ghost nodded.

Tears clouded Priya’s vision. The urge to cradle the girl in her arms burned like a fever.

Throat thick, she managed, “Call 911, Miles.”

“Are these ... trophies?” He set the box he held back into the trunk.

“Yes.” Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Miles rubbed her back in slow circles as she wept. “I’ll call.”

After confirming their location on Google Maps, he placed the call.

“Can you spell?” Priya asked the ghost.

An affirmative nod.

Priya had a new mission. Intent upon hunting down a pen or other writing instrument, she tuned out his crisp, succinct answers to the operator’s questions.

The ghost watched her with interest.

The toolbox held just what she needed. Under a jumble of screwdrivers and wrenches, she found a carpenter pencil. She wrote out the alphabet on a

taped box lid. “Will you show me your name?”

Amanda Clark did just that.

Miles disconnected the call. “When the police get here you tell them about Levi.” He held up his hand when she started to protest. “Hear me out. You tell them about Levi and your other friend here.”

“Amanda. And her mother is Heather.”

He raised an eyebrow. Priya tapped the cardboard lid and he looked down, noticing the alphabet letters written there. “All right. Amanda led us here. The window was broken and we opened it. I smelled old blood. It isn’t a lie. He used cleaners down here but he hasn’t gotten rid of all of it. We were worried there might be someone trapped down here and that’s why we went in.”

“Without calling the police first? Because that’s what they’ll say we should have done.”

“We got overexcited.”

“Ghosts. Breaking and entering.”

“No. No.” He shoved a hand through his hair. “Remember the window was already open. We have to keep our story straight.”

“Did we find the window like that?” She swept her hand toward the glass shards and broken wood below the shattered window.

“We tell the truth. I had a little trouble getting through.” He had the grace to look sheepish.

Frustrated, she spread her arms wide. “Miles, I don’t think you understand how the police think. They are skeptical and any talk about ghosts is going to land us in a cruiser, heading straight for the station. My mother will kill me if I’m arrested.”

“All right. I’ll call Rafi.”

“Why?!” The word came out half-strangled, and not because of her sore throat.

“We have the trophies. We have blood. We have the fake Santa.” He ticked each item off on a finger. “We need my boss. Having someone with political clout in our corner won’t hurt. Rafi will back me up. I should have called him first. He’ll probably be pissed that I didn’t, but he’ll come through for us.”

Behind him, Amanda cupped her hands into a heart shape and made smooching motions with her lips.

Priya pinched the bridge of her nose. “Fine. Call Rafi.”

Miles adjusted the collar of his shredded jacket. He tilted his head from side to side, cracking the vertebra in his neck, then smoothed a hand over his tousled hair. He sucked in a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

Priya opened her mouth and then snapped it closed. Probably better not to tease him right now about working up his courage.

Finally, he made the call.

Amanda pointed to the alphabet printed out on the cardboard.

“Go ahead,” Priya said. “I’m ready.”

Amanda spelled out C-A-L-L-M-O-M.

There was no room left on the taped box, so Priya hastily wrote out numbers on its neighbor. “What’s her number?”

Priya repeated the number back to confirm she had it right. Amanda gave her a distracted affirmative nod as she turned to glare at the sinister Santa.

“He won’t hurt anyone again,” Priya said.

Deliberately turning her back on him, Amanda went to the jewelry box and stroked the smooth pink opal. She angled her head and pinned Priya with an intense stare.

“What do you need?”

Amanda continued running her finger over the stone.

“What about the necklace?”

She held Priya’s gaze as she slowly crossed to the cardboard box and touched the letters G-I-V-E-T-O-M-O-M.

“Yes, I’ll make sure your mom gets the locket. Is there ...” Her voice cracked. Blinking back more tears, she started again. “Is there anything else you want me to tell her?”

Amanda cupped her hands again into a heart shape.

“Of course.” Priya swiped at her cheeks. “I’ll tell her how brave you are. How you stayed with Levi. How you helped us.”

As she spoke Amanda approached, stopping a hair's breadth away from Priya. It took everything Priya had not to wrap her arms around the child.

She gasped in surprise as Amanda lunged forward, enveloping Priya in a hug.

Energy, feather-light yet potent, swept through her, stealing her breath.

Amanda faded with a beatific smile on her round face.

Priya swayed. Miles was there in an instant, pressing a steadying hand against her back.

“What happened?”

“She’s gone,” Priya whispered.

“The ghost? Amanda?”

Exhaustion mugged her. “Yes.” She turned into him, resting her forehead on his chest.

He wrapped his arms around her. “That’s good, right?”

“It is. She’s moved on.” And even though she was pleased Amanda found peace, Priya’s heart ached.

She felt the barest of pressure against the top of her head. Had he just kissed her?

“That’s wonderful.” He released her and brushed his thumb over her cheek. “I was right. Rafi wasn’t thrilled I didn’t call him first. But he came through for me. Help is on the way.”

Alarm spiked through Priya. “Rafi is coming here?” She wasn’t sure she could handle the pressure of being around a Prime, let alone an angry one.

A siren wailed in the distance.

“How ... how angry ...” Her mouth went dry. She couldn’t seem to get enough air in her lungs. Priya latched onto Miles’s coat. Her short nails dug into the shredded fabric. “Is he?”

Miles cupped her face between his hands. “Priya, breathe. Rafi has far more pressing matters to attend to than coming down here. He’s sending a lawyer.”

“Oh!” The panic ebbed. The tightness in her chest eased, allowing her to draw in a full breath. She didn’t let go of his coat.

A second siren sounded, harmonizing with the first.

“A lawyer,” Priya managed to rasp out. “That’s good.”

“I imagine we’ll be tied up answering questions for quite some time.” Miles gave her a devastating smile. “How about for our second date I take you out for a cinnamon roll? Does tomorrow night work?”

“That sounds perfect.”

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Miles...

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ABOUT ANDRA DILL

When not daydreaming about plot lines and characters Andra practices yoga, reads voraciously, and drinks too much coffee. She loves road trips and going off on wild tangents. Andra writes in multiple genres—including but not limited to—urban fantasy, steamy romance, paranormal romance, and horror.

IGNITING THE WITCH



A WILDE WITCHES PREQUEL

ERIN RICHARDS

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IGNITING THE WITCH

A witch's rivalry turns dangerous when a sexy warlock's at stake.

Sage Wilde's gotta kiss her wild days goodbye and embrace her role as witch leader. The Solstice festival is her chance to prove she's fit to rule the Western witchworld, once she bonds a warlock, that is. Enter handsome Rafael Reyes, a mysterious and unbonded warlock who draws Sage in with his powerful aura and irresistible charm.

There's a catch: Rafael doesn't know he's a warlock, and Sage's nemesis, Zelda Helwig, has already claimed him. Bewitched by Sage's beauty, her power, her all, Rafael's helpless to curb his attraction to her. Does he even get a choice in this strange witchworld, or is he already sunk?

As tensions soar between Sage and Zelda, Sage's rare aether magic spirals out of control, putting everyone at risk. Zelda will stop at nothing to get what she wants, and Sage fears everything she's fought for will crumble before her eyes. Can Sage capture Rafael's heart and defeat Zelda before Zelda wreaks havoc on the witchworld?

CHAPTER 1



THE BACK OF SAGE'S NECK PRICKLED AS SHE STUMBLED THROUGH THE covenstead woods. Her slippery ankle boots skid on the dew-covered path, and she slowed down before she face-planted herself. Dim and misty pre-dawn light shrouded the forest, giving nothing away, but she could feel the eyes of something watching her. Low landscape lights and her phone flashlight guided her toward the house, and she couldn't walk fast enough to reach it.

Owls hooting in the towering evergreens abruptly stopped. In response, her owl familiars churned over her skin beneath her blouse. The ink of their tattoo forms tickled her already prickling flesh. More than the hushed forest owls gave her familiars the heebie-jeebies. An ethereal purple glow filtered through the trees and muted the stars overhead, creating an eerie environment that didn't help.

Powerful magic hit her senses. Elemental fire and air. Out of place on the off-limits walkway, but not threatening. Yet. Her familiars caught wind of the crackling magic and tiny flying embers. They swooshed over her skin, preparing to launch off her in protection mode. Sage halted on the path she'd traveled since she'd learned to walk. Wood smoke filtered through the early summer air. The faint brackish scent of the Pacific Ocean also tinged the air, destined to drive the smoke away.

"Gwyneira," she berated her main familiar, trying to halt their roaming over her already sensitive chest. Fat chance. Their apprehensive roving continued driving her nuts. She didn't need crazy on top of her thundering headache. One too many tequila shots on the first night of the California covens' Summer Solstice festival. Thank the goddess, she'd only sexed it up

with one warlock, though eight had vied for her attention. More than one would've ruined her for the day, for sure.

The warlock she'd chosen to spend the night with had fallen asleep the minute he came inside her, and she'd slipped from his tent without waking him. Joshua's single-minded focus did nothing for her in the arousal department. Maybe the reason he was an unattached warlock. Damn, she needed a good lay with a man who knew how to please a woman. Maybe she'd have better luck tonight.

And her brain had a mind of its own when she needed to concentrate on the magic surrounding her. *Focus, Sage!*

The foreign magic didn't hurt or impede her, but it raised red flags. A hollow, sparking fireball rolled off her fingers and danced on her open right palm. She used her left hand to draw a ring of witch-air to splinter the magic surrounding her. The unknown fire magic scattered into embers and reformed, also killing the landscape lights.

"Crap on a cracker." Sage flashed her phone light around her to illuminate the nearby trees and pea gravel path. "Who's there?" She spun in a circle, drilling her sight into the gray dawn, made darker by the woods. "Show yourself. Now," she demanded. After all, she owned the land. She ruled the California region and the coven members who'd arrived on the covenstead yesterday. By tomorrow, she'd become the youngest High Priestess of the entire western witchworld, following in her deceased mother's footsteps. A position held by a Wilde witch for over a century. Threats to her were a witch-style jail sentence!

Ire trekked up her spine in a cold ripple. "Either reveal yourself or take a hike off my land. You're no longer welcome at the solstice gathering."

The unknown witch-fire sizzled around her fireball, hovering over her palm. She sniffed the foreign fire to discern the source. No dice in the familiarity department. It touched her hand for a second before her witch-water doused and iced the burn.

Freaking Zelda Helwig. The bane of my coven's existence. "Zelda. I know it's you. What do you want? If you're trying to scare me, you're shit out of luck. Don't forget who you're screwing with. We've crawled this road before. Didn't end well for the Helwigs." The High Priestess of the Scotts Valley coven held a distinct edge to her witch-fire, and her fire always shifted to teal blue when it touched skin. Zelda knew how to disguise her magic, the reason Sage let it touch her, despite the burn to her hand. Zelda also

possessed a rare double element with witch-air, and both elements dangled in the air. Silence greeted her.

“You’re on report to the Council. See you on the flipside, *Zelda*.” Sage slogged down the path toward the house, increasing her pace, the sky lightening to a paler gray through the treetops. Passing by several dead landscape lights, she tripped in a rut and collapsed on her butt.

“Goddess, save me.” She massaged her rear, rubbed her aching head. Hangover cotton stuffed her mouth. She’d kill for a toothbrush and a bottle of aspirin. And a long, hot shower.

Her familiars stopped moving, their tattoo bodies quivering in awareness on her skin. Crashes through the bushes to her right stilled her movements. Her familiars scurried up to Sage’s shoulder and launched off her. They shifted into their natural form, and threads of glowing magic dangled from their talons.

Ignoring the literal pain in her ass, Sage vaulted up to her feet. Fireballs formed on both palms. A low-throated snarling joined the rustling in the brush. Too dark and too hungover to find her way home by walking backward to watch her back, Sage stood her ground. The shuffling moved from her left to her right, then crashed through the underbrush toward her. She tossed fireballs toward the sounds, and the balls hit the drought-stricken forest floor. Flames flared up, and she sprinkled witch-water to douse the fire before she ignited the entire mountainside. Gwyneira flew in a circle to encapsulate whatever threatened her in threads of witch-air. No such luck. The invisible animals escaped her familiar’s magic. Growling and snarling arose to her other side, then behind her, circling her, but not approaching. Near enough to drive more chills up her spine.

Peering into the dim forest, she let her eyes adjust to search for any signs of wildlife or other life. The Wilde property was crawling with people in tents and cabins for the solstice festival. The presence of the witches and their entourages should’ve driven all the natural wildlife farther into the depths of the mountains. Which meant these little shits were no ordinary animals.

“Your ass is grass now,” Sage yelled and tossed three more fireballs, chased them with a sprinkle of witch-water. No need to add forest fire to the overflowing Blame-it-on-Sage card.

“Who’s there?” She strengthened her wobbly voice to hide her fear. “I swear to the goddess, if you don’t call off your familiars, I’m gonna go *loco* on you. And you don’t want to experience my kind of crazy.” Was it a witch

or a warlock she'd shunned last night? Plenty of enemies or naysayers had a bull's-eye on Sage's forehead, jealous of her position, her power, her standing in the witchworld at only twenty-four years old. *Well, hell, it's not like I offed my mother just to steal her crown.*

A growling and snarling animal approached, soon joined by several more, glamoured by an invisibility spell. The air wavered and the forest floor debris ruffled. They snarled and snapped as if they wanted to eat her alive. Sage spun her left fingers in the air, invoking a protection bubble of witch-air. Hard to tell if they were foxes or bobcats, or something equally frightening. Not like she knew the sounds the forest animals or all the familiars in the world made.

She wracked her hungover brain to recall Zelda's familiar. A bobcat? Gray fox? Both remained prevalent in the hills of the Helwig covenstead in Scotts Valley up the highway, which shared the same mountain range as the Wilde coven.

"Sage Wilde," a hoarse, unrecognizable voice floated out on a gust of wind. Definitely female.

"What do you want?" she demanded, safe in her warded bubble. The beasts on the ground held their positions, which meant they definitely were familiars. A real animal could infiltrate a protection circle. Not so much a familiar.

"You don't deserve the High Priestess role of California, let alone the entire western region."

"Stop the world so I can jump off." Sage tipped her head back to face the pinkening sky. Same old, same old. "Why? Because every horny warlock under the sun wants me? Or 'cause I can drink myself to oblivion and live to tell about it? Because I'm wild, loose, inexperienced, and *young*." Sarcasm dripped from her tone. She'd heard the ridiculous litany of complaints from a myriad of sources since her mother and father wound up dead at the bottom of a canyon in the Lake Tahoe Mountains. A drunk driver had forced their car to careen over a cliff last year. Big freaking deal if she wanted to enjoy her twenties before real life took a spin at her.

A flaming arrow pierced her protective bubble, missing her right shoulder by a skosh. A real flaming arrow, not magical. Rubbing her shoulder, she ducked to the ground, scrambled off the path into a thicket of bushes amid a cedar grove. Shit just got real. She lugged her protection circle with her, and the gaggle of snarling invisible animals followed, keeping their three-foot

distance. Once they fenced her in again, their tails swished dead leaves, twigs, and evergreen needles on the forest floor, which eclipsed the taut silence.

Sage eased her cell phone out of the back pocket of her skin-tight denim skirt and tapped her nine-one-one.

Her sole bonded warlock answered. "Ready for me to come get you?" He yawned loud enough to wake the dead.

"Ricky. Listen. I'm on the north path leading from the meadow. Someone's attacking me. Real arrows, actual threats. A witch."

Rustling sounds accompanied Ricky's stern voice. "On my way. Keep the line open. Can't you use magic?"

"I'm in a protective circle, but magic won't do spit against flaming arrows. I'd rather not use wind magic to force them away and risk setting the forest on fire. Can't see the glamoured familiars, and they've surrounded me."

"Move closer to the house in the protective ward."

"Too dangerous with all the people here for the festival. I need to ground my circle here. Any hole in my ward can trigger these gremlins to attack."

"I knew this was a bad idea," he grouched. "I'm snagging the first witches I see. On the way. Here, talk to your sister."

"Hey," her middle sister, Aspen, chirped into the phone.

"I've had enough of today already. We're in a no-magic period. Festivals are supposed to be safe zones for everyone to set aside their beefs for three days." She spoke louder for her stalker to hear her ranting.

"Did a stupid rock hit you on the way to your orgy?" Aspen chortled. "Ya think the Helwigs and their minions care one wit about rules?"

A flush of annoyance stole up Sage's chest. "Shut up." She knew better. But alcohol and sex spoke a unique language.

"Sage, honey." Concern rode her aunt Jessica's voice. "Are you safe?"

"Safe as can be." Another flaming arrow hit the ground at her feet, and she scurried behind a cedar tree. She swished her hand like a hose nozzle and doused the fire.

A telltale ache formed behind her eyes. Gritty eyeballs and blurry vision chased the pain. *What the holy goddess?* Her buried aether magic hadn't surfaced in years. Such powerful magic, she never used it, nor ever controlled it. Why now?

"Son of a witch's tit. Gotta jam." She hung up and wedged the phone in

her pocket. Spine stiff, she stood and readied fireballs on her palms. Using her witch-air, she tossed the fireballs at the ground where her four-legged stalkers waited. Witch-water followed to extinguish any flames.

She uttered a silent spell to control the flames and launched more balls of fire. They sizzled to the ground, and embers showered the air. Dirt, dried leaves, and twigs pinged her shield. Flames threatened to engulf the creatures, and they yelped an ear-piercing sound. They fled, their screeches fading into the depths of the woods. A fire spread across the dry forest floor, consuming a small ribbon of land, the heat exacerbating the natural heat of her body. She raised her hands, ready to use her witch-water to extinguish the flames. But to her surprise and joy, the fire died down on its own, leaving nothing but ash and smoke. Her silent incantation to douse the flames reverberated in the air. A spell always just out of her reach. Knots untied in her shoulders, and she returned to the path. Why now had her rare aether magic emerged and aided her witch-fire?

The unseen witch uttered her final say, “You won't see me coming next time. I won't hold back either.” The words dissipated in the misty morning air, floating toward the Pacific Ocean.

The threat drove shivers down Sage's spine. She hiked through a puff of smoke and raised witch-air to dispel it. Fear and uncertainty lingered in her mind. She'd taken her security for granted. Took life for granted. The incident was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. The time had arrived to prove to the witchworld that she was a smart, capable adult, not a silly, irresponsible party animal. Maybe then they'd respect her magic. Respect her, period.

CHAPTER 2



FOOTSTEPS APPROACHED FROM THE DIRECTION OF THE HOUSE. SAGE READIED her witch-fire for blast off, but the gloomy dawn revealed Ricky, Aspen, and Jessica. Cell phone flashlights lit the gravel pathway and bounced up. Their eyes glommed onto her, radiating a mixture of curiosity and concern.

“Are you okay?” asked Jessica, her mother’s twin sister. They weren’t identical twins, which helped smother her grief every time she looked at Jessica. Jessica had already donned her ubiquitous fashionable jeans and a loose, shimmery silk blouse. A light layer of makeup on her youthful face accented her short-layered brunette hair, styled for the day. Way too early for Sage.

The sun emerged above the distant horizon, and the forest eased to life, bathing the foliage in a soft, warm light. The trio cut their flashlights and the forest murk settled in again.

“I’m fine,” Sage replied, her pulse not quite steady. The threat hammered the last remaining nail into her fate.

“We saw a fire. Do I need to do anything?” Ricky asked. With his shaved head, he stood warrior-like, ready to slay her foes. Jessica had assigned the forty-year-old warlock to Sage under duress. Sage’s duress. She wasn’t ready for the three warlocks a High Priestess required. Ricky was enough. Though not a warlock she ever wanted to sex it up with. Too old, too much in love with another coven witch. The way she wanted it. She didn’t want biases disrupting his split duties. And he wielded her witch-fire well. Her bonding familiar, Ice, flitted on his neck, speckled-white feathers against the collar of his black T-shirt.

“No. I doused the fire,” she replied, trying to process the freaky situation.

He led the procession to the house, Jessica taking up the tail.

“What happened?” Aspen clutched Sage’s arm to her side. “You shouldn’t be alone with the circus in town. Why didn’t you call Ricky to escort you home?” Tendrils of Aspen’s long red hair escaped the ponytail she wore when working in her lab. She already wore a purple work apron, and rosemary and echinacea wafted off the coven’s young healer and alchemist.

Sage invoked an air mask over her nose to filter the herbs aggravating her sinuses. “I’ve walked this path a million times.” Sage plodded forward, the aether ache receding into the alcohol-induced implosion of her entire head. The eye grit cleared, but her inner turmoil refused to abate. “I don’t know what happened. Some douchebag attacked me, and I defended myself against a few familiars.” She knocked her head against Aspen’s head. “My aether magic surfaced,” she whispered.

Aspen ground to a standstill. “Wait, what?” Sage pushed at her to move, not wanting Jessica to freak out.

“This incident is why you need another warlock. Rules dictate it, Sage,” Jessica admonished. “Too many witches and warlocks are on the property for the festival. It’s too risky to wander alone.”

Sage tossed up her arms. “Okay. I get it. Sheesh. Can I go take a shower?” She stretched her arms, feeling the ache of fatigue in her bones, as she mentally prepped for the day ahead and the need for peak performance. Now more than ever. The foursome trooped forward, silent, lost in thought.

Aspen fractured the peace for Sage’s ears only. “Long time since your aether’s popped up. What triggered it?”

Sage gnawed on her bottom lip. “I guess the threat to me.” But it was more. Way more. Way too much magic on the property confused her senses.

“You’ve had plenty of threats without your aether interfering. Your magic bonked you on the head for a reason.”

“You think?” Sage grumbled. “Don’t tell anyone. Not even Jessica.” Ricky led the witches out of the surrounding forest and toward the expansive gardens of the Wilde backyard.

The early morning sun had risen higher in the sky, its light reflecting off the dew-covered grass ahead of them. The myriad green shades of the leaves and evergreens became more vibrant, and the shadows receded toward the forest. Birds chirped their morning song, and Sage left behind the serene forest, as if it hadn’t just crapped all over her day.

The path they’d left behind was one of two connecting the backyard to

the meadow beyond the woods, where tents had arisen over the last day or two as witches and warlocks converged upon the Wilde property. Not all stayed in tents. Some High Priestesses claimed the spare bedrooms in the mansion, some in the cabins on the property, or booked hotel rooms in nearby Santa Cruz to enjoy peace and harmony along the Pacific coast. Others planned to drive in each day, like the Helwigs who lived in the small town of Scotts Valley, a stone's throw up the highway.

Blooming roses, hydrangeas, and other flowers grew in abundance in rock-faced planters. Home grounded her, and she reveled in the beauty of their gardens. She dipped her hand in the tinkling, three-tiered water fountain in the center of the lawn and created a whirlpool in the largest bowl. Tiny floating water lilies appeared and swirled in the whirlpool. Sage's earth magic at play.

They halted on the sparsely populated patio. Still early for the overnighters to awaken after a day of travel and reunions. The aroma of coffee, eggs, and bacon wafted out of the open doors. Sage would kill for a pot of caffeine.

"Was it a Helwig?" Jessica asked. "Did you ID the familiars?"

"I suspect Zelda." Sage rubbed her aching forehead. "Does she have a bobcat? I need to hear the familiars again to tag them."

"Yep. Bob-kitties," Aspen quipped as she dug through her fanny pack and produced a tiny vial. She uncorked it and handed it to Sage. "Drink up, buttercup."

"Energy or pain?" Sage sucked down the concoction, grimaced, and smacked her lips to rid it of the vile taste.

"Pain. I'll give you a spelled charm for energy later."

"Thanks." Sage tossed the vial onto a patio table. The glass tube pinged against the tempered glass tabletop and bounced to the pavers, taking Sage's patience with it.

"The Helwigs weren't here yesterday. They're day trippers." Ricky scratched his chin, his fingers following the outline of his goatee. "I'll send a team of warlocks to investigate in full light."

"We'll figure it out later. I need to prep for the day." Sage eyeballed her short skirt and the ash and dirt streaks on her legs. "Thanks for the assist." She elbowed past Ricky through the French doors into the great room. Multicolored Tiffany lamps shed luminous light in the corners of the room, jeweled reflections bouncing off the decorative wall mirrors scattered around

her favorite room. Her warlock and aunt beat a hasty retreat. Aspen not so much, as the clack of her sandals followed Sage.

“Walk of shame, sis? How much did you drink? How many warlocks did you boink?”

Sage turned and fixed Aspen with an icy stare. “Big deal. Partying on the first night is a given. I’ll adult the rest of the festival.” *The rest of my freaking life. Le sigh.*

“Did you really wash it out of your system?” Aspen’s light and frothy voice followed Sage up the staircase to their bedrooms. “Who’d you bang?”

On the landing at the top of the stairs, Sage recoiled. “Joshua.” She paused. “I don’t know his last name. Thought he might contain powerful magic that’d play well with my fire, but he’s not all that. Arrived with the Sacramento covens.”

“Well, you do need two more warlocks. Them’s the rules. What’s he all about?”

“He’s all about pleasing himself and ensuring any woman he’s screwing does nothing but please *him*.” Sage gripped the railing overlooking the great room.

“Oh. My. God.” Aspen quaked with amusement. “Does he know who you are? Did he want you to bond him?”

“Yes, and hell to the yes. You know I only sleep with the unbonded to test them out. We had fun until we hit the sack. So much lost potential, so little magic.”

“Wow. You’d think he’d flip over backward for the opportunity. You picked *him* from all those warlocks vying for your attention last night?” Aspen belly-laughed, pressing on her middle.

“Dial it down, dimwit. You’ll wake the house.” Sage cupped her hand over her sister’s mouth. “Massive error in judgement. I thought he’d at least know what to do with his mega dick. What do you expect from a twenty-one-year-old? Plus, the magic in his aura’s half-assed. The sex was so bad I couldn’t figure out what element he’d wield.”

“So he wagged his mega dick at the wrong sage bush?”

“He’s better suited to you, Aspen tree.” Sage snorted and trod to her room. “Take him for a spin. At twenty, you’d teach him a thing or three. Maybe he’d get over himself. A big dick’s not enough.”

“No, thanks. Don’t want your sloppy seconds. I’ve heard all I want to hear about Mr. Ginormous Selfish Prick.”

Poor Joshua will never live it down now that Aspen knew. Word among the covens would spread like a wildfire in the drought-stricken forest. The dingleberry drank his weight in tequila and might grovel at her feet later. If he even remembered he'd screwed the highest of the High Priestesses in the region, before he'd fallen asleep on top of her, his mega dick shriveling to a wet noodle inside her. The lame incident forced her to incant air spells to muzzle his snoring and to escape his dead weight.

Solstice festivals typically ended with Sage hammered and in bed with a delectable warlock who wanted Sage to bond him after rejection at the warlock lottery. One last chance for a warlock to snag a witch. Bonding was the only way a warlock could use magic. Without a witch's bond, the warlock sensed an empty core, an impression of a piece missing inside him. A powerful witch sensed the magic in his aura waiting to be tapped. Joshua had a skosh of magic, but not enough for Sage. Her powerful magic would probably kill him.

"What does it say about my dumbass choices?" she bellyached on her way to her parents' former bedroom. Sage closed the double doors to the primary suite, drowning her sister's retreating giggles. She'd taken over the reins from her mother as High Priestess of the Wilde coven and the California region. Today, she'd take over her mother's position to rule the entire West once the Council counted the votes and invested her in the position. The youngest High Priestess ever to rule an entire region. She had uber big shoes to fill.

Sage had put her own stamp on the bedroom to curb her constant grief, and never tired of gazing out the large windows overlooking the backyard and forest beyond. Her sanctuary. Fairy lights hung on the trees surrounding the entire backyard, installed for the festival, and they still glowed on the trees like diamonds on fire. The sun burned away the coastal fog seeping into the mountains, but a fog bank hung over distant Santa Cruz on the Monterey Bay. Lights popped on in the cabins, greeting the dawn of a long day of gatherings and ceremony on the Summer Solstice, the longest day of the year.

The morning crashed into her again. Dread and vulnerability deluged her, and she refused to surrender to their insidious nature. Sage refused to believe someone had the balls to threaten her on her own land. Senses on high alert, she was prepared to take action if another attack came.

No way did she plan to allow the other witch to get one over on her. Magic had lingered in the woods, in the flaming arrow, in the gremlins

waving their forks and knives at her. Sage had more than one enemy among the California witches who thought she'd destroy them all because of her youth and because she was a Wilde—and wild—witch. Sage had suffered the pressure since her mother's death and since her aunt Jessica abdicated her position as next in line. She refused to let her coven down. She'd had a year to get her act together. The year had ended, and she didn't plan on losing it all.

“It's *my* birthright. Line in the sand drawn.” Sage's skirt shimmied down to her ankles, and she tore her blouse over her head. “They won't see *me* coming. I'll show them all.”

CHAPTER 3



BY THE TIME SAGE CLEANED UP, FUELED WITH HALF A POT OF STRONG COFFEE and a strawberry and granola yogurt parfait, she was ready. Ten o'clock on the dot. Time to confront her fans in prep for the Council meeting.

“Fans my ass.” She pasted on a smile she didn’t feel and tucked the front of her dropped-shoulder blouse into her casual summer skirt.

Noise escalated from the great room as she descended the wide, circular staircase. Although she’d taken aspirin and another pain potion Aspen had given her, her headache lingered. Not all of it tequila induced. Sound dropped when she entered the great room, and all eyes landed on her.

Potted plants in every corner carried the outdoors into the room. Bouquets and garlands of summer flowers garnished the room in abundance. Fresh evergreen and roses perfumed the air filtering in through the wide-open windows and patio doors. Her paradise and the perfect cure for her lingering hangover.

“Eat, drink, and be merry. Don’t let my presence kill the mood. This is an informal space,” she said. Clinks and clatters of silverware on plates resumed, as did the voices of chitchat and laughter. Formal ceremonies occurred in the witch-house or at other designated sites on the grounds, but never in the house. The joint rooms reminded her of family, love, and all the happy times growing up, and she refused to spoil it with business.

Mirrors and landscape paintings decorated the walls between the many windows. Comfortable couches and chairs took up the lion’s share of space. Sculpted pillars divided the great room from the dining room, every spot at the twelve-seater table occupied by witches and warlocks. Sage luxuriated in the beauty and comfort of the room before real life snatched control.

Ricky jogged to her from the rock-faced fireplace. He'd already scanned the house for threats or he'd never allow her down the stairs. With the festival going full tilt, too many people were on the grounds for comfort.

"Don't tell anyone what happened this morning," she murmured.

"Only Aspen and Jessica know," he replied. "I've sent out a few feelers, though."

"Good." She shifted toward the French doors flung open to the patio. Long-haired Joshua with his massive dick and abs to die for glowered at her. Anger reddened his cheeks and flushed down his neck.

Who peed in his cup? He has no right to anger. Unless Aspen already circulated smack about him. Oh, hell. Sage cut through the room, closing the distance between them. "Joshua," she greeted. No smile, no touch.

"Why did you leave?" he blurted out. "We were having a blast." He hadn't brushed his long, rocker hair. Threads curled around his well-defined cheekbones and his two-day stubble. Cute, but not for her.

Sage's eyebrows arched. "I wasn't aware I needed your approval."

"But I wasn't done," he sputtered. "I mean, I thought—"

"Done?" She kinked her head to the left. "You pleased *yourself* and fell asleep on top of me without giving two shits about my pleasure. I guess *you* were done." Snickers rose from the nearby chairs.

He shook his head as if flinging off fleas. "Bull. You spelled me, witch." His frustrated voice echoed through the patio and dining room, leaving a palpable silence in its wake.

Sage decided to teach him a well-needed lesson. Whoever dragged him to the festival hadn't versed him on the rules. Or on who was who.

Aspen ran to Sage for backup and stood by her side. "Hey, *big* guy." Her gaze flickered to the crotch of his board shorts. "Suppose you don't know who you're talking to here, do ya?" She hugged Sage's arm to her side and let go.

"Just another witch." He lifted one shoulder, let it drop. "The one who brought me said she might grant me warlock powers and that I might join a coven. It's why we're here, me and my buds." He swished his toned arm toward two stud muffins on the patio surrounding the table where the Bay Area coven witches sat eating.

"Well, Joshua," Sage said, loud enough for onlookers to hear. The words she meant to say to embarrass him faltered in her mind. Pausing, she pulled her train of thought in a different direction. What would Mom do or say? The

crux of the matter. She needed to grow up and fast, or her world promised to crumble into dust and blow into the Pacific.

Sage stuck her hand out to Joshua. “Hello, Joshua. I’m High Priestess Sage Wilde of the Santa Cruz Wilde Coven.” The blooming spots of pink on his face deepened. Sage tensed to avoid the vein ready to pop in his jaw. He shook her hand, his palm damp and rough. “You’re on my covenstead as my invited guest. I might’ve said or done something last night or early this morning under the guise of alcohol. If so, I apologize. Now, if you’d like to meet some nice witches who’re searching for a warlock to bond, I can introduce you.” She paused, and couldn’t silence herself from saying for his ears only, “One or two witches who’ll teach you the fine arts of pleasing a woman... in bed. You have the tool...”

A sunbeam caught on a mosaic glass candle holder on a patio table and towed her attention beyond Joshua and the steam billowing out of his collar. Sunlight winked off the mosaic and shot across the patio to a pair of young men talking together, one so enticing his appearance stalled her heartbeat for a second. Whatever Joshua said in response and every other sound in the room glided away.

The gorgeous stranger stood next to a warlock, someone she recognized from another coven, but couldn't name him. Neither had vied for her attention last night. Had they just arrived? A sense of intrigue sifted through Sage as she perused the stranger. Tall, dark, and divinely built. Short, layered chestnut hair framed his tan face, his striking chiseled cheekbones, and strong, aquiline nose over full sensuous lips. Powerful energy emanated from him even from her distance. The unbonded stranger was no ordinary warlock. He possessed intriguing powers. Powers she hungered to uncover.

Aspen nudged Sage’s arm, but the words her sister uttered flew in one ear and out the other, not stopping at “go” and collecting two hundred bucks. Dazed, Sage sidestepped past Joshua and strolled onto the patio. Curiosity killing her inner cat, she headed toward the two men.

As she watched The One with every step closer, something about him compelled her. She couldn’t stop approaching him even if she wanted to. Powerful, innate, he was more than his gorgeous visage and tall height that made her five-nine height appear short. He had muscles to die for beneath his short-sleeve T-shirt and snug jeans. She needed to know Mr. Freaking Gorgeous ASAP. Both warlocks’ gazes settled on her and stuck. Their surprise and fascination twisted into her own awed senses. Had she found her

first chosen warlock to bond? The warlock every High Priestess in the western region demanded she bond? Her literal *First Warlock*? The prospects crammed her with a buzzing excitement.

The man standing beside Tall, Dark, and Dreamy bowed his head, prodded the other to do the same. “Greetings, High Priestess Wilde,” he said, following formal witchworld rules.

“Hey,” The One said, tripping over the word. “Um, High Priestess Wilde.”

His voice! Oh, goddess, his smooth baritone set off a fountain between her legs. His gaze never ceased slurping her up, crawling from her ankle boots to the roots of her long, loose blonde hair. Heat assailed her, and she invoked witch-air to fan her face. Her hair wafted in the breeze she created, and she killed the spell to avoid detection.

“Hello—” She started to say “boys,” but they were all men. “Gentlemen. Who brought you to the festival?”

“I’m Sammy Luchese. Came with the Scotts Valley coven this morning.” He elbowed his friend. “This mute is my bud Rafael Reyes. Came with me, but he’s unbonded.”

Sage’s eyebrows hiked up again. Might be a permanent hike if she didn’t watch it. “So you’re bonded.”

“A Helwig witch bonded me at the Autumn Solstice festival.”

The surname of her arch-nemeses couldn’t dampen Sage’s fascination and the lust raging in her womanly parts. “So, Rafael.” She inclined her head at him in acknowledgement. “Can you speak?” A smile teased the corners of her lips.

He cleared his throat, scratched his jaw. “Sorry. Yeah.” Golden glimmers twinkled in his awestruck whiskey-colored eyes.

With a sudden sharpness, Sage realized she needed him more than anything else in her life. More than air. “Have you pledged to a witch yet?”

“Not sure what that means.” He slid a questioning glance at Sammy.

“He’s lost.” Sammy grinned, displaying impeccable white teeth, no doubt a victim of teen braces. Red streaks in his short, choppy auburn hair glittered under the rising sun. Though Sammy was a few inches shorter than Rafael, his toned and powerful body would make any witch feel safe entrusting him with her magic. The typical warlock, hence the reason they made perfect guards. “Thought I’d help him find someone who’d give him the four-one-one.”

Rafael's innate tug on her fire intrigued the hell out of her. As if he'd reached into her aether core and snapped handcuffs on her magic, and only he held the key. As though he possessed his own magic that harmonized with hers. The residual aether glowed bright and warm inside Sage, but the good side of the aether coin. She wanted to bathe in it and melt under his hands, his lips, under his entire body. Why hadn't *he* attended the party last night instead of Joshua?

"Well, Sage Wilde," a hateful, grating voice infringed upon the moment. "I see you've met my recruit." The witch glided to a standstill beside Rafael, not bothering to give Sage the proper greeting of one in a higher station. Ire turned her stomach into a tight ball. Zelda's rosewater perfume overwhelmed the air. Not a scent she'd smelled in the woods earlier. Not that it mattered. Could've been any Helwig minion following orders.

Sage rotated her body a bit toward the older witch. Older by at least thirty years. Not unattractive unless you counted her uppity, snarky attitude, evilness, and spitefulness. No pointy hat or pointy-toed boots graced her all-black attire and board-straight black hair.

"Well met, Zelda." Sage nodded at the Helwig witch. "Did you just arrive?" Or did you attack me in the woods earlier? Sage's unspoken question begged for an answer.

"Yes. My sister and I are excited for the Council meeting today." She linked her arm in Rafael's and his startled gaze bounced from Sage to Zelda. "Now, my dear boy, it's time we got better acquainted." Sammy bowed to Sage, and Zelda guided the two men toward the woods.

A twinge of jealousy ripped through Sage's fury. As she watched Rafael disappear down the flagstones, she couldn't shake the feeling that her path promised to cross his again. Anticipation fluttered in her chest, diminishing her anger. She made a mental note to find ways in her busy schedule to seek him out. Rafael Reyes in the mix guaranteed an exciting adventure and a hopeful future. Despite Zelda laying her claim and the rules of poaching a witch's warlock. Warlocks retained a choice, and she'd damn well ensure Rafael chose correctly.

CHAPTER 4



DISORIENTED, RAFAEL WALKED AWAY FROM THE ALLURING BLONDE WITCH, the smell of her perfume still enticing him. The intensity of her gaze lingered on him. Lust barreled through him, and he wanted to zip back to her, touch her, and feast his sight on her. Her curves shot his desire into overdrive, and he itched to touch her, to ensure she wasn't an illusion. Was the weird internal connection he felt real?

As he walked into the woods toward the Helwigs' designated spot on the fringes of the meadow, that connection wrenched on him. Tried to lure him back. To the most beautiful and bewitching woman he'd ever seen. Her long, wavy hair glinted like spun gold in the morning sunlight. She was so damn hot. The sight of Sage Wilde's captivating beauty made his heart skip a beat, like fate had delivered. As if the universe had chosen him to experience something special in coming to the festival.

He'd accompanied Sammy not just for a good time, although God knows he needed to party, but Sammy also said he might learn about himself. It wasn't until they'd arrived at the Helwigs' property that Sammy divulged what he meant. Until that morning, he had no clue Sammy was a warlock and derived magic from a witch. The witchworld had remained in total darkness in Rafael's mind, until Sammy hinted Rafael was probably a warlock. Which explained nothing. Which explained a shit-ton about why he didn't know his family roots or what was living inside him. Until he met Sage Wilde, and that thing inside him stirred like never before. About to scurry back to her, he halted and Zelda's arm fell from his.

"Something wrong?" the witch asked. Sammy came up short behind him and nearly brained himself against Rafael's back.

“Sorry, man.” Rafael stumbled on his words, so tongue-tied from the revelations opening up his mind. “That girl, Sage, who is she?”

Zelda’s perpetual frown shifted to a deadpan look of hatred. “*Girl* is about right. You don’t need to distract yourself with Sage Wilde. She’s too busy screwing everything on two legs and drinking herself under the table.”

“Wait, I thought she’s the High Priestess of the entire California region.” Sammy shuffled his sneakers in the pea gravel lining the path. “Aren’t the coven heads supposed to vote her in as the western region High Priestess? Pretty damn young for such a prime position.”

An epic scowl altered Zelda’s half-assed pretty face to an old hag. Rafael almost slunk into the woods to avoid catching whatever crawled up her ass.

“Yes, well, we’ll see how over-stacked the deck is today,” Zelda spat out, mega distaste and jealousy in her words. “Witchworld laws and rules have a mind of their own, and the goddess always seems to favor the Wildes. They’ve been a thorn in the Helwigs’ sides for eons.” She linked her arms again with Rafael and Sammy, inserting herself between them. Her clinch so tight, Rafael felt like a purchased man with no will of his own. He had no choice but to tag along. After all, she was his plus-two with Sammy. A plus-one? Who knew? But she wasn’t the witch he wanted touching him. Not by a long shot.

“Come, gentlemen. I want to test Rafael’s powers. I believe I may want to bond you myself.” She practically drooled on Rafael’s arm. “You’re too valuable for a lesser witch. That blonde twit doesn’t have my experience, or the two elemental powers I possess. She’s not ready for a warlock of your potential.”

Ants crawled up his spine. *Did* he have a choice? Or was he trapped? Crazy visuals he could do without. “I don’t understand. How do you know I’m a warlock?” He yanked his arm out of her ironclad clasp and pinned both arms to his sides. He needed her not touching him.

She released Sammy. “Sweet boy, most warlocks don’t know they contain magic until a witch opens the doors. Sammy, tell him how Helena found you.”

“Dude.” Sammy guided him to a cement garden bench in the woods.

Trees stretched toward the sky in the woods surrounding the bench. Leaves and evergreen boughs rustled in the breeze, casting dappled shadows on the forest floor, creating shadows on his thoughts. The sweet perfume of summer pines permeated the air, not enough to overpower Zelda’s cloying

rose perfume. The rough texture of the cement bench under him and the solid earth beneath his feet grounded him. He appreciated the beauty of the woods, but he couldn't ignore the subtle undercurrent of danger around him.

"Take a chill pill. These witches know their stuff, man. You hold magic in your aura and they sense it. Your real magic will come from the witch who bonds you." Sammy flung out his hand, tossing an invisible band of air around Rafael, binding him to the bench. Rafael struggled against another ironclad hold, fuming, fire roasting his face.

"Helena's an air witch," Zelda added. "She found Sammy ready to toss himself off a cliff into the bay last year. The untapped magic inside him languished too long before being tapped. The poor boy couldn't handle the disorder and depression, not knowing why he felt he didn't fit within the human world."

Sammy grinned and released his band, the air whooshing from around Rafael, ruffling the sleeves of his T-shirt. He shook himself like a dog flinging off water and leaped onto the bench, and then into the air. A pillow of air cushioned his landing on a crumbling tree stump.

"Dude, the moment Helena bonded me, I found myself." Sammy slapped Rafael on the back. "She's taught me a crap-ton about the witchworld and magic. She's not a bad lay either."

"Wait, what?" Rafael wagged his head, sending his hair flying around his temples. "You've been seeing Melissa for two years. You cheated on her?"

"No, man." Sammy gave Rafael the hand. "Sex with a witch is a way for her to gauge abilities since mine weren't obvious. Also strengthens the bond."

"It's time you cut ties to Melissa, Sammy." Zelda linked her arm in his again, sending another crawl of ants down Rafael's spine. "Melissa doesn't fit in our world. If you can't break it off, Helena can gently turn her against you."

Zelda's words registered, and the ants dug holes in Rafael's skin. He held his tongue, waited for Sammy to blast the bitch a new one.

"Yes, Ms. Helwig. I understand," Sammy responded, his reluctance evident in the drooping of his shoulders.

Shock suffused Rafael, and he jerked off the bench to his feet. "Do you hear yourself, man?"

"Sammy. Return to our campsite." Without another word, Sammy strode off, flinging a last pleading glance over his shoulder at Rafael.

“Rafael, my dear.” Zelda gripped his wrist, her fingernails digging into his skin, forcing him to follow her into the woods behind a giant redwood. She rose on her toes and dropped a kiss on his mouth, her sweet berry lipstick shooting heat to his groin. He was powerless to kill the lust barreling through him. Had she spelled him?

“It’s best this way. Non-magicals cause problems, and using magic around them could unintentionally hurt them. Do you want Sammy to harm Melissa by accident?” He shook his head. “This is a price to join the witchworld. In return, you receive powers you’ve never dreamed of. You’ll belong to people who’ll embrace you and *never* let you down.” Zelda squeezed his biceps and rubbed her thin body against him, doubling her efforts at his crotch. An instant erection caused her full-throated laughter. “And you can have all the sex you want. The Helwig witches share our warlocks well. Plus, with the power I sense in you, you can become a warlock leader.” She squeezed her fingers inside the waistband of his jeans and raked her long fingernails down his hard length. “Doesn’t that sound divine?”

Emitting a groan, he unbuttoned his jeans to relieve the pressure, and Zelda slid his zipper down. The zipper’s rasp incited his lust further. Nodding, Rafael pressed his erection into her hand now going to town on him. The shrill screech of a blue jay over his head whacked sense into him. People talking on the pathway forced him to jerk her hand out of his pants.

Horror swamped him, an instant buzzkill. “Stop,” he rasped out. His head spun, and he darted into the woods. He jogged as fast as the terrain allowed until he confronted the edge above a shallow ravine, panting against a boulder cropping out of the earth, signaling the descent. Readjusting his pants, he flinched when his jeans pressed on his now deflating erection.

Closing his eyes, he leaned a hip on the boulder until his breathing leveled out. *What the hell was that crazy business?* He felt no attraction to the witch! After a year-long dry spell, he was long overdue, but it wasn’t the witch’s hand his mind’s eye felt. All he pictured was Sage Wilde stroking him.

“What the fuck?” He slid down to the ground, nudging aside a rock poking into his butt. He scrubbed his face and stretched out his legs. No telling how long he sat, soaking in the sun filtering through the sparser trees when he heard a rustling in the nearby brush. His eyes shot open.

“Rafael? Are you okay?”

Sage Wilde, goddess personified. The sun shimmered off her hair, haloing her in gold. He rubbed his eyelids and blinked a few times, sure he was dreaming and expecting the scene to fade.

“Rafael?”

He lurched up off the ground, steadying his hip against the boulder. She tossed her hair over her shoulder, holding her head high. A confidence in her stride ratcheted up her attraction tenfold. “Sage, I mean, High Priestess—”

She held up a hand and gave him the most radiant smile he’d ever seen. Her pink-frosted lips spread, revealing a straight line of perfect white teeth. The sun sparkled in her green eyes, disbursing grass-green flecks among the emeralds.

“No need for formalities at our festivals. You’re a witchworld guest.”

“Not what that Helwig witch said.”

“Yeah, well, *that Helwig witch* is a witch.” She giggled, and he about melted in the tinkling, cheerful sound. “You’re on my covenstead. I make the rules.”

“You’re pretty young to rule.” He craved to know her, but he didn’t know if he’d just insulted her or handed her props.

She laughed, not at all insulted, and his heart beat again. “Yep. Happens when your parents careen off a cliff in the Tahoe Mountains. I’m the oldest of the three daughters they left behind, so it’s my turn to rule.” Pain deadened the radiance in her eyes. “It’s my time to adult.”

“I’m sorry.” Before he thought better of it, he touched his right fingers to her forearm. She caught his hand in her own. Fire erupted between them, roaring up his arm and down his chest, triggering his heart to thunder anew. That unnamed thing—no other defined name existed—deep in his core connected to the fire and zoomed through his body.

Sage’s eyes rounded, and instead of releasing his hand to extinguish the flames from broiling them alive, she linked her fingers in his. A blustery wind fanned her silky hair over her shoulders. Water misted them both from a clear blue sky, only somewhat cooling his jets. Her fire burned unabated inside him, and he wanted it, needed it. He didn’t know if he’d survive another minute without her. Rafael gripped her hand so tight she yelped.

“Sorry.” Without releasing her, he relaxed his hold.

She beamed her luminous smile. “No prob. I like your strength.” She drew him closer, close enough to kiss. “Why are you by the ravine?”

Dropping her hand, he dug his hands into his front pockets and hunched

over. “Needed to clear the storm out of my head.”

She jolted backward. “Really? This is the path I take to declutter my head when too many people hound me. No one comes out this far.”

“Like minds.” Witch protocols swirled in his head. “I thought you always had a warlock guard.”

“I *have* a warlock here.” She winked, and a part of him dissolved.

The way she said the words, honest and intimate, set him on fire again. Lust speared to his dick. Instant tent pitch. He’d never gotten aroused from a woman’s mere voice. Had she also plunked a spell on him? What’s with these witches?

Her head dipped, and he realized he hadn’t zipped up his jeans. The evidence of his arousal bulged out between them. *Dumbass*.

Eyes twinkling, she said teasingly, “Umm, did I interrupt a date... with your hand?”

His laughter boomed, and he felt the heat of his embarrassment fading. “That Helwig witch couldn’t keep *her* hands off me.” He released Sage’s hand to zip up his pants, and she tried to stop him.

“Not on my account.” Her teasing, lilting voice turned his erection to steel.

Were these witches for real? He was smack-dab stuck in one of those sappy romance novels his last foster mom read, like a love triangle. Without the love. He’d arrived in an alternate reality, and he feared never finding himself again. A frigid revulsion iced the heat swamping him, and he backed away from her, held up his hands to stop her from closing the gap.

“Stay away from me,” he ordered.

Sage’s face sagged, and she hugged her arms over her chest. “What did I do?”

“You witches are trouble. I see it now. I don’t belong here.” But he did belong, not just because he desired Sage; he still tasted the sweetness of her coconut and vanilla perfume on his tongue. Magic hummed in every fiber of his being. Her magic. Confusion stirred the tempest in his head, pain battering his skull. He needed time to digest, away from Sage and this covenstead.

“Rafael, my magic mingled with *yours*. You *do* belong.”

“Nope. I don’t have magic. I’m just a normal guy.” He backed up another step as if the extra space promised to temper the simmering pot in his core.

“Oh. Okay.” Sage seemed to accept his words, but her disappointment

gutted him. Uncertainty gutted him. “I believe you’re a warlock,” she continued. “It’s why we connected”—she gestured at his middle—“so easy.”

“I didn’t connect to Helwig. She told me my magic wouldn’t manifest until a witch bonded me,” he spat the words out.

“True for most witches and warlocks. You’re powerful, and I don’t need to bond you to sense your magic. There’s magic inside you. You have a powerful aura, which connects to my magic. But I, or another witch, need to bond you for you to use the magic. I can explain more later.”

“Not buying it.” But the fizzing airy fire inside him negated his words. His frustration tripped off the rails. He didn’t know right from left, and searched for a hole in the ground to sink into. The tree-studded ravine looked like a perfect haven.

Sage forced a thin, tight-lipped smile. “Do you want to leave the festival?”

Hell to the yes. No fucking way. “Yes.” The only word he managed to croak out, whether right or wrong.

CHAPTER 5



IN A TENSE SILENCE, SAGE TRUDGED TOWARD THE BACKYARD GARDENS, AND Rafael followed at a lengthening distance. He puzzled her. Her magic connected to his powerful aura, when she should've only sensed his potent magic. She'd never met such a powerful warlock before bonding, not that she'd bonded many. Ricky was the only warlock currently bonded to her. The crux of her situation. Council rules dictated a High Priestess must have three warlocks for protection. Since she was close to becoming the regional leader, she had to bury her procrastination and fill her dance card. Bonded to a powerful warlock like Rafael might allow her to escape the three-warlock rule for a while. She'd have to bond him to find out for real. No need for sex, despite her intense desire to dance that waltz. Holy hell, she wanted him even if he wasn't a warlock.

Lost in her random thoughts, she tripped on an old fallen branch. She yelped as she tipped forward, angling toward the ground. Before taking a header, Rafael caught her from behind, his arms encircling her waist. She liquified against his sinfully hard body, loving the feel of his muscular arms around her.

She clamped on to his arm across her middle. "I'm such a klutz. Thanks for the save. Bruises and broken bones might ruin my rep at the Council meeting."

"Do you mean the rep of a doesn't-give-a-fuck party girl?" His mouth hovered near her left ear, and a shiver worked its way across her shoulders.

She cringed. "You heard the stories?"

"Only what Zelda Helwig spewed." His arm eased upward until it lodged beneath her breasts. "Is it true?"

She trailed her bare fingernails over his arm, loving the steel beneath his warm skin. “I’m young. I socialize.” Rafael exuded a tantalizing scent of spice and citrus, like a forbidden temptation.

“Do you screw every warlock you meet?” His stomach sucked in.

White-hot rage bristled through Sage. She peeled both his arms off her torso.

Shame mottling his skin, he hung his head. “Sorry. Not my business. I’ll hit it now.”

“No,” Sage demanded in her High Priestess voice, meant for all in her world to obey. Rafael dropped his arms and stood stock-still, his dark whiskey eyes somber. “The witchworld grants High Priestesses leniencies, and it includes screwing any unattached or unbonded warlock we want. Having sex with a warlock can strengthen the bond between them. I can recite the bonding spell when we are both at our most vulnerable. We also use the act to test a warlock’s strength. A witch can’t grant a warlock her magic until she establishes a bond. I also test warlocks for my coven, not just for me.”

“So you’re a sex goddess?” He snorted.

Sage headed down the path again. Why this man? Why this day? “Yes, Rafael Reyes. I have a lot of sex. Do I enjoy the sex?” The morning’s antics and the aftermath vaulted to her mind. “Sometimes. Do I fall in love with a candidate warlock? Nope. Do I bring them to my bed. Hell to the no. Do I do PDA and go on dates? Again, no way. I do my job for my coven. I do it because I’m the most powerful Wilde witch alive. I can determine what magic a warlock would excel at by touching him. Sometimes it takes more than a touch. I’m a matchmaker between my witches and warlocks. And if I find a warlock who doesn’t fit in our coven, I send him to another coven where I believe he might fit. But he has a choice. He can leave the witchworld and never look back. Or he can leave and return anytime he wants. Our world is centuries old. This is our way.” Perspiration dripped between her breasts.

The sound of their shoes on the pebble pathway and the approaching music and people playing games pervaded the air, but didn’t make a dent in the moment’s seriousness. The festivity had driven the birds and small forest animals deeper into the woods, the place where Sage wanted to run to escape the rest of her life. She missed the white noise of the birds teasing her owl familiars.

Sage hit the split in the path and stepped onto the right fork leading to the house. Without changing direction, she slowed her roll. “See ya, Rafael. You’re welcome to stay. Check the schedule posted by the witch-house, the barn-like structure. Festival ends tomorrow at five.” She didn’t wait for a response and was almost running by the time she reached the rear patio.

Wishing he’d followed her, she checked over her shoulder, but he’d vanished. Wherever he went, he lugged along a tiny piece of her heart. Something so fundamental hurt inside her. Her aether stirred restlessly, more than it had earlier. Everything inside her begged her to seek him out and continue their conversation. To convince him to stay. To encourage him to accept her, the sole warlock she’d ever wanted to bond. Not only bond, but to allow him in *her* bed. Her bedroom, her sanctuary.

Aspen skipped down the path, two frozen tropical drinks in her hands, rainbow cocktail umbrellas fluttering in the breeze. She extended one to Sage. “You look like you need a daiquiri.”

Just the look of the fruity concoction in the glass soured her stomach. “No, thanks. I’ve had my fill for the week. Hell, the entire month.”

Aspen’s eyelashes flapped, her mouth transforming into a flycatcher. “What? Sage Wilde is rejecting a shindig in a glass.” She rested a frosty glass against Sage’s forehead. “Do you need a happy pill?” She rotated to the side and dropped her arm. “Back pocket. Energy potion.”

Sage grabbed both glasses and set them on a nearby table, tempted to dump them out. “It’s not even noon. And you’re underage.”

Aspen snatched one drink and stuck the straw in her mouth, took two deep draws. “It’s noon somewhere. And I’m almost twenty-one.”

Sage frowned, hoping and searching the yard for Rafael. “You seen Ricky?”

Aspen dug a vial out of her pocket and handed it to Sage. “He’s pissed you took off.”

Sage accepted the tiny vial and sucked down the contents. She needed witch-style energy to slide through the day. Gagging, she stammered, “Jeez, are you off your meds? Is this poison?”

Aspen grinned. “New potion I’m working on. Flavor comes later. I’m meeting the other alchemists tomorrow to trade notes.”

“Good. You need to bounce ideas. Mom taught you well of the old potions, charms, and spells, but she didn’t add to her arsenal often. It’s time for you to jazz things up.”

“Exactly. I got gummies, mints, and other ideas floating in the noggin.”

Sage’s phone beeped with a text. “Ricky spied me. I gotta bounce.”

Aspen wasted no time in snagging the other daiquiri and darting down the path. At least Sage didn’t have to parent her seventeen-year-old youngest sister, Willow, during the festival. Since Willow hadn’t come into her magic yet, she didn’t want to attend anything witch related, especially with warlocks hulking around. Willow enjoyed no fond memories of warlocks except their father, a warlock who didn’t follow the tradition of witches dominating them, and was their mother’s equal. Different from the old witchworld rules. Too modern, too progressive. Sage preferred witches to rule and dominate their warlocks in the way of the old traditions, which included sleeping with any unbonded warlock she chose.

The only warlock she wanted touching her was the fleeing Rafael Reyes. *Why can’t I boot him out of my freaking head?*

Burying her thoughts of the mysterious warlock, she scurried to the witch-house. Already, the energy potion warmed her gut, and she felt an extra pep in her step, as her father used to say. Aspen was on to something. Adrenaline rushed through her veins and drove out the dregs of her hangover headache. Was it the potion? Or the idea of bonding Rafael Reyes? A man who didn’t know his true identity and wanted no part of the witchworld, the place he clearly—at least to her—belonged. She snickered, not letting those thoughts turn Debbie Downer on her.

The California covens and their individual councils already filled the converted barn. Sage stepped through the open sliding barn doors. They’d arranged long tables in a square. Beverages, lunch, and a myriad of other snacks loaded down tables against the walls. More flowers and vines adorned the witch-house. A pair of witches waved feathers to disburse smoke rising from thick sage sticks to purify the witch-house and prepare for their solstice blessing. Calming lavender bubbled in bowls scattered around the barn to diffuse the sage and any potential tension that might arise.

Jessica motioned for Sage to join her at the head table, though they had another fifteen minutes until the meeting commenced. The Wilde Council included Aunt Jessica, her younger and absent world-traveler, aunt Juliette, Aspen, and Jessica’s daughters, twins Marina and Brianne, and the eldest Eden. Bonded warlocks surrounded the perimeter of the room and guarded the two entrances.

Glowing, Ricky joined Sage, the heat of his annoyance leeching down

her side. “Don’t go off alone without a trusted warlock. Not after this morning.”

“I needed to clear my head,” she defended.

He growled. “Don’t do it again. Not until we get a handle on the sitch.”

“What did you find out?” Sage asked.

“Like you said, the arrows were real, not magical. I also found cat scat in the area.”

“Zelda’s familiar.” Jessica scanned the crowd for the other witch.

“Bitch,” Sage blasted out. “It’s always the Helwigs fighting for everything the Wildes have earned.”

“Wait.” Jessica gripped Sage’s arm. “You said multiple animals.”

Her arm may fall off if one more person locked on to it. Sage licked her bottom lip, thinking. “At least four. Bobcats roam our woods too. But with all the people here, you’d think they’d all scampered for the deep hills.”

“Zelda doesn’t have four familiars. She has three bonded warlocks, her summoning familiar and her main familiar.”

“Her warlocks might’ve been there,” Ricky shot back.

“They would’ve made too much noise. The Helwigs didn’t arrive until just before breakfast.” Sage glided her fingernails over her cheek, gnawed on a cuticle.

“Not if they used a protective ward.” Jessica released Sage’s arm. “My bet’s on Zelda.”

“We’ve got her dead to rights,” Ricky insisted.

“Hardly.” Sage rubbed her arm, trawling a fingernail across her skin. “Still not convinced.” She focused on the room at large. “I need to call the meeting to order. Ricky, look and listen for expressions, signs, anything from anyone who’s not a friend to the Wildes, or me.”

“Already on it.”

She fought the desire to fly off—broomstick not required—and escape her duties. She craved Rafael Reyes like no man or warlock she’d ever met. But she needed to suffer through the necessary evils of the Council meeting and festival. Not simply as host, but as the California, and soon the entire western region, High Priestess. Not for the first time did she selfishly wish her mother had never died and held the reins in her rightful place. As the youngest High Priestess in the U.S., Sage hated the weight of the expectations bogging down her shoulders.

Sage clenched the wooden gavel in her right hand and banged it down on

the podium three times. The warmth of the smooth, worn wood brought her closer to her mother and grandmother, prior Wilde High Priestesses. The gavel clattered to the podium surface, and the raucous noise in the room dropped to a dull roar until all the witches took their assigned seats. Warlocks stood or sat in chairs behind their witches. Wilde warlocks and witches guarded the doors from the festivalgoers who wandered in by accident.

“Bright blessings and merry met.” Sage projected for all to hear. The witches threw out jovial greetings. After the noise died again, she picked up the electronic tablet and read the Midsummer blessing aloud:

Blessed be the turning of the wheel as the sun reaches its zenith on this Summer Solstice. May the warmth and light of this longest day fill us with joy and vitality, and may we be blessed with abundance throughout the season.

May the power of the sun infuse us with courage, strength, and inspiration to pursue our dreams and goals. May we honor the earth and all its creatures, and work to protect and preserve the beauty and balance of the natural world.

As we celebrate the solstice, may we remember the connection of all things and the cycles of life and death, growth and decay. May we embrace change with open hearts and minds, and may we find wisdom and guidance in the traditions of our ancestors.

Blessed be the Summer Solstice, and all the magic it brings.

Sage banged the gavel down and brought the summer Council meeting to order. Jessica, as the Council secretary, replaced her, and Sage returned to her seat at the head of the table behind the podium.

“First task on our agenda is to announce the vote count to install the western region High Priestess, a position left open when Jana Wilde passed.” Grumbles rose from the Helwigs and their allies seated near them, while most of the room projected healthy and positive vibes. “An unbiased third-party counted the vote because of accusations the Wildes might tamper with the election.” Jessica’s head swiveled to the Helwigs, held a few seconds, and turned back to face the center of the room. “Everyone agreed on the method and agreed to accept the vote as final.”

Imelda Helwig, Zelda’s younger sister, waved her hand as if swatting a fly. “Get on with it,” she mumbled loud enough for everyone to hear.

It wasn’t a given that Sage had won. She was young, hence the reason for the vote. If she had been forty-something with ten or twenty years of experience under her pointy hat, no one would’ve thought twice. Well, no

one but their longtime adversaries. Zelda had been hell-bent on merging the small Scotts Valley and Santa Cruz covens for decades. Every attempt at usurping control got thrown in Zelda's face, and she hadn't attempted a coup since Sage's mother became High Priestess. She was shocked Zelda hadn't tried a takeover this year. Maybe the Helwigs had another evil coup up their sleeves. Or maybe Zelda had rigged the vote.

A witch from the unbiased Far Northern California coven handed the locked steel box to Jessica. Ben, Jessica's sole warlock and husband, closed in on her. The voting company had mailed the box to the Far Northern coven and a key to three random-drawn covens. Such was the way of the current witchworld. Dreading the results, no matter which way they swung, Sage pushed out a sigh.

Jessica set the box on the head table. "Does anyone want to inspect the box to ensure no tampering?" She baited the Helwigs, and Sage gave her a mental high five.

Zelda elbowed her sister. "Yes."

Imelda hoofed it to the table, her all-black outfit mimicking her older sister's austere clothing. She wore a large antique moonstone pendant, a permanent fixture around her neck. Sage had never seen her without. The pendant matched a moonstone ring Zelda wore on her left hand, signifying her marriage to her coven. Strands of silver shot through Imelda's lustrous long, black hair. She inspected every side of the box and gave Zelda a thumbs-up. "The Helwig clan has no issues with the vote container. Who received the keys?" The witch scanned one corner of the room to the others.

The Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area High Priestesses stood, and Zelda joined them. Imelda smirked and returned to her seat.

Sage rolled her eyes. Sometimes, she wished she could slither out of these Council meetings and hide under a rock until everyone hit the road. The idea of a magical broomstick sounded awesome. *As if.*

The three witches opened the box and inspected the sealed envelope inside. With deliberate motions, Ben used his pocketknife to slice it open and slipped out the printed vote results. He handed it to Jessica, and the trio of witches lunged for it.

Magic climbed in the air, perceptible to Sage, who had an uncanny knack for sensing magic that escaped other witches. She sprang up, her metal chair folding in on itself and clattering to the wood flooring. "Stop!" Her glare primed to blast a hole in Zelda's forehead. *One could only wish.* "Zelda. Drop

the freaking magic. You know magic's not allowed in here."

A bright red flush stole over Zelda's face, her indignation palpable. "You're insane, girl. You're sensing all the witches in the room. Too much for you to handle, huh?"

"Nope. You turned up the knob. Now hit the kill switch." She snatched the gavel and pounded it on the table, the sound reverberating up to the high-beamed ceiling. "Did you spell the letter, trying to destroy it before Jessica reads it? Did you glamour it? Afraid I'm gonna win? You know my name's written all over the results. No one wants you ruling." She'd stepped over the line articulating the thoughts of three-quarters of the room. The witch hag had pushed Sage's last button. Knowing that Zelda wanted Rafael shot her patience to the moon. *All's fair in love and war. Whoa! Where'd the word love stem from?*

Warlocks edged closer to their witches. Magic in all the elements flared up in the room as witches prepped their defensive magic. The pungent odor of fertile loam and brimstone overpowered the ineffectual lavender drifting through the air.

Jessica tapped the mic several times, the loud booming and resulting electronic screech quelling a near insurrection. "Shut down the magic and return to your seats. Or we call this meeting off."

"Then what? Sage rules because she's a Wilde?" Zelda sneered.

"Read the vote." Sage stamped her boot on the wooden floor, vibrating several planks. "If you don't agree with the results, tough shit. I'm shitting in the same woods, and you don't see me threatening anyone."

The witches returned to their seats, tense and grumbling. Warlocks stood stalwart and nervous at their prior positions. Residual witch-air billowed through Sage's own witch-air, scattering it. Invisible witch-fire converted the space into an inferno and sweat formed beneath her breasts. A pungent earthy aroma permeated the room, and Sage expected weeds to pop out of the woodwork if she blinked. Remaining vigilant, she opened her senses to detect another magic outburst.

Jessica's hands trembled as she unfurled the paper with the results. "By order of the Western Witch's Council, Sage Wilde is hereby voted in as western regional High Priestess by a majority vote, until she forfeits, loses her magic permanently, is permanently incapacitated, passes to the other side, or receives a *unanimous* regional vote to remove her from office." Jessica handed the paper to the High Priestess on her left. "It is written, so mote it be

pursuant to the Book of Shadows, modern edition number three.”

The room erupted, a chaotic combination of applause, cheers, and loud dissent from the Helwigs and their minions. Once again, magic seeped into the air, creating a visible mushroom cloud of doom at ceiling height.

Zelda rushed forward, rammed Ben out of the way, and clutched the mic. “You will all rue this day. This chit will never meet your expectations. The government will crack down on all witches and enact laws to hamper our every move. Sage Wilde will destroy the witchworld.” The room fell silent to her angry bellows. “I demand a new vote in three months’ time, per the rules.”

Misty, the Bay Area High Priestess, and a staunch Wilde ally addressed the crowd. “Sage won the vote fair and square. They outvoted you, Zelda. Take it like a lady. Three-quarters of the region don’t want a Helwig leader. We all know the history of the Helwigs who dragged us into the Witches and Warlocks war, on the warlock’s side, I might add. So zip it and pop a squat.”

Sage perched a hip on the table, grim and stone-faced. She’d expected Zelda to screech out a tangent. Fire roiled in her chest, and she wanted to blast the Wicked Witch of the West to smithereens.

Jessica grabbed the mic from Zelda’s hand, wincing from the heat Zelda projected on the handle. “If you force another vote, you’ll challenge me on the ticket.”

Sage gasped and gained her feet. She cupped her hand over the mic. “Aunt Jessica,” she whispered. “You abdicated. You said you don’t have it in you to rule, and you wanted young blood to carry on our traditions for a longer time.”

“Let me finish,” Jessica murmured. Sage removed her hand from the mic, and Jessica continued, “Although young, Sage has the smarts, the power, the business and finance degrees to run this region for a good long time. She’s the most powerful witch we’ve seen in decades, if not longer. By the witch’s decree, the role is my rightful place in Jana’s stead. You’ll waste time and money forcing another vote.”

Rebel, High Priestess of the Silicon Valley coven and Wilde ally, stood next to Misty. “The vote stands. Sage is our regional High Priestess.” Every other witch repeated the words until Sage heard her name chanted over and over. Several of Zelda’s best bitches even chanted Sage’s name.

The Helwigs’ biggest hater from a Southern California coven, whom Sage had a difficult time naming, shouted, “Accept the role, Sage. We need

your young blood to carry us into our next chapter. You were born for this. Your mother prepared you for this. No one can take it from you, least not Zelda or Imelda Helwig.”

The outpouring of encouragement and acknowledgment stunned Sage. She scrambled up on the table and shouted, “I accept!” Hating the role with everything in her, but wanting to please her deceased parents from the grave, she blew out the candle she’d picked up and accepted her inheritance. “So mote it be.”

CHAPTER 6



SMOKE SPIRALED UP FROM EMBERS RAINING DOWN UPON SAGE, AND A GUST of wind disbursed the fire magic. Zelda released her bobcat familiar, and it dashed toward Sage, stopping short of leaping on the table, teeth bared and tail swishing.

Sage yelped and her pulse quickened. The candle dropped from her hand and clunked onto the floor. Arrows shot from her eyes at Zelda. The bobcat emitted a high-pitched scream, like a hysterical woman, mimicking Zelda. Silence fell upon the room, and Ricky helped Sage clamber off the table. Her temper flared, overpowering her fear. Aether ascended inside her, and her vision grew blurry as agony gathered behind her eyes.

“How dare you threaten me?” Sage didn’t miss a beat. “As regional High Priestess, I banish the entire Helwig coven from the solstice event. Now retrieve your familiar before I unleash my ninja fairies on it.” Her aether ebbed and flowed, said ninjas raring to go medieval. Sage felt the telltale silver circling her darkening irises. Mirror unnecessary. She ducked her head to hide her shifting eyes from the crowd. “Get me out,” she whispered to Ricky. “Now, please.”

The wildcat hissed at Sage before Zelda summoned it. It scuttled up her arm, morphing into tattoo form.

Ricky escorted Sage out the rear door. Uncertainty set up a padded room in Sage’s mind. The bobcat sounds didn’t mirror the animals from her forest escapade. *What the what?*

“What’s wrong?” Ricky shut the door behind them. Music and the cheerful clamor of the festival gatherings and games drowned out the racket in the witch-house. Sage tipped her head back for his view, and he recoiled,

his shoulders shuddering. “Your aether?” Only a few people in her life had ever seen her aether rising, or even knew about it.

She nodded. “I didn’t want anyone to see. For all they know, the bobcat scared me and I left to regroup.” She knuckled her eyes, leaned against his bracing arm. “The animals that threatened me this morning sounded different.”

“Are you sure?” Ricky led her to a weathered picnic table behind the witch-house, an area off bounds from the festival. He unfolded a dusty lawn chair, and she sagged into it, elbows on her knees, chin in her hands.

“Positive. But she could’ve used magic to throw me off.” The aether retreated into her core, boiling and popping, waiting for Sage’s call to action.

“True.” Ricky crouched, picking at weeds growing between the pavers. “By the way, congrats.”

“Gee, thanks. How does it feel to be the number one warlock of the entire western region?” Ice, her bonding familiar, peeked out from the neck of his T-shirt and cooed at her with adoring eyes.

He grinned, his mouth stretching out his trim goatee. “Can’t say I feel any different. Guess I will once you bond three other warlocks, considering I’m only temporary.”

Sage wagged her head. “What do you mean temporary?”

Ricky rose and paced the patio. He kicked at more weeds in the pavers, toed pine cones in a pile. Always ready to clean up any mess when Sage needed him. “I want to ask Leah to marry me. I can’t be bonded to two witches, and it’s not fair to her if I remain tied to you.”

“Oh, Ricky. Of course you two must marry and bond.” Sage sat back, her eyes normal and her headache a dull throb. “I love Leah. She’s a great earth witch to have in my coven and to mentor my cousin.” Although not a blood relative, Leah had joined the Wilde coven two years ago. In her mid-thirties and an only child, her parents had moved to Spain and abandoned her except for the occasional phone call. She’d found a home with the Wildes and lived in a cabin on the property with Ricky. “You ready to learn earth magic?” She tossed him a smile.

“How hard can it be? I’ll miss your witch-fire though.” He held out his hand. “Come on. You need a drink.”

“I’ll grant you earth magic and you can take it for a spin. With our ley lines, you’ll eat your words.” Sage took his hand, and he tugged her up. With her aether, the melting pot of all elements, she possessed the ability to wield

air, water, earth, and fire magic. But she only granted fire to her warlocks, the magic of all magics.

“Any warlocks catch your eye? Other than Joshua?”

“You heard that BS?”

“Aspen made him the butt of several jokes making the rounds.”

Sage cringed. Just what she needed. Another angry warlock hovering around. Speaking of, would Rafael Reyes return, or had the door slammed on his delectable rear? A wistful tweak on her heart proved how much she detested never seeing him again. She needed to track him down. After the festival, when normal life resumed. First, she needed to wake up and smell the roses. Every High Priestess in the region will badger her to form her protection team. Especially with the constant Helwig threats.

“I had my eye on one warlock.” Movement in the gazebo sheltered by the trees and decorated in floral vines and fairy lights caught her attention. A young couple sucking each other’s faces off sat on a marble bench. Wistfulness blossomed around her heart.

“Is he powerful? A good connection?”

More than she cared to blab to the world. “Very.”

“Make a play for him. He’ll boot everyone off your back until you find two more.”

The door opened, and Aspen bounced onto the patio. She shut out the drama in the witch-house. “Those biotches won’t let up.”

Sage’s spine arrowed straight. “Did the Helwigs leave?”

“Nope. The Council banished them, but allowed them to finish today’s Council biz and attend the warlock lottery.” Aspen hid a burp behind her hand and brushed her long, lustrous red hair behind her shoulders. Strawberries-and-rum-scented breath wafted from her. Sage had no plans to rat out her sister. The resulting hangover would be fitting punishment.

She spun her thoughts to more persistent matters. Thank the goddess Rafael had split, after all. Or else Zelda would snare him. Sage didn’t want that fight on her scorecard.

“Better finish the meeting before we end up stomping down a revolution.” Aspen headed to the door. “FY in your eye. Every High Priestess here’s gonna force you to bag at least one warlock tomorrow.”

Sage cringed. “How many available warlocks are there? I saw seven last night. Including The Tool.” She traded wicked grins with Aspen.

“A dozen, give or take. They’ll be on display”—she did air quotes—“at

the party tonight. Maybe one or two will catch your eye, or another body part. Now get your rear in gear.”

Sage plodded through the day to finish Council business. Unrestrained magic dwelled in every corner of the witch-house, the bulk stemming from the Helwig table. Lunch came and went, and the meeting ended at four o’clock.

Exhausted and jittery, Sage left, Ricky on one side and Aspen on the other. She plucked another drink from Aspen’s hands and sucked down a gulp, gagged. “What god-awful concoction are you drinking now?” She jammed the glass into Aspen’s grabby hand.

“Secret sauce.”

“Geez, any more alcohol and you’ll puke your guts out tonight.”

“You’d know, right?”

“Bite me.” Sage whacked Aspen’s arm, jostling the glass in her sister’s hand, the sticky drink sloshing over the sides. “I mean it. Cool it on the alcohol. I need your head clear.”

Fake-pouting, Aspen dumped the drink in a box planter of colorful summer annuals. “I’m just having fun.”

“Have your fun. But be responsible.” When did she start playing mother in this new reality?

“Can I go play with my itty-bitty friends now?” Aspen replied in a toddler’s voice.

“Beat it.” Sage waved her off. Aspen saluted her and jogged off toward the house.

“She’s a good kid.” Ricky guided her around a raised flagstone on the path cutting through the rear gardens.

“I don’t want her repeating my stupid mistakes. Nor do I want to contribute to the delinquency of a dumb minor.” Although Jessica was Aspen and Willow’s legal guardian, Sage had adopted a quasi-parental role to her younger sisters. Another adulting item on her plate.

A group of Wilde warlocks caught Ricky’s attention on the rear patio. “You okay if I check in? Everyone has their senses peeled for clues to our situation.”

Sage bumped her elbow against his thick arm. “Go. I need a power nap, anyway.”

..*.*.*

Sage woke hours later, having missed dinner and the lighting of the bonfire. Twilight descended, swathing a purple hue over the sky. Mini lights, lanterns, and candles flickered in the backyard, like a million stars sprinkling the yard and perimeter woods. The celebration spilled out of the witch-house and onto the covenstead grounds, music and revelry ringing out into the night air.

Normally, she'd be queen of the party. The one most likely to drink herself under the table, rip off her clothes, and dance naked in the meadow wearing only a floral crown. Not tonight. Although her election win was an unsurprising result of her family's long-standing authority in the witchworld, it was still worthy of a celebration. Yet, the heavy weight of her new duties dampened her already crappy mood.

She showered and slithered into a short, body-hugging dress, knee-high boots, and a tiny, leather half-jacket. Hair flowed free and lustrous. Time to make her expected appearance. Maybe she'd discover another unbonded warlock she'd missed last night. On her way out, she stooped to pick up a note Ricky had slid under the door. *Text me when you wake up. R.*

"Crap." She stuck her phone in the inner pocket of her boot, needing more alone time, at least on the short walk to the gathering. Who'd hurt her with a million witnesses watching?

A mad idea hit her brain, and she rushed down the hallway. It took her a half hour to reach the French doors leading to the patio after a myriad of witches stopped to congratulate her and chat. By the time she reached the open doors, peace lured her beyond the party. "Goddess, save me from this unnatural mood you dumped me in," she muttered.

Two witches sandwiched her in, clamoring for attention. "Sorry, I need to attend to Wilde matters. I'll catch up to you later." She rushed to the witch-house, greeting everyone who crossed her path, stopping shy of lingering for more chatting.

Bands of air rimmed by fire caged the unbonded warlocks at the back of the large room. Two water witches remained close to contain the fire from escaping and razing the barn. The warlocks strutted in various states of undress, all in good-natured fun. Cognizant of her identity, they catcalled and whistled to her. They surged toward her, seeking her attention, but she only had a single-minded focus for two warlocks, both absent.

"Hey, guys! You're a feast for my eyes," she encouraged them, touching the biceps and abs of a couple preening like studs on a ranch. No magical

insta-connections. Could she find a warlock to bond from this group? “We’re missing two warlocks I met earlier today.” And Joshua. Apparently, he’d escaped the cage. One could only hope he’d hit the road. “Anyone seen Rafael or Sammy? Helwigs brought them.”

“Sammy’s bonded. He returned to the Helwig covenstead.” The familiar voice came from behind her.

Shoulders flinching, she spun around. “Hello, Joshua. Hope you’re enjoying the festival.” She nearly choked on her words. The stench of a brewery sailed off him, and he carried several longnecks.

“Not as much as I would’ve if you hadn’t spread shit about me.”

She smiled, attempting to set him at ease, but her smile ratcheted up a muscle tic in his jaw. “So sorry. You were the casualty of big ears and a bigger mouth. Join the group.” She waved her arm at the gaggle of gorgeous men. “You’ll find a witch.” She moved on. “Has anyone seen an unbonded warlock by the name of Rafael Reyes?”

“What? The rest of us aren’t good enough for you?” Joshua badgered, so close, his spit hit the side of her head.

Magic mounted inside her, and fire danced along her arm to her hand, tiny flames hardly perceptible to the naked eye. Three witches orbited the warlocks’ cage, oohed and aahed over them, not paying attention to her other than to nod in respect.

“Joshua.” Cringing inside, she touched his arm. A muscle jumped beneath her touch. “Don’t you ever get up in my face,” she gritted out. Sparks shot off her hand and scorched his flesh. He yelped and yanked his arm to his side. “See my healer about that sting.”

The music swelled, and her head pounded. Magic bristling over her body, she snagged a fresh pale-yellow drink off the bar and escaped out the back door. No one followed, and she sped down a clear path into the woods toward her favorite bench fringed by trees and flowering shrubs. Lanterns containing battery-operated candles hung from the trees, illuminating the area and providing shadows to hide in. Gwyneira launched off her shoulder and took a perch on a tree behind the bench. She sat, the warmth from the June sun close to the horizon radiating off the cement.

“Hope Zelda picks that asshole.” A titter slipped out, and she gulped her margarita on the rocks. “Ugh.” The strong drink did nothing for her, and she dumped it out. An act unheard of before that day. “I’ve lost my freaking mind. Lost my way. What a way to start my new *job*.” She kicked at a pine

cone, and it thrashed into the bushes. “Do this, Sage. Do that. Bond a warlock or three.” She flailed her arms in the air above her head.

“Do you always talk to yourself? Or are you talking to the trees?” The questions came from her left, and her head swung up. Excitement kick-started her heart into overdrive. Footsteps chased the voice, crunching on the gravel, until *he* stood in front of her.

CHAPTER 7



THE MOST STUNNING SIGHT OF RAFAEL'S CRAP-ASS DAY, HELL, HIS ENTIRE life, took his breath away. As full dark eclipsed the dregs of twilight, the shimmering lanterns lent Sage an ethereal glow he wanted surrounding them in a bubble together.

"Rafael," she breathed out his name. "You returned."

He cleared the frogs from his throat. He wasn't the type that got tongue-tied around a woman, but she brought out the worst—or the best—in him. "I never left."

Her slender fingers grasped her neck. "I thought you gave up on us."

"I hung on the fringes. Listened to the music, ate, drank. Watched."

She smiled. "So you're stalking witches now?"

"Just one." Head hanging, he shuffled his sneakers in the pea gravel on the pathway, pushing scattered rocks back onto the path. "You shouldn't be alone. Where's your warlock?"

"Gave him the slip. Besides, I'm *not* alone." She stepped toward him, and her scent washed over him, enticing and warm. "You're here."

"I'm not a warlock. Can't help you there," he said. Her wary gaze probed for signs and answers. "Why'd you dump your drink? Thought you're the badass party girl."

"You don't miss a trick, do ya?" Sage closed the distance between them. "I drink to slog through all the witchworld business. Because circumstances plunged me into a position of power way too soon. I drink to erase reality for a few hours." Her heat scorched him, but he wanted it touching him, needed it like air. "Tonight, I don't need alcohol. I want to feel everything... especially now."

She eased forward until a few inches separated them and pressed her palm on the center of his chest. His gut ignited, and he gasped, but didn't break contact. Her palm blazed through his chest, deep into his core and pulled that seething unnamed thing to the surface. Sparks shimmered off her hand, and he wasn't sure if she created the magic or if he did.

"What... what just happened?" he stammered.

"You *are* a warlock. I knew it!" Her hand slid up his chest, and her fingers trailed over his neck, leaving fire in their wake. She cupped his cheek. "You contain more power than I've ever seen in an unbonded warlock. Unique and all you."

He basked in her touch, shifted his head to the side and kissed her palm, his lips lingering against her soft, fiery skin.

"It's why I never left. I need to understand who I am." Anguish deepened his tone. "Zelda said she'd help me discover myself. It's why Sammy brought me to her." And just like that, he ruined the moment. Sage removed her hand, and a frigid wind blew off her and cooled the fire she'd left behind. Sparks dripped from her hand, and the wind scattered them like fireflies. "I suspect mentioning her name's not so cool."

"No. The Helwigs and Wildes have topped each other's shit lists for a century. Helwigs want to rule the entire witchworld. They ruled the West at one time, but succumbed to shenanigans that threatened everyone. The Wildes took charge and have remained in the power seat since."

Unsure how to respond, he soaked up the sight of her and her tropical scent, wishing they lay side by side on a deserted island, away from the madness.

"Look, Rafael. If you promised yourself to the Helwigs, I won't prevent you—"

"Whoa." He held up an open hand. "Back up the bus. I've made no promises. *She* made a claim on me, whatever that means. I need to understand why you all think I'm a warlock. But she wants me to quit my job, work and live at her covenstead. She made it sound like I'll be a kept man, no say in my life."

Tangible fury whisked around them as Sage released gusts of wind. Bands of white air glowed off her, floating from her spread palms. Her magic confused him. He'd heard she was a fire witch, not an air witch. Motion over her shoulder drew his attention to a fearless owl, watching them from a gnarled tree.

“If she claimed you, she’ll fight newts and toads for you in the warlock lottery,” Sage spat out the words like shards of glass.

He closed and opened his eyes. The bird still eyeballed him from its perch on a low tree branch. Sage folded her arms around herself, as if wrestling with the desire to touch him. God, he wanted it so damn much.

“Why’s it called a lottery?” he asked, engaging in a safer topic.

Sage smiled her smile that sucked him in, one that belonged to him alone. “It’s a loose term. A lottery requires consideration, prize, and a chance. Consideration is the goods and magic a witch will grant you if she chooses you. The warlock is the prize. A witch and the warlock both take a chance.” She dropped her arms to her sides, her tension falling with them. “It is what it is.”

“Got it.” He revisited more pressing matters. Answers he needed first before he lost himself in Sage and lost his ability to think. “Who will Zelda fight against? Don’t I get a choice? I mean, I can walk, right?” He crouched down, then sat on the gravel path, legs bent and chin resting on his right knee. “Your witchworld needs a Wiki.” Sage towered over him and he didn’t mind it, but he wanted her sitting next to him. He lifted up and tugged them both to the cement bench. “Do you mind? Can you stay a while?” The sparkle of her smile pierced him like an arrow straight to his heart.

She left her hand gloved in his. “I can stay as long as you want me to stay. I have a boatload to explain. Foremost, you absolutely have a choice. Somehow your friend Sammy suspected that you’re a warlock. You won’t possess actual powers until a witch bonds you, then you’ll possess whatever magical element she wields.” Sage toyed with the hem of her slick leather jacket that left little to the imagination. “Even if Zelda *claimed* you, you can choose any available witch on the prowl. Or walk. But understand this, you belong to the witchworld. That’s the huge missing link from your life.”

Absorbing her words, he squeezed her hand tighter, met her gaze, the lantern light catching on silver flecks in her emerald orbs.

“I need a warlock. I’m required to have three,” she continued in a rush as though she needed to unload. “Ricky’s ready to propose to his girlfriend, another witch. I’ll need to break his bond. The Wilde Council may assign any random warlock to me. So I’m desperate.” She flushed, and her heat hit him like a bonfire erupting in his stomach. “I mean, if I wasn’t desperate, I’d still want you...”

The fiery boulder burst into fragments that shot through his bloodstream

and straight to his throbbing dick. “So the Council could stick you with someone like Joshua?” he stuttered to diffuse his internal situation and grinned. She playfully slapped his arm. “Couldn’t resist. I heard the story.”

She buried her face on his shoulder. “Oh my goddess. I never meant the entire world to hear. I should’ve known better telling my bigmouth sister. Can we talk about anything else? Tell me who you are.” She eased off the bench and stretched out on the path without a care in the world.

He lay down beside her and extended his arm to give her a pillow. “Rest your head on my arm.” She did, snuggling close until their heads touched and her hand alighted on his thigh, practically singeing a hole through his jeans. He’d never met a woman who held such fire in her touch. Guess she truly was a witch and knew how to use her charms. Hell, they worked on him.

“What do you want to know?” he asked so gruff he thought he’d give away the lust barreling through him, if she hadn’t already figured it out by the visible bulge. He had gone a year without the closeness of a woman, not wanting to risk involving another person in his tangled life. Even his prior occasional hit and runs wanted more from him than he could give.

“What’s your favorite color?” Sage danced her fingers on the sleeve of his T-shirt.

“Gray.”

“Wow. I’ve met no one who loved gray. Why?”

“Reminds me of old black-and-white photography. A neutral color, containing many shades that convey a depth, subtlety, and nuance.” He shrugged, sending a ripple of movement through his body. “A versatile color with a wide range of emotions and impressions.” He twisted a lock of her hair around his fingers and sniffed, savoring the faint fruity fragrance. “Goes with a lot of other colors too.”

She shifted, and their gazes met and held. “Black is just black and white is just white. Gray’s the middle where black and white meet, which colors your world.”

He took her hand in his and settled their twined fingers on his thigh. “Right now, my favorite color is gold.” He fingered strands of her silky hair.

She pinched the hem of his plain charcoal-gray T-shirt. A finger skimmed over his skin, and he quivered. “What do you do for a living? Where do you live? Oh, and are you single?” She whispered the last word as though she feared the answer.

An arrow pierced his heart. “I wouldn’t be lying here, touching you if I

wasn't single." Sparkles appeared in the air, glittering jewels in the sky. "If I bond a fire witch, can I do that?"

A hearty chuckle gushed from her. "That's a sample of what you'll be able to do. I'll show you more later."

"Will there be a later?" He held his breath.

She leaned across him, her breasts mashing against his chest. Butterflies exploded in his rib cage as he pulled her closer, her softness pressing down the length of his body. The gentle touch of her hands on his face encouraged him, and he met her lips with his own. Her warm lips were inviting, and he deepened the kiss, falling under her spell. Time froze as they explored each other's mouths, and the world faded as they lost themselves in the moment. A first kiss that hinted at a future. Passion loaded the intense kiss, leaving him euphoric and wanting more, so much more. Air in short supply, they parted, foreheads touching. No matter how it all ended, he etched this moment forever in his memories.

"There will definitely be a later." Sage rolled off him, her head resting on his arm again. This time, she snuggled closer and twined her leg around his.

The night's first stars dotted the indigo canvas above. Starlight dappled the tops of the towering trees, glimmering like the fairy lights decorating the covenstead, creating an otherworldly atmosphere. He rested his cheek on top of her head. Lust beat at the doors of his sanity, and he hauled his thoughts back to the mundane. "I live in Santa Cruz in a shared house with two roommates. It's the only way we can afford it. I work for a security company, designing and installing security systems."

"Security? Hmmm. Now that my new role is official, a good security team sounds stellar."

"Damn straight. You have enough haters. You need to secure your property and house. I can set you up."

She rolled on her side and traced designs on his chest with her finger. "Well, we do have witch-style security."

"Oh. Yeah. Right." He paused, coughed to the side. "So about—"

"Don't say her name." Groaning, she stretched her hand flat over his heart.

"What will happen if she or someone else claims me in the lottery?"

Sage lifted to scrutinize his face. "I'm claiming you. If you want, that is. You'll be the most powerful warlock in the West."

"Hell yes, I want you to. Zelda can go choke on her Botox." He waved

his arm over their bodies. “After this, I can’t deny there’s a connection between us. More than magic. Or am I wrong?”

“You’re not wrong.” Sage dropped half on top of him again. “Goddess, Rafael. I’ve never met another warlock, or man, like you.”

He clutched her tight and kissed the top of her head. “Ditto. I mean witch and woman.”

She planted a kiss on his chest, her lips searing through his T-shirt. “Glad we’re on the same page.” Another kiss, so close to his heart, it skipped a beat. “Where are your parents? Why don’t you know you’re a warlock?”

“Grew up in the system.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. You have witch blood in your family history somewhere. Well, at least you know now.”

“But I don’t know how to be a warlock.”

“Don’t worry. I think you’ll catch on fast. Warlocks in my coven will teach you. And it’s totally up to you, but there’s an empty cabin on the property. Needs some TLC to make it habitable, but it’s yours. Rent-free. We have the funds to upgrade it, just haven’t gotten to that last one. No roommates, except the people who live and spend their days on the grounds. Again, no pressure. I’m not a Helwig. You’ll have free rein among the Wilde coven.”

His heart stuttered. He couldn’t believe how his luck had changed. He needed a moment to digest. “Why all the cabins on the grounds?”

“Used to be a campground. My parents bought it, demolished the house and built the McMansion before I was born.”

“I would’ve loved to have grown up here. I love the outdoors and hiking in the Santa Cruz hills. This sounds corny, but it’s enchanted here.”

“It’s not corny. I feel the same. I’ve always thought it magical, and I never want to leave.” Her finger danced another risky tango on his chest.

“My turn for questions. Why do all the Wilde witches keep the Wilde name? It wasn’t your dad’s last name, right?”

Her fingers reached the hem of his T-shirt and he sucked in his stomach in anticipation, but she didn’t reach beneath. He exhaled a tinge of disappointment.

“Simple. Females in the witchworld keep their witch-heritage name. Anyone they marry has to suck it up.” Her gaze flitted to his, gauging his reaction to such a momentous statement. Didn’t bother him in the slightest.

“Do you know an owl’s watching us from the tree behind us?” he asked.

Her fingers trailed lower and reached dangerous territory. He stilled her hand. Not the time, not the place.

“That’s Gwyneira.” She waved at the owl and the owl winked a wide eye at her. “My familiar. She’s watching you. If she sensed evil intent, she’d incapacitate you.” Another small owl crawled out from beneath her sleeve. She flicked her hand, and the white owl flew off her fingers and alighted on his shoulder.

He felt a compulsion to close the short distance, only a strip of air between them. The owl flew back to Sage and disappeared beneath her dress.

“What did you feel?” she asked.

“Magic?” He squinted. “A tingle, a feeling like I had to get closer to you.”

“That’s my summoning familiar. I commanded her to compel you closer.”

“Guess it’s my lucky night that your owl didn’t kill me.” Gravel layered his words. “Can I kiss you again?”

“It *is* your lucky night. You can kiss me all you want.”

As she rose up to meet his lips, people laughing and walking, or more like staggering, on the path alerted them to potential discovery. Cell phone lights bounced on the path and lit up the nearby trees. Sage and Rafael leaped up so fast they staggered into each other, missing knocking each other’s head by a hair.

“Follow me.” Before she darted into the woods to her secret path, Aspen called her name. They confronted her sister and a gaggle of witch friends. All hammered.

“Sage! Ricky’s crawling out of his skin hunting you.” Aspen slurred her words, wobbled between two witches equally unstable on their ridiculous platform heels. “Oh my goddess. Who’s this hottie?” Her gaze slurped Rafael up from his feet to his hair. “Wait. You’re that Rafael dude Zelda’s yakking about. Thought you split.”

“Aspen, shut it,” Sage said under her breath. “Dial it down.”

“Well, sis. You should be dancing and drinking. We’re celebrating your ass too.” Aspen teetered forward, and the girls caught her before she did a face-plant. They all burst out in giggles.

Rafael pivoted his body toward Sage. “Go. It’s your day. The celebration’s about you. Aren’t you supposed to dance around the bonfire, chanting and holding candles with flower wreaths on your heads?” A smile

toyed with his lips.

Sage had pulled Rafael from the brink of despair that night. He'd always known he differed from others, although no one ever expressed why. Foster families couldn't deal with his desperation to fit within the human world. He'd lived in group homes until booted out at eighteen. His background shaped this very moment, and he needed more time with Sage. Maybe a lifetime more.

"Not all's about me. It's our normal Summer Solstice festival," she replied. "And no, we don't do pagan dancing." She snickered. "Although we sprinkle ceremonial herbs in the bonfire for kicks, connect with nature by going into the forest, the ocean, or the meadow. All geared to feel the air against our bodies, the warmth of the sun seeping through us, creating a deeper connection to the earth, and letting the salt water cleanse us to prepare us for a new season."

"Guess I need to attend witch school."

Excitement in her eyes, she turned to her sister. "Text Ricky. Tell him I'm safe with a trusted warlock." On that note, she wrenched on Rafael's hand, and they sprinted down the path toward the mansion. "And quit drinking," she yelled over her shoulder.

"I'm sober as a judge," Aspen slurred and giggled.

Gwyneira flew above their heads, hooting and flapping its wings, guiding their way.

"Where're we going?" he asked. Sage stumbled on the uneven path cutting through the woods, and he caught her before her witch-air dove for the save. Landscape lights provided just enough illumination to avoid offing themselves.

"To my bedroom. No one'll bother us there."

Rafael screeched to a standstill, hauling Sage into his arms to keep her from falling. "You said you never take warlocks to your bedroom."

She linked her arms around his neck and smashed her boobs against his chest. Instant hard-on. She rubbed herself against him right where it counted. "They're witch-style one and dones. I didn't want to sully my bedroom with that business."

His heart galloped. *What was she saying?* "I'm not a one and done?" he asked, breath lodging in his throat as he waited for her answer.

"I don't need to sex it up with you. Goddess, I'm dying to. But your magic is so strong, I've already sensed your power and abilities. For once in

my life, I need slow. I need the burn of touching, kissing, and getting to know one another first. You'll be the first and only warlock ever to grace my bedroom."

CHAPTER 8



GWYNEIRA SWOOPED DOWN FROM THE SKY, STARTLING RAFAEL. HE BATTED at the owl's wings flapping at his head. The familiar landed on Sage's shoulder, evaporated to ink, and slithered under her dress.

"Where'd it go?" Rafael spun in a circle seeking her familiar.

Sage plucked the neckline of her dress aside, revealing Gwyneira's white wings. "Once I bond you, you'll see a familiar shift from real to tattoo. And you'll have an owl familiar as your own, who can guide your magic in certain ways."

He traced the tattoo on her neck, his gentle fingers inciting a hormonal jig in her southern parts. "I like the sound of that. *Once you bond me.*"

"Will you accept?" She gloved his hand on her skin, needing his touch to breathe.

"Let's hit up your bedroom, and I'll let you know." He chuckled and brushed his mouth over her lips. He clutched her hand again, and they resumed their trek to the side yard to avoid the partiers.

An almost hypnotic herb-laced wood smoke perfumed the air, giving more impetus to Sage's actions. She guided him into the garage and through the kitchen, winking at the kitchen staff, her index finger cutting up her lips to request their silence. She snatched a tray of mixed appetizers, and Rafael grabbed a half-empty bottle of Bordeaux wine and two plastic cups. They zipped up the back staircase to her bedroom.

Rafael opened the door and stepped over the threshold. He jolted back, fumbling with the wine bottle before it fell to the floor. "Whoa."

Sage's jaw dropped. "It's warded from intrusion by magicals. Try that again."

Again, he stepped a toe over the threshold, and an invisible wall thrust him into the hallway.

“Holy hell. Your magic’s potent. My ward shouldn’t have impeded an unbonded warlock or non-magical from entering.” Adrenaline popped in her blood. “What do you feel?”

Rafael scratched his head. “Felt like a burning mattress forcing me out.”

“No, I mean, how do you feel inside?” Sage held up a finger for him to wait. She uttered the spell to kill her protective ward and wiggled her fingers toward the doorway to dispel the magic. “Get in here.” She set the appetizers on a small accent table between two cushiony chairs in front of the large window overlooking the backyard. He shut and locked the door. “Smart man.” Grinning, she took the wine and cups from him, set them by the food.

Appreciation lit up Rafael’s eyes as he perused the large bedroom and the king-size bed. A dozen earth-tone pillows decorated the cream, gray, and pale sage comforter. “Not much different from my normal. Like something sizzling inside me. Since I’ve tasted your magic, I know it’s magic waiting for a witch to tap. Seems like fire, air, water, earth all rolled in one.”

Sage sagged down on one of her cushiony arm chairs. “It sounds like—” She stopped herself from saying “her aether.” Too soon to give up all the goods on her magic. “You need a powerful witch to uncork your magic.” She picked up a cucumber and cream cheese sandwich and absently chewed it, handed one to Rafael, who chose a meatier appetizer instead.

“Are you that witch?” He chomped on a handful of pigs in a blanket. Simple fare for the festival.

She fake-sneered, flicked a finger in the air. Appetizers flew out of his hand and floated in the air. “Want more of that?”

“No! I’m starving.” He laughed. She floated the food back to him, and he caught them in his cupped hands. They ate and drank in companionable silence for a few minutes, until Rafael asked, “But I’d kill to do stuff like that. How ’bout you bond me tonight?”

Sage’s heart thudded in her chest. Her shock and absolute joy on the best day of her life swamped her. She scrunched her face and groaned. “I hate to even put this out there. No. You need to absorb everything you’ve learned today. I *will* bond you. No question. But I also want to make it special.” She lowered her pitch seductively. “I may include sex.”

Rafael choked up a weeny bit. “Then let’s fucking do it now,” he croaked out and guzzled his wine.

“Can we just hang tonight? It’s been a long-ass day.”

“I know, babe. I’m kidding.”

Sage didn’t miss the word “babe.” He’d said it so natural and heartfelt. No doubt Rafael could be her First Warlock, the one who’d rule by her side, her right hand. Her forever warlock.

She moved to sit on her bed and pulled her boots and jacket off, then lay back, bolstering her head on her toss pillows. She patted the bed beside her. “I don’t mind if we get more comfortable and fool around, though.”

Sage and Rafael tumbled into their comfortable and calm private world. They talked, touched, laughed, and most definitely kissed until the early morning hours when Sage fell asleep wrapped in Rafael’s arms.

..*.*.*

Sage awoke the next morning to find Rafael watching her sleep, a grin morphing his already handsome face into gorgeous territory, more so with his tousled bed-hair.

“Are your eyes stalking me?” She hid a yawn and her fuzzy morning breath behind her hand. For once, she didn’t care that her makeup and hair resembled Beetlejuice.

“Can’t help it. You’re so damn beautiful.” He feathered a kiss across her forehead.

“Good morning to you too.” Her hand accidentally brushed his steely erection hiding in his black briefs—they’d stripped down to their underwear in the early morning hours—and she jerked her hand to her hip. “Sorry. I wasn’t trying to tease.”

“Tease all you want.” But he put an inch or two of space between their lower regions. “Last night, this morning—” He choked up. “Is all this real?”

“Magical?” Her eyebrows arched. “I keep pinching myself.”

“Beyond magical.” He nuzzled her neck, sending goosebumps across her skin.

Avoiding his erection, Sage snuggled against Rafael’s firm, muscular body one last moment before crawling out of bed. One more day to adult, then she could take a breather before her future submerged her.

“I’ll grab you a toothbrush.” She slipped on a short, silky robe and escaped the room before Rafael’s body enticed her to remain in bed all day.

She gathered guest toiletries from the hall bathroom and snagged a

newish, clean gray T-shirt from the hallway of abandoned clothes. The Wildes always enjoyed overnighiter guests and had designated the cabinet a free-for-all of left-behind items.

Hands full, she bumped into a staggering Aspen in the hallway outside her bedroom door. Her hair hung in strings and she wore pasty like a zombie. “Aspen tree. How you feeling?”

“Stop.” Aspen covered her ears. “Don’t screech at me.” Her bleary gaze raked over the toiletries in Sage’s hand, and her head inched up. “Zelda has already claimed Rafael. Don’t start anything with him. We need to let the emotions die down.”

“It’s already started. I can’t *not* make a claim on him.”

“You’re falling for him?”

“Already fallen,” Sage replied.

“Oh my goddess.” Aspen cupped her mouth. “Today’s not gonna be a good day.”

“Not for Zelda.”

“Not for *you*.” Aspen brushed past Sage and rushed into the bathroom.

“Not for you either.” Sage snickered and strode to her bedroom, hoping to find Rafael still in bed. She needed another snuggle. What a fantastic, exquisite night.

An empty bed and water spraying in her shower built for at least two met her senses. Did she dare? She stood outside the ajar bathroom door, bit her bottom lip. Decided he was too alluring. If she didn’t make a full-day appearance at the festival, someone would release flying monkeys down upon her. Plus, she had to skate through the warlock lottery and make her sole choice. The heavenly man standing naked in her bathroom.

Averting her gaze from the shower, she dumped the toiletries and T-shirt on the expansive vanity and called downstairs for breakfast. The kitchen staff provided a breakfast spread in the dining room and the witch-house for the overnighiters, but she wanted more alone time with Rafael before facing the masses. Not knowing what foods he liked—they hadn’t discussed favorite foods—she ordered multiple items for him.

The shower door clicked open and thunked shut. Sage waited to give him time to dry off before approaching the bathroom.

“Use anything you need,” she said through the crack in the door.

“I was waiting for you to join me,” he tantalized.

“No you weren’t.” She laughed. “But I thought long and hard about it.”

“Don’t use the word *hard*, babe. I’m in a state of perpetual hard around you.”

The word “babe” again softened her heart. She jabbed the door open. He stood in front of her vanity, facing the door. His chestnut-dark hair slicked back, water glistening on his bare chest, dripping to the smattering of hair arrowing down to the top of the towel wrapped around his waist, showing clear evidence of his *hard*.

“You called me ‘babe.’” She touched her palm to his damp chest.

“Sorry, it slipped.” He covered her hand with his. “I’ve never called another girl that. Not sure where it came from.”

Heat pooled in her lower region. “Cool. I like it.”

They remained in the moist, warm bathroom for a moment, taking each other in until text messages blew up Sage’s phone from the bedroom.

“Give me a few and the bathroom’s all yours.” He picked up the T-shirt. “How’d you know Led Zeppelin’s my favorite band?”

“The only gray shirt in the lost and found. But now I know your favorite band.” Her phone kept dinging. “Crap, I gotta check my texts.”

Ricky wanted to know what warlock was protecting her after Aspen’s cryptic message to him last night. She texted: *Don’t worry. I’m safe. In bedroom.*

He texted: *I know you’re in your bedroom. Who’s with you?*

She responded: *Tell you later. Dad!*

She’d missed enough of the festival, and witches had been hunting her down last night. Most wanted to catch up on life, others wanted to discuss witchworld progression before the festival ended. Not ready to share Rafael with the world, she’d remained cryptic, stating she had a headache and needed to rest.

She texted Aunt Jessica: *Be down soon. Feel fantastic.*

“Trouble?” Rafael wrapped her in his arms from behind, resting his chin on her shoulder. “God, I feel like I’ve come home. You’re uber comfortable to be with. Sorry if that’s too much to hear. I just—”

Sage pivoted in his arms, rested two fingers over his lips. “It’s exactly what I want to hear.”

And he kissed her, his minty-fresh mouth hungry, his lips soft and firm at once. She twined her arms around his neck, feeling the warmth of his skin against hers. His arms wrapped tight around her, a haven so unlike anything she’d ever experienced. She pressed so close to him, like two halves of a

whole reunited after a long, difficult separation. The kiss deepened, and Sage was drowning in Rafael, until breathless and they separated.

“As much as I want to kiss you all day, I can’t shirk my duties any longer.” She punctuated her words with quick pecks on his mouth.

“I know.” He adjusted the crotch of his jeans. “This bonding thing better happen soon.”

“You’re cocky,” she teased.

He thrust back his head and groaned. “Don’t say ‘cock.’ You’re killing me. And damn straight I’m cocky. Can you say this *wasn’t* fate? I was meant to come to your covenstead this Summer Solstice. You’re the reason I couldn’t leave when I ghosted you yesterday. Something, *you*, grounded me here.”

A knock banged the door and broke the spell. Before Sage answered it, she said, “The goddess works in mysterious and wondrous ways. Everything yesterday and this morning that drove us together happened for a reason. Right time, right place, the stars, moon, and sun aligned for this perfect moment in time.” She stroked his arm, loving the firmness and strength beneath her fingers. “Now I gotta go rule the rest of the day. Open the door and eat the breakfast waiting in the hallway. I need to shower and beautify myself.”

“I doubt you can improve upon this.” He wanded his hand the length of her body.

“Give me a half hour and you’ll change your tune.” She added an extra sway to her hips and sauntered into the steamy bathroom.

CHAPTER 9



THE PHRASE “LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT” SUNK RAFAEL. HE’D NEVER BELIEVED IN insta-love. Until he’d met Sage Wilde. He’d kissed her one last time in her bedroom until her lips were plum and plump. They’d decided to keep their night together under wraps.

Avoiding people, he escaped down the rear stairway of the crazy-huge Wilde mansion and thanked the kitchen staff for the best breakfast he’d ever eaten. Sage assured him the kitchen witches were discreet. Despite his stuffed stomach, he helped himself to another mug of gourmet coffee and lingered at a semi-hidden corner of the back patio, his shoulder propped against a pillar. A man could get accustomed to the plentiful food at the Wilde covenstead, the beautiful scenery, the total picture. And seeing Sage every day.

His gaze wandered to the people peppering the lawn and hiking the paths from the meadow, witch-house, and the mansion. A carnival atmosphere. Sage explained how the California covens rotated hosting the Summer Solstice festival every three years.

He peered beyond the yard into the woods at the line of cabins trailing to the meadow, and the other cabins stretching through the trees on the opposite side of the thicket. What did it mean to be a warlock, the western High Priestess’s right hand? Or to live on this kickass property? They had talked little about their future, but the excitement coursing through his blood had forever changed him. For once in his life, he belonged somewhere with people who understood him, with a gorgeous woman who’d become the brightest star in his world.

On the other side of the lawn, Zelda and her entourage gathered in a group. When her eagle eyes spied him, he nodded in greeting. Her expression

remained intractable, her movements jerky. A step beyond her regular resting bitch face. She flicked her hand and several warlocks disbursed, including Sammy. Man, he needed to thank Sammy for helping to make yesterday the best day of his life once he'd swallowed his lame fears and hopped on board the witchworld train.

Sammy rushed toward him, a grimace turning his smile upside down. "Dude, thought you left."

"Planned to. Decided to chill here instead." He set his empty mug on a patio table. "What bug crawled up Zelda's ass? By the looks of it, she's prepping to go apeshit."

Sammy shifted his weight, his gaze skittering away from Rafael's face. "Beats me. Guess she slept in the wrong bed."

Unease wound through Rafael's full stomach. "I wanted to thank—" Before he finished his sentence, several pairs of feet scuffled behind him, and a full hood landed over Rafael's head. "Hey! What the fuck?" Someone muffled his mouth, and he recognized a band of witch-air. They half carried and walked him to the side of the garage out of view of potential witnesses.

Sammy leaned in close. "Don't fight it," he murmured. "It's a warlock hazing ritual. You'll be fine."

Silent, his captors wrenched his arms behind his back and tied his wrists in another air band. Rafael struggled against the arms shuttling him forward. He wasn't fine. Sage didn't tip him off to any hazing ritual. On the verge of hyperventilating, he forced himself to concentrate on just filling his lungs with air. A foster brother once tried to smother him with a pillow in his sleep, and this act felt identical. Ever since the incident, he'd loathed having his head and mouth covered. Feared never coming out alive. Kicking and trying to shout through his gag, he fought off his captors.

Knocking him around with quiet deliberation, they shoved him onto the carpeted floor in the rear of an SUV or van. A warlock slipped his hand in Rafael's back pockets and nicked his phone and wallet.

Another warlock clambered beside him, and the engine rumbled to life. He checked his breathing, tried to deal with the red-hot pokers stabbing his middle, spearing through his untapped magic. Too bad his magic remained dormant, or he'd blast these assholes to the North Pole with a one-way ticket.

"Dude. Take it easy," Sammy said in a low voice. "It'll be over soon."

The cargo hold smelled fresh, as though used for transporting people, not gym bags or pets. Or dead bodies. It gave him a skosh of hope. A few

moments later, Rafael's heartbeat steadied and his breathing leveled out. He railed at his so-called friend behind the hood and gag, to no avail. Rafael had to ride it out and conserve his strength for the right moment. Evil permeated this bullshit act, and he didn't believe for a second it was a hazing. He lay on his side to keep from leaning on his hands and risk them falling asleep. Once the bastards untied his wrists, he wanted full use because he was raring to bash some heads.

He'd met Sammy three months ago through one of his roommates, and they'd become fast friends. Yesterday, when they'd passed through the Helwig covenstead's gates, the sound of metal squeaking against metal had echoed in Rafael's ears, but didn't suppress Sammy's words when he'd unloaded his shocking warlock status. Sammy's head was first on the chopping block.

They drove for about twenty minutes when the screech of wrought-iron gates sliding open confirmed his theory. The Helwig covenstead. *I knew that bitch is calling the shots.*

Sage had given him an earful about the animosity between the two covens throughout the decades. Rafael had sensed evil in Zelda from the jump, and didn't care for her attempts to dominate him, a far cry from Sage's warm and open acceptance. He wanted nothing to do with the Helwigs on principle alone.

The vehicle engine shut off. The doors opened and slammed shut, rocking the vehicle and knocking his head against the back seats.

"Don't fight the process, dude," Sammy said again under his breath as if he didn't want the other warlocks to hear.

It took everything in Rafael to ignore his backstabbing friend when he wanted to blast him a new one. No sense in engaging him again. He was toast on the friendship front.

The rear doors opened, hands gripped his ankles and dragged him out of the cargo. He wanted to fight tooth and nail, but again resisted. They weren't trying to hurt him, and puzzlement battled the anger in his head. The feeling that Zelda wanted to remove him from the warlock lottery for her own selfish purposes refused to subside inside his churning stomach.

Several dudes—he assumed warlocks—guided him inside a building. He swore if this went assbackwards, he'd go full medieval on whoever was involved. They steered him down a staircase and through a doorway.

Someone killed the spell on his air muzzle and plucked the hood off.

“What the hell is going on?” He glared at the warlocks, three he recognized from the Helwig crowd. No Sammy in sight. The small, windowless room built from cinderblock with a bare cement floor mirrored a jail cell.

“We have orders to hold you until Ms. Helwig returns.” The leader dangled the hood from his hand. The other two took up defensive stances, legs spread and arms crossed over their chests, barring the door.

“This isn’t a warlock hazing. It’s a fucking abduction.” Rafael’s untapped magic boiled fiery bubbles in his gut, rising and popping like a severe case of indigestion.

The two wingmen laughed. “Good one,” Tall, Blond, and Skinny squeaked out. “We don’t haze warlocks.” He cracked his knuckles as if gearing up for a fight. “We might make an exception for you, though.”

“No,” Leader Dude said. “Zelda said to make him comfortable. This is all the comfort you get.” He grabbed Rafael roughly, and with one swift motion, released the spell on his shackles. Blood gushed to his stinging wrists. The warlocks backed out of the small dank room, locking Rafael inside.

He rubbed his wrists, flexed his taut arms and searched the room for a weapon or a way out. A twin bed, a sink, and toilet behind a curtain comprised the cell. At least they’d given him toilet privacy, more than most prisons. He whacked the curtain, almost pulling it from the rods dangling from the ceiling.

“Son of a bitch.” Rafael pounded on the steel door. After working out his frustrations on the door, he paced the tiny room, his fists curling and uncurling at his sides. Would Sage search for him? Had he made a big enough impression on her for a future together in any way, shape, or form? Or would she cut and run and find another warlock to bond? Did he even want to join the witchworld and learn about himself in exchange for being treated like a tool? His mind churned with what-ifs.

At least an hour rolled by before he heard keys jangling and scraping the door. The lock clicked, and the door opened. Zelda Helwig parked it on the threshold, toting a wicked smile that truly personified a witch hag, absent her decrepit broomstick and nasty flying monkeys.

He sprang up from his perch on the thin mattress atop a crap-ass daybed and gave Zelda the hairy eyeball. “You can’t hold me here. It’s called kidnapping.” Warlocks behind her blew gale force winds around her that shoved him backward onto the bed. It stole his breath for a few seconds until he blocked the air from hitting his face.

“It rather appears that I *am* holding you here.” Her smile didn’t budge.

“What do you want from me?”

“You came to me, if I recall.” She swished her arms up. “I’m giving you the world you’ve craved.”

A headache brewed behind his eyes. “I’m good. I’ve changed my mind.” Lies rolled to the surface. If he wanted to learn anything more, he’d learn it from Sage. “Let me leave now.”

“No takebacks. Time to play this out. You contain huge amounts of untapped power, and I can unleash it. Then you’ll beg to remain at my side.”

Air in the room became murky over Zelda as she shrouded herself in a bubble. A strange smell wafted from the air vent in the ceiling, permeating the room. Acidic on one hand, sweet and tangy on the other. Cupping his palm over his nose, dizziness overcame him. He faltered and his butt hit the top of the mattress.

“What are you doing to me?” he slurred, every muscle and bone in his body floating on air.

Zelda eased closer, the bubble of air preceding her. He tried to touch her, but the solid air pushed against his hand. Crouching down in front of him, she cupped a hand to his cheek, and he couldn’t raise a finger to stop her. “Think of the possibilities of being bonded to the most powerful witch in the region.”

She flicked her hand. Her two warlocks left and shut the door behind them. “Don’t worry. I won’t hurt you. I won’t touch you if you prefer. We can proceed without sex. But sex always makes everything better.” She licked her tongue up his cheek, massaged his rising erection. An erection he fought to contain, but he’d lost control of his reality, his entire mind and body, even his soul. Foreign commands dictated his every thought and movement, and he was powerless to resist.

“Do you want me to bond you, Rafael Reyes?” She pressed a kiss to his lips and then kissed her moonstone ring. “You must verbalize your consent.”

A fissure formed in his confused mind. It screamed “NO” at him. But it didn’t match the words rising to the forefront, or the directives his mouth and hands threatened to take.

Leaning forward and digging his hand through the dense air shrouding her, he cupped his hands around her cheeks, pressed his lips to hers until that tiny dissenting vote in his head stabbed his brain. He kissed the moonstone ring she held up to his lips, the stone warm and inviting. Sharp pains in his skull forced him to pull back.

“It’s okay.” Zelda rose to her full height. “Words are enough. Until later.”

The strange conflicting scent overpowered him, lured him to fill his lungs to capacity. The muddle lessened in his head, smothering that dissenting nag, until a new clarity chased the fog out to sea.

Slowly, he lifted his heavy head, the weight of it causing a crick to form in his neck. “Yes. I want you to bond me. I agree to your dominion, and I swear fealty to you and the Helwig coven.”

CHAPTER 10



DELIGHT SPLASHED THROUGH SAGE. SHE GRINNED LIKE A BESOTTED IDIOT AS she entered the witch-house after being summoned by nearly every witch in her coven. She didn't expect to see Rafael until after lunch. The morning gave the witches more time to peruse and grill the unbonded warlocks, and she didn't want anyone else laying claim to Rafael. The visuals of his to-die-for body lingered in her mind, and she couldn't wait to see him again for the warlock lottery.

"Sage!" Jessica shouted in admonishment mode from across the room. "You need to make a choice." Witches and warlocks jammed the corners in small groups, chitchatting and eating breakfast before the final festival events. Jessica handed her the clipboard with the unbonded warlock names.

"I know, I know. I've picked one," Sage replied.

"What!" Jessica squealed a little too eager. "You found a warlock to bond?" Jessica clenched Sage's arm, her eyes widening mischievously. "Don't tell me you're bonding Joshua."

"Hell to the no way." She examined the list. Multiple High Priestesses claimed most warlocks, which meant each witch had to convince a warlock to choose her over another. Three-quarters down the list, two warlocks had one witch name beside his. Helwig. No one ever wanted to battle Zelda. She always won. One name was Joshua. *Good luck with that.* The last name, Rafael, had only Zelda vying for him. A smile kicking up the corners of her lips, she seized the pen from Jessica and wrote her name on Rafael's line.

Jessica's fingertips dug into Sage's arm. "It'll end in disaster if you fight her on this. Choose another warlock or wait. We can stall the Council on forcing you to select one today." Jessica kept talking as if Sage wasn't

shaking her head. “He’s not worth it, is he?” Resignation layered each word.

“Aunt Jessica.” Excitement barreling through her, she said in a rush, “He’s worth more than all these warlocks lumped together. We connected and spent all night together.” Sparks flew off her fingers and drizzled to the floor. “We’re meant for each other. The way my magic connected to him was surreal. His untapped power is tangible.”

“So you two had sex?” Jessica squinted.

“Goddess knows I wanted to. We connected on so many levels unrelated to the witchworld. I didn’t need sex to tap his power.” Rafael’s aura differed from anything Sage had ever seen. Since he had an uber powerful aura, she knew it killed him not to grasp everything happening to his body. He needed a witch to bond him before he tripped off the rails.

Startled, Jessica shook her head, her earrings tinkling as she stepped back.

Ben rushed over, his hand settling on his wife’s shoulder. “What’s wrong? Where’s Ricky?”

“We’re fine.” Sage patted the air for him to dial it down. “Ricky’s investigating a lead on my attack.”

“What are you saying, Sage?” Jessica whispered. “Did your aether connect with him?”

“Yes... I think it did. It was surreal.”

“Who? We need him in the coven. The aether connection’s a game changer.” Ben leaned forward as though to press his words onto Sage. He trailed his index finger down the list until it rested on Sage’s sole selection, and groaned. “Will he pick you over Z?”

“Yep. We already discussed it. He knows Zelda has no claim on him, despite her lies to the contrary.”

“Where’s the warlock now?” Ben searched the room over their heads. “Don’t see him. In fact, I don’t recall seeing him at all.”

“Zelda scared him off yesterday. But he remained on the fringes.” Sage picked at her fingernails. “He’s hanging outside. He’ll be here for the lottery.”

“Not good enough. Ricky and I need to meet him,” Ben ordered. “Call him. This is a make-or-break decision on both your parts going up against the Helwigs.”

Sage threw up her hands, more sparks dripping from her fingers. “Okay. Okay.” She dug her phone out of her jeans pocket. She’d dressed casual on the last day of the festival. A chill lingered in the air, hence the long pants

versus summer shorts. Her call to Rafael rolled to voicemail, and she left a message, then texted him: *Ben and Ricky want to meet you ASAP. Come to the witch-house.*

While waiting for a response, she greeted the witches who thanked her and Jessica for a wonderful festival. Fifteen minutes of radio silence later, her anxiety flew off the charts. A tapeworm of paranoia wound through her belly. Jeopardizing new relationship cling-on status, she texted Rafael several more times. More ghosting. As she turned to stand at the podium, a strange draw on her aether left her gasping. She teetered, caught herself against the podium.

“You okay?” Ricky rushed up behind her, arriving for his security duties. Although an entourage of Wilde witches and warlocks surrounded her, she needed her warlock in case the lottery went sideways.

“Yeah. Tripping over my own feet.” She forced out a laugh, while someone carved a knife through her internal magic, leaving an aching hollow. A hole devoid of future, hope, and promise. *What the what?* All eyes in the room shifted to her, and her time to freak slipped into the ether.

Fighting against the crater inside her, she forced the words and motions for the morning’s blessing. Other witches in the room joined in for their parts, sprinkling herbs, and lighting candles at the four points of the compass to signify air, water, fire, and earth.

The last event arrived, and the witch-house filled to the brim. The lottery represented a fun escape to watch the witches bicker over unbonded warlocks and the warlocks getting their rocks off on decisions that guaranteed a profound effect on their life. Witches had a last half hour to spend with the unbonded warlocks to confirm their choices.

Anticipation pervaded the witch-house. They’d cleared out the four long tables and set rows of chairs and smaller round tables in their place that filled up fast.

“Anything?” Jessica asked.

“No. I’m worried. He should be here for the lottery.” Sage gnawed on her bottom lip. “The Helwigs aren’t here either.”

“Are you sure your connection was as strong as you think?” Jessica asked.

“Maybe he played you.” Aspen elbowed inside their huddle, rocking a lovely shade of green. “You know, just to screw your brains out. Hit and run.”

Sage whacked her sister's arm, a tad harder than playfully. "Shut it. We didn't have sex," she gritted out. "I swear to the goddess, I'm not making shit up."

Mollified, Aspen hugged her sister's arm, more for her own stability than Sage's support. "Just yanking your chain. Sorry."

"Honey, you need to prep for the lottery," Jessica encouraged. "I'm sorry about Rafael. Maybe he needs time to sort out his head. If he doesn't return, we'll find the right warlock for you."

Sage left their huddle, her senses sweeping one corner of the room to the next and everywhere in between. Still no Rafael. Had she imagined the incredible night they'd spent together? The joy surging through her? Had he led her on? Questions swirled in her bewildered mind. Had she imagined a break in her aether, a scattered piece of herself that already belonged to Rafael?

..*.*.*

Rafael lifted off the bed, his languorous body barely able to obey the commands his brain spoon-fed it. Surely the witch had spelled him. How else would his body betray him? Hope floated in his mind as a few memories lingered. The radiant blonde witch. What was her name? He struggled with the recollection but it slipped away. Guess it didn't matter. Zelda Helwig promised to show him what he'd missed all his life. She promised him a future of knowledge and power. So what if she wanted him to quit his job and move to Scotts Valley? So what if the witch wanted him in her bed? Although way older than any other woman he'd slept with, she wasn't bad looking. It's not like he planned to marry her. Plus, she promised him a job on her covenstead. But the idea of being a quasi-kept man didn't sit well. He fisted his hands. Everything else in his mind fell by the wayside.

"Come, Rafael." Zelda kissed him on the mouth, her thin lips glacial. "Follow me to my spelling circle."

He marched behind her up the stairs to a large room. A painted pentagram decorated the polished cement floor. She guided him to the center of the pentagram and placed unlit candles at each point. Thick, pliant air seemed to imprison him in a cocoon. He listlessly raised his right arm an inch, and the air slapped against him, curtailing his motions.

"Careful, Rafael. I've bound you in air. I'll join you in a moment." She lit

the candles one by one, reciting words Rafael had a difficult time hearing let alone digesting.

The air shroud wavered and thinned. Zelda appeared next to him, holding two candles. She handed one to him, the flame dancing from the air sifting around them. She took his free hand in hers.

“Recite each line after me.” She voiced the bonding spell, words Rafael didn’t grasp.

By rote, he repeated each line after she uttered it. At the end, Zelda blew out her candle and motioned for him to do the same. As the flames sputtered out, a sharp, stabbing sensation ripped through his insides, like someone had thrown a shattering bowling ball into his middle. Fire broiled his internal walls, and he staggered against Zelda. She caught him, but his weight slumped them both to the floor, witch-air cushioning their fall.

A squiggly, rushing sensation up his right forearm left him gaping at the bobcat tattoo blending over his skin. Zelda’s bonding familiar.

Three warlocks joined them, helping them stand and guiding Rafael to a seat on a wooden dining room chair. For the first time, he noticed no cushions or couches in her living room. All the chairs and benches were wood or cement, absent all the comforts of the Wilde home. *Wilde?* Fruitlessly, he wagged his head to dislodge lost memories trying to cut through the fog.

Every fiber of his being sizzled. An airy sensation flooded his middle, giving him the consuming need to disburse it somehow. Fire rimmed it, but didn’t expand. He needed more magic to fill the voids. Adrenaline pumped through his languid body. Toting a newfound purpose, a sense of hope for the future energized him. The witch-air dislodged incoherent memories. He tried to study them, but his body forced him to concentrate on the sensations creating havoc in every cell of his body.

“You’re feeling my magic, Rafael,” Zelda explained. “As you learn to use my air and fire, it’ll normalize.”

Shock zinged through his chest. The witch had awakened that sleeping giant inside him. He couldn’t say she’d awakened all of it, but his internal eyes had blinked. Concentrating, he stood and forced a ball of air to roll to his open palm.

“You’re a natural.” Zelda beamed and clapped. “You’ll gain in power as you learn to use my magic. We can take over the witchworld.” An evil, eager tone accompanied her words, and with an unnatural exhilaration Rafael

believed them.

“It’s incredible.” Gravel layered his voice, and his eyes bulged in awe.

Zelda withdrew a heavy silver chain from her billowy blouse pocket. A carved, silver bobcat pendant hung from it. She looped the shiny chain around his neck. “You’re a Helwig coven member. Always wear it.” Then she tied a leather, beaded bracelet around his wrist. “The beads are a conduit which will help your magic.”

He inspected the trinkets she’d gifted him, tracing the bobcat design.

“Toss the ball of air.”

“I don’t want to damage anything.” As he focused on the growing, opaque ball on his palm, an ache formed behind his eyes and they fogged over. He stopped concentrating and the weird sensations retreated.

“Don’t worry, dear.” She scrubbed her hands together. “As time goes by, I’ll feed you more power to bolster your abilities, including my fire magic. Let’s go slow. Think and say the word ‘fly.’”

Spinning on his heel, he turned to an empty corner of the room and commanded, “Fly!”

The air ball soared off his hand to the far side of the room and blasted an empty ceramic vase off a black coffee table. The vase crashed to the floor in a million shards of silver ceramic and pinged the floor and walls.

Zelda clapped. “Oh, dear goddess. You’re amazing.”

“Sorry.” Rafael moved across the room, his stride slow. He swished his foot over the floor, sweeping the shards into a pile.

“Leave it for my cleaning staff.” Heading toward the front door, she motioned him to follow. “We must return to the festival.”

Two warlocks joined them, and they loaded up in Zelda’s gray SUV.

Everything inside Rafael turned airy. The small amount of witch-air he’d blasted didn’t make a dent in the magic prodding the gates of his insides.

Zelda faced him in the back seat. “Do you see your potential now?”

The elation in his heart felt like a caged bird, desperate to be released. “Yes. Thank you, Zelda.”

She leaned closer, propping her hand on his knee, and she forced his head closer to her. She kissed him, her lips imparting no warmth, only a cold desolation. Repulsed, he didn’t respond to the kiss, battling the motherly vibe toting a major ick factor.

Instead, all his desire focused on the beast she’d awakened inside him. When would his entire body awaken? When would those insidious memories

banging the crypts of his mind pop through the doors? Would the heat of the bracelet stop burning his wrist and kill that intoxicating odor he'd smelled in the small room and now on the beads?

CHAPTER 11



SAGE DELAYED THE LOTTERY UNTIL VARIOUS WITCHES EXCITED FOR THE SHOW badgered her to begin. Some were raring to hit the road after three days of meetings, ceremonies, and parties.

How'd a night and morning of absolute bliss morph into a hot poker stabbing her middle? Her intuition never kicked her in the butt. Despair caused the connection she'd shared with Rafael to splinter every moment he didn't appear. A bereft and decimated ice formed around her, despite the heat of her witch-fire.

After sweeping the room one last time, she caught Ricky's eye. He lifted his hands, let them fall. One last fruitless check on her cell phone and she tapped two fingers on the microphone. The sound thumped to the open beam ceiling and quieted the excited tittering. The last standing witches took their seats. She needed this stupid-ass lottery over. She had chosen no other warlock, and she no longer had a stake.

"Greetings." She bestowed a smile she didn't feel on the unbonded warlocks standing to her left. Although the warlocks preened for attention, a nervousness rode the air. A new, exciting, and sometimes perilous life lay ahead of them.

Sage addressed the young men. "May the goddess bless you all with enlightenment in the choices you make. This role will change your life. It's a great honor for a High Priestess to choose you to join her coven. You'll enjoy a long life with magic, acceptance of your identity in the world at large, and a place to call home. You may find love"—she nearly choked on the word—"or a great companionship, as well as many new friendships. *You will belong.*" She read the preprinted words. "Do you all accept your choosing

witch's dominion and agree to live by the witchworld rules?" Each of the thirteen warlocks said, "I do." The fourteenth glaringly missing. A few witches expressed concerns about his whereabouts and what'd happened to Zelda. Not one Helwig sat in the room, which meant no one would choose Joshua and the third warlock, unless by a Hail Mary from another coven.

"Each warlock will come to the podium in your pre-selected order. You know who is vying for you by the names on the sign-up sheet. Those witches will state their proposal in two minutes or less. You may ask questions, then make your choice all within two minutes. By now, you've spoken with each witch. The witches will provide a counteroffer within the allotted time, and you may change your mind." Sage paused to recall the rules for a situation she didn't think had ever occurred. "For warlocks selected by Zelda Helwig, you may decline the offer, or hold your decision until later. However, since she's not here, she forfeits her rights to you, and another witch is free to choose you. Or you're free to leave." She perused the eager young men. "Understood?" They all assented by nodding and otherwise verbalizing their affirmative responses. Joshua and the other warlock Zelda had chosen stood next to each other, arms crossed over their chests, seething in silence. Their brows furrowed in tandem.

Energized by the upcoming fun, witches whooped and clapped. Warlock numbers had dwindled over the last several years, and this solstice festival marked the largest group of unbonded warlocks they'd seen in years. The warlocks were not born to any modern witch, but possessed witch blood in their bloodlines. The growth in numbers alone was cause for celebration.

Sage called warlock number one. Stepping to her seat behind the podium, she tuned out the room. Her sight kept drifting to the closed door. One part wistful, the other part a slow-building resentment thawing the ice encasing her.

The process continued until Joshua's name hit the list. He approached the podium, and Sage joined him, standing closer than she wanted. He eased aside so as not to touch her. The heat of his anger sailed off him.

"Joshua. What do you want to do?" she asked. Despite what'd happened, he didn't fit in her coven. Half-assed magic and the thirty seconds of sex told her nothing about his potential. Sage feared whoever bonded him may travel a long road to train him. He had handsome and brawn going for him. Well, that and his large, but sorely lacking-in-talent tool. None of which were enough. Sage had the feeling he thought his enormous prick made up for his

expertise. She hid a smile behind her hand.

“I’d like him to join my coven,” Misty shouted, rising from her chair. “I have a young witch who needs a third warlock.”

Shock zipped up Sage’s spine. She didn’t realize Misty’s younger witches had multiple warlocks. Not unheard of, but junior witches had only one warlock unless they needed extra protection, especially with the recent dwindling warlock numbers.

“Do you want to join the Medeiros coven?” Sage asked Joshua. “Misty is the High Priestess of the large San Francisco Bay region. Very prestigious covens.”

Before Joshua uttered a word, a commotion redirected attention to the main doors, both sides rolled wide open. Zelda and her entourage had arrived in the nick of time.

“I believe Joshua is mine,” the older witch announced from the double doorway. Three warlocks flanked her. “If he so chooses, of course. Joshua, I stand by my promises. Promises I doubt being a third warlock to a mediocre witch could match.”

With a huff, Misty sat down. “Fine. Whatever. He’s all yours.” She grinned at Sage, then texted her: *Don’t really need him. Doing you a favor to get him out of your... hair.*

A dancing penis emoji in Misty’s text forced Sage to stifle a fit of laughter. The laughter caught in her throat when Zelda and her three warlocks stepped inside the room. Rafael stood centered in the doorway alone.

Her heart stopped beating, then zoomed into fifth gear. The glimpse of him kick-started her desire, and joy jammed her hollows once again, except that freaky crater of missing magic.

His gaze swept the room, landed on her for a second and bounced onward. No recognition, no joy, nothing in his eyes. He strode forward and awkwardly linked his arm through Zelda’s arm, as if responding to an unspoken command. Curious chaos set the room buzzing.

Gasping, Sage clamped onto the edges of the podium, using it to prop up her legs threatening to buckle and dump her on the plank floor. Ricky and Jessica rushed to her side, ready to catch her if she fell. They couldn’t catch her heart from shattering into pieces and ping-ponging her rib cage.

“Call the meeting to order,” Jessica ordered.

Air lodged in Sage’s throat. She’d shed her last tears over her parents’ death and had not shed another since. In that moment, she wanted to smack

Zelda upside the head and demand answers from Rafael. No tears, just recriminations and epic bewilderment.

“He doesn’t belong to you now. Don’t fight her over this,” Jessica hissed. “She’s not worth shirking your duties and new leadership role over. You trained for this all your life. Don’t let one warlock destroy you.”

“I know all that.” Sage spoke through gritted teeth, her voice almost a growl. She banged her palm on the microphone several times to restore order to the room. “Settle down. Let’s finish the lottery.”

Everyone returned to their seats, making room for the Helwig entourage in the rear. Rafael sat next to a smirking Zelda. Sage caught his eye, and they locked gazes for a few too quick seconds. A spark of recognition widened his eyes for a fraction before Zelda leaned over to whisper in his ear. Sage looked away from all that was unholy.

“Joshua, since Zelda’s here, do you accept her bid and the Helwig covenant?”

He seemed to hem and haw a bit, his focus bouncing from Misty to Zelda, then landing on her. “Thought you’d make a bid for me. Guess your rep was overrated. I need an older witch who can teach me what you lack,” he said in such a snide tone, Sage wanted to smack him to next Friday.

“Well, then, have at her.” Sage waved her arm in Zelda’s direction. “He’s all yours, Zelda.” She bit her tongue to halt the words she wanted to spew out, and to stop the same old litany vaulting to her mind about not having the right character, smarts, or dedication to follow in her mother’s footsteps. An epic shitshow had ruined her day, and she wanted it done, wanted every non-Wilde witch and warlock to get the hell off her property.

With another nasty hiss, Jessica pried the microphone from Sage’s grip. “It’s settled. Joshua goes to Zelda Helwig.” Her clap met half-hearted applause from the audience.

Joshua stomped to the Helwig covenant, his features stormy dark. Zelda gestured to an empty chair next to her and he sat, squishing Zelda between himself and Rafael. She laid her hand proprietarily on both Joshua’s and Rafael’s thighs.

Sage wanted to upchuck the last three days and pretend they never existed. Sure as the fog promised to roll in over the bay tonight, the witchworld would see a new Sage, a new order, a new everything. She may have lost Rafael to the vilest witch in Oz, but she’d damn sure not lose the role defined by the Wilde High Priestesses who’d preceded her. Not now.

Not ever.

Between burying her emotions and Jessica bolstering her up to manage the lottery, a grueling couple hours later, one last name remained on the list.

Despite her aunt's nagging, a renewed eagerness to plead her case for Rafael sent a thrill through her chest. Maybe he played Zelda by hanging with her since she'd brought him to the festival. Whatever. She'd lure him from the hag for good.

"Last but not least, the final candidate is Rafael Reyes," Jessica called out. "Rafael, please advance and make your choice."

He remained fixed in place, his confusion clear as his eyes bore into Zelda. Excited chatter and murmuring rippled through the audience.

Sage leaned over the mic Jessica had returned to the podium. "Rafael, you must follow the process since two High Priestesses are vying for you."

"I don't understand," he said loud enough for the entire room to overhear.

Why is he hanging all over Zelda as if she's the only steak at a tofu convention? Sage wanted to fly to him, extract him from the Helwig realm, and shake sense into him.

"Oh, dear boy. Yes, let's play this out." Zelda blew out an exaggerated sigh. "Go and hear what High Priestess Wilde has to say. I'm curious what the twit will spew myself." She tapped Rafael's thigh. He wiped his palms on his jeans and walked toward the podium.

Burying her annoyance at Zelda's weary insults, Sage's senses feasted on him. She recalled the touch of his fingers, the warmth of his body, the firm softness of his lips. He wore the same gray T-shirt and jeans from earlier that morning, but Sage noticed a pendant hanging off his neck and a beaded bracelet he hadn't worn when he'd left her room earlier. As he walked closer, Sage identified the silver pendant. Perspiration formed on her chest, and she wanted to wither and die. The bobcat necklace meant he belonged to Zelda, or at the very least promised to choose her, after already accepting her bid, plea, or blackmail, however Zelda couched it.

A grievous loss tried to submerge Sage, and she rammed the grief below her rising aether. The telltale headache flirted behind her eyes. Grit hadn't reached her eyeballs, but one more misstep, threat, or horrendous news byte might trigger a swell.

When Rafael tipped his head back, not one iota of recognition flickered in his blank stare. Flustered beyond reason, she buried her emotions so deep, she'd need three earth witches to dig them out. Everything felt out of whack.

What new clusterfuck had Zelda caused? Sage needed to prevent the Helwigs from plowing over the western region.

No time like the present.

Everything changed, and her future solidified in her mind. No more raver. No more agreeing to the Helwigs and their kind or taking bullshit from the witches of the West. They'd voted her in, and she'd be the High Priestess they needed, whether they wanted her or not.

She slammed her palm on the microphone. "I'm taking fifteen minutes for a private chat with Rafael before I make my offer. Since he's the last unbonded warlock on the list, you are all free to leave, except for Zelda."

Enthralled, not one person moved nor objected. Perfect fodder to end the festival. One reason they did a warlock lottery, for fun and entertainment. *Where's the hot-buttered popcorn when you needed it?* Sage felt far from entertained.

"Time for talk is over. Make your bid and be done," Zelda announced. Her beaming smile could have charmed the most venomous of snakes. Sage noticed a nervousness in Zelda as she rolled and unrolled the cuffs of her long sleeves, distracting her hands or her magic. Who knew?

"As regional High Priestess, it's my right to talk to any warlock during the lottery. Check the bylaws," Sage said. "Meanwhile, Rafael and I will talk on the rear patio. I'll be done when I'm done."

"That's bullshit," Zelda screeched, springing out of her seat. Her witches and warlocks closed ranks around her. "There's no such bylaw granting the regional High Priestess extra rights."

"*Au contraire*. Read the fucking bylaws," Sage shouted, confident in her memory of witchworld rules. Witches across the room scrambled to engage their tablets and phones. Even if it wasn't an obscure rule, Zelda could suck it up and die for all she cared.

She clenched Rafael's hand, and a strangely familiar herbal scent wafted off the wooden beads on his charm bracelet. Their touch incited a dance of opposing magic, not the magic of their connection, but Helwig magic meeting Sage's magic. Zelda's witch-air, untapped and unknown to Rafael, but ready for commands.

Zelda had already bonded him. The bonding explained the new void inside her. *Holy shit on a broken broomstick*.

Aether sand coated her eyeballs, and she felt her irises change to a deeper emerald on their way to obsidian. His untapped magic, whether Zelda's or

whatever else he possessed deep in his core, whipped her aether inside her, like the branches on the evergreens dancing to gusts of wind.

Sweat dampened Rafael's warm fingers, but he didn't withdraw his hand as she led him out the back. Shouts and commotion accompanied the slam of the door as Sage shut out the chaos.

Not caring whether her demon eyes frightened him, she dropped his hand and spun on him. "Did she bond you?"

His face was a mix of fear and dread, but he didn't move away. He slipped his fists in his front pockets as if to stop them from touching her. "Guess so. She did a ritual and I accepted. She said I'm her warlock now. I feel her magic inside me. Don't know how to work it yet."

"Why? What's going on?" Sage stamped her foot on the pavers, trying to tamp down her rising aether as well.

"What do you mean? She discovered me. I made promises to her." Unease flitted across his face. He planted a foot of distance between them. "I mean one of her warlocks, Sammy, discovered me."

A breeze blew the scent of the wooden beads up to her nostrils again. Sage crinkled her nose. She wracked her brain to place the herb. Zelda had spelled Rafael, but she didn't want to touch the bracelet until she recognized the scent. Didn't want to cause potential further damage by removing it. The spell affected his memory, made him lethargic with a skewed sense of reality. She tested her theory.

"Don't you remember *us*?" She burned with a desire to touch him, but curled her fists at her sides, her fingernails biting into her skin. "The night we spent talking, planning. Kissing, touching, and wanting so much more." Urgency caused her pitch to escalate as her eyes began to normalize.

Rafael squinted and his lips pinched in a grim line. "I remember seeing you a couple days ago from afar. We've never talked. I think I'd remember kissing you." No grin, only somberness as if resolved to his fate.

Thuds hit the door from inside the witch-house. Sage heard Ricky shouting, barring the door. Probably the Helwigs trying to reach Sage and blast her a new ass. She tuned out the ruckus.

Rafael spun on his heels toward the door. Another whiff from the beads hit her and crashed through the doors of her memories. Datura or maybe henbane carrying a belladonna—deadly nightshade—kick. Enough to suppress his memory by slowing down his metabolism and brain function, with a sleepy, hallucinogenic affect.

Sage lunged forward and ripped the leather band off Rafael's wrist. She flung the bracelet in an empty plant pot, needing to preserve it for evidence.

"Hey!" Rafael yelped, rubbing his wrist.

"Sorry, it's spelled. Come closer." She gestured him closer, but he backstepped. "Please. I can fix this."

"Fix what?" He scratched his head. "Sage, right?"

"Yes, I'm Sage." Relief skated across her shoulders. But he would not return to normal fast enough without magical intervention. "I can heal your confusion."

"Okay," he said haltingly. "What—"

As she touched her fingertips to his forehead, something banged the door again. Quickly, she whispered a counter-spell to dispel the effects of the charmed beads. Might not be fast enough, but it would break the spell Zelda had plonked on the beads. She uttered, "So mote it be," aloud and smoothed her fingertips over the lines etched on his brow.

Pain arced across Rafael's pale face. "What did you do?" He rubbed his forehead, pressed his palm over his heart, then over his abdomen. "I don't feel so hot."

Sage waved her open hands and pushed fresh witch-air at his nose, trying to rid his senses of the stench from Zelda's charm bracelet. "Inhale deeply, then exhale," she said. "Again and again!"

"Sage?" Puppet strings seemed to jerk his head up, and he glanced around the patio, at the door holding back the chaos unfurling on the other side. "What's going on?"

"Do you remember me? When did we meet?"

"Yeah. We met yesterday."

Sage clutched the bobcat pendant in her fist. "Do you remember Zelda Helwig giving this to you?"

He tipped his chin down. "Nope."

"Do you remember we spent the night together last night?" Silence gave his answer. "What do you recall?"

He slumped his butt atop the old, weathered picnic table, pain lancing his body, evidenced by the shudders renting him. "What's happening to me?"

"Zelda spelled you and used spelled charms to bury your memories and keep you compliant to her demands."

His spine jolted straight. "Spelled me how?"

"She coerced you, repressed your memories, suppressed your actions."

“Why?” He smoothed his fingers over his scalp, winced. “I’m roasting inside.”

Sage mumbled another spell and sprinkled witch-water on him, expanded her witch-air spell to cool him off. “The pain you’re feeling is from Zelda bonding you without your permission. She coerced your actions.”

Nobody had busted the door down, and someone must have barricaded the main entrance to the witch-house, otherwise, witches and warlocks would’ve swarmed the patio. The break wouldn’t last forever. Laying her hand over his heart, Sage intoned another counter-spell, hoping to scrub out the coercion spell quicker. “Do you remember anything?”

“Warlocks abducted me. Told me it was a hazing ritual. You said nothing about hazing, so I didn’t believe them.”

Relief untied another knot in Sage’s shoulders. “They lied to you. What else?”

“They locked me in a room on the Helwig covenstead. Then Zelda came in and asked if I’d accept her bond. She made me recite...” His voice trailed off. “That bitch.” Shock seized him with a sudden jerk of his head and a wide-eyed expression. “Sage,” he breathed out her name, all the weight of their intense time together in the one word. “It’s coming back.”

Sage leaned down and pressed her lips to his. Instinctively, he stood and wrapped her in his weak arms as if she belonged there, the only one who could re-energize him. He deepened the kiss until they were both forced to seek air. She mashed her breasts against his chest, feeling the rapid beat of his heart. He buried his face in her hair, his hands smoothing over her butt and up her back. His touch intoxicated her more than any tequila shot.

“Do you recall us now?” she asked, emotion splintering her voice.

“She erased you from my memories. I remember now.”

Sage sagged against him. “How bad is the pain?”

“Lava’s gushing through me.” He sifted his hand through her hair. “Sage, god, you’re the sunshine in my dark hell.”

“Do you still want me?” she demanded, loving his hand plying her hair.

“More than anything I’ve ever wanted.”

“Good. Because I refuse to give you up to Zelda. I need you, want you. The goddess meant for you to come to this festival. For us. You’re the only thing that matters.”

His mouth opened but nothing came out. He scratched his cheek and said, “Not sure I can join your world. It’s already done a number on me. But I

want you more than anything I've ever wanted in my life."

"Do you trust me?"

"Absolutely. Can't we just run away together?" He quirked a sluggish eyebrow.

"Everything will improve once we sort out this bonding business. If Zelda doesn't release you without a fight, I'll compel her to break the bond. She forced an illegal coercion spell on you, not giving you the choice you're allowed. She'll face extreme consequences either way."

"Then what happens?" Wincing, he rubbed his stomach.

"Then I bond you. If you'll accept me." She winked.

Footsteps rushed around the corner of the witch-house. The clock had run out.

"Sage!" Her aunt halted on the walkway at the side of the building. "You need to bring the meeting to order. The Helwigs are out of control. They're gunning for you." Jessica's tabby familiar raced around the patio searching for threats against its master. The cat stopped and growled at the door where the internal uproar played out. Sage tipped her head to the side, a memory attempting to disrupt her. She thrust it into a crypt for another time.

"Go settle them down," Sage commanded. "We're coming. Also, pull the bylaws. Zelda committed an illegal coercion spell on Rafael. *After* abducting him."

Jessica's jaw dropped, but a small smile played at the corners of her lips, and she sprinted away.

"Don't go." Rafael dug his hands in her hair, his grip pulling her head closer. His lips landed on hers possessively, tempting, and oh so evocative that Sage felt like drowning in him. "I remember this. Kissing you. You're like a drug. My salvation."

"Then don't stop kissing me." She once again parted her lips to deepen the exquisite kiss.

He tangoed his tongue around hers. No one had ever kissed Sage the way Rafael kissed her, like he'd chosen her from a stadium packed with all the women in the world. Like she was his air, his heart, and soul.

So absorbed in Rafael's masterful kiss, Sage didn't hear the door burst open.

"Hands off my warlock, you slut!" A blast of wind preceded Zelda onto the patio, a squall shoving Sage and Rafael apart.

CHAPTER 12



ZELDA'S WITCH-AIR HOWLED AND GUSTED AGAINST SAGE. EACH TIME RAFAEL reached for her, the tempest blasted Sage farther across the patio until she landed at the perimeter of the woods. Sage's own magic kicked in and prevented her from crashing to the ground. A ring of blue fire encapsulated her, and she tossed out fire-tinged air magic to deflect Zelda's magic.

Rafael remembered Sage telling him a secret that she held all natural magical elements, a rarity among the witchworld. Then why had he accepted Zelda's offer? Why wouldn't he want to join forces with a more powerful witch? One as beautiful, smart, and sexy as Sage. One who he'd connected with on a more emotional and visceral level than magic. The memories of their night together emerged from the shallow grave unearthed in his mind. Rage smothered the memories to concentrate on his current predicament. His fury at Zelda for treating him like a possession, stealing his freedom, and for her betrayal of Sage howled inside him.

The tug on his derived witch-air from Zelda brought him closer to her. He fought the compulsion to keep his distance. But she called the shots, and he had no magical leg to stand on considering his untrained abilities.

Witches and warlocks surrounded them on the patio, attempting to stop Zelda or trying to aid her, depending on which side of the sandbox they played in. Magic whipped the air in tangible air ropes. Leafy vines and lightning bolts tried to slice through Zelda's solid walls of air separating him and her from the rest of the world.

A booming voice cut through the chaos, and he drilled through the foggy air to see Jessica Wilde standing on the picnic table, a megaphone hiding her face.

“Stop this at once. Stand down,” she bellowed.

It took a few more commands before the magic simmered. The jittery, tense crowd lingered in groups around the patio’s perimeter. A light wind of air magic ruffled hair and clothing. The lightning bolts fizzled, and the thick vines retreated into the ground. Familiars leaped, flew, and scurried to their witches. Sage’s owl familiar soared above their heads, dragging glowing ropes of magic in its feet and beak. A fluffy gray and brown tabby squatted on guard at Jessica’s feet, hissing and yowling at anyone attempting to approach her except for Wilde coven members.

Sage charged toward him from the woods where the wind had caged her. He liquified at her fierce beauty, her hair swirling in tangles around her head. Panting and vibrating with emotions, she came abreast of him. He picked leaves out of her hair and brushed dirt off her arm, then took her hand in his. The moment he touched her, a strange magic inside her linked to that deep untapped well inside him that not even Zelda’s magic touched.

The fire searing his insides erupted anew, and the pain of Zelda’s illegal acts killed any other sensation. He dropped Sage’s hand and clutched his arms over his chest, needing to staunch the pain. He swallowed bile, looked for an escape route before he made a fool of himself.

“What in the goddess’s name, Zelda?” Sage yelled. “You bonded Rafael without his permission. A major-ass infraction.” Gasps broke the silence, but Sage continued, undeterred by their hundred or so witnesses. “I demand that you break your bond now or you’ll suffer the fullest extent of the witchworld law.”

“Tack on illegal magic raising and a boatload of other charges,” Jessica spat out. “What were you thinking, Zelda? Not only did you break the warlock lottery rules by not giving Rafael a choice, but you bonded him without his permission? Who does that?”

“*How* did she do it, is what I want to know?” Another High Priestess stepped to Sage’s other side. “Well, speak up, witch. What do you have to say for yourself?”

Zelda finger-brushed her snarled hair and smoothed down her skewed blouse. A small bobcat familiar leaped off her upper arm, crouched at her feet, and glared at Jessica’s tabby. “I did nothing of the kind. Mr. Reyes and I reached an understanding earlier. If you read the bylaws regarding the warlock lottery, you’ll find a clause that allows a warlock to choose a High Priestess without going through the lottery if he finds the perfect fit.” She

folded the long sleeves of her tunic up, then down, something Rafael had seen her sister do. She did another fold, then down and he realized it was a sign. Imelda Helwig nodded at her sister.

All eyes shifted to Rafael. The blood rushed down his face, and he sucked in fresh air before he crashed. “Zelda’s warlocks abducted me and locked me in a room at her covenstead. She spelled me. Next thing I know, I’m here. Sage broke the spell and released my memories.”

Zelda’s inky eyebrows arched. “How did I spell you, Rafael?”

He scratched his head. “How the fuck do I know? I’m not a witch.”

“You used a coercion spell on him, a mix of henbane, datura, and belladonna.” Sage gauged the shocked reactions of the witches. “I tore a charmed bracelet off Rafael that kept the spell alive. She smothered his memories so he wouldn’t remember he had chosen me.”

A tiny smile curled the corners of Zelda’s mouth. “Find the charm. Prove these accusations you’re slinging.” A handful of witches and warlocks began combing the wind-blown patio and nearby woods.

Fiery pain lanced Rafael in two. “Sage,” he whispered. “I don’t feel so hot.”

She touched his arm, a soothing press of her fingers. “He’s fighting her magic. Isn’t that proof enough of a coerced bond?” Sage took his hand in hers, her slender fingers soft and inviting. He never wanted to let her go again. “Let’s sit inside,” she suggested. “Don’t fight it.” She addressed the nearest witch. “Where’s Aspen? I need a potion to soothe his pain.”

“I can remove his pain,” Zelda tossed in. “He’s suffering the usual new-bonded-warlock affects.”

“Does that lie keep you warm at night?” Sage rebutted, and Rafael knew how much he was out of his depths. Holding Sage’s hand offered him the impetus to stay and learn about his new world... as long as she stood by his side.

A Helwig warlock stepped between Zelda and Rafael, one of the ones who’d kidnapped him. With all his lagging strength, Rafael hauled back his arm and slugged the warlock so hard and fast the warlock didn’t have time to raise magic before he slumped to the ground, out like a light. “That’s for kidnapping me, asshole.” He shoved his fist against Zelda’s upper arm. He didn’t give a rat’s ass that she was a woman. “Kill the bond, or so help me god, I will bury you.”

A Wilde warlock rushed to Sage, dangling the bracelet. Sage sniffed it,

frowned.

“What’s wrong?” Rafael asked.

“It’s dead.” Zelda grinned at Sage’s proclamation. “Her air magic rendered it void.” Sage tossed the bracelet on the ground. “Undo the bond. Rafael chooses me.”

“Where’s your proof?” Zelda palmed her moonstone ring as if gaining power from it. “I will not undo the bond. You’re overstepping your boundaries, Sage Wilde.” She held her hand out to Rafael, and he retreated a step. “You chose me. Come. You’re mine. I will not release you to this stupid child.”

More anger than he’d ever experienced thrashed through him again. He didn’t know a way out, other than to let Sage duke it out for him. Otherwise, he’d be stuck bound to this old hag until when? Until she died? Until he died? *Two hundred bucks for a clue, Alex.*

Sage shivered, flexed her hand in his, and he let go, flinging off the magic she emitted. An intangible roiling mass of fire, loamy air, a drizzle of water and vines growing out of the ground and snaking over the patio alarmed the crowd into backing away from Sage. Her eyes turned dark as night, surrounded by a glimmering silver halo. Shimmery bands of white magic whipped and swirled around her, the electricity crackling in the air.

“Do you trust me?” she asked, her breath warm against his ear.

Without a doubt, he nodded. He had found his home in her, and he’d cherish her with every fiber of his being... and fight to the death for her.

“What do you want, Rafael? Who do you want to bond.” Outside sounds dropped to nothing, unable to compete with the dynamic hum of Sage’s magic.

He lifted his head, raised his voice for the crowd ogling the train wreck on the patio. “I never chose Zelda Helwig. I demand she release whatever fucked-up bond and spells she dumped on me. I choose the light, the sunshine, the magic, the home I found among the Wilde coven. I choose Sage Wilde.” His bold stare shot switchblades at Zelda. *If only.* “Release me now or I will destroy you.” He ripped the chain off his neck and flung the pendant where it clinked to the pavers at Zelda’s feet.

Two more wild cats sprang off her and surrounded her feet, growling and snarling. His own bobcat tattoo—not that he’d accepted it—remained static on his arm.

“Big words from an untrained warlock.” A glower flitted across her

features. “I can asphyxiate you in two seconds. Or do you prefer to die in an inferno?”

“You heard him. Release him. Now.” Sage advanced a step toward Zelda. A bobcat screeched at her, forcing her to freeze. Rafael stretched out his arm to hold her back, as if to protect her.

A cacophony of loud gasps echoed through the crowd. Zelda jerked back from Sage, clutching her neck, her features screwed up in horror. Rafael checked Sage from his peripheral vision. The black and silver of her eyes, the tangible aural glowing bands drifting and seething around her scared the life out of him. And everyone else by the alarm on their faces and the distance they put between themselves and Sage.

Wind funnels stirred up a symphony of sound as they whipped the tree branches around them. Evergreen needles gyrated in the air. Rain coalesced into a typhoon, dripping from a clear blue sky. Tiny stars tumbled from the sky, trickling within the wind and water. Embers and ashes fell upon the Helwigs and their supporters, their magic ineffectual against the stars singeing their clothing. Sage circled her hand and drew a blue fire ring around the patio, preventing escape or containing the magic. Didn’t matter.

Zelda twirled her arms above her head, stirring up a wind storm. It plucked on Rafael’s center of magic. He needed an outlet to rid his body of her, but he didn’t know how yet.

“Drop the magic, Sage,” Zelda screeched.

“Break the bond,” she replied, calm radiating off her despite the magical chaos. “He chose me.”

“I will not. I invoked my right to bond him. A fight over a warlock during a lottery means the warlock walks away. He can’t choose or bond any witch from our region for three years. Read the bylaws.” She threw Sage’s words back at her.

Was it true? Rafael’s racing heart stuttered.

A band of air whacked Rafael across the face, smothering him, muffling him above all. The bands spiraled around him, cementing him to the pavers. His thoughts remained clear, and he could still see and talk. The magic inside him remained. He fought the witch-air, knowing he couldn’t use magic against Zelda. The bond prevented him from doing so. But something inside him disputed that notion, and he worked on internalizing his thoughts to match his magical action and reaction.

“Screw you, Zelda. You broke the rules when you magically raped him.”

Lightning bolts erupted over Zelda's head, threatening, but not harming. Yet. Sage's owl familiar directed the bolts in a ring of fire surrounding the Helwig coven members.

Zelda signaled Imelda and several witches from her coven, and they broke apart the fire ring, blasting wind, water, and their own fire through it. Another signal and they hurled a combined fiery ball, propelled by witch-air, at Sage.

Sage thwarted the attack, but the effort strained her. Perspiration formed on her upper lip, and her cheeks blazed crimson. Her magic thrust Zelda's entire coven and her allies to the edge of the woods.

The threats to Sage drove Rafael's every command into the magic inside him, battling against Zelda's influence. He cracked his knuckles, the sound loud against the swirling and popping magic. "How dare you threaten my witch, you fucking bitch?" He chucked fire-tinged air at Zelda, catching her off guard, giving her no chance of a counterattack. How was he able to use magic against Zelda? The fire and air felt eerily similar to the magic Sage wielded.

As Sage had threatened, figurative flying monkeys and ninja fairies broke out to fight Zelda's ineffectual air magic. Rafael stood, arms outstretched, immune to any magic. Another few seconds flew by that seemed like hours, air against air, fire against fire, intangible but powerful. After one last thrust of rebound magic at Zelda, her hands scratched at her neck, her mouth hung open in horror, and she crumpled to the ground in a heap of billowing black clothing. Her bobcat familiars clambered onto her body and morphed into their tattoo forms beneath her clothing. The bobcat that'd so far remained dormant on Rafael's arm, slithered off his skin in earth-tone shades of ink. The ink blotches slinked to Zelda's body where she reabsorbed them on her right hand.

Magic faded, and the air stilled. Zelda gasped out several gusts of air and sparks dripped off her fingers, splatting onto the pavers. That foreign entity inside Rafael disintegrated into dust and rushed out of him, alleviating the pain he'd felt since Sage broke Zelda's spells. The fire eating him alive tempered and dulled. He'd decimated his connection to Zelda. Again, how the hell had he managed it?

Imelda rushed to her sister's prone body and squatted on the ground. Her fingers searched for a pulse until she stood, spine rigid and glowered at Rafael. "You've killed her." Not one tear filled her eyes.

Seething, Sage stood next to Rafael, smelling of burnt sage and brimstone. Crackling, stinging magic wafted off her and mingled within the residual magic. He'd take it any day over Zelda's toxic magic.

"No. She killed herself," Sage said. "A warlock is incapable of using magic against his bonded witch. She brought this on herself by defying the witchworld laws."

Jessica approached Imelda, Ben in tow behind her. "I'm sorry for your loss, Imelda. Zelda has always been a loose cannon, and her number came up. Now take her body and all your people and please go."

Imelda's glare at Sage threatened to kill. "You will rue this day. With *you* at the helm of the western region, you'll destroy us all." She addressed the crowd at large. "You all made the biggest mistake of your lives."

CHAPTER 13



SAGE RUSHED A SILENT AND SKITTISH RAFAEL TO HER BEDROOM, THE SAFEST place on the compound. Ricky followed and remained on guard in the hallway. She shut her bedroom door, locked it, and faced Rafael. “We’ll be safe here. My witches and warlocks will kill the chaos.” As much as she wanted to wilt to her knees in exhaustion and magic depletion, she needed to ensure Rafael was okay. “Did you feel the bond break? Like a knife slicing through an intestine.”

Pasty and sweaty, he nodded, balled his hands at his sides. “What did I do? How is she dead?”

Sage gloved his left fist in her hands and coaxed him closer. He didn’t resist. “You did nothing. She caused her own magic to lose control when it reacted to the magic she granted you.” Sage paused, wondering if Zelda’s magic also reacted aversely to her aether. She’d never seen the like, although she’d heard of witch-air smothering a person. “The witch-air stole the air from her lungs, deflating them. It smothered her. She brought this on herself.” Sage wasn’t a hundred percent convinced her aether didn’t play a part, and she knew she had to get it under complete control before her world crumbled around her.

“I still feel weird.” He recoiled.

“It’ll take time for the magic to dispel.” Sage tried to wrap her arms around him, but too much distance separated them. She dropped his hand, leaving her frigid, despite the fire roaring through her body. Magic refilled the crater inside her, a return to her new normal of rising aether and Rafael’s strange brew.

“Part of it’s normal,” he confessed, dipping his head to study his feet.

“I know.” Did she? He felt more magic than an unbonded warlock should. But she let it go. No sense in freaking him out all over again. “You’re reacting to all the magic on the compound. Everyone will suffer until my aether disburses.” She snorted, trying to diffuse the awkwardness. “I promise you’ll feel better.”

Tension fled Rafael's body by the drooping of his taut shoulders. He took a cautious step forward and plucked a vine from her tangled hair. “You’ve got vines in your hair.” He tried to pull another twig from her damp hair, and she winced from the sting on her scalp. “Sorry. Won’t come out. Damn, it’s like it’s... growing out of your head.” He chuckled, fighting his shock.

Smiling to set him at ease, she clasped his hand again. “It’ll die and fall out.”

Horror masked his face. Until the unthinkable happened and the mask slipped. He busted out in laughter so infectious they both sank to the floor, rolling and clutching their stomachs.

“Laughter’s killer medicine to recover from a shitshow,” she said between bouts of giggles.

“God, I hope so.”

“I promise you we’ll laugh a lot.” She rolled closer to him and they both lay on their sides facing each other on the dense wool rug. She inhaled the welcome scent of him.

“What about romance? And sex?” He cradled her face in his hands, his touch gentle and loving.

Feeling the depth of their connection, she gazed deeply into the warmth of his eyes. His tender and affectionate touch conveyed his desire and devotion. As he leaned in to kiss her, time stood still. His lips met hers with a longing that had been building for what felt like an eternity. The kiss was soft and slow, yet filled with an intense passion that took her breath away.

She savored the salty taste of his lips and the warmth of his body as they held each other in a tight embrace. The world around them faded away, leaving only the two of them lost in each other. As the kiss ended, he pulled back slightly with a soft smile and sparkling eyes.

“I can promise tons of romance,” she said, and twined her arms around his neck. The strength in his firm body pressed against hers and just his mere presence provided an anecdote to a disastrous day. “I can definitely promise lots of sex.”

“Ditto.” Easing back, he let out a frustrated groan. “Not yet. Not like

this.”

Sage fake-pouted. “I know.”

“You need to bond me now. You need my protection more than ever. That Imelda bitch is gonna seek revenge.”

Joy overcame her, and her limbs melted onto the rug. Stars sprayed the air above their heads and rained down in rose petals all over them.

Rafael caught red petals on his palm and inhaled them. “Is that a yes?”

“Absolutely. Everything I offered stands. But we can’t until Z’s magic is out of your system.”

His shoulders sagged, and the rose petals fluttered from his hands. “How long?”

“A week maybe.” Before he reacted, she pressed her mouth to his again, and they kissed until her head stopped spinning, and a knock on the door interrupted them. She wiped a smudge of ash off his temple. “Take a shower. Rinse that hag off your skin. I need to end the festival. I’ll ward the room, and no one will bug you.”

“Sage,” he breathed out her name in the way she loved. “I think I’m gonna love it here. Or wherever *you* are.” He pushed up off the floor and helped her stand, his hand warm and strong gloved around hers.

“Well, good. I feel the same about you.” Without an ounce of remorse or regret, she watched him saunter into her bathroom and close himself inside.

Sage unlocked and opened the door, and Jessica’s tabby, Pebbles, darted in ahead of Jessica. The cat growled and hissed at the bathroom door.

Sage rounded on her aunt, resigned. Also confused and ticked. “It was you in the woods threatening me yesterday morning.” No question, just plain fact.

The door shut, and Ben and Ricky’s voices drifted away. Jessica looked her point-blank in the eyes. “How’d you figure it out?”

“Pebbles. I recognized her growl and hiss.” Irritation flared in her chest. “Who did your dirty work since you were at the house? Why would you all threaten me?”

“Ben and your cousins helped.” Jessica wrung her hands. “I wanted you to treat the scare as a threat from your enemies, from the Helwigs. To get angry, to show every witch in the region that you won’t take crap from anyone. You need to stop the partying, grow up and take the reins, accept your heritage.”

“It was *your* heritage,” Sage reminded Jessica, not unkindly.

“The role was never mine. You’re more powerful. Younger, more progressive, focused, and aware. More educated. With your aether, you can rule the witchworld someday. Your mother prophesied it after she conceived you.”

Sage’s eyelids fluttered, and shock beat down her anger. “You and Mom planned this?”

“Of course. That’s why she trained you for this role. Unfortunately, it landed in your lap too soon.” Jessica squeezed Sage’s hand. “I will always be here for you. I’ll be your second, but we’ll also need to train your sisters and cousins to run the coven and region.”

“Yeah. After today’s crap-storm, I could’ve bitten the bullet and left you all high and dry.”

“Well, you showed the California region your strength going against a Helwig. Rumor in the entire region is that they made the right choice in choosing you.”

“Did you doubt it?” Relief streamed through Sage’s limbs.

“Not for a second. But you’d marched down a path that could’ve changed everyone’s opinions. At least tell me you have a new warlock now.” Jessica’s focus drifted to the bathroom door, the sound of the shower white noise to mask the occasional sound from outside.

“I do, and more.” Warmth swamped Sage, and she was dying to join Rafael in the shower. Alas, duty prevailed.

“Don’t fall in love yet. You can’t let love blind you to growing the coven and proving our strength. If you fail, we may never rule the region again. You have plenty of time and the grit to enforce change, to gain respect. Maybe not the Helwigs’ respect and allegiance, but more than enough to keep your majority.”

“Too late. I’m falling.” The water shut off. The shower door clicked open and shut.

“He ignites you.” Jessica’s features softened. “Oh, honey. I’m happy for you. Promise you won’t let him interfere with your duties.”

“He’s the strongest warlock I’ve ever seen. I need him. Now more than ever. Together, we’ll kill it. Mark my words.” Sage knew the moment she’d met Rafael they’d make a formidable pair in the witchworld. She’d show every witch on Earth how her gut never let her down. And she’d prove it while falling in love with him. Rafael at her side gave her a sense of reassurance, and she felt unstoppable. *Party girl will not define me ever*

again. So mote it be!

..*.*.*

The door to Sage's office burst open and Rafael rushed through. "Sorry, babe. I finished an installation job early and came to work on the cabin. Lost track of time."

Grinning, Sage shut her laptop and relaxed back against her desk chair. Ten days after the Summer Solstice festival, they'd fallen into a beautiful and happy pattern. Although Rafael worked and lived in town, his time there neared a close. Every moment with him was better than the last and she didn't see it changing soon, or ever. And she wanted him on the covenstead.

Although she'd never know if her aether magic played a part in Zelda's death, every witness at the catastrophe concluded that the witch's death was accidental, brought upon by Zelda's illegal and unnatural bonding of Rafael and her magic reacting adversely. Sage had to take the consensus at face value and start her new chapter ruling the region with Rafael. The western witchworld counted on her... and counted on her bonding Rafael to form the power duo she'd promised.

She slid an envelope across the desk. "Your first paycheck."

He slivered his eyes. "Huh?"

"We pay our warlocks. We don't expect you to quit your jobs and work for free, especially in a more dangerous job."

Rafael didn't touch the envelope. "You're paying me to spend time with you? No, thanks. It's my honor to be your warlock... and your boyfriend."

"No, it's my honor to be your witch and girlfriend." Sage slid her chair back from the desk. "It's not a payoff. If your boss cuts your salary because of your warlock duties, we need to cover the difference. Honor doesn't pay your bills."

"How do you afford the pay? *You* don't work."

Sage's laughter echoed through the room. She didn't feel the least bit insulted. They hadn't much discussed the business side of managing the coven in their time together. Too much kissing and touching, laughing and learning about each other, and hiking in the woods. "My father was a high-profile attorney and a kick-ass investor, like his father. We hold active investments, which I might add, is at least a part-time job." She quirked her eyebrows. "Plus, every witch contributes in various cottage industries. Heck,

my cousin Eden's a successful novelist."

Rafael sidled around the desk, and Sage rose to meet him in a passionate, soul-filled kiss. After they broke apart, she leaned her cheek against his chest, loving the scent and feel of him, from the fresh shampoo of his damp hair to his natural musk and the clean laundry fragrance of his dove-gray T-shirt.

"I want to contribute." He rested his chin on her head.

"Rafael, you already are contributing."

"Once you bond me, I'll need to be here full-time, which means I need to quit my job."

"Right," she said, her spine tensing.

"My boss has talked up selling his security firm in a year or two. He wants to train me on the business end, and he's giving me first dibs on buying the biz. He'll let me pay him in installments. Put my pay toward that." He squeezed her closer. "It's everything I've always wanted. Well, except for you." He nuzzled her neck and kissed the skin behind her ear, leaving goosebumps traveling down her neck.

Joy streamed through Sage, warm and comforting. She drew back and took his hand in hers. "I want to show you something."

"Then I've got a surprise for you." He followed her out of her office to a door across the hall.

Slow and hesitant, Sage opened the door to a smaller office, cleaned out except for an empty desk, bare shelves, and office equipment. "My father's office and man cave." The perfect office for Rafael to sit in front of the large window and watch the sunrise from inside the house. "It's your office now as my First Warlock."

Rafael held a breath for the longest time before he exhaled. "Did you just say First Warlock?" He spun toward her, his mouth gaping.

She'd waited five extra days to ensure Zelda's magic had taken a hike. She didn't want any other magic interfering during the bonding ritual. They'd already planned for the ceremony that night. "Do you think you can run a security firm from here? You deserve all the conveniences of my home, my covenstead, our witchworld. This is your home too."

He trailed kisses from her jaw to her ear. "Already feels like home."

"Is that a yes?" His thumb traveled to first one nipple, then the other, rubbing them into stiff points, spiraling lust downward, and she gasped at the depths of her feelings.

"Oh, yeah." His lips rested on hers, and she drank him in until they

parted, breathless as always when they kissed. “Follow me.”

They strode out to the backyard. Through the trees, Sage spied fairy lights lighting up the marble gazebo her parents had built. Delight rippled in her chest. Her favorite place when she craved serenity. Candles lit the inside from the round table in the middle to the three marble benches inside the perimeter and on the two steps outside. A bottle of wine sat on the table next to plates of finger foods, the same food they’d eaten the fateful festival night.

Giggling, she spun in a circle. “This is enchanting. You did this?”

“It’s why I ran late. Aspen helped.” Apprehension smoothed out his grin.

Sage reached for his hand, squeezed and dropped it. “It won’t hurt. Not like what Zelda did to you.” They’d already decided that sex was off the table for a while. They wanted to go slow and build their relationship without adding sex to the menu until they were ready. Sage didn’t need the sex to understand his magic strength or to know his warlock powers matched her magic. She didn’t need sex to strengthen an already perfect bond. Most of all, Sage didn’t want to treat him like the myriad other warlocks she’d tested in bed. Rafael was too unique, and they had a lifetime to create their own special magic, in and outside the bedroom.

She picked up an unlit candle and lit the wick with her pointer finger. “Rafael Reyes, do you accept my bond of witch to warlock of your own free will?”

“I accept any way you want to bond me.”

“Goddess, you heard his assent.” Sage added other questions just in case. “Am I, Sage Wilde, or any other person or thing, coercing you, Rafael Reyes, to accept my bond?”

“Hell to the no.” He vigorously shook his head.

“Goddess, you heard his answer.” Sage lit another candle on the table, another point on the compass to signify his answer.

“Do you, Rafael Reyes, accept the witchworld rules?”

“Yes.” Another lit candle.

Oh beautiful moon

Oh brilliant fire, which I hold in my hand

By the air that I breathe, by the breath within me

To Rafael Reyes, bound together I wish to be

I give you the magic of my body, my heart, my soul

Eternal and steadfast

I open my body to your magic

*Call upon my magic as if it were your own
I'll never use my magic or yours against you
I will guard your powers as I guard my own
Link us together
Take this spell and make it be
As I will, so mote it be.*

Rafael uttered the words Sage had him memorize. Once he repeated “so mote it be,” they both blew out the candle in her hand.

Magic connected them, whipping inside her, and he bucked against her. She caught him in her arms, the candle tumbling to the marble floor. Awe spread across his face, the fairy lights reflecting diamonds in his eyes. Stars rose above their heads, twinkling brighter than the light strands.

Rafael’s acceptance of her magic was nothing she’d ever experienced with any other warlock. Like his magic completed her. It seemed to strengthen her magic. Or maybe because she’d never fallen for a man like Rafael, her magic was purer and more tolerant.

“What do you feel?” Arms held above her head, she spun around the gazebo, directing the stars shooting from her fingers to the domed roof.

“Like my insides want to explode outside my body, and I’m the ignition for an inferno.”

“Oh, no. It’s not supposed to hurt.” Dismayed, Sage dropped her arms and pulled her phone out of her back pocket. “I’ll call Aspen for a pain potion.”

He covered her fingers on her phone. “No. It’s incredible. The magic’s wanting to explode. It’s me wanting to use your magic. Totally insane.”

Sage leaned into him, and he embraced her, her body liquifying into his. “Thank the goddess.” She vowed never to bring another warlock to the gazebo. It would always remain their sacred place.

“I feel alive for the first time in my life. All because of you.” He tilted her head back, cupped her cheeks, and brought his mouth to hers. They kissed, their lips leisurely and tenderly exploring one another. When they parted, she felt her heart racing with desire and a silent promise for a forever future.

Thank you for reading!

Continue the Wilde Witches series in Book One, BLACK MAGIC RISING.

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ABOUT ERIN RICHARDS

USA Today best-selling author, Erin Richards, lives in Northern California. She writes young adult fiction and adult romance where you'll typically find her characters in peril, whether based in reality or a contemporary fantasy setting. Magic, murder and mayhem are all in a days' work!

Erin loves spending time on the coast. In her spare time, she enjoys reading (of course!) and perpetually landscaping her yards, even though she hates digging holes... unless she's burying fictional bodies! She also confesses to a fascination with American muscle cars... and reality TV shows.

IMMORTAL CURSE



EMPIRE CITY VAMPIRES SERIES, PREQUEL

EDEN HART

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Edited by: Linda Ingmanson

IMMORTAL CURSE

Cursed by fate, united by love.

In ancient Wallachia, Cristian Lazar returns to his family estate. His father has left Cristian the vineyards that define his wealth. Contentment eludes him. Revenge against the scoundrel who killed his father drives him. When he learns of a healer witch, he's drawn to her beauty, and intrigued by her magical power. A power that could be the answer to Cristian's woes.

Sage Hawthorn lives under the watchful eyes of her coven leaders, who have promised her to another man. But when she meets Cristian, she yearns to defy tradition. He's interested in her world, and intrigued by her. Love for the noble takes root in her heart.

But Cristian strikes a perilous bargain, becoming a vampire, ignorant of an ancient curse banning vampire-witch love. Desperate to be together, Sage and Cristian race to find a way to lift the curse that could destroy the lives of everyone they cherish...but the sacrifice demanded to save them all may destroy the very love that binds them.

CHAPTER 1



CRISTIAN

Wallachia, 1462

AMID THE ROLLING HILLS, where sprawling vineyards spread to the horizon and the imposing silhouette of Castle Ravenscroft dominated the landscape, I reigned supreme. Pulling my long black jacket closed over my linen shirt and trousers against a cool breeze, the weighty gold chain of the Lazar family draped around my neck, I surveyed my realm with a hard, discerning gaze.

“You, there! Double your efforts, or find work elsewhere,” I barked, pointing a gloved finger at a hunched figure in the vineyard. The man flinched, nodding feverishly as he scrambled to his feet and began to labor harder.

I turned to Vasile, my trusted adviser, who was watching with a carefully blank expression. “Look at all this. I have everything a man could want, yet I feel empty inside,” I confessed, sweeping my gaze across the hills. “The wealth, the power... Why is it not enough?”

My father, a merchant who’d married his way into the nobility, would’ve scoffed at such discontent. He’d been a stern man, hardened by a life of struggle and relentless ambition. Through clever and sometimes ruthless practices, he’d eventually amassed enough wealth to marry my mother, a woman of noble birth who gave him the title and prestige he’d yearned for, as well as the very lands upon which Ravenscroft and the vineyards stood. After she died, he pushed me hard to excel.

“I remember my father’s words like it was yesterday,” I told Vasile. “‘Power, Cristian, is the only currency that truly matters in this world,’ he’d always say. And so I strived, and I achieved. But still, I am left with an emptiness that I don’t know how to fill.”

I’d been sent to Târgoviște for an education, not only in books but also in life. I’d been immersed in a world of art, culture, and intellect, an experience that had shaped my thoughts and aspirations. Then I’d fought against the Ottoman Empire under the leadership of Vlad Dracula in many a savage conflict, until I received summons of my father’s death and returned home.

Around us, the place hummed with life. The scent of ripening grapes wafted through the air, mingling with freshly turned earth and distant hints of lavender. It was paradise. Despite my strange discontent, I could at least take solace in the fact that these beautiful vineyards, the foundation of my wealth and power, were thriving. And yet there was a hunger in me, a driving need for...more.

The faint thud of hooves resonated from a nearby road, and a minute later, a black horse appeared with Radu Mirea on its back. “Of course,” I said, my voice growing darker, “there’s Mirea to contend with. He’s probably riding out to gloat over his ill-gotten land.”

Not only had he stolen one hundred acres from Ravenscroft, but he was growing more influential with each passing day. With his greedy eye on carving more acreage from my estate, he was a threat I couldn’t ignore. I watched as he took the narrow path that led to his property and the manor home that he shared with his wife and two children.

A quiet tension gripped the air, and Vasile’s worried gaze was directed at me with good reason. Radu Mirea was responsible for my father’s death. Lord Darius Lazar had always paid his wagers, but to lose a part of the estate to a cheat and then suffer such immense stress was intolerable. I did not doubt that what Mirea had done played a role in my father’s untimely passing.

“My lord,” Vasile said, his voice steady and composed, “although we cannot ignore the actions of the past, I suggest we approach *this* situation with caution and wisdom.”

I considered Vasile’s advice. The older man had served my family for many years. While he was firm and assertive when needed, Vasile also possessed a gentle nurturing side, often offering sage advice and support to me during moments of uncertainty. “Go on,” I ordered, studying Vasile’s

weathered and lined face.

“Confronting Radu may lead to unnecessary conflict, and we must prioritize the stability and reputation of the Lazar name. Instead, let us consider a diplomatic approach, seeking a resolution that benefits both parties without escalating tensions. Perhaps invite Radu for a private audience, allowing us to discuss the matter openly and honestly. Through civil discourse, we can try to reach a compromise that restores the rightful boundaries of the estate while preserving harmony among our neighbors.”

After thoughtful consideration, I replied, “I value your insight, and I respect your suggestion of a diplomatic approach. I do not wish to escalate tensions needlessly. Therefore, I will extend an invitation to Radu for a private audience.” Better to hear Radu out than to send him away and let him plot against me in the shadows.

“As you wish, my lord. If you don’t need me for anything further, I have duties to attend to at the castle.”

I nodded and watched him walk the winding path up to Ravenscroft. “As long as I live,” I whispered into the wind, “I will not settle. I will correct my father’s mistakes and restore my lands. No one will stand in my way—especially not Radu Mirea.”

The castle’s imposing silhouette grew larger as I strode toward it, the steady rhythm of my footsteps against the cobblestones a soothing cadence. The double doors swung open at my approach, revealing the dimly lit grand hall.

Flickering shadows cast by the many candles masked one of my stewards blocking my path. “All’s well, Master Lazar?” he asked.

I waved him off, nodding curtly. “Ensure the vineyards are worked through the day. The harvest must be early and plentiful this year.” My voice rang through the silent castle, and he hurried off to execute my orders.

The weight of my estate felt as tangible as the cold stones under my boots. As I strolled the corridors, portraits of past Lazars stared down at me, their unsmiling faces etched with the same drive, the same hunger reflected in me.

When I reached the grand library, I was surrounded by towering shelves filled with books. My father used to say, “Wealth may buy a man power, but knowledge gives him control.” And it was control I thirsted for.

I unrolled a map of my land and spread it across the giant oak table that occupied the center of the room. Bordering the estate, like a lion circling its

prey, were the lands of Radu Mirea. As his influence grew, so did his presence in my world. I would do whatever it took to get my land back and more...

CHAPTER 2



SAGE

THE EARLY MORNING light wove through the emerald canopy above my little cottage nestled in the depths of the forest. Dapples of sunlight cast an ethereal glow around the room. A soft breeze blew in from the windows, rustling the parchment where my latest herbal concoction was jotted down. In my world, where incantations twined with natural remedies, this was just another day of harmony.

A sharp knock broke through the tranquility. The villagers rarely ventured this far into the forest, and when they did, it was always pain that drove them to my door.

“Come in,” I called, my heart heavy with the familiar weight of responsibility. The door creaked open, revealing old Crina, her face pale and lined with worry.

“My grandson,” she gasped out, her hands trembling. “The fever...we can’t...”

I didn’t need her to finish. I grabbed my cloak and followed her out into the forest.

As we trudged through the village, the humble thatch-roofed cottages stood in sharp contrast to the grandeur of the Lazar estate. Even at a distance, the towering stone castle overshadowed us, a constant reminder of Cristian Lazar’s power over the people.

At Crina’s cottage, I found the child burning with fever that no natural

remedy could assuage. My hands hovered over the boy, and I closed my eyes, reaching deep into the reservoir of my magic. Words of healing flowed from my lips. A sigh of relief escaped me as the fever broke, and the magic within me receded like a wave after the storm.

The boy's breath evened out as he drifted into a peaceful slumber. I couldn't help but feel a surge of affection for the small life that escaped the clutches of death.

Crina's gratitude filled the room, and I accepted it gracefully, a reminder of my purpose. As I left her home, my gaze instinctively moved once again to Ravenscroft castle, its lofty gray edifice as cold and inaccessible as the man himself. A place of influence and nobility, far removed from my own. Yet, a strange sensation stirred in my soul, a premonition that our paths would collide.

With soft steps, I walked back to my cottage, and upon entering, my thoughts drifted to my heritage. Every herb hanging from the rafters, every crystal and potion was a testament to my lineage and the long line of powerful Hawthorn witches, the women from whom I was descended.

My mother and grandmother had been my teachers; their wisdom was a legacy I carried. Love, they taught me, was the most potent form of magic. Love could heal the deepest of wounds and overcome the greatest of evils. I was their living embodiment—a witch whose strength lay in a compassionate heart.

I settled in my chair by the fire. The crackling flames danced, casting long shadows, like the old stories that lived in this very room, that caressed the floor and walls like gentle fingers. I closed my eyes, letting the warmth seep into my bones. Later, I would attend the village celebration. It was an annual event, and I was expected to be there.

Traditions were important to the village, and to my own family. We all had our proscribed roles to play. Soon, I reflected, I would be expected to marry the man my family had chosen for me when I was but a child. Staring into the flames, I tried not to surrender to the familiar resentment that burned in my chest whenever I considered that I had no choice in the matter. As witches, our bloodlines were vital, and the elders blended lineages with care and wisdom to ensure our magic carried on, as strong or stronger, to the next generation.

I realized I was digging my fingers into the arms of my chair and consciously relaxed them, taking a deep breath. I must respect the wishes of

the elders. Even though my heart beat wildly to fly away and be free.

CHAPTER 3



CRISTIAN

“MY LORD.” Vasile’s voice rang out, drawing my focus from watching peasants dancing in a joyful circle. “It’s unlike you to attend such a common gathering.”

I glanced back at him as he approached to stand at my side, arching a brow at his mild reproof. “Is it? Or maybe it’s just that I’ve grown weary of the opulence of my lifestyle. Sometimes, simplicity brings a respite.” And I also wanted to know if there were whisperings about Mirea scheming to lure villagers away to work his new lands.

“I don’t think you’ve been to the village since you were a lad,” my adviser said with a crooked grin.

I shrugged. “Indeed.” Fighting the voivode’s wars had kept me away until my father’s untimely death. But this, Vasile knew. “It seems the village is doing well. The people look well fed and content.”

“Well fed and content? They’re not sheep or cows, my lord,” he scoffed.

Vasile must have been imbibing the local ale or he wouldn’t be so bold. I found it amusing. “Of course. I’m only noting that in other villages, the people seem...less jolly.”

“Well, it’s the witches, my lord.”

“The witches?”

“Aye. They’re healers. They make sure the crops grow and the harvest is bountiful.”

“My father always did have a soft spot for them. I didn’t realize they were so influential.” I searched the group of laughing, dancing villagers, trying to spy any that might be a witch. A hunched crone or a hollow-eyed wizard, perhaps. “How many are there?”

“Oh, a whole coven, my lord. They’ve grown in number since you’ve been gone, and we’re all the better for it. They keep the evil away.” He squinted his eyes and made a claw with one hand. “Vampires, you know. We’re untouched. They’re a scourge elsewhere.”

I scoffed. Of course, vampires were an issue in some parts of the country, but I had never seen one. I passed my gaze over the boisterous crowd once more. “Which one is the healer I have heard so much about? That one?” I pointed to a very elderly woman bent over a cane with a faded red kerchief around her iron-gray curls, her toothless smile widening as her foot tapped along to the music created by rustic instruments played by the village men.

“Hardly, my lord. Uh...” Vasile peered to the right and left, then his brows lifted and he pointed. “Ah, there! That one, Sage Hawthorn. She’s the village healer. Lovely girl.”

I turned to see where he pointed, and all thoughts of vineyards and villagers melted from my mind. And for a moment, I knew...peace.

The firelight bathed her in an amber glow, shimmering in her golden hair swept up in a loose knot upon her head, lending her an ethereal beauty that was utterly captivating. But it was not merely her physical appearance that ensnared me. The whispers of her magical prowess had reached even the high walls of my castle, painting her as a healer, a beacon of hope for the villagers. The air around her thrummed with unseen energy. I was drawn to it, drawn to her.

“I have heard of her,” I murmured. “Carry on, Vasile.” I broke away from my adviser, my feet carrying me toward the mesmerizing figure. As I neared, she turned, her eyes meeting mine. They were a vibrant shade of green, and they held me captive.

“Lord Lazar,” she acknowledged with a graceful curtsy.

“Mistress Hawthorn,” I replied, feeling the edges of my lips twitch upward into a slight smile.

She eyed me with cautious curiosity. “To what do I owe this unexpected honor?”

“I merely wanted to meet the woman who’s become the talk of the village,” I said, my gaze unwavering. Her expression shifted subtly, her eyes

revealing a flicker of surprise before she masked it with a soft smile.

“And what do you think of such a woman, Lord Lazar?” she asked, her words leaving an open challenge hanging in the air between us. Rarely would a noblewoman address me with such cheek, but Sage held my gaze as an equal. Something I found utterly charming and deeply appealing.

I chuckled, the sound low and filled with genuine amusement. “I find her intriguing. You have earned my people’s respect, not through fear or wealth, but with compassion and kindness.”

There was a pause, a moment when the clamor of the celebration faded into background noise. She studied me with those sharp eyes, a spark of something akin to intrigue flickering within them. “Yet, here you are,” she pointed out, “a man of ruthless power amid the simplicity of a village celebration.”

“Sometimes wealth and power aren’t enough, Mistress Hawthorn,” I confessed, and at that moment, I found myself drawn into her lovely eyes. “Sometimes one yearns for something...different.”

As Sage observed me, her gaze searching for the truth behind my words, I felt a vulnerability I hadn’t experienced in a long time. There was an honesty in her demeanor that was disarming, and I found myself wanting to reveal more of myself to her.

“I have everything a man of my station could desire,” I continued, my voice taking on a softer, almost introspective tone. “Wealth, influence, and power are at my disposal, and yet, I can’t help but feel a void within. There’s an emptiness that material possessions can’t fill.”

Sage’s expression softened, and she nodded as if understanding my dilemma. “I’ve always believed that true wealth lies in the heart and soul,” she said gently, her words resonating with wisdom beyond her years. “The love and respect of your people can’t be bought or forced. It must be earned.”

Her insight struck a chord within me. “You speak the truth,” I admitted. “You have a rare gift—a way of seeing through the facade and perceiving a person’s true self.”

A hint of color tinged her cheeks. “It is a gift I cherish,” she replied humbly. “My magic allows me to see beyond the surface, to understand the emotions and desires that shape us all.”

“And what do you see when you look at me?” I asked, intrigued by the prospect of being laid bare before her empathic abilities.

Sage regarded me thoughtfully. “I see a man burdened by the weight of

expectations and the desire for something more,” she said softly. “You have a restless spirit, seeking solace and meaning in a world that values power and ambition above all else.”

She saw me for who I truly was, and that was both thrilling and terrifying. It was as if she had peeled back the layers of my persona, exposing the vulnerability I had always kept hidden, sometimes even from myself.

In that moment, I felt an inexplicable pull toward her—an undeniable desire to know more about the woman who could see past the noble trappings of Lord Lazar and recognize the man beneath it all. There was an intimacy in her gaze, a connection that went beyond the superficial.

“Perhaps you could show me a different path,” I murmured.

A small smile graced her lips. “I can only offer guidance, Lord Lazar,” she demurred. “The path you choose is ultimately yours to walk.”

As the night wore on and we strolled along the perimeter of the festival, we continued to talk, our conversation flowing effortlessly. I found myself sharing more with Sage than I had ever shared with anyone before. There was a comfort in her presence, a sense of acceptance that made me feel unguarded.

At that moment, I knew that meeting Sage Hawthorn was no mere coincidence. She had entered my life for a reason, and I was determined to discover what that reason was.

CHAPTER 4



CRISTIAN

THE MORNING SUN cast a warm glow through the tall windows of my study. The scent of parchment and polished wood filled the air, creating an ambiance of quiet contemplation. My thoughts wandered back to the previous night, to her. Each memory and word swirled within the confines of my mind, painting a vivid picture that both confused and fascinated me. This wasn't like me. Yet the feeling was impossible to ignore.

"Thinking about the village healer, are we?" Vasile's voice cut through the silence of my private study. He wore a teasing smirk, a rarity in his usual stoic demeanor.

I propped my elbows on my desk, my fingers laced before me and my brows knit in mock puzzlement. "I can't imagine what you mean."

My response prompted a chuckle from my seasoned adviser. "The entire village is abuzz, seeing as you spent most of the night with the witch. Do not be so guarded, my lord. It is not forbidden for a man of your stature to be interested in a beautiful woman."

I rolled my eyes at his assumption, trying to brush it off with a nonchalant shrug. "It is not her beauty that intrigues me, Vasile. It's her essence, her being."

"Her magic?" he asked, the mischief in his eyes replaced by curiosity.

I nodded, rising from my seat to walk toward the window. The sprawling estate, the symbol of my status and power, lay before me, yet my mind filled

with thoughts of Sage. “Yes. It’s so different, raw and unpretentious. Unlike the power we deal with, hers seems to bring peace.”

Vasile nodded. “The villagers have always believed in her. Her abilities have healed many, and because of that, they offer her goodwill.”

I inhaled deeply of the fresh morning air and let it out slowly. I sat back at my desk, my fingers steepled. “Perhaps this is what I’ve been missing. Why all this”—I swept my hand toward the window overlooking the vineyards—“does not satisfy me, even as I struggle to defend it. She is beloved. Respected as well.”

“I daresay you’re respected, my lord,” Vasile said.

“Because I’m feared. I spend so little time with the villagers. I want to learn more about them. Perhaps Sage would be willing to teach me her ways.”

Vasile’s eyebrow rose at my unintended use of her first name before he schooled his features. “Very well. But remember, my lord, a witch’s world is unlike ours. It thrives not on power and command, but love and respect.”

I nodded, the challenge igniting an excitement I hadn’t felt in a long time. As I prepared to dive into the unknown, I found myself anticipating the journey.

For once, my desire wasn’t driven by a lust for power, but by a quest for understanding and unraveling a mystery that suddenly made my life feel much less mundane. Sage Hawthorn was no longer just the village healer. She had become my curiosity, an enigma I was eager to explore. I could not deny that her magical abilities fascinated me. What must it be like to wield that strange power?

I knew something of witches because we’d always welcomed them on the estate to tend to the villagers’ needs, but beyond that, I knew little. I tried to convince myself that I wanted to see Mistress Hawthorne again for purely educational reasons, but of course, my mind persisted in resurrecting the image of her lovely face and a figure that could not be masked by her simple clothing. I longed to hear the music of her laughter again, and her sweet voice as she explained the uses of each herb hanging from the rafters of her cottage as she’d done last night...

Just as I was about to speak, a servant arrived.

“Lord Lazar, Radu Mirea is here,” the servant informed me.

I glanced at Vasile, a knowing look passing between us. “Ah, yes. As we’d discussed, I’d requested an audience with him,” I replied, nodding to

my adviser. I forcibly put thoughts of Sage from my mind and focused on matters at hand.

Vasile nodded briskly. "Indeed, my lord."

The servant shuffled his feet. "Shall I show him in?"

"Yes, please," I answered, trying to keep my tone composed.

Moments later, Radu strolled into the study, arrogance oozing from every pore. He was a tall, swarthy man with sharp features and hawklike eyes that missed little. A silver sword hung at his side. Rumor had it he'd won it from an officer by cheating at cards. "Lord Lazar, how good of you to summon me."

Ignoring his condescending tone, I offered a curt nod, gesturing for him to take a seat. "We have matters to discuss."

He settled into a chair, scanning the room with an air of superiority. "What is this about, Cristian? I hope it's not an attempt to reclaim your land."

"It is precisely about that, Radu," I replied, using his first name as rudely as he had mine. "I believe we should come to an agreement, one that benefits both of us."

He drew thumb and forefinger over his thin black mustache. "Oh, and what do you propose?"

"I'll offer you a fair price for the land," I said, trying to keep my emotions in check. "Even more than it's worth. In exchange, you will relinquish it back to my possession."

Radu's laugh was as grating as ever. "Why would I give up such a valuable property?"

"Because it's the right thing to do," I replied. "I won't let you continue to profit from my family's loss."

He slouched back in his chair and regarded me with amusement. "Perhaps you'd like to make a wager for the land...in addition to more? I'd like to test my best stallion against that gray of yours in a race. And I've had my eye on the parcel with the pond..."

"Never," I retorted, my frustration finally bubbling to the surface. "I would never be foolish enough to gamble with a cheat and scoundrel like you."

When Radu merely smirked, I stood, my hands clenching into fists. "Enough of this. I'll find another way to get what's rightfully mine."

Vasile, who'd been standing behind me, placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "My lord, perhaps it's best to take a moment to gather yourself," he

murmured.

I took a deep breath. “You’re right, Vasile. Show this vile dog out, before I do something I’ll regret.”

As they left the study, a mixture of frustration and anger churned in my chest. I would find a way to reclaim what was rightfully mine, no matter the cost. Radu may have won the land, but I would win back my family’s honor.

The more I dwelled upon the situation, the more my temper threatened to boil over. I needed a diversion. Something to take my mind off my family’s legacy. Instantly, my thoughts shifted back to Sage. Perhaps her magic and compassion would ease the bitterness that simmered within me.

CHAPTER 5



SAGE

I HAD JUST FINISHED TENDING to the last of the day's visitors, a sweet old man suffering from joint pain, when I heard a knock on the door. The evening sun was setting, casting long shadows on the cobbled path outside my cottage, and I could hardly imagine who would be visiting at this hour. As I opened the door, I found myself face-to-face with the last person I expected to see.

"My lord," I murmured, my voice a whisper beneath the evening chorus of the crickets. Cristian Lazar stood in the soft light of the setting sun, his dark hair gleaming, and his boldly handsome face smiling down at me. He seemed out of place amid the humble surroundings of my cottage. Yet I couldn't deny a thrill of happiness danced through me as I inhaled his scent of leather and pine.

He'd haunted my thoughts since that night. I'd expected him to be cold and condescending, yet in the time we spent together, I realized he had an inquisitive mind, a sharp wit, and a seemingly sincere desire to know more about our lives here in the village. Including my life. Every time I recalled his dark eyes burning into mine as if I were the only person in the world, my body heated, as it did now. I turned my head, lest he notice my unseemly desire.

"I hope I'm not intruding, Mistress Hawthorn," he said, leaning a hand against the doorframe. On one finger, he wore a heavy gold ring with the Lazar crest upon it.

“Not at all. Please, come in.”

As he stepped inside, bending and turning to pass my lintel, as he was exceptionally tall and broad-shouldered, I couldn't help but feel a sense of anticipation. Beneath it was an undeniable curiosity. This was my world, the world of herbs and potions, of love and healing, and seeing him in it, so out of place, was almost amusing.

“May I offer you some tea?” I asked, eager to fill the silence.

“Yes, thank you,” he replied, peering around the cottage, taking in the shelves filled with jars of herbs, the simmering pot of broth on the hearth, and the small wooden table covered with scrolls and parchment.

“You seem surprised by my visit,” he said, finally turning to face me. His gaze was steady, devoid of the arrogance I had expected. His luxurious wolf-fur-lined cloak and gold-beringed hands aside, he seemed just a man, with a man's appreciation of a woman, one whose eyes took me in from my thin leather boots to the forest-green ribbon plaiting my hair. I felt the touch of that gaze everywhere and found my breath coming short.

“I am,” I admitted, then turned to busy myself making tea. Better that than let him see how he affected me. “What brings you here, my lord?”

He seemed to consider his words for a moment before speaking. “I want to understand,” he said simply. “Understand why people respect and love you so much.”

His words caught me off guard. Why would a man like Cristian Lazar, a man of such wealth and power, be interested in my humble world? The people's love and respect didn't come with authority or influence. They couldn't be used to manipulate or control.

“You want to understand why people respect me?” I asked, trying to mask my surprise. “It's quite simple. I care for them. I help them.”

Cristian nodded thoughtfully. “And they love you for it, don't they?” he asked, looking at me with a strange intensity.

“They do.” I thought of all the villagers who treated me like family, who shared their joys and sorrows with me, trusted me with their lives. “They know I care for them and my magic is for them. Love reciprocates love, my lord.”

He stepped closer, appearing as humble as I'd ever seen him. “Teach me.”

His words hung in the air, his request sincere, his gaze almost pleading. I felt a strange pull toward him, a desire to show him that there was more to

life than power and control. I knew his reputation as a fierce warrior, but little else about him. Could a man like Cristian Lazar learn to understand a world built on love and respect? I wasn't sure, but his determination and sincerity ignited a spark of hope within me.

"All right," I finally said, "I'll try to help you understand. But remember, this isn't a world that can be dominated or controlled. It thrives on respect and love, not power."

He nodded. "I understand. And I'm ready to learn. If I'm to be your student, then you must call me Cristian." His sudden grin was almost boyish, startling an answering smile from me.

"And you should call me Sage."

He nodded solemnly, though the light of mischief still sparkled in his dark eyes. "Sage."

The sound of my name on his lips sent a shiver through me, not of cold, but of heat. My body stirred at his closeness, and all he'd done was speak my name. Was I making a mistake? I could hardly tell the lord of the land no.

The evening shadows lengthened, blanketing my cottage in a serene calmness. As I prepared to show Cristian Lazar the world I cherished, a strange feeling of anticipation washed over me. I hoped he'd use this knowledge to be a better master over the lands upon which we all depended. For the sake of the people I cared for, and perhaps for Cristian Lazar himself.

"You're not a witch, of course," I began, "so magic will be beyond your grasp. But I could show you medicines and herbs that I use for the most common ailments."

"Thank you," he murmured. How many times in his life had this noble lord said those simple words? Perhaps this was his first time, I mused.

My pulse fluttered uncertainly as I began. "Let's start with the simplest thing. This"—I held up a vial containing a radiant blue liquid—"is an essence of moonflower, harvested at midnight, when the flower is most potent. It is used to calm the mind, to ease anxiety and fear."

Cristian reached out, taking the vial from my hand. He held it up to the fading sunlight, examining the liquid's iridescent shimmer. "And people come to you for this?"

"Yes," I answered. "They come seeking comfort, relief. Not all ailments are physical. Sometimes, the mind hurts more than the body."

He nodded thoughtfully. "And they trust you with this? Their minds, their fears?"

I smiled gently. “Yes, they do. Trust is earned, my lord...Cristian. Not bestowed. I earned their trust through consistent acts of care and understanding.”

In silence, Cristian absorbed my words. He set down the vial and asked, “And what about you, Sage? Whom do you trust?”

His question startled me. Whom did I trust? I’d never really given it much thought. I trusted the villagers, of course, and my familiar spirits who aided my magic. But beyond that, I had always been somewhat alone. “I suppose,” I began, “I trust in the goodness of people.”

Cristian seemed to contemplate my words before finally saying, “You’re different from anyone I’ve ever known, Sage.”

I lowered my gaze modestly. “I am but a humble healer.”

He tucked a finger under my chin and lifted my gaze to his. “Oh no,” he murmured. “You are much more than that.”

His words hung in the air between us, and where his touch lingered, warmth radiated. I stared back at him, unsure of what to make of his assessment. Yet, beneath the uncertainty, there was a flutter of something else—intrigue, attraction? Undeniably. Here I was, alone in my little cottage with this handsome, powerful man...

But I was promised to another. I realized I’d been swaying toward him and caught myself, clearing my throat and turning toward the table to break contact. I busied my hands straightening vials.

Cristian set one aright that I’d clumsily knocked over, and with a smile said, “I look forward to learning more. For now, I must return to Ravenscroft. Until our next lesson, Sage.”

With that, he departed, and I was left with a swirling sense of anticipation.

Could a nobleman truly learn to value love and respect over power and influence? Could he genuinely understand my world? I wasn’t sure. But as I closed the door behind him, I realized I was intrigued to find out. I did my best to ignore the way my body yearned for him and how his fresh pine-and-leather scent lingered among the sharp and earthy herbs.

Curiosity propelled me toward the small window that overlooked the narrow path leading to the cottage. I caught sight of his silhouette disappearing into the evening, swallowed by the enveloping darkness of the night.

Drawing a deep breath, I shook my head, trying to clear my mind. There

was no point dwelling on it now, I reasoned. There would be time enough to ponder Cristian Lazar's motivations later. Now, I had other responsibilities to attend to.

I turned my attention back to the ingredients scattered across the table. There were mushrooms to be sorted, potions to be brewed, and remedies to be prepared. Yet, my mind stubbornly drifted back to our conversation. His candid admission that he found me different, his genuine intrigue with my healing craft, made me feel unbalanced yet alive.

Cristian Lazar had walked into my cottage driven by curiosity and ambition. He brought a promise of change, a hint of something new, something different. And as I rhythmically ground marigold petals with my mortar and pestle, I found myself hoping that the nobleman would indeed understand my magic and what I so deeply believed in. Perhaps, this was the beginning of a journey neither of us had anticipated.

CHAPTER 6



CRISTIAN

MY VISIT to Sage's cottage left me restless. I desired a taste of her world, of the magic that seemed to flow through her veins like a life-giving river. I wished for a supernatural force of my own, a secret weapon that could further elevate my position and magnify my dominance. With each sunrise, this yearning grew, feeding on my thoughts and dreams. Seeing that braggart Mirea riding his black stallion out to survey what should have been my lands only lent fuel to the fire of my discontent. A desire for more power, something unattainable, began to consume me.

I made inquiries and searched the lands for such power. In my quest, I crossed paths with a creature, Seraphus, whose existence was whispered about only in the quiet corners of the village. A vampire, they said, as old as time itself. To many, he was a figment of tales spun on dark, moonless nights, a myth designed to terrify disobedient children. To me, he was a means to an end.

After waiting until the sun had fled and a sliver of moon crept into the sky, I found him living in a hide-and-moss-covered hut by the edge of a bog. Tall and gaunt, with a long, coarse beard that must have once been fiery red but now was dimmed to the color of dried blood threaded with silver, he regarded my approach wordlessly, as if he'd been anticipating my arrival. Even the insects fell silent, and no night bird called from the heavy hanging willows. Bearing a torch, Seraphus, clad in rustic gray robes, silently

motioned me to enter his hut. I ducked my head to avoid hitting the strings of small animal bones hanging in the doorway.

He listened in enigmatic silence as I laid bare my desires before him. My voice trembled with determination and uncertainty. “I seek something beyond the confines of mortality, Seraphus. A chance to grasp the world with hands that will never wither. I yearn for more than this mortal coil can offer.”

Seraphus regarded me with eyes that seemed to pierce the very depths of my soul. “Ah, the allure of power and immortality, the elixir that has driven countless souls into my embrace. You seek to transcend the limitations of humanity, Lord Lazar, to reach heights of which mere mortals can only dream.”

As Sage had told me, I could not be a witch. But seeing what she could do with her magic opened the door to wanting my own. I wasn’t born with supernatural abilities. No coven’s lineage ran through my veins. But such power could be bargained for. This was the “more” I’d longed for. Mirea would quake at my feet. “Yes, I wish to be an unstoppable force that shapes the destiny of my world.”

His ancient face showed little reaction, but the strange flame dancing in his eyes flared, and he uncurled his ice-white hand toward me. “I can grant you all that you desire and more. But know this—such gifts come with a price, a heavy burden that you must bear.”

A cloud must have passed over the moon, for the already dim light in the hut darkened further. My skin grew cold despite the fire burning in the hut’s small brazier. “I am willing to pay any price, Seraphus. My desire exceeds any fear of consequence.”

The vampire’s gaze locked onto mine, his obsidian eyes ablaze with forbidden knowledge. “Then I shall grant you what you seek. Brace yourself, for the transformation shall be a crucible, a trial by fire that will forge you into something more than mortal.”

Before I could take a breath, he was on me, and a terrible pain radiated from my throat outward through every vein and artery. An otherworldly energy engulfed me, and I was thrust into a maelstrom of pain and ecstasy. It was as if my very essence was being torn asunder, every fiber of my being ignited with a searing agony. I convulsed in torment as my bones shifted, my flesh tearing and mending in an eternal loop of pain.

Through the haze of torment, I heard Seraphus’s voice, cold and unyielding, “Embrace the darkness, Lazar. Embrace the forces that shall bind

you to the night, and you shall emerge as something beyond human comprehension.”

In that moment, I felt as if I were losing myself, my humanity slipping away like grains of sand through my fingers. The transformation was a dance with death, a trial that tested the limits of my resolve. But my lust for power, my ambition to emblazon my legacy in history and beyond, drove me onward. I refused to succumb to the agony that threatened to consume me.

A day or more passed, and as the last rays of sunlight vanished from the horizon, the pain subsided, and I found myself gasping for breath, reborn into a world forever altered. A newfound strength pulsed through my veins, and I stood taller, feeling invincible. I was now a creature of the night, a vampire—a being of darkness and shadows.

I saw Seraphus in his true form, his skin awash with a dim glow that cast his black eyes into deeper shadows, save for an enigmatic amber light in their depths. His teeth were sharper than a wolf’s, his hands clawed, and his body lean and coiled with inhuman strength. “You’ve gotten your wish, my lord. But in exchange, the vampire council will summon you, and then you must pay their price.”

“Price?” I gasped. Then realized I no longer breathed and had to choose to draw in air to speak. My flesh was cold, and when I looked down at my hands, they were nearly white as bone.

“Did you think immortality would come without cost?” Seraphus smirked. “For now, go. Your body will instruct you how to survive.”

Even as he spoke, hunger unlike anything I had ever known surged through me. It was an abyss, a never-ending void that screamed for one thing—blood. As the truth of my new existence dawned on me, I retreated into the shadows. I had become like Seraphus, the embodiment of the stories told to frighten children, the monster that lurked in the dark.

As the magnitude of my choice washed over me, I was swallowed by a sea of regret. In my desire to understand Sage and her magic, I had plunged myself into a world far darker and more terrifying than anything I had ever known. My dreams of power had been realized, but they were now shackled to a nightmare of my own creation.

I staggered out of the hut into the evening, where everything seemed limned in moonlight. I looked out over the forest and saw the trees as if it were bright noon, the colors all silver and white. The voices of the night creatures, once haunting and strange, were as sweet as music, and the breeze

carried to me the scent of life, of blood, of lust... Dragos, my faithful gray stallion who had been through many a fierce battle with me, snorted fearfully as I approached. Only with a firm hand was I able to mount and gallop back to my castle.

As the days passed, I was lost in the throes of my newfound existence. I clung to the shadows, avoiding the sunlight that threatened my existence. The man who was once master of his sprawling estate now found himself imprisoned within it. Vasile eyed me sorrowfully, yet he remained faithfully by my side until I sent him away, with a promise to send for him when I had control over my impulses again.

Thirst was an ever-constant companion, a siren's call, relentless and potent. Each heartbeat I heard was a resounding drum, each pulse a tantalizing whisper. I was a predator now, destined to stalk the very people I had once ruled. In the dead of night, I found myself venturing out, my heart heavy with regret, my body driven by a monstrous appetite. I barely restrained myself long enough to hunt among Mirea's villages rather than my own. I yearned to destroy the man himself, but Radu was well guarded, and my vampiric strength was fledgling and uncertain. I needed time, but now...I had all the time in the world. A prospect that terrified me more than I'd anticipated.

Each encounter was a battle, a struggle between the lingering remnants of my humanity and the beast that raged within. Every time I succumbed, each drop of blood that quenched my thirst left me more hollow, more detached from the man I once was. Each life taken was a nail in the coffin of my past self, a self that was fading into a distant memory.

The reality of my choice bore heavily upon me. I was no longer Cristian Lazar, the nobleman. My ambitions had led me astray, turning me into something I hardly recognized.

My nights were filled with self-loathing, my days filled with a longing for a life I could no longer have. The visage of Sage that once tantalized me with hope now filled me with deep despair. I yearned to see her, to hear her laughter, but I couldn't risk her becoming a casualty of my monstrous appetite.

As I gazed out the window at the sprawling estate that lay bathed in moonlight, I made a solemn vow. I would find a way to break free from this transformation.

I returned to Seraphus's hut, only to find it gone as if it had never been.

From then on, I started an arduous quest, a pursuit for redemption. I studied ancient texts, unraveled cryptic enigmas, and sought knowledge from forgotten lore. The answer had to be there, buried beneath centuries of knowledge and history. It was not just for me, but for the people who cowered in fear each night, unknowingly prey to the monster their nobleman had become.

I locked myself away in the dusty, forgotten corners of my castle's library, my only company the faded parchment and ancient scrolls. In those silent, starlit hours, I learned of methods to feed without causing harm. Animal blood could sustain me, though it left me feeling unsatisfied and weakened. It was a meager substitute for the crimson nectar that truly slaked my thirst. Yet, I embraced the necessity of the sacrifice.

I learned of other vampires who had mastered their darker impulses, finding ways to coexist with humans without causing harm. Traveling only by night, I sought guidance from elusive hermits and scholars, seeking to unlock the secrets of my kind.

With each passing day, I longed to confess the truth to Sage, to tell her of the monster that lurked within me, but the fear of destroying her was a specter that haunted my every thought.

CHAPTER 7



SAGE

ANOTHER NIGHTMARE ROUSED me from sleep. My eyes fluttered open to the darkness of my cottage, and my heart pounded as an eerie sensation washed over me. It was Cristian. Something awful had happened.

I thought back to the last time I had seen him and remembered the way he had looked at me before he left my cottage. His words still rang in my ears, “*I look forward to learning more.*”

I had shown him my world, and he appeared to want to see more, but as the weeks passed and there was no word from him, my hurt feelings soon turned to anger.

I’d heard rumors that he’d become some kind of blood-drinking monster, terrorizing the neighboring villagers at night, but I scoffed at that. Cristian had been a topic of fear and envy since he’d returned after his father’s passing, and I’d assumed that was the source from which the latest round of gossip had arisen. It was my nightmares that cast some doubt on my theory, and I couldn’t ignore them anymore. What if the villagers were right, and Cristian had actually become a monster?

I had to find out, so I riffled through old tomes, scrolls with ancient glyphs, and faded maps that I’d collected over the years. The table in my modest cottage groaned under the weight of my magical arsenal. My heart ached with concern, a heavy dread building as I unraveled what might have happened to Cristian.

I pulled out an aged volume bound in leather, its pages whispering untold stories of the supernatural. As I traced the gilded title, *The Chronicles of Blood*, my fingers tingled with unease. Between witches and vampires lay an ancient curse. A thousand years ago, a powerful sorcerer had lusted after a beautiful witch, only for her to betray him by falling in love with a vampire. In retaliation, he had rendered a terrible curse so that no witch and vampire could be together again. If they should evoke the curse, they, their covens, and their councils would lose their powers forever.

Since then, the covens vowed to only serve light and life. In retaliation, vampires turned to darkness. And so for millennia, witches and vampires had been anathema to each other, and would be for eternity.

“Knowledge, Sage. It’s your only weapon,” I muttered to myself as I dove into the book, each page revealing more about the enigmatic creatures of the night. Their powers, their curses, their vulnerabilities—everything was there, written in ink that had turned sepia with time.

Hours slipped away, daylight receding, making room for the soft glow of my candles. I squinted at the script, my eyes stinging with fatigue. Yet I persevered, driven by a compelling need to understand what had happened to Cristian.

“Vampires,” I said aloud, as if hoping to dissipate the eerie aura the word brought. “Immortal, strong, but cursed with an insatiable thirst for blood. Forced to live in the shadows, out of touch with humanity, their nature forever tied to their monstrous desires.”

As I delved deeper, nothing I read made me feel better about Cristian’s fate. I needed to know for certain what had happened to him. If the rumors were true.

That evening, as I retired to my tiny attic room, I found myself gazing at the moonlit landscape. Somewhere out there, Cristian might be dealing with the aftermath of his transformation. The thought filled me with an inexplicable longing, a yearning to reach out, to help.

Wrapped in my cloak of worry and armed with newfound knowledge, I resolved to face whatever might come. If Cristian had plunged into the realm of darkness, I would bring him light. He was not just a nobleman or a vampire; he was a man I found myself undeniably drawn to, and I was ready to fight for him. A sense of determination welled up in me, as powerful as the magic that pulsed in my veins.

I whispered, “I must be the witch, the healer, the friend.” The words

carried a promise, a vow not just to understand Cristian's new world, but to be a part of it, for better or worse.



THE NEXT DAY, I went to the village. As always, it bustled with life. Women sang as they did laundry by the riverside, and children scampered through the street, their laughter ringing amid the cottages. And all the while, the burden I carried weighed heavily on me.

I visited the elderly Mrs. Dascalu, her wrinkles deepening in her round face as she smiled at me. "Ah, our lovely witch! What brings you here?"

"I need your wisdom," I admitted, my fingers clutching a small leather-bound journal filled with decades of her wisdom about the supernatural. She had seen and known more about the otherworldly than most in the village. Little escaped her notice. "I seek information on vampires."

Her smile faltered, replaced by an expression of profound concern. "That's a dark path, my dear. One best left untraveled."

"Unfortunately, I don't have that luxury," I confessed. "I fear a friend is in trouble."

We huddled over linden tea sweetened with honey in her small, cozy cottage, discussing the more salient pages in her journal. She regaled me with tales she'd heard as a child, warnings about the creatures of the night. "Powerful but cursed. Their allure can be deadly." She paused a moment, gazing into her steaming cup. "May I ask... Is your friend Lord Lazar?"

I bit my lip and slowly nodded.

She exhaled heavily. "I'm not one to spread rumors"—she absolutely was; this was why I had sought her out—"but I have heard he's been seen skulking through the village on Radu Mirea's estate, late at night. And several men have been found"—she leaned forward, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper—"drained of every last drop of blood."

"Might it have been something else? Perhaps Lord Lazar was there hunting whatever caused this?" I asked hopefully.

Mrs. Dascalu's plump cheeks trembled as she shook her head. "I saw his man, Vasile, leaving Ravenscroft a week ago. He told the other servants not to return to the castle. What cause could there be for that other than that his lord had fallen to the shadows and become a creature of the night?" She took

a noisy sip of her tea, her wide brown eyes studying me over the rim of her cup for my reaction.

Well, that was bad news indeed, the very worst. Mrs. Dascalu's words merely confirmed what my heart already knew. Cristian's ambition had caused him to seek a transformation. My stomach clenched at the thought.

"Do you know of the curse between vampires and our kind?" I asked her.

"Of course," Mrs. Dascalu said, picking at her pear-filled *frgál*, freshly baked that morning, "the feud arose from that curse. No vampire or witch may fall in love. Else disaster will rain down upon us all. It is so ominous that as far I know, no one has challenged it for centuries. Perhaps your grandfather might know more?"

"Perhaps. I'll be sure to ask him...next time I see him," I said, not wanting to sound too anxious. Her shrewd gaze missed nothing.

As dusk fell, I left Mrs. Dascalu's with a troubled mind. The wind whispered through the trees, rustling leaves in a mournful song as I walked back to my cottage.

I paused for a moment outside my home, looking up at the silhouette of Ravenscroft castle against the twilight. It was a stark reminder of his wealth, his status, his power, and now, his damnation. Determination filled me. He was trapped in a world of darkness, and I would be his beacon, guiding him back toward the light.

The small, iridescent crystal pulsed with warm energy, the embodiment of my resolve. The supernatural world was vast and complex, full of ancient beings, secret curses, and endless enchantments. But I, Sage Hawthorn, the village witch, was ready to stand up to it all.

"I will help you, Cristian," I vowed under my breath, clutching the pendant around my neck.

The promise echoed in the stillness, a silent vow to a man I barely knew, yet to whom I felt inexplicably connected.

CHAPTER 8



SAGE

AFTER WAITING until dusk had fallen the next day, I decided to seek Cristian out, Mrs. Dascalu's stories still ringing in my ears. I knew that vampires could be active during the day as long as they avoided sunlight, but I was more likely to find him by night.

A deafening silence marked the journey to the castle, the normally chirping crickets now ominously quiet, as if in anticipation of the confrontation that was about to unfold.

As I reached the castle's grand entrance, I hesitated. My fingers brushed over the pendant around my neck. The tiny crystal hummed with warmth, a silent reassurance. Taking a deep breath, I stepped forward.

No one answered my knock. Neither his adviser, Vasile, nor any other servant appeared when I pushed open the heavy iron and wood door, confirming Mrs. Dascalu's information. The atmosphere within was cold and still. No fire burned in the great hearth of the hall. Taking a deep breath, I forged ahead, down one corridor then another, until finally, I discovered what must be his library.

Cristian stood in silhouette by one of the tall arched windows, staring at the sprawling moonlit landscape below. Bathed in shadows, he turned as I entered. His dark eyes glowed with a fiery crimson flame deep within, and I knew...everything I'd heard and feared was true.

"Christian," I breathed, a shudder skipping down my spine. His name was

a whispered plea, a fervent prayer.

“Sage,” he murmured, the word a soft knell in the cavernous room. His gaze held mine, the intensity unnerving.

I felt the pull between us as I had before, yet now it was even stronger, an irresistible force that drew me closer to him. When I stood before him, my pulse racing, he reached out, fingers gently tracing the line of my jaw, sending a tremor of desire and longing through my veins. I leaned into his touch, my own hand reaching up to cup his cold cheek. *At last*, my body seemed to whisper. Despite everything, I knew I was where I was meant to be.

His eyes bore into mine, the crimson flames now dimmed, revealing a glimpse of the man I knew.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he whispered, pulling away.

“I want to help you, Cristian.”

“Help me?” His features hardened, his face as white as chiseled marble. “There’s nothing you can do to change what I’ve become. I’ve searched for a way to reverse this, but this is who am now. I’m sorry. I’ve failed you and everyone else I’ve cared about.”

“There is a way. There must be.” I clutched his cold hand and brought it to my cheek as if to warm it. “Together, we can find a cure.”

“It’s too dangerous for you. I thought I could save my lands.” He shook his head, a lock of his ebon hair falling over his white brow. “My foolish ambition has destroyed me.” He trailed his fingers down my cheek again, fingertips resting over my pulse, the yearning in his eyes almost unbearable. “You should go, Sage. And never look back.”

“I can’t leave you. I won’t. My heart won’t let me.”

A silence stretched between us, impenetrable as fog. But despite the tension, a sense of calm washed over me. I needed to show him I wasn’t afraid. That I wouldn’t reject him. “I want to be with you.” I raised my chin. “I fear no magic, nor anything otherworldly, no matter how dark. Teach me who you have become.”

His gaze softened as he looked at me, the hardness in his eyes replaced by a swirl of emotions, the bright curiosity of the Cristian I knew blended with a powerful sensuality born of his new powers. I yearned for both. Goddess help me, I wanted him.

He cupped my face in his hand. “Sage.”

His kiss was cool, yet my body filled with heat. Though his skin was

unnaturally cold, it warmed wherever I touched him—his cheek, his throat, and, when he stepped away from me to open his shirt, his chest. His alabaster skin flushed pink and healthy as I swept my hand over it, as if I could bring him back to mortal life if only I could press myself against him. Yet when I stopped touching him, his body returned to its pale vampiric shade.

“Oh, Cristian... Why did you do this?” I whispered.

“To defeat Mirea, who would destroy everything I have. My lands, my legacy...”

“Is all that worth the loss of your soul?”

He touched his lips to mine again, my breath warming his skin. “You are my soul,” he murmured. “When I first saw you, for the first time, I felt as if I knew my purpose. I didn’t feel empty anymore.”

I drew back. “I’ve heard...stories. Terrible tales of people and animals drained of blood.”

He nodded slowly. “I have stopped drinking from humans. It is difficult...more than you can know. But your light inspires me. It is all I have left.” Uncertainty filled his dark eyes as he held out his hand to me. “I will never harm you, Sage. If you truly meant what you said, then be with me now.”

He was giving me a choice. I knew if I walked away, he would let me. But his words echoed in my mind. When I saw him for the first time, I’d also felt as if I wasn’t alone anymore. He filled the emptiness inside me.

I took his hand.

CHAPTER 9



SAGE

I'D NEVER BEEN in Cristian's castle, though I'd imagined it many times while gazing at it, looming above us on the hill in all its gray-stoned glory. I'd imagined tapestry-covered walls and gilt sconces, silver and gold everywhere, while we peasants scraped a living from the earth. And indeed, the castle's interior was luxurious and impressive, but Cristian's private chamber was modest, nearly bare save for a few simple pieces of plain wooden furniture and a bed near the fireplace.

He quickly started a fire there, casting the room in a golden glow that helped soften Cristian's paleness, though shadows gathered beneath his sharp cheekbones. As he led me by the hand to stand beside the bed, the flames seemed to find their partners in his eyes.

His otherworldliness did not repel me. As a witch, a practitioner of magic, I felt his power and responded to it. It swirled desire within me like a growing storm. There was great healing power in sex, though that certainly wasn't my only motivation. I couldn't seem to divest myself of my simple shift quickly enough. Cristian assisted, his cool hands sliding over my burning shoulders and lowering the shift until it pooled at my feet.

He bent to deftly unlace my *opinici*, slipping them off my feet, then trailed kisses up my legs as he knelt before me. I let my fingers run through his thick black hair, and gasped when his mouth reached my mons. He kissed, then lightly licked there. I widened my stance instinctively, tightening my grip on

his hair. Already, I was wet for him, and welcomed his lips and tongue. In tune with nature and the earth, I felt no shame for my carnal desires. They were true and natural, as elemental to life as the flowing river or the rising sun. I gave myself to him with joy.

Just as I teetered on the edge of release, he rose and cupped my breasts, flicking first one sensitive nipple, then the other with that clever tongue, before sucking each in turn, leaving me clutching his jacket and writhing with need. Why was he still dressed? I tugged at the collar of his long cotton shirt. With a low, sensual chuckle, he shrugged out of his garments until he stood naked in front of me, a beautiful marble statue, lean and hard, a warrior as pale as moonlight save for his red-flamed eyes. I rose on tiptoe and seized his mouth in a kiss.

He bent me over his arm, his strength easily holding me as he feasted on my mouth, then he swept me up and laid me on the bed. For one brief moment, my will stumbled as I gazed up at him. He had the strength of ten men now, and no weapon could harm him. If he so desired, he could snuff out my life as he would a candle flame. He had done so already to others. Seeming to sense my slight hesitation, he paused, his head cocked as his gaze roamed leisurely down my body. Everywhere his gaze touched burned in response.

“Will you...drink from me?” I whispered.

“No, my love. I would never wish this curse upon you. I will protect you always.”

I nodded then and opened my arms to him, and he came over me, slowly, as if still giving me the choice to refuse him.

I did not.



Cristian

WHEN I HAD GAZED out over my vineyards in the first rosy glow of dawn, I thought I'd seen beauty. When I'd ridden my stallion at a gallop across snowy fields, I thought I'd known joy. But no experience had prepared me for the wonder of this woman lying in my bed, her arms and body open to

me, full of trust and...dare I hope, love.

Her hair was a golden halo around her head, and her green eyes were as welcoming as a cool forest, full of life. Her skin was warmed by the fire's light that gilded her breasts and the dip of her waist and the elegant curve of her hips. I let my hand follow that curve until it slid over her thigh, where I cupped her, finding her even wetter than she had been when I'd tasted her nectar moments ago.

I moved over her and kissed her. Her sweet mouth was so hot, her tongue so eager. As I lowered myself, she spread her thighs and raised her hips. Never in my living life had I been so eager to plunge my cock into a woman's body, yet I held back, teasing her with my fingers, wringing groans and gasps from her, pleasuring her breasts, enticing her with sucking kisses along her throat and shoulders, until finally, she moaned my name. And I slid inside.

Oh, the glorious heat... She cried out and twined her legs around my hips. Images flooded my mind—tipping back my head to feel the sun shining on my face on a cold winter's day; the sweet scent of freshly cut hay in the summer; the buzzing of bees flying among the bloodred roses that grew along the castle walls... The joys I'd sacrificed to enter my unnatural life were given back to me tenfold by this kind and good woman in my arms. As I found a rhythm that drove us both to a brilliant peak, I thought only of her pleasure, of her strong heart beating against my lips when I kissed her throat and her lips. And when she came, crying out, I caught her living breath and returned it with a shout of my own as unfathomable pleasure convulsed me.

When her breathing had slowed once more, I cradled her against me, her skin sun-warmed brown against my alabaster tones. I brushed her hair back from her cheek, unsure if I'd find the dampness of tears, or horror in her eyes at the realization she'd given herself to a monster. Instead, I found her smiling at me, and she pressed her small, soft hand against my cheek. My undead heart turned over in my chest with undeniable love.

"I am yours now, Cristian," she whispered.

I pressed my lips to her palm. "And I am yours. Forever."

CHAPTER 10



CRISTIAN

AS SERAPHUS HAD SAID they would, the vampire council summoned me to a distant estate. As the newest addition to their kind, I needed to understand their hierarchy, their laws, their demands.

When the wrought-iron doors to the grand hall swung open, I was ushered into a room bathed in an eerie glow, the muted light of the moon spilling in through tall stained-glass windows, painting the floor with splashes of ethereal blue. The towering dark walls seemed to pulse with the weight of ancient history.

Dominating the room was a semicircle of grandiose thrones, each occupied by a figure shrouded in shadows. As I drew closer, their pale faces emerged from the darkness. Cold eyes watched me, appraising, evaluating. The seven members of the ruling council.

“Welcome, Cristian Lazar.” A female voice as icy as frost clinging to the winter leaves rang throughout the hall. “I am Edeline, the council’s leader.” Her sharp eyes pinned me like a predator eyeing its prey. She introduced the other council members before turning to me once more.

“I trust your transition has been enlightening?” Her cold smile didn’t reach her ageless eyes.

“Indeed, it has,” I responded, forcing a cordial tone.

“Excellent,” a male voice chimed in. It belonged to Oskar, who, with his more corpselike appearance, seemed to be the oldest among them. His eyes

held a flicker of interest as he shifted on his throne, the silver embroidery on his black robe catching the moonlight.

Oskar's gaze hardened. "You must remember, we live by laws, Lord Lazar, to maintain order among our kind. Violating them is not advisable."

I felt the gravity of his statement, the underlying threat in his voice. "I understand."

"Then you must also understand this..." Edeline said, her gaze sharp as she leaned forward. "There are restrictions on whom you may form associations with."

"Associations?" The question escaped my lips before I could stop it.

"Romantic associations," clarified Oskar with a knowing look.

I felt a sudden chill, my mind filled with images of Sage, her emerald eyes, her kindness, her courage. The mere thought of her filled me with warmth, but here, in this cold, unfeeling council, it felt like a forbidden flame.

"Specifically with witches," Edeline said, punctuating the last word like the toll of a death knell.

A jolt of fear ran through me. My gaze met Edeline's. "And if such a relationship were to occur?"

"There is a curse on our kind and witches. Never may we know love with one another. If a vampire were to be so foolish as to give his heart to a witch, all our power, and yours, would vanish. We would be as dust, and the witches would be divested of their bond with their goddess, leading to insanity."

I kept my face as still as possible, but it was abundantly clear they knew about Sage. Had someone seen her at Ravenscroft? This curse they spoke of, if true, would spell her demise. I cared nothing for myself nor for the council, but Sage and her family did not deserve to suffer. I was treading in dangerous waters, and the undercurrent was swift and deadly.

"I understand," I said as steadily as I could manage.

No more was said of the curse after that. They moved on to rules and territorial disputes among powerful vampires, while my mind kept returning to their first words with a sense of desperation. After the meeting concluded, I hurried back into the cold night. My mind was a whirl of thoughts, of the council, their laws, and this chilling prohibition against a love that I was only beginning to understand. And amid it all was Sage, her presence in my life now a danger to us both.

I galloped Dragos back to my castle, my mind wrestling with the warnings. A sense of foreboding enveloped me as Ravenscroft's grand

silhouette loomed in the darkness. I had stepped into a new world, embraced the darkness for power, but at what cost?

My thoughts drifted to Sage, her radiant smile, the softness in her eyes, her unwavering belief in love and healing. I ached for her, to feel her against me once again.

But the council's words were etched in my mind—a warning, a threat. I was a vampire now, and the laws of this world were absolute.

Later, I wandered into the castle's library, a room that had always been a sanctuary to me in my human days. It was a place of solitude, a haven filled with knowledge and wisdom. But tonight, the towering bookshelves and ancient tomes felt cold and detached, their comfort replaced by an unfathomable void.

As I absently traced the ornate spines of the books, a beam of moonlight fell upon one in particular as if guiding me to it. *Arcane Traditions and Forbidden Love: An Examination of Otherworldly Relationships*. It was an old book, its pages yellowed with age, its cover worn. A sense of forbidden curiosity arose within me. Did it hold any answers for me? For us?

I retreated to my favorite armchair by the fireplace, the book in my hands. The fire flickered, illuminating the pages as I turned them. Stories of forbidden love filled the pages, tales of witches and vampires, their love always ending in tragedy as they were hunted and destroyed by their elders before the curse consumed all. My hopes sank as I read, each word a painful reflection of my predicament.

Closing the book, I let it rest in my lap, my gaze fixed on the glowing coals in the hearth. So, this was it. The more I delved into our world, the more I realized that this forbidden love, this entanglement with Sage, was not just dangerous, but deadly.

A sigh escaped me. The irony of it all was not lost on me. I had yearned for more power, for more control. And yet, here I was, trapped in my own decisions, caught in a love that could be my downfall and hers.

But as I sat there, a growing resolution hardened within me. I was a man who had never backed down and always fought for what he wanted. I had defied traditions before, rising above society's expectations. Could I not do it again? For Sage, for us?

As I retired to bed that night, I held on to that resolve. No council, no law, no decree could stand in the way of love. It was a battle I was ready to fight.

CHAPTER 11



SAGE

THE WANING MOON cast a silvery glow over the small cottage as I pored over the ancient scrolls spread across my wooden table. The staccato beat of my heart matched the storm of emotions swirling within me.

My fingers traced over the faded ink, words and histories that connected generations of Hawthorns. These were stories passed down from my ancestors, secrets of witchcraft and tales of the sorcerer's curse and the feud that arose from it. Each side blamed the other for the curse that put all their power and lives in jeopardy. So that there was no risk of vampires and witches finding peace and even love with one another, the two sides had become the bitterest of enemies. Vampires resented witches for walking in the light, and witches despised vampires for embracing darkness and death. We were both magical races, but never could the vast divide between us be bridged.

My hands shook as I realized the implications. Cristian, the man I had grown to care for deeply, was now part of that world, obedient to a council that had been an enemy of my family for centuries. Neither would my family ever accept him. How could I reconcile my feelings for him with my loyalty to my family? The man I loved was now a symbol of an ancient hatred that ran deep within our blood.

I forced myself to read on. The words swam before me, forming tales of lost love and forbidden relationships. My ancestors had paid the price for

defying the council. Could I risk the same fate?

My heart ached as I thought of Cristian. I remembered the intensity of his gaze, his laughter, and the warmth of his presence. He was a part of me now, a part of my soul that I couldn't just abandon.

Yet my loyalty to my family ran just as deep. I couldn't allow my love to put them in danger. My grandmother's words sounded in my mind: "*Family, Sage, is what keeps us grounded when storms rage. Our loyalty to each other is what makes us Hawthorns.*"

A tear slid down my cheek, a silent testament to the internal battle waging within me. How was I to choose between love and loyalty? Would the curse truly destroy us all?

I looked out the small window, the peaceful night a stark contrast to my inner disquiet. The moon, my silent confidante, seemed to offer solace. It reminded me that life was a series of phases, of cycles of darkness and light.

Perhaps, just like the moon, I too would find my light amid this darkness. I pulled on my cloak, slipped out of my cottage, and made my way toward the center of the village. My mother's home, nestled near the stone well, was an embodiment of warmth and welcome even in these late hours. I paused outside the door, taking a moment to steady myself before I pushed it open.

"Mother," I called out, stepping into the small, cozy room illuminated by the flames of the fireplace. She turned from the pot of herbs she was tending, her eyes, the same hazel as mine, reflecting the firelight.

"Sage." Her surprise was evident in her voice. "What brings you here in the middle of the night?"

My words caught in my throat. "It's about Cristian Lazar," I finally managed to choke out, my hands nervously playing with the fringes of my cloak.

"Lord Lazar?" A cloud of concern shadowed her face, and she set her herbs aside, beckoning me to sit. "Tell me everything."

I did. I poured out my heart, the torment of my feelings for Cristian, his transformation into a vampire, and the discovery of our family's ancient feud with the vampire council that had arisen from the curse. As I spoke, I watched the play of emotions on her face that reflected my own fears and uncertainties.

When I finally finished, Mother's gaze was distant as she became lost in thoughts and perhaps memories I had no access to. Finally, she spoke.

"Sage, my dear." Her voice was soft, her hand reaching out to cover

mine. “Life is a complex tapestry of emotions and decisions. Loyalty to family is paramount, as is the pursuit of happiness and love.”

“But what about the feud with the council? What about the risks?” I asked, my eyes searching hers for an answer, for a direction.

“We cannot change the past, Sage,” she said, her gaze steady on mine. “We cannot change the actions of our ancestors or the circumstances Cristian finds himself in. What we can change is our response.”

“So, you’re saying...” I trailed off, uncertainty still gnawing at me.

“I’m saying”—she squeezed my hand, her eyes filled with an understanding born of experience—“love is a powerful magic. It’s time for the curse to be broken and the feud put aside. Search for the answer. Let your heart guide you.”

Such a wave of relief and hope overcame me that it nearly stole my breath. I leaned forward, hugging her tightly. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me quite yet. There is one thing you must do in order to break this cycle of animosity. You must gain your grandfather’s blessing. Only he can vouch for you to the elders. What you’re taking on is incredibly dangerous for us all.”

My smile quickly turned into a frown. I’d always been his favorite, but would he do this for me? There was only one way to find out.



THE WALK to my grandfather’s was a short one, but it felt as though I were traversing an endless path. His home, a larger cottage on the outskirts of the village, was known to all as the home of our coven’s head, a man of strength and wisdom, who was deeply entrenched in the old ways.

Pushing open the heavy wooden door, I found him hunched over his old oak desk, scrolls unfurled before him, the warm glow of candlelight painting him in a somber tableau. His keen eyes glanced up, instantly softening as they found me.

“Sage, my little star,” he said into the silent room, “What brings you here so late?”

“Grandfather,” I began, my voice trembling with the weight of my confession, “I’ve come to speak to you about Cristian Lazar.”

His demeanor shifted instantly, the warmth replaced by a chilling rigidity.

“I’ve heard the rumors. Are they true, then?”

Swallowing my fear, I nodded.

Grandfather straightened. Despite his years, he was still a man of great strength, and his resolve showed in his clenched jaw, his big hands clenching by his sides. “He must be destroyed, then. We cannot allow a vampire to be the lord of the lands on which the coven resides.”

I shook my head. “No! Grandfather... He’s still a good man. He’s...he’s refused to feed from mortals and has turned to animals instead. He’s vowed not to hurt us.”

Grandfather’s eyes, as cold as I’d ever seen them, pinned me in place. “And how do you know all this?”

I swallowed hard. “Because...I love him. Grandfather, please hear me out!” I cried as his jaw tightened in anger. “He sought power to keep us safe, to stop these lands from falling into the wrong hands. His intentions were good...” I trailed off unevenly.

He shook his head, shoving his hand through his thick mane of white hair. “By the Great Mother, Sage! He’s a monster!” His thunderous voice reverberated off the stone walls. “You cannot be serious about this...this creature of death!”

“I am, Grandfather,” I said, straightening my spine. “I love him, and I believe he can bridge the gap between our people.”

His laugh was bitter, hollow. “And can you stop the curse? If you persist, you threaten all our lives, everything we’ve built together. Even if I gave you my blessing, the elders would hunt both of you down and destroy you, and if not them, then the vampire council. The hatred between our species is elemental. We support life. *They* bring death.” He folded his arms over his broad chest. “I cannot agree to this.”

“I’m not asking for your approval,” I said in a small voice. “I’m asking for your blessing.”

His eyes grew wide in disbelief, then narrowed as he scowled. “Impossible.”

“Then I...” My words caught in my throat. What was the cost of love? Of happiness?

“*Then*, Sage,” he interrupted, his tone unyielding, “you will be exiled. From our family, our coven, and our village. We must cast you out and disown you lest you bring the curse down upon us all. Is this creature worth such a price?”

My heart ached, threatening to shatter under the weight of his words. I'd never seen Grandfather so angry. I had anticipated resistance, perhaps even disbelief, but exile?

His gaze never wavered as he waited for my response. I drew in a shaky breath, my thoughts racing. But as I looked into his stern eyes, a quiet strength settled over me. This was my path, my decision.

"Even if that is the price, Grandfather," I answered firmly, "I choose love. I choose Cristian."

A moment later, as the heavy door of my grandfather's house slammed shut behind me, I felt my legs buckle. The night was silent, holding its breath as I leaned against the rough, mossy wall of the cottage. I was on the precipice of losing everything—my family, community, identity as a witch—all for love.

Casting a glance upward, I sought solace in the moon, a beacon of hope in the lonely night. Just like me, it had its phases. Now, it seemed, was my time of darkness.

But I couldn't allow despair to swallow me whole, not yet. I had to be strong. For me, for Cristian, for us. I took a deep breath, the cool night air sharp against my throat, before steadying myself away from the wall.

As I trudged home, every flickering light in the windows, every cobblestone beneath my feet was a stark reminder of what I was risking. The thought of leaving this all behind, the only world I had ever known, was terrifying. But as the image of Cristian's face swam into my mind—those deep, haunting eyes filled with an irresistible mix of vulnerability and strength—I knew I had no other choice.

I needed to see Cristian...to let him know what we were up against.

CHAPTER 12



CRISTIAN

AS I NAVIGATED THE FOREST, my vampire senses heightened in the thick veil of night. Owls hooted from the treetops, and a distant stream gurgled softly. But despite the peace, an ominous dread gnawed at me, matching the urgency in Sage's missive, delivered by a white dove.

The forest gave way to a moonlit clearing, and there she was. Sage, radiant under the ethereal glow, her hair a wild mane of golden waves. Her beauty hit me like a physical blow, breathtaking and heart-wrenchingly painful all at once. Somehow, with my vampiric sight, she was even more achingly beautiful.

"Cristian," she greeted, her voice soft yet laced with a strain that hadn't been there before. She stood rigid, her usual warmth dimmed.

"Sage." I closed the distance, desperate to erase the unease between us.

"We need to talk," she began, her tone grave, her hands fidgeting with the fabric of her gown.

A sense of foreboding washed over me as I watched her struggle for words. "What is it?"

She took a deep breath, her gaze meeting mine, a silent plea for understanding. "I went to see my grandfather today," she confessed. "I needed his blessing for us to...continue."

A pit formed in my stomach, an instinctual knowledge that this was not going to end well. "And?"

“He refused,” she answered shakily. “Cristian, he knows about you, about what you are now. Our families, they have a history, a feud.”

I bowed my head. “I heard the same from the vampire council. A curse, they said, from a thousand years ago that forbids witches and vampires from loving each other.” I drew her into my arms and rested my cheek on the crown of her head as her arms tightened around my waist. “I care nothing for curses.”

“I wish I could say the same, but, Cristian”—she drew back and gazed up at me with vulnerable huge green eyes—“if we continue, we’ll put everyone in danger. Not just us. Because of that, Grandfather said I’d be exiled and driven from the coven. And that we’d be hunted—”

I pressed my lips to hers to stop her rush of words. When she twined her arms around my neck and kissed me back, pressing her body against mine, I felt as if we were the last two beings on the face of the earth and our love was all that mattered. “We will find a way, Sage,” I whispered when we parted.

“How?” she asked, myriad emotions playing across her face—fear, regret, and stubborn determination. “I don’t want to lose you. But I’m also scared of losing my family, my coven.”

I caressed her cheek. “We’re at a crossroads, our worlds colliding, forcing us to make impossible choices. We can fight, challenge fate, our leaders, or accept their rules and part ways.”

“I don’t want to lose you,” she confessed, drawing back to take my hands in hers. Her warm fingers wrapped around my cold ones, a touch that used to bring comfort but now only seemed to herald our impending heartbreak.

“Nor I you,” I said, our shared pain a tangible force between us. “But neither do I want to be the cause of your ruin. You don’t deserve to be shunned by your people.”

“And you don’t deserve to be alone, to be deprived of love,” she countered.

“But your family, your grandfather—”

“They will have to understand. They can’t dictate whom I can or cannot love.”

I gripped her hands more firmly. “Sage, this is your entire life we’re talking about. Your coven, your legacy,” I reminded her, not wanting her to make a decision she might regret later. “And there’s the vampire council to contend with as well. There were threats made against us both.”

“I don’t care. You’re a part of my life, Cristian,” she said, searching my

eyes. “I won’t deny my feelings for you. Not for my grandfather, not for the coven, and not for the vampire council.”

She was prepared to fight, to stand against everyone for us. My strong, brave girl.

I kissed her knuckles. “I feel the same, my love. You are what I was missing in my life. Not this.” I tipped my head to indicate my undead body. “I made a terrible mistake. This is all my fault. But I’ll find a solution.”

“We’ll do it together.” Her beautiful eyes brightened with hope. “We need a plan.”

“We have to be careful,” I agreed. “It’s late now. The sun will be rising soon. But let’s begin by searching through all our tomes and scrolls. There must be an answer somewhere, a way to break that curse.” I glanced up at the slowly brightening sky. “For now, I should get you home.”

She nodded, and I pulled her into my arms once more, my soul filled with love for this fearless woman. We kissed slowly, letting our lips linger, tongues silently making promises for nights when we could be together as one.

As we made our way back through the forest hand in hand, I couldn’t help but feel the enormity of our situation. Our love was a beacon, but it was also a target. In the shadows of the forest, I promised myself and Sage that no matter what, our love would not be a casualty of the impending storm.

CHAPTER 13



SAGE

WITH OUR CONVERSATION of the night before bearing on my mind, I woke the following day with a new sense of purpose. What once felt insurmountable now seemed like a problem that required a solution. And if there was one thing I had learned from my grandfather, it was that no problem was without a solution. We just had to find it.

Early morning sunlight streamed through the open window of my cottage as I started sifting through ancient texts and forbidden lore. I was searching for anything that could give us a clue about breaking the ancient curse that divided our communities and ending the feud. The smell of parchment, the dust dancing in the warm sunlight, the ink-smearred pages all created a comfortable cocoon of familiarity that helped to ease my troubled thoughts.

Midway through an old and worn-out grimoire, I paused. “Love as the antidote to curse, a bond stronger than hatred.” The words stirred something within me. Could love truly be the key to overcoming the centuries-old curse? I quickly penned a note to Cristian, my hand shaking slightly with excitement and apprehension. My enchanted white dove carried the note to his window.

Later that evening, once the daylight had waned, we met again in our safe haven, the secluded forest. The twilight cast long shadows that mirrored our unspoken fears. But the stunning blues and purples of the setting sun painted a picture of hope on the canvas of the evening sky. I held up the grimoire.

“Read this,” I said, pointing to the passage about love and curses. His dark eyes skimmed the lines, then he looked at me.

“You think our love could be the solution?” His voice held a note of skepticism, but his eyes were hopeful.

“I’m not sure. But it’s a start,” I said. Our eyes met, and in that moment, the outside world faded. We were just two beings fighting against the world to be together. The thought was terrifying, but oddly empowering too.

Over the next few weeks, Cristian and I threw ourselves into the task at hand. We consulted old texts, and we strategized, always careful to keep our actions covert. We worked tirelessly, driven by the hope of a future together. The world may have been against us, but we were resolute in our mission.

Two weeks later, the strain of our secret efforts began to show. I was helping my fellow villagers during the day and diving deep into forbidden lore with Cristian by night. The weariness was starting to seep into my bones, and it seemed the same was happening to Cristian. I knew that for my sake, he’d forgone feeding on the neighboring villagers and had resigned himself to feed only from animals. But his determination never wavered. It only served to strengthen my resolve.

One night, after an intense discussion on our next steps, we took a moment to rest. We sat beneath our usual tree, the serenity of the forest a soothing balm to our weary souls. Cristian was unusually quiet, his gaze fixed on the horizon, lost in thought. I studied his profile, his strong jaw and noble brow, and felt a wave of tenderness wash over me.

“Are you afraid?” I whispered, breaking the silence.

He turned to look at me, his eyes reflecting the silvery glow of the stars. His fingers intertwined with mine in a comforting grip. “We are walking a path fraught with danger. There’s a council of vampires and an ancient coven of witches against us. Fear is inevitable,” he quietly confessed. “But your strength gives me courage. Your love gives me hope. So, yes, I am afraid. But I am also hopeful,” he finished, squeezing my hand.

His words reflected my own feelings. As I leaned against him, his arm wrapped around me, I knew this was where I belonged. Fear be damned, we were in this together.

We’d been digging into the darkest corners of vampire and witch history, unearthing secrets, piecing together puzzles. Our progress was slow, but each new discovery ignited a spark of hope, fueling our belief that we could find a charm, a spell, or an incantation that would counter the sorcerer’s curse.

I also started noticing a change in the villagers' attitude toward Cristian. They had always feared him, but now, there was a subtle shift. They were beginning to see the man behind the nobleman, behind the vampire—the man I loved. It was a small victory, but a significant one. It gave me hope that if the curse could be lifted, the feud could be put aside too. Despite everything, my heart was full.

As the moon illuminated our secret sanctuary in the forest, I looked up at Cristian, his eyes filled with the same love, the same determination. Whatever came next, we were ready to face it. Together.

CHAPTER 14



CRISTIAN

THE BURDEN of our clandestine work had been heavy, and I saw fatigue etching itself on Sage’s beautiful face. She hid it well behind smiles and stubborn resolve, but I saw it. I yearned to take away the weariness and replace it with joy. And so I decided to surprise her, to give her an evening of respite, of romance.

I’d found a secluded garden on the outskirts of the village, bathed in the glow of moonlight, flowers shimmering with evening dew. The scent of jasmine and lavender perfumed the air. A serene pond reflected the starry night sky, its tranquility punctuated only by the soft whispers of the wind. In the heart of this garden, I prepared a small clearing adorned with wildflowers Sage loved and lit by fireflies encased in delicate crystal orbs.

As Sage approached the garden, blindfolded and guided by my hand, I felt nervous excitement fluttering in my chest. “Are you ready?” I whispered.

“I trust you,” she replied, her brow knit with curiosity.

With a deep breath, I gently removed the blindfold. Her gasp was all I needed to know that she loved it. Her eyes shone with joy, reflecting the starlight and the soft luminescence of the fireflies.

“This is beautiful.” She spun around, her eyes wide, her smile radiant.

“Only the best for you, my love,” I replied. I led her to the center of the clearing, where a small table was set with a simple meal and a single vibrant moonflower—her favorite.

We spent the evening beneath the stars, sharing laughs, stories, dreams. There, under the canopy of heaven, our conversations were honest and heartfelt. I reveled in her laughter, in the way her eyes lit up when she spoke about her passions, and in the tenderness of her touch.

“Cristian, thank you,” she whispered, her hand finding mine across the table. “Not just for tonight, but for everything. For standing by me, for fighting for us.”

I squeezed her hand in response. “There is nowhere else I would rather be. I love you.”

We held each other’s gaze, the silence around us amplifying the intimacy of the moment. It felt like the world had paused just for us. She rose and rushed into my arms, burying her face into my chest. We held each other, a promise of love sealing our shared determination.

As we lay down in the grass, staring up at the stars and whispering sweet nothings, all living things seemed to be in perfect harmony.

Tonight, in our secret garden, we were not a vampire and a witch fighting against the world. We were just Cristian and Sage, two souls irrevocably entwined.

Our whispers grew quieter as the night deepened, the fireflies dimmed their lights, and the moon cast its soft, silvery glow over us. Lying on our makeshift bed of soft grass and wildflowers, I looked at Sage, her face peaceful and content. My thumb traced gentle circles on her hand.

“I won’t stop until we’ve found a solution,” I murmured, devastated by the thought of a world without her. “A way for us to live together, not just in these fleeting moments.”

She turned to me, her emerald eyes filled with a solemn determination. Her hand traced the sharp lines of my jaw, her touch so tender, I felt it throughout my entire body. “This is worth fighting for. You and me, we we’re worth fighting for.”

The conviction in her voice sparked a surge of hope in me. I brushed a loose strand of hair away from her face, my fingers lingering on the softness of her skin. “I love you, Sage,” I whispered, my words a promise carried by the quiet night. “And I will fight for you, for us.”

I took her mouth without urgency, and she opened to me, our tongues caressing, our hands wandering as if we had all the time in the world. Her blood called to me, but I wrestled with the need, willing my rapier-sharp fangs to stop their descent. With a sharp intake of breath, I pulled away from

her.

She propped up on her elbows. “Are you all right?”

Eyes closed tight, I nodded. “Forgive me. Sometimes...the hunger is difficult to ignore.” I opened my eyes quickly and took in her pale face. “But I would never hurt you. Sage, please believe me.”



Sage

“I DO.” I saw the conflict, the struggle on his face, and my heart broke for him. Without another word, I unbuttoned my bodice and slowly bared one pale breast to his gaze, offering myself to him with total trust. The nipple was already puckered and ready for his lips. I ached for his mouth on me. “I do,” I whispered again. “I hunger too.” My tongue darted out to wet my lower lip, and he kissed me quickly, then deeply. And then something caught at the edge of my vision, and I gasped softly. “Look,” I whispered.

He lifted his head to see a pale silvery glow swirling around us. His vampiric luminescence blending with my witch magic that reflected the power of the goddess moon. Drawn to the ethereal light, fireflies hovered close by, lending their sparkle.

“Enchanting,” he murmured with a small smile, though he was looking at me, not at our combined glow.

“Don’t you see?” I whispered, touching his cheek. “Our magic is blending. Oh, Cristian.” I reached up and kissed him, pouring all my love into it, drawing him down so that he pressed his rigid cock between my spread thighs. “You are my heart.”

“And you are my soul,” he said softly against my lips, then dipped his tongue into my mouth before tracing it down to my waiting breast. I gasped when he suckled me, and together, we shed our clothing until we lay naked as the first man and the first woman beneath the moon’s loving gaze.

This time, he lay on his back and encouraged me to straddle him. Though I’d never done anything like this before, I wasn’t shy. I believed that passion was meant to be shared freely between people who cared for each other. It was a continuation of the life force, a giving and taking, an echo of the sea

and the movement of the stars. Rising above him, I then slowly lowered myself onto his hardness. Oh, it was cold, but quickly warmed in my body's embrace. Cristian closed his eyes and tipped back his head in the silvered grass. His warrior's body was etched with shadows, so strong, so beautiful, that my heart ached. Unbound from its braids, my hair fell about my shoulders and rippled down my back, my nipples peeking from between the strands as I arched and sought my pleasure. Our kisses grew voracious, our cries unhindered as we drove each other to ultimate pleasure.

I gasped out in joy, then a moment later, as his thumb worked my hidden bud, I bucked again and again, until at last I collapsed across his chest. He rolled me to my back in the soft grass and finished, groaning in ecstasy with his mouth against my throat. I bent my head to expose my throat to him further, to show him I trusted him implicitly not to hurt me, and he kissed me there, then my shoulder, then each breast in turn, before he finally lay on his side and held me close against him, our arms wrapped tight around each other.

My vampire, my lover, my everything. We held each other's souls for as long as we walked this earth.

CHAPTER 15



SAGE

I STOOD in the center of my garden, surrounded by the lush tapestry of flora that whispered secrets of ancient magic. Their voices hummed in my ears, a symphony of knowledge passed down through generations of witches. With the charm I'd made in my hands, I chanted the incantation passed down from my mother, the rhythm of the words resonating deep within me, invoking my power.

My fingers danced over the delicate silver chain, tracing the small sun pendant that would hold my protective enchantment. A surge of energy coursed through me, drawn from the earth and channeled into the charm. I closed my eyes, focusing my will, my essence into that tiny piece of metal. With each whispered word, each verse of the spell, I felt the charm pulsate with my energy, with my love for Cristian.

Sweat trickled down my brow, a small price to pay for the magic I was weaving. It was a taxing spell, draining my already exhausted strength, but every ounce of effort was worth it. Though it wouldn't lift the curse, it could at least bring us a respite from living in shadows. The thought of Cristian being able to walk in daylight, even for a little while, was a joy that overpowered any physical discomfort.

I uttered the final words of the spell, and the silver pendant glowed bright, resonating with the power of my magic. A triumphant smile danced on my lips as I held the charm to the morning sun, watching it catch the light and

shimmer in response.

Later, under the protective and encompassing shade of the forest, I presented the charm to Cristian. His expression of surprise as he watched the pendant flicker in the sunlight was priceless.

“Sage,” he began, his eyes reflecting the same sparkle that the charm held, “what is this?”

“A gift,” I finished for him, intertwining my fingers with his. “I want you to have this. A charm, to let you walk in sunlight, just for a little while. Be careful, my love. Once you feel the sun starting to burn, come back under the trees, and you’ll be safe.”

His stunned silence was answer enough. For a long moment, he just stared at the pendant in wonder, then back at me.

He slipped the chain around his neck, the sun pendant resting against his chest, its faint glow merging with the ethereal light that he emitted. As he stepped out from under the willow, the sunlight fell on him, casting a halo around his figure. I held my breath. A moment passed, and for the first time since his transformation, he stood in the daylight unscathed, his face upturned to the golden rays of the sun.

I watched him, my heart swelling with a mix of pride and love. We may have had the world against us... Even our very existence was a contradiction. But we had each other, and we had love. A love that shone brighter than the sun.

“Thank you,” Cristian whispered. He pulled me into his embrace, our bodies bathed in sunlight. “Look at us,” he said, drawing back to gaze at me. “Under the sunlight, together.”

The sight of him, unharmed by the sun’s rays, filled me with joy and hope that one day, we would stand together as husband and wife for all the world to see.

“Nothing is impossible when it comes to us.” I found myself repeating his earlier words. “We are the sun and the moon, and we have found a way to coexist.”

Our laughter mingled with the rustle of the willow’s leaves, a happy song celebrating our victory, our love. As the sun slowly began its descent, I couldn’t help but relish this fleeting moment. Cristian’s eyes, usually shadowed under the moonlight, sparkled with an unhindered joy in the daylight.

“That’s what I adore about you,” he murmured, tracing a finger down my

cheek. His touch was like a spark, igniting a flame that only he could kindle. “Your relentless spirit, your boundless love. You’ve given me more than just sunlight.”

His confession made me feel vulnerable yet empowered. I knew he was right. I had given him more than sunlight; I had given him hope, a reason to embrace his new vampiric existence without fear, a love that defied the boundaries set by our worlds.

“I promise you,” I swore, my hand reaching out to hold his, “We’ll find a way to break this curse, to challenge these laws. For us.”

His brow furrowed, and he swiped at his forehead, then quickly retreated into the shade of the willow tree. The charm was wearing off. It wasn’t permanent. It could only gift him a short while under the sun each day, a mere respite from the eternal darkness he was now bound to.

His smile, however, remained unchanged. It was the same warm and affectionate smile that had entranced me since the day we’d met.

“Your charm worked better than I could ever have imagined,” he said. “While under the sun, I felt...human again. Thank you for everything.”

“I would do anything for you.”

And it was true. I would brave any storm, fight any battle, just to give him that. Just to give us a chance.

We sat together until night fell, speaking quietly and listening to the sounds around us. The hoot of a distant owl, the rustle of the leaves in the cool evening breeze, the steady rhythm of our beating hearts. And in that silence, we found comfort. In that silence, we found strength.

CHAPTER 16



CRISTIAN

I STOOD before the ornate doors of the vampire council, the sense of unease clutching my soul like an iron vise. The marble building loomed ominously under the obsidian sky, cloaked in shadows and veiled secrets. In this place, power was not just a privilege; it was the law.

Shortly after Sage had given me the sun charm, a strange summons had come for me, urgent and nonnegotiable. The council was typically a distant entity, rarely meddling in the lives of fledglings like me. But of course, my case was more complicated since they knew about Sage, and knew I had not heeded their warning. And now here I was, standing in the hallway that bore centuries of history, waiting to face a group of beings whose lives were so old that time seemed insignificant. I dreaded what they would say.

The grand doors creaked open, and I was ushered into the room. As my gaze swept across the stone-faced council members, my heart beat with an intensity that belied its lifeless state.

Seated around an ebony table, the council members eyed me, their centuries-old gazes penetrating and unblinking. At the head of the table, Edeline, the council's leader, fixed her eyes on me, her gaze holding a hint of cold curiosity.

"Cristian Lazar," she began, her voice echoing in the vast room. "Our scouts have brought disturbing news."

Unease crept up my spine, icy fingers dancing over my nerves. The room

was filled with a tense silence, broken only by the crackling fire in the grand fireplace. As Edeline unfolded the tale of the scout's discovery, my blood ran colder than the marble beneath my feet.

An image of Sage flashed in my mind, her emerald eyes sparkling with determination, her laugh floating like a melody in my ears. The scouts had seen us together, in our secret garden, under the cover of the moon.

"Love between a vampire and a witch is forbidden. You know this." Edeline's voice pierced my thoughts, cold and unforgiving. "Worse, she's given you a sun charm. If the two of you walk together in the sunlight, you will invoke the curse that will destroy us all. You must abandon her. If not, you will be exiled and hunted."

"But I..." I began, my voice barely a whisper. I felt like I was gasping for breath, a sensation I hadn't felt since my transformation. The thought of leaving Sage, of letting her go, was suffocating.

"Choose, Lazar," she commanded, her voice reverberating with her immense power. "Your love for the witch or your life. Choose wisely, for this decision comes with grave consequences."

Her words bounced off the high vaulted ceilings and settled on my shoulders like vultures. The council's ultimatum presented an impossible choice. How could I explain to them that we were searching for a way to reverse the curse, to end the bitter feud between our races? They wouldn't believe it was possible. I wondered if they would even want that. They wore their hatred of witches like crowns and believed in their own immortal superiority.

And so I remained silent.

The council waited, their eyes boring into me, their anticipation palpable. I knew, deep down, that no matter what choice I made, I was already paying the price.

"Sage... She means more to me than you can comprehend," I said.

Edeline's gaze turned icy, and her bearing stiffened. She was a monument of composed hostility in the face of my defiant confession.

"She's a witch, Lord Lazar," she hissed, her tone seething with centuries of ingrained disdain. "Can you not see the danger she poses? To you, to us?"

My fingers curled into fists at my sides. "I see her for who she is, not what she is," I defended.

A ripple of surprise ran through the council, faces hardening further, if possible.

“And what of us?” Edeline demanded, leaning forward, her eyes burning into mine. “What of your loyalty to us, to your own kind?”

My kind. The words resonated within me. Were these truly my people? Did our mutual condition, our nocturnal existence and shared hunger, bind us in an irrevocable bond? Was I expected to abandon my heart’s desire for this fellowship?

“And if I choose her?” I finally dared to ask.

“Then you will condemn us all for no reason. She is a mortal, and will live only a fraction of your long existence. Eventually, she will be as a fading star in your memory, as meaningless as a forgotten conversation. But we”—she swept her hand to encompass the council and beyond—“will suffer because you will have invoked the curse. Already there have been whispers of vampires losing some of their abilities. It will only continue to get worse if we don’t stop it now.” She leaned forward on her ebon throne, gripping my gaze. “Lord Lazar, you are but a fledgling, and you have no concept of what a tapestry of time lies before you. Because of that, we are not wholly unsympathetic to your plight, and so we do offer you a choice. But if you choose her, then you force our hand.”

In the hardened gazes of the council members, the tightening of their lips, I saw that they were united against me. I would be cast out, considered a traitor to my kind, hunted, and despised. I would be alone, save for Sage.

But as the image of her face surfaced in my mind, her smile radiant as a moonbeam, her eyes twinkling with boundless affection, I realized that I could endure anything, even exile or enmity, for her. And in that moment, my heart, though cursed with immortal near-stillness, had never felt more alive.

“I will choose her,” I said, my voice unwavering, ringing throughout the chamber. “Every time.”

A murmur swept through the council, a low buzzing hum that skated over my senses. A dull throb began in my temples, the vampire blood in me roaring against my audacity, my defiance of our sacred order.

“Then you’ve made your decision.” Edeline’s words were final, a chilling decree. “You have chosen your path. You are no longer one of us.”

I looked into the faces of the council members, these ancient beings, etched with ages of wisdom, power, and dogma. Their disapproval radiated through the chamber, a palpable force that stirred the stagnant air.

And yet I stood tall. My decision was not born of impulsive youth or short-lived passion. It was cemented by an irrevocable love that transcended

the divide of our species, broke the shackles of our feuding pasts.

“Yes, I have chosen my path.” I echoed Edeline’s words, not out of defiance, but out of resolution. “And I am ready to face the consequences.”

As I exited the chamber, a newfound resolve settled within me. There was no looking back now, only forward to a path unknown, where uncertainties loomed and dangers threatened. But I would tread it with confidence, for there was Sage at the end.

The night had never felt more alive, the stars twinkling above in silent acknowledgment. I felt the night breeze whip around me, the scent of damp earth filling my senses. My preternaturally still heart roused, thumped with the rhythm of my decision, each beat drumming out the name of my beloved: Sage.

As I set out into the unknown, the words of the council still ringing in my ears, I felt a strange serenity. The calm before a storm, perhaps. Or maybe the calm of one who had accepted his fate, and embraced his chosen path, however fraught it may be.

And so, under the gaze of the ever-watchful moon, I stepped out of the council’s territory and into the wilderness of my new existence. A vampire, yes, but now also an outcast, a renegade in the name of love. I carried that title with pride, a badge of my undying love for Sage.

It was just the beginning, the first step in my battle against time, destiny, and the chains of my supernatural existence. But whatever lay ahead, I knew I was ready.

CHAPTER 17



SAGE

I HAD BEEN CONFINED in my cottage all morning, studying any ancient texts that offered even a glimmer of hope for Christian and me. I penned down another potential spell that promised to break the curse. Lost in my world, I almost missed the three knocks that rattled my door.

“Enter,” I called out, not lifting my gaze from the parchment.

The door creaked open, and a familiar scent wafted into the room—lilac and fresh morning dew. I turned to see my mother wringing her hands together.

“I spoke to your grandfather, and he told me what you asked. You must end it, Sage,” she said.

I blinked, my quill halting midsentence, the dark ink pooling and staining the aged parchment. A knot tightened in my chest.

“You said you understood, Mother. You told me to follow my heart.”

Her gaze softened, but her stance remained unwavering. “I know I did, my love. But this...this is bigger than both of us. Than both of you.”

My mind raced as I studied her, the lines of worry etched on her face, her fingers now twisting the edges of her shawl. She was torn, much like me. Her loyalty to our family, to our coven, was battling with her love for her daughter.

“Grandfather.” I swallowed, feeling a bitter taste creep into my mouth. “What did he say?”

The silence that ensued was deafening. I knew, even before she spoke the words, what had transpired.

“He has given his decree, Sage. He...he threatens to disown you if you continue this path.”

I bit my lip and tossed my quill to the table. But the reality was cruel and unyielding. I had hoped for understanding, for acceptance. Yet here I was, facing the age-old ultimatum—love or loyalty.

I began to loathe the traditions I’d once loved, resent the family that had once brought me such comfort. Why couldn’t they understand? I knew what my heart longed for. I loved Cristian. I loved my family too, my coven. But how could one choose between two halves of their own soul?

“I won’t leave him, Mother.” I choked out the words, tasting their bitter truth. “We are trying to find a way to break the curse—”

“Sage!” she cut in. “Do you think others have not tried to do the same? While it has been hundreds of years since the last time a witch defied her coven, the story remains. Crops died, animals became infertile. Suffering fell upon the land. Our spells were powerless to help the sick, the dying. You have no idea the magnitude of the evil you’re awakening.”

The look my mother gave me was one of heartbreak and resignation. We both knew the gravity of my decision, the repercussions it would have. But even then, my resolve did not waver.

“I believe...” I began, then drew a breath and stood taller. “Cristian and I believe, based on our research, that our love may be enough to overcome the curse. Then, if we’re successful, the feud between the vampires and the witches can end too.”

“If! If!” my mother cried, her arms lifted in exasperation. “And if *not*?”

I slowly shook my head. “We must try, Mother. Please, believe in us.”

She pressed her hands to her face and sobbed. In anguish, I watched my mother leave, her figure retreating until it disappeared into the lush green of the forest that surrounded our village. The cottage felt emptier than it had ever been, filled only with my resolute silence and the dream of a defiant love.

The world outside seemed oblivious to my quandary. Birds chirped merrily, the wind rustled through the trees on the towering mountains, and the sun cast long, dancing shadows. The world was alive, vibrant, while my own world was spiraling into a storm of heartache.

I picked up my quill again, my fingers trembling. The spell before me

seemed to blur. But I was ready.

Rising from my chair, I rolled the parchment, tucked it under my arm, and left the comfort of my cottage. I welcomed the burst of wind that caressed my face and ruffled my hair as I stepped into the wide-open expanse. Despite my surging emotions, the day was tranquil. The verdant trees surrounding the village whispered secrets to each other, while the cobbled pathway stretched ahead, winding its way through clusters of quaint houses.

As I walked toward the center of the village, my heart pounded loudly in my ears. Ahead, perched on a rise overlooking our world, was my grandfather's home. I had to speak to him, to try to sway him to my cause once more.

The journey seemed endless. Each step I took felt like a victory and a defeat. I was approaching my family, my roots, but with the risk of losing it all.

Finally, the cottage stood before me. The wood-and-stone structure, weathered by centuries, was a symbol of our heritage, our traditions, the power of our coven. I took a deep breath, summoning all my courage, and stepped forward.

Inside, the room was dimly lit, the air heavy with the scent of old books and dried herbs. I found my grandfather seated in his usual armchair, his figure silhouetted against the faint glow of the fireplace. His piercing gaze landed on me as I entered, unwavering and stern.

"I am told," he began, "that you have chosen to defy our laws, to forsake our coven."

His words stung, but I stood my ground and held out the scroll. "I have chosen love."

"For a vampire? A creature of evil?"

"For someone who sees the world not for what it is, but for what it could be."

"You risk too much, Sage," he warned, his voice softer now as he stood to face me. "Too much. The curse aside, the feud between his kind and ours cannot be overcome. We are beings of light and life. A vampire can offer you only one thing: death. How can you reconcile yourself to being with a creature that must murder humans to survive?"

I quickly shook my head. "He doesn't do that now. He drinks from animals."

“You understand that will only weaken him? Eventually, his unholy appetite will master him, and he will feed from the innocent once more.” Grandfather’s wise and serious eyes bore into mine. “You’ve devoted your studies, your life, to healing. You might cure a child’s fever in the morning only to have your lover kill that same child in the night.”

A chill shivered over my shoulders and down my spine. “Cristian would never harm a child.”

His lips quirked. “An adult, then? A mother or father, a friend, a person who has dreams and hopes of their own? Whom will you allow to be his next meal?”

I held out the rolled parchment that held my scribbled notes. “We have been working together to find a way to reverse this curse so that we may be together.”

He gave a short, harsh laugh, his bushy eyebrows rising. “You’re a strong witch, Sage, but even for the most powerful among us, that would be impossible.” He sighed, a long-drawn-out sound that spoke volumes of his disappointment, and he rubbed his forehead wearily. “I warned you before. If you continue this path, you do so alone. Without your coven, without your family.”

I lifted my chin, hardening myself against the guilt I felt for defying him. “You could help. With the combined knowledge of you and the other coven members, together we could find a—”

He cut me off with a slice of his hand through the air. “Need I remind you that you’re already promised to another? Have you forgotten about Cezar? He is a strong witch. Together, through your children, you will carry on our bloodlines.”

“Is that all you care about, Grandfather? Bloodlines? What of love?”

“For witches, our love and compassion is meant for those we heal and guide.” He shook his head. “Our duty is to the coven first and foremost, not to our own selfish hearts.”

“I don’t believe that. I can’t!” But seeing that he would not be swayed, I turned on my heel and left the house, leaving behind my family, my coven, and my past.

As I journeyed back through the village, my heart was as heavy as the setting sun. I looked around at the charming cottages, their whitewashed walls glowing softly in the dusk, the scents of cooking stews and the sound of laughter and muted conversations rising to me as families gathered for the

evening meal, and felt a deep pang of longing and regret. This was my home, the only world I'd ever known. Could I truly walk away from all this?

The journey to Ravenscroft was a blur, my mind whirling with thoughts and fears. I knew I couldn't let them consume me. I had to stay strong, for both of us.

Cristian's face was a mask of concern when he saw me. "Sage," he breathed, "it's not safe for you to be here."

I nearly fell into his arms. "I've spoken to my grandfather," I said, without preamble. "He told me again to abandon you. To return to our traditions. Including the feud between our kind."

Cristian's brows furrowed, his expression darkening. "And?"

I hung my head, steadying myself. "He said if I choose you, I choose to stand alone. Without my family. Without my coven."

Cristian reached out, his fingers gently tilting my chin up to meet his gaze. "You don't have to do this. Not for me."

But I pulled away from his touch. "No. Not for you. For us."

He wrapped me in his arms, holding me close as though he could shield me from the world. "The vampire council exiled me as well. No matter. We'll find our own way," he whispered into my hair.

I drew back. "There has to be a way to lift the curse, but I don't know where else to look. It seems like we've been through every book ever written."

He offered me a crooked smile. "There's still the castle repository. It's full of old texts. We could look there if you don't mind the cobwebs and dust."

My mood brightened a bit. "Cobwebs and dust don't bother me at all."

CHAPTER 18



CRISTIAN

THE CASTLE REPOSITORY was a maze of high shelves, each filled with antiquated scrolls and weathered leather-bound books. Cristian's father had been well traveled and had collected many tomes and parchments containing tales of otherworldly powers throughout the years. Likely, this was from whence his affection for witches had arisen. Our plan was to explore every dusty corner and forgotten shelf in search of a solution. We were not just hopeful, but desperate.

We began to pore over manuscripts and texts, some so ancient they nearly crumbled under our touch. Our fingers grew stained with dust and old ink, our eyes weary from scanning line after line of archaic scripts and symbols.

It was past midnight when Sage, her brow furrowed in concentration, reached for a thick tome from a top shelf. It was bound in faded leather, its pages yellowed with age. Its title was inscribed in an ancient dialect, a blend of witch and vampire languages that few could decipher. But Sage, with her extensive knowledge of magical languages, slowly traced the letters.

"The Confluence of Dark and Light," she read aloud, her voice clear and strong in the silent library. "This could be something, Cristian."

Intrigued, I watched as she gently flipped open the aged book. The pages were covered in elaborate illustrations and cryptic verses. As Sage began translating, I felt a strange tingle, a sudden shift in the air, a pull toward the pages in front of us.

And then we found it. Nestled in the middle of the ancient tome, surrounded by darkly intricate illustrations, lay the prophecy. It spoke of an unbreakable bond formed in love, of the moon and sun uniting, of a witch's magic and a vampire's blood breaking an ancient curse. But it also warned of an "ultimate sacrifice." The words rang in the air between us, heavy and foreboding.

"Could it really mean..." Sage trailed off as she reread the passage, her expression reflecting the fear I felt deep in my gut. "Could it be talking about us?"

"I think so," I said. "It's too coincidental."

"But this sacrifice," she said, her fingers gently tracing over the ominous words. "What is it?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "But I'm willing to do anything."

We continued to scan the tome, stopping at an interesting section of text.

"The witch must meet with a high priestess and the vampire with its elders to learn of their sacrifice," Sage read aloud.

It was a monumental discovery, a potential solution to our dilemma, yet the gravity of the prophecy weighed heavily on us. And there was no guarantee the high priestess or the elders would cooperate. Nevertheless, as we left the library, I looked up at the sprawling expanse of the star-filled sky and wondered if this was the path we were destined to take. If I was ready to make that ultimate sacrifice.

"Sage"—I reached for her hand—"are you sure you want to do this? I cannot bear the thought of you in danger."

She turned to me, her eyes filled with determination. "I made a promise to you, and I intend to keep it. We've faced so many challenges already, and I'm not about to back down now. I'm willing to face whatever it takes to be together."

I clasped both her hands in mine, drawing strength from her touch. "I know you're brave, but this is no ordinary journey. The high priestess and the vampire elders are powerful and wily beings. They may demand sacrifices that are too great for us to bear."

A flicker of uncertainty passed over her features, but she quickly masked it. "We won't know until we try. I believe that our love is stronger than any prophecy. We owe it to ourselves to find out what we must do to break this curse. Not only for us, but to end the feud between witches and vampires that has gone on for so many centuries."

Her words resonated deep within my soul. “You’re right. We can’t let fear hold us back. But promise me this: if the sacrifices are too great, we will find another way. I cannot bear the thought of losing you.”

Sage squeezed my hands gently, her eyes filled with love and understanding. “I promise.”

CHAPTER 19



CRISTIAN

THE CARPATHIAN MOUNTAINS LOOMED AHEAD, towering snow-shrouded peaks blanketed in an eerie mist that seemed to whisper ancient secrets. The journey had been arduous, but I knew that within these formidable mountains lay the answers I sought—the vampire elders held the key to breaking the curse. These were the masters of all the lands’ councils, and their decision would overrule those undead who had already turned against me. I could only pray they would hear me out.

As I approached the ancient temple hidden amid the mountains, I felt a mixture of trepidation and determination. The tall, weathered stone pillars stood like sentinels, guarding the sacred knowledge within. I took a deep breath and entered the dimly lit chamber, the scent of incense filling the air.

“Welcome, Cristian Lazar.” A voice arrowed through the chamber, ethereal and commanding. I turned to see a group of elders seated in a semicircle, their eyes gleaming with their preternatural power.

“I seek your counsel,” I said, trying to conceal the urgency in my voice. “I wish to break the curse that binds me...and the woman I love. She is a mortal. A witch.”

The vampire who had greeted me nodded solemnly. Seated stiffly in his throne of white marble and gold, he regarded me with piercing ice-blue eyes set within a chiseled alabaster face, his pale gold hair falling over his shoulders. “We know who you are and why you have come. We have

foreseen it.”

Of course they had. I had never felt like more of a fledgling than I did just then. I nodded and said, “Then you know I’ve come to you with a proposition. We want to break the curse so that we may join together in love, as husband and wife. And we believe we have found a way.”

The elders exchanged doubting glances, and their leader addressed me once more. “The curse has withstood such efforts before, Lord Lazar. What is your plan?”

I held out the book. “According to this text, if we each make a great sacrifice, we’ll be able to be together. And vampires and witches will no longer be under the yoke of the curse.”

“Are you willing to make such a sacrifice?”

I clenched my jaw and nodded resolutely. “Yes, I am. I will do whatever it takes. This scripture says that the witch must ask her high priestess what her sacrifice must be, and as for me...I am asking you all to determine the price I must pay.” I scanned their merciless gazes, but could not tell if they were moved by my plea.

In the ensuing silence, I sensed they were communicating with one another through the power of their inscrutable minds. After a moment, the blue-eyed leader intoned, “Then you must give up something you love dearly. Your land must be relinquished to your nemesis, Radu Mirea. Only then can the curse be lifted.”

I suppose I shouldn’t have been so surprised that they knew of Radu and our antagonistic relationship. These wise, if ruthless, beings rode the winds and saw all. My gaze darted among the elders, and I hesitated. My love for Sage was boundless, but the thought of surrendering my land to Radu Mirea was a bitter pill to swallow. It was more than just an estate—it was a legacy, a symbol of my family’s history and honor. It was the very reason I had given up my mortal life.

“My land is not just property to me. It holds significant importance, not only to me, but to the peasants who live in the villages surrounding the estate. I must weigh the consequences carefully.”

The leader inclined his head. “Perhaps this will make your decision easier. You may keep Ravenscroft castle and the land it stands upon. But you shall relinquish the vineyards.”

Without the vineyards, I would have no income...no power. Putting my own more selfish feelings aside, I considered the villagers. I’d grown fond of

many of them in the time I'd spent with Sage. They were good people. Yet I doubted many would be comfortable living in the shadow of a vampire... Although I despised the man, Radu was no worse master to the villagers on his estate than I had been to mine. He would need them to continue working the vineyards, and so they would be treated fairly. No doubt, they'd be relieved that their undead lord was no longer walking the vineyards in the moonlight.

When all was considered, I realized it was only my inability to surrender the power and wealth that had made me a lord that was holding me back. And I knew none of the trappings of nobility were important to Sage. She was all that mattered to me as well.

"I have made my decision," I declared, my voice unwavering. "I will give the vineyards to Radu Mirea."

"Very well," the leader said, bowing his pale head.

With a bone-white hand, he wrote upon a parchment given to him by a servant, adorning it with intricate symbols and writing in an ancient script. "This is your vow, Lord Lazar. The pact must be sealed with your blood."

I drew a blade from my belt and cut my palm. As I pressed my bleeding hand to the scroll, a shocking power surged through me, stealing my breath and whitening my vision for a moment, leaving me trembling. As I staggered back, my hand instantly healed. I curled my fingers into my palm. I was a vampire still, but one step closer to a life with my beloved.

I watched as the leader chanted over the parchment. He bit the heel of his hand with his fangs and dripped black blood over mine. As soon as his blood blended with mine, a glowing stone formed from the droplets. Before I left the chamber, the leader handed me this artifact—a stone that pulsated with otherworldly power, imbued with primal magic.

"If all goes well, this will be the key to breaking the curse," he said. "But it can only be activated when united with the one you love. Once she has made her sacrifice as well, you and the witch must hold it together to lift the curse."

I nodded, tucking the stone safely in my pocket. "Thank you."

As I made my way back to the village, the weight of my decision settled on my shoulders. The land I had fought so hard to protect would now be in the hands of my enemy. But as I thought of Sage, the woman I loved with all my soul, I knew it was a sacrifice worth making.

CHAPTER 20



SAGE

THE AIR WAS heavy with anticipation as I made my way through the ancient woods toward the heart of the coven. Each step brought me closer to the answers I sought. I needed to know what my sacrifice would be—the price I must pay to break the curse that divided us so cruelly.

The coven's high priestess, a learned and revered figure known for her powerful magic and boundless wisdom, resided in a secluded glade deep in the woods. As I approached, the trees seemed to whisper my name, as if the forest itself disapproved of my love for the vampire prince.

Finally reaching the glade, I found the high priestess seated on a moss-covered stone, her silver hair cascading gracefully over her shoulders. Her eyes, the clear blue-green of secret pools, met mine with a sense of knowing.

"Sage," the high priestess said softly. "I have been expecting you."

This did not surprise me. Able to commune with all living things, from insects and plants to every animal that crept or crawled, she would have been following my forbidden journey with Cristian. I struggled to keep my voice steady. "High Priestess, I need to know what my sacrifice will be in order to break the curse and so that Cristian and I may live together without fear. Tell me, please."

The high priestess gazed at me with compassion. "Child, the sacrifice you must make is the deepest desire of your heart—the one you hold most dear."

My gut clenched at the words. I knew in my soul what the high priestess

meant, yet I struggled to understand. “You mean... Cristian? I must give him up to break the curse?”

The high priestess nodded solemnly. “Yes, my dear. If you refuse, the curse will remain. Not only will you be exiled from the coven, but your family will be as well, leaving all of you to wander without the protection and love of your kind. Cristian Lazar will walk for eternity without you, never safe from the wrath of the vampire council.”

The weight of the choice pressed down on me, and I sank to my knees, tears streaming down my cheeks. “But I love him. He is my heart and soul. How can I let him go?”

The high priestess soundlessly approached me and rested a hand on my shoulder. “Love is a powerful force, my child. It can bring joy and strength, but it can also demand sacrifice. At birth, you were promised to another man. This is the way of the coven. He is the one you are to marry.”

I shook my head wildly. “No. I cannot—”

The priestess raised a quelling hand. “The path ahead is difficult, but know that love’s light will guide you through the darkness.”

How could love’s light guide me when there could be no love in my life without Cristian? Yet I couldn’t be so selfish. The high priestess had named the price. Unless I agreed, Cristian would be hunted for eternity, an outcast. My family would be exiled. The feud between witches and vampires would remain insurmountable. And the curse could still destroy the lives of innocents caught up in it as crops withered and livestock died...

I had come to her for an answer, and now I must accept the consequences, whether I liked that answer or not.

The high priestess spoke softly. “You have a choice. You must make the decision that feels right for you. But remember, sacrifices are made not only for our own happiness, but for the greater good.”

Biting my lip, I linked my hands together and pressed them over my aching heart.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting the glade in shadows, I wiped away my tears and stood tall, bent with sorrow, but filled with a grim sense of purpose.

“I will face the council and announce my decision,” I said resolutely. “I won’t let fear dictate my heart’s path.”

The high priestess smiled, her eyes twinkling with pride. “You are strong and wise, my child. Trust in the love that binds you and the choices that will

shape your destiny.”

I left the glade and headed back to my village, the burden of my decision making every step difficult.

As I walked the path to the village, in the light of the rising moon, I caught a glimpse of Cristian waiting for me outside Ravenscroft. I ached at the sight of him. My feet carried me to him as if of their own accord. As I drew closer, Cristian came to meet me, his handsome face drawn with concern. I had a terrible feeling his meeting with the vampire elders had not gone any better than mine with the high priestess. I ran the last few steps into his open arms and allowed myself a moment to rejoice in his strong embrace before I tore myself away.

“I spoke with the high priestess,” I said, my voice trembling. “I know what I must do to break the curse.”

Cristian’s expression was a mixture of hope and fear. “And what is it?”

I took a deep breath, my throat tightening with every word. “I must give you up. I must marry the man I was betrothed to at birth. It’s the only way to break the curse and save my family from exile.”

Cristian’s face fell, and he took a step back. “No, Sage, you can’t do that. We can find another way. I can’t lose you.”

I reached out, my hand trembling as I touched his cheek. “I love you with all that I am. But sometimes love means making sacrifices—for ourselves and others. I can’t bear to see my family suffer because of me. And it will save you too, my love. You will no longer have to fear being hunted by the council, exiled to walk the earth alone for eternity.”

He shook his head slowly, disbelievingly, then pulled me into a tight embrace, holding me close as if he could protect me from the sorrow that lay ahead. “This is an impossible choice,” he whispered, his voice choked with emotion. “Surely there’s another way?”

I buried my face in his chest, tears streaming down my cheeks. “I must do it for my family, for the coven, for everyone. This curse could bring pain and suffering for generations. If breaking it means giving up my heart’s desire, I will do what I must.”

He held me tighter still. “The elders told me that someday, my memory of you would be like a fading star. But my brave and beautiful witch, I will never forget you.”

I swept away my tears and asked, “What of you? What did the vampire counsel say?” I stepped back to gaze into his face.

He grimaced. "I must give Radu the vineyards."

I gasped. "Oh no! What did you decide?"

He shook his head. "It was a small price to be with you. But now..." He closed his eyes and grimaced, then looked at me. "If you are brave enough to break this curse, then I will too. Nothing has meaning without you. I will fulfill the vow I made and surrender the lands so that the curse will be finished, even if it means we cannot be together. We must think of others and hope for a better future."

I fisted my hands. "They've betrayed us both. The counsel has tricked you into giving up your lands, and the high priestess has made it impossible for me to be with you."

He scraped his fingers through his hair. "A greater plan is in motion here, I fear. And we are just pawns."

"What can we do?"

He reached for me and kissed my lips lightly. "We can make our own vow, my love. No matter the passage of time or distance, I will find you again. I promise this on my immortal soul."

With tears burning my eyes, I clutched him harder. "I promise to wait for you, Cristian. Never stop looking for me, no matter how many lifetimes it takes."

"Until the end of time itself, Sage, I will love you."



THE DAYS that followed were filled with anguish and longing. I'd announced my decision to the coven elders, and Cezar, the man I was promised to, had been summoned to marry me. I had not seen nor spoken to Cristian again, although we had sent notes to each other agreeing to meet after the ceremony to finally break the curse.

On the eve of my betrothal ceremony, I found myself standing in the same secluded glade where I had sought the counsel of the high priestess. The moon hung low in the sky, the goddess's cold light illuminating the forest.

As I stood there, consumed by grief, a soft voice filled the air. It was the high priestess, an ethereal presence in the darkness. Despite how much I hated this situation, I knew I had to trust in her wisdom.

“Sage,” she said, her silvery hair lifting on a breeze. “I see the pain in your heart, and I know the sacrifice you are about to make. But remember, sometimes the greatest act of love is to let go.”

I nodded. “I know,” I said softly. “But it doesn’t make it any easier.”

“You are allowed to grieve. Your heart is strong, and love will always find its way back to where it belongs,” she said, as if she’d overheard my and Cristian’s vow. Goose bumps rose all over my skin, and the same breeze that toyed with the hem of her embroidered gown caressed my cheek.

As I turned to meet my fated husband, I felt a sense of resolution wash over me. I knew that I was making the right decision for those I loved.

CHAPTER 21



CRISTIAN

I STOOD AMONG THE SHADOWS, hidden from the world's prying eyes, as I watched Sage exchange vows with another man. My chest clenched with an ache that seemed to sear through my soul. I had known this day would come, but seeing it unfold before my eyes was a torment I could never have imagined.

Her radiant beauty, enhanced by the soft moonlight, was a bittersweet sight. I couldn't tear my gaze from her, even as every fiber of my being screamed in protest. She looked resplendent in her ceremonial robes, yet I knew her soul was just as torn as mine.

As the ceremony progressed, I saw the pain flicker in her eyes, mirroring the agony that twisted in my chest. I knew the sacrifice she was making, and it made me want to destroy something. She was giving up her heart's desire—us—to protect her family and her coven, and to protect me from exile. Yet in my anger and frustration, I felt the dark hunger of a vampire stir in my soul. Why should I be merciful to a world that had shown no mercy to me?

And then the weight of the artifact drooped my pocket, a reminder of the hope and desperation that had driven me on this journey. The stone held within it my vow, my love for Sage, her love for me, a fusion of energies that could break the curse that hung over us all.

Yet, despite that knowledge, I felt powerless. The sacrifice that I had made was now unnecessary. I had given up my vineyards to a shocked and

pleased Mirea, and Sage was marrying another. But the pain of losing my land was nothing compared to a life without her.

I wanted to rush forward, sweep her into my arms, and tell her that we could find another way to fight against the curse. But I knew I couldn't. The counsel and the coven were stronger than we could ever be, and we couldn't fight them all.

In the distance, the priestess spoke words of unity and commitment, binding Sage to the man who would be her husband, the man who would lie with her, who would father her children, who would take care of her and become the center of her life. With each vow they exchanged, a vise tightened around my heart. But I remained rooted to the spot, unable to tear my eyes away.

I couldn't help but wonder if she sensed my presence, if she knew that I stood amid the darkness.

When the ceremony had finished and the celebration commenced, she stole a glance toward the path that led from the revelry. Without a second thought, I stepped out of the shadows.

"Sage," I whispered as she approached.

Her eyes widened with relief as she reached me. "Cristian." She breathed my name, her voice a melody that caressed my soul.

I took the artifact out of my pocket and held it between us before she could come closer. If she embraced me now, I think the sorrow would shatter me. "Here is the key to breaking the curse."

A tear escaped her eye, glimmering like a star in the moonlight. "This is it, then?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"It is," I affirmed, taking her small, warm hand in mine and placing the stone in her palm. I covered it with my own hand. "With this artifact, we can free all witches and vampires of the curse."

Her grip tightened on my hand, the stone tight between our palms. Her eyes locked on to mine with a fierce determination. "We made the ultimate sacrifice, but it will not be in vain."

Gazing into her eyes, I found my courage as she had found hers. She truly was the strongest, bravest person I had ever known. I could do nothing now but honor what we'd done together and be brave as well.

With our hands clasped, we activated the ancient artifact, and a surge of energy enveloped us. It was a bittersweet moment, knowing that this union was only temporary, yet we held on to each other as we once had in the

moonlit glade, surrounded by the pure glow of our combined magics, cherishing the precious remaining seconds.

As the curse began to lift, I felt a profound connection to Sage, as if our souls were weaving together for one last dance. A ribbon of memories spooled before my eyes, the love we shared spanning lifetimes. In that fleeting moment, we were truly one.

Then, just as swiftly as it had begun, the spell was broken. Sage stepped back, her eyes glistening with tears.

“I will find you,” I promised, my voice choked by my own sorrow. “In the next lifetime, I will find you, and we will be together...” I held her gaze, my heart swelling with love and longing.

“I will wait for you,” she vowed, her voice unwavering, her huge green eyes shining. “No matter how many lifetimes it takes.”

With one last lingering touch, we reluctantly parted ways. I sank back into the shadows.

“I will find you, Sage,” I whispered, watching her go to her new husband, surrounded by her family in the light of torches. “No matter the obstacles, no matter the centuries that stand between us, I will find you, and we will be together once more.”

EPILOGUE



ASTRIDE HIS FRACTIOUS STALLION AT THE EDGE OF THE WOODS, RADU MIREA stared at the scene of revelry before him. Tonight, the witch Sage Hawthorn had bound herself to a brown-haired stranger from another village. Yet Radu knew that her heart belonged to another man: his enemy and rival, Cristian Lazar.

So, he thought with a sly smile, Lazar had lost her too, along with his vineyards. Mirea hummed along with the tune being played to celebrate the marriage, but he was pleased for an entirely different reason. It made him happy to see Lazar denied his heart's desire.

He loosened the reins, and his horse surged forward, trotting along the woods' edge and snorting softly, champing at the bit. The beast was nervous any time they rode too near the village. It didn't like anything unnatural, such as witches or—Mirea cast a gaze up at the dark silhouette of Ravenscroft—vampires.

Mirea chuckled to himself. What a fool Lazar had been. Given the ultimate power of immortal life, he'd squandered it and now was trapped in that useless pile of rubble. Mirea hoped he'd spend many hours staring out from the parapets, watching the villagers making Mirea rich by bringing in the bountiful harvest Lazar had worked so hard to produce. And even though Mirea had little use for it, he wanted the castle too. He wanted everything—he was *owed* everything, because of what Lazar's father had done to his family.

While Cristian was off gaining glory fighting by the side of the Voivode of Wallachia, Vlad Dracula, Mirea had been caring for his own father, Claudiu, who'd lost everything when Darius Lazar ruthlessly undercut him in

every aspect of business. Whether it be wheat, linen, or wine, every sale fell through as Darius stole the business away, building his empire at the cost of Claudiu's sanity. Eventually, his family destitute, and driven by desperation, Mirea had honed his skills at gambling and learned that drunken soldiers and arrogant nobles were easy to cheat, and easy to beat. He was good at it too.

Good enough to finally start taking back from Darius Lazar that which meant the most to him: his precious land.

Mirea's revenge would not stop now that Darius Lazar had died, of course. The son was as great a greedy fool as his father had been, not even satisfied with a mortal life. When Mirea had heard rumors that Cristian had become a vampire, at first, he'd been bemused, then...concerned. For a strong vampire could wreak havoc amongst his villages and people. A vengeful vampire could destroy the one thing Mirea truly cared about: his wife and children. Finally, a whisper of jealousy had slithered through Mirea as he thought of himself aging, failing, dying, while Lazar carried on, undoubtedly amassing more wealth and territory than Mirea ever could.

Leaving the light and music of the village behind, Mirea kicked his horse into a gallop along a shadowed path in the woods toward the bog where few ventured. Populated by vipers and fearsome creatures, it was rumored to be haunted. Even if those tales were mere fancies, there were very real patches of soft ground in which he and his horse could flounder and sink to a dreadful suffocating death, with no one around to hear Mirea's cries for help. Nevertheless, he put spurs to flank and urged his mount to lengthen his stride.

The moon was high, and the time was short. His spies had told him where to find the hide-covered hut.

At last, he saw it, and standing beside it, a tall, gaunt figure holding a sputtering torch whose flame only made his pale, drawn face more ghastly. Mirea dismounted, tied his horse's reins tightly to a fallen tree, and approached. The pale being beckoned him in through a door hung with strings of animal bones.

Mirea turned to the silent figure, his hand resting on the hilt of his silver sword. "I desire the gift of eternal life."

The vampire's slight smile sent a chill down Mirea's spine, and he murmured, "I can grant you all that you desire and more. But know this—such gifts come with a price, a heavy burden that you must bear."

In answer, Mirea tore the collar of his shirt and bared his throat to him.

There was no price too high for revenge against Cristian Lazar.

Thank you for reading!



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ABOUT EDEN HART

Eden Hart is the author of the Empire City Vampires series, a spellbinding collection of paranormal romance novels that delve into a world of vampires, witches, and mystical beings.

Her writing journey began with a fascination for the unexplained, a passion for love stories, and an affinity for the dark and mysterious. Drawing on her extensive research and vivid imagination, she crafts characters that are as complex as they are compelling, and settings that are both fantastical and grounded in myth.

When she's not writing her next tale of magic and desire, Eden can be found enjoying a cup of tea in her garden. Her books are a passport to a world where the supernatural is real, and love is the most powerful force of all.

KISS OF THE SCORPIO MOON



N.D. TESTA

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Edited by: Dr. Edith A. Kostka

KISS OF THE SCORPIO MOON

When the Blood Moon rises in Scorpio and kisses the sun, the magic and love of the Meadowbrooke women will be no more.

Bellatrix Meadowbrooke, Princess of Maldinia, has been betrothed to a man she does not love. On a gloomy autumn night she makes her escape from the castle and loses her memory after hitting her head in the wood.

A year later, Bellatrix has her memory healed by the Good Witches of the Woods only to discover she bears a curse that forbids her from expressing love. To add to that she remembers she has a twin sister and they both are witches.

To break the curse, Bellatrix and Jaiyana must journey across the realm to the Cave of Aldenshine to battle a ferocious dragon for the Crystals of Time. Then they must return home to the palace and face Bellatrix's betrothed who has taken over as king. The two must reclaim their titles as queen and prove to their father that women are capable of rule. This all must occur before the end of the lunar eclipse. For if the princesses do not break the spell before the Hunter Moon sets, they will never find true love.

CHAPTER 1



“BELLATRIX, YOU CANNOT STAY HERE! YOU MUST LEAVE!” CRIED JAIYANA.
“He is coming!”

Foggy mists swirled around the silhouettes of two young royal princesses, cloaking them from danger. The massive castle of Maldinia loomed over them. The stone railing outlined their hiding place, and pillars bore statues of dragons. An eerie silence echoed through the castle chambers, and colors of red, yellow, and orange leaves swirled through the air.

Eighteen-year-old Bellatrix Meadowbrooke stared into her sister’s face, an exact copy of her own. Dark wavy hair fell to their waists, and their slender bodies were adorned in elegant garments. Amber eyes sparkled under thick lashes, and plump lips turned pressed together in worry.

“B-but what about you?” asked Bellatrix looking at her twin. The only difference between the two was the fact Jaiyana limped from a deformity suffered at birth. She used a long staff with intricately woven designs to help her walk. She hid the talisman from her father who often looked at her with disdain.

Jaiyana shook her head. “Father does not care about me! You see my stance. It makes me unsuitable for marriage, unsuitable for motherhood, unsuitable for anything. He simply tolerates me. But you are the one he is concerned about. Now that we are eighteen, he is going to arrange a hideous marriage to horrid Prince Roarke, and your life will be miserable until the day you die.”

Bellatrix looked out into the distant woods. Blood coursed hot through her veins and her heart beat in fury. This was their kingdom; they were the future heirs to the throne. Yet their royal claim was denied them, because

their father did not believe a woman was capable of ruling a realm.

Something soft and warm pressed itself against Bellatrix's leg, weaving in and out around her feet. She looked down to see their cat Jinx maneuvering himself between the two princesses. With trembling hands, she picked up the black feline and cradled him in her arms. Jinx's eyes glowed yellow like the stars in the sky.

"This is an outrage," she hissed. "This is our home. We must defend it!"

"How can we?" replied Jaiyana.

Before Bellatrix could reply, the neigh of a horse could be heard in the distance. From the nearby castle, their lady's maid poked her head out of the upper window casement.

"He is here! If you are going to escape, you had better do it now!"

The princess took a deep breath and let the cool air fill her lungs. She would not become a wife to a man she did not love. Her kingdom would not fall to the hands of a king through an arranged marriage. She placed Jinx into Jaiyana's arms.

"I will come back," she whispered. After giving her twin a hug, Bellatrix pulled up the hood on her cloak. She raced down the stone steps littered with fallen leaves and into the dark woods that surrounded the castle.

Tall tree limbs filled with stubborn leaves blocked most of the moonlight, casting the forest in darkness. Sharp briars bursting from thorn bushes snagged Bellatrix's gown as she raced through the underbrush as quickly as her legs would take her. Her heart pounded against her rib cage, and her chest heaved as her lungs fought to take in as much air as possible. Above her head she could hear the owls hooting, never a sign of good fortune, and eerie noises jumped out at every turn.

Goosebumps broke out along her skin, and beads of sweat appeared on her forehead. The princess had no idea where she was headed. She knew she had to get as far away from the castle of Maldinia as possible.

I should have brought a lantern with me, she chided herself, but she knew a glow of light on a dark night would give her away. Discovery was the last misfortune she needed should her unwanted betrothed find her. Her body threatened to give out from exhaustion, yet she willed herself to continue to run. A sensation ran along her body and bubbled in her stomach. She was unsure of what it was, but it felt as if her soul was trying to tell her something.

A rustle to her right startled Bellatrix. She jumped to the side and her foot caught in an exposed tree root. She fell, hit her head on a boulder, and lay

still.



ONE YEAR LATER...

LIGHT from the open window fell across Bellatrix's closed lids. Fluttering her long lashes, she opened her eyes at the sound of the bedroom door creaking. Sitting up, she turned to see Iris enter her room.

"Good morning, my dear. Did you have a good night's sleep?" Iris was a short elderly woman with thick white hair that fell in cascades to her waist.

Bellatrix shook her head. "No." For the past three weeks the same dream has plagued her soul. In her nightmare, she was running through the woods. Something was chasing her, but she could not see anything. She also had this feeling that a part of herself was missing, and she needed to find it, but she did not know what it was that she had lost.

"It could be your memory starting to awaken," observed the kind woman. "The village healer said that your mind would return when it was ready."

Bellatrix sighed. It had almost been a year since Iris had found her in the woods. The white-haired woman had been out picking berries when she found the young maiden lying on the ground with a wound to her head. Iris went for help and got the huntsman to carry Bellatrix back to her cottage. Unconscious when she was taken in by the good-hearted woman, the young maiden woke in a strange house with no recollection of her past. The only evidence she could remember was her name: Bellatrix; everything else was forgotten. She had no memory of who she was nor why she was in the woods. Upon examining her, the village healer told her that the head injury had caused a form of forgetfulness. When her mind had fully recovered, her memory would return. Yet here she was, a year later, with her identity still forgotten.

"No need to feel distressed. Remembrance shall come when it is ready. I told you that you are welcome to stay here as long as it takes for your thoughts to return. I enjoy the company of one so young. As a pretty maiden, you possess an intelligence that speaks of costly tutors and a well-stocked library. You are no ordinary young lady. When the time comes for you to

remember who you truly are, there will be repercussions throughout the realm. Now it is time for us to make the jams.” Iris closed the door behind her.

Bellatrix got up and changed into her plain brown dress and apron. Iris lived in a small cottage on the outskirts of Maldinia near the forest. Her gentle benefactor concocted delicious recipes from ancient sources that turned wild berries into luscious, magical jams. Iris sold her unique delectables for a good price at the market in town. They brought happiness and good health to those who consumed the savory flavors of such fantastic fruits. For it is always in the fruits that the magic appears.

Moving the objects on the table, the young maiden looked for her hairbrush that had gone missing.

“Everything goes missing, just like my thoughts,” grumbled Bellatrix. Lately she felt a strong agitation throughout her body as if her soul were trying to tell her something, but the message could not get through. “Ugh! Hairbrush! Where are you? Come here!”

Her eyes flicked upward to look at herself in the mirror and she gasped. Her missing hairbrush floated behind her. With graceful movements, the brush glided through the air and landed on the table in front of her. Bellatrix’s heart thumped wildly within her chest. She rubbed her eyes and tried to make sense of what she had just seen. The runaway brush lay in waiting for her hand to embrace it and maneuver the bristles through her hair.

“Bellatrix, come on dear, we have a long day of jam making ahead of us.” Iris’ voice danced in her eardrums. The amber-eyed maiden told herself what she had seen was a hallucination and headed to the kitchen.



SWEAT BEADED on Bellatrix’s forehead and matted her hair against the back of her neck as she stirred the jam in the pot on the fire. The sun was high in the sky and the young guest along with Iris had spent most of the day creating different exquisite flavors and packaging them in glass jars with their signature green ribbon.

Iris tied a bow around a jar of elderberry jam. “Bellatrix, it is time for tea. You have been working hard,” she called.

Wiping her face, Bellatrix looked at the crates of jam stacked next to the

table. “I think we need another combination to entice the village folk to buy our wares.”

“Your peach and blueberry jam was most favorably received,” noted Iris. “Do you think we need another new one?”

Nodding, Bellatrix looked around the messy kitchen. “The more coins we can bring into our coffers each week, the more security will ensure that we may purchase items needed to run the farm. Once our profits increase, we could acquire cows and sheep and use their milk and wool to bring to the market.

“Ay, Bellatrix, I do not know what I would do without you. Your brilliant ideas for fruit preserves have helped me more than you know.”

Smiling, Bellatrix reached for a basket on a hook by the door. “I am going into the woods to gather some boysenberries for our next batch.”

“And I am sure a handsome young man will be waiting for you by the waterfall,” Iris gave her a wink.

Bellatrix bit back a smile, “I will be back.” Twirling her basket in her hand, she waltzed out the door.

Autumn breezes played merrily with the locks of the pretty berry maid as she entered the woods. The forest held secrets hidden in its mighty branches. Lingonberry bushes grew beside a small pond, a sanctuary that held a place dear to Bellatrix’s heart. A section where love sang on the wind and safety was felt through the mist came from a majestic waterfall, a breathtaking oasis where her soul felt at peace.

Bellatrix stepped off the path and sat on a giant log that faced the cascading waves.

Clacking of hooves sounded behind her and a voice called, “Hello, Beautiful!”

A grin spread across her face as she turned to see a magnificent white horse trot to the pond. On top of the horse was a marvelously well-formed young man with a lace-up blue shirt and dark pants. A sword hung at his waist.

Jumping to her feet, the young woman ran over to the fellow who scooped her up in his arms.

“Eryx!” she cried as his lips touched hers and his warm embrace housed the comfort she needed while her brain remained in a fog.

Eryx was an armorer who made and supplied weapons for the castle where the royal family lived. He resided alone in a cabin at the edge of the

woods.

For almost a year, the two had been courting. She had met Eryx shortly after she had been found by Iris in the woods. Through the subsequent months, while picking berries, she suffered the sense that she had been running from something frightening, but she was never sure what that was. Her dreams often found her afraid of a dark shadow, and she experienced the oddest feeling that she knew who that shadow was. But she could not quite see the face to identify the person who filled her with such terror. When she found Eryx, kindness sent the shadow away. She was happy in his company.

“How are you feeling, my love?” asked Eryx as he brushed his hand gently against her face.

“Alas, my memory has still not returned. I do not know what I am going to do if I cannot regain my identity.”

Eryx’s deep green irises rested on her furrowed brow. “Have faith, my love. The world works wonders even when we do not believe so. After all, it has brought us together.”

Bellatrix gave him a smile. She thought back to the first time they had met. It had been a week after Iris had found her unconscious in the woods and taken her in. Feeling confused and full of anxiety, she decided to take a stroll to the forest to see if she could jog her memory. She had been standing near the waterfall, trying to remember what had happened before her accident when a beautiful white horse came crashing through the bushes. The horse was visibly upset and began rearing up on hind legs. Using patience and kindness, the lovely berrypicker tried to calm the beast and succeeded as if by magic. A few moments later, exhausted, Eryx came through the woods in search of his horse. He had no idea what had frightened his stalwart steed, but the minute his eyes had fallen upon the dark-haired beauty, he knew he loved her. After a few meetings in the woods, the two had fallen hopelessly in love with one another.

“For that, I am grateful, my dearest,” replied Bellatrix. “However, I cannot abandon the fact that there is trouble in my past. I need to know who I am. I know my name, but I do not know when I was born or where I come from. I have no idea who I am.”

“I know you are the love of my life, and I wish for us to be together always.” Eryx reached into his pocket. His eyes widened as he began to pat all of his pockets in an urgent manner. “I thought I had brought it with me,” he muttered to himself.

“Have you lost something?” asked Bellatrix.

“I - oh, never mind. I am sure it is at home. I am so sorry. I thought I had it where it was safe.” Eryx scratched his head. “I wanted to ask you something, but now I cannot. Without the treasure, I do not wish to be disrespectful.”

Bellatrix’s heart fluttered in her chest. She believed she knew what her beau wanted to ask her, and even without the desired object, she wanted to hear him say it. “Go ahead,” she begged. “It is alright, my love. Please say what is on your mind.”

Nodding, Eryx took her hands in his and sank to one knee. “Bellatrix, my darling, would you...” The sentence was unfinished as Eryx began to cough. “Sorry, my dear, would you...” again Eryx stopped abruptly and was unable to continue.

“What’s wrong?” asked Bellatrix, “Are you alright, my love?”

Eryx rose to his feet. “I must be unwell, for as much as I try to say the words you long to hear, my tongue will not allow the words to be spoken.”

“How peculiar,” mused Bellatrix. “My answer lies within my heart. I say...”

Before the happy forest dweller could produce the word ‘yes,’ a fit of coughs racked her body. “Eryx I...” Her lips barred her from producing the phrase of romance.

She clasped her hands to her chest. An utterance that she had been able to say so easily a week ago was now lost to the wind. “Dear heart, it seems I too am unable to say the sentiments of affection.”

“It appears acts of wickedness have been bestowed upon us, my darling.” responded Eryx.

“I know how I feel about you,” whispered Bellatrix.

“And I about you,” responded the armorer, “Then we are in agreement?”

Bellatrix nodded, “I only wish we could speak it for the world to hear. Our desire for one another is now held prisoner in our souls with our tongues as the guard.” Her eyes sparkled with hope as an idea came to her. Grabbing her lover’s arm, she cried. “We must go tell Iris. She has a knack for this sort of conundrum. I know she will be able to help us.”



“YOU ARE CURSED!”

Bellatrix and her beau’s eyes widened as Iris’ revelation rang throughout the cabin.

The old woman got up from the table and walked over to the cupboard. She pulled out a faded leather-bound book. Flipping through the pages, her finger ran over the various words on the sheet. “Ah here it is. The Curse of Lovers. When two people in love want to express their affection, they are unable to do so. Words of romance are forgotten, and couples are unable to confess their deepest desires or agree to any form of matrimonial commitment. Their love remains bottled inside, unable to escape into the world.”

“Someone has hexed us and we do not even know who it is?” asked Bellatrix.

Iris held out her palm to place her hand in the palm of the befuddled Bellatrix. Upon doing so, the elderly woman let out a gasp. “It is you who bears the misfortune, my dear. A dull, dark tinge upon the fingernails shows desperation of emotion. The heart cries in silence. Tears speak for words unspoken.” She looked at Eryx’s nails. “You have been spared, but Bellatrix has projected her jinx upon you.”

Jinx? Thought Bellatrix. *Why does that name sound so familiar?* “Why did someone place black magic upon me?” she asked.

Pondering her question, Iris shook her head. “That answer I do not know. But I have a feeling it has something to do with your past, my dear, that your memory refuses to acknowledge.”

“How can we regain her memory?” asked Eryx. “If my beloved can remember, then we can break this spell and marry.”

“Tisk, tisk,” replied Iris as she continued to flip through the pages. “It appears this hex will not be so easy to break. There are levels to love curses, and it appears this one is the most powerful. A bewitchment made in the act of envy and jealousy. A charm of possession. A conjuring of anger and not wanting another to experience true love.” She clasped her wrinkled hand to her chest, and the creases in her forehead deepened. “This curse was created during an October full moon near All Hallow’s Eve. You must find a way to break this incantation or it may last forever!”

“How can we break this hex?” asked Bellatrix, tears forming in her eyes.

“You must go deep into the woods until the trees become ghosts. There you will find the Good Witches of the Woods. They shall have the answer

you seek. I only know general knowledge of curses, but they will have the secret to vindication.”

The Good Witches of the Woods was another name that produced an echo of familiarity to the sweet guest that Iris wanted so badly to help.

“You must go now, for every minute wasted makes the power grow stronger, and it could mean a life without true love.”



WALKING DEEP INTO THE FOREST, the two lovers pondered what the other one was thinking. Farther than they had ever gone before, Bellatrix thought of their secret grotto where the beautiful waterfall and quiet pond flooded feelings of a settled life. They were miles away from their gathering place. She tightened her grip on Eryx's hand. Ever since they had received the devastating news of the evil spell, they had fallen into an awkward silence. A curse was the most dangerous fate to befall any innocent couple.

While her mouth made no sounds, her brain was chattering. Who would curse her? What had she done to someone to cause that person to take away the ability for her to give and receive love? She groaned inwardly. If only she could remember.

“You do not have to take this journey with me, Eryx,” she bowed her head. “It is I who is cursed, not you. If you do not wish to be with me, I understand. Why would anyone want to spend eternity with someone who has no memory of her past?”

Her beloved armorer stopped and looked at her as if she had uttered a foreign phrase.

“What on Earth are you talking about, my dear?”

“What if the witches tell us that the curse cannot be broken? Will we not be able to marry?”

“Why would you want to be with someone who cannot state her affections?”

Eryx put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her amber eyes. “My darling, you know how I feel about you. I may not be able to say the proper words or ask you the question that will make our souls complete, but I do know that my heart belongs to only you. We will break this curse, and if not, we will continue as we are. For I know I cannot live without you by my side.

We may not be able to verbalize our affections yet, but our hearts and souls communicate with each other silently everyday.”

A smile crept across Bellatrix’s face, and her heart leaped with joy. She leaned forward and pressed her lips against his. “Then together we shall be, with or without words.”

Swooping down from above, the cackle of a raven disturbed the romantic moment. The lovers were separated as the dark-feathered bird dived down between them, swooped overhead, and took off into the sky.

“Ay, it seems the curse walks among us with every intention of separating us for good,” noted Eryx. “It appears we are lost, as well.”

Turning around Bellatrix attempted to make sense of the surroundings; however, each tree trunk appeared to be a twin of the next. The rustle of the wind through the branches sent a shower of multi-colored leaves onto the couple. Pulling out a red leaf from her dark locks, a chill ran up her spine. The darkness of the woods and filtered lighting through the boughs make her fearful. She was not sure why, but a growing sensation told her she had been here before. Eryx called to her, and she broke from her moment of pensive thought.

“No, dear, we are not lost,” replied Bellatrix. “Iris told us we must journey to where the trees become ghosts.” She pointed to a grove of trees that were the color of snow. The uniqueness that surrounded the particular section of woods was the fact that trees resembled the rest of the coppice, only they were pure white. The trunk, branches, and remaining leaves glistened in the light as if covered in ice, but the phantom cluster rang true to its name for the flora indeed resembled ghosts.

Reaching forward, Eryx took her hand and together they walked toward the ghosts. As they neared the silent sentinels, the demoiselle felt a jarring within her soul. A feeling of agitation swept through her body as if her heart were trying to communicate to her, but her brain kept severing the connection.

Entering into the domain of the Good Witches, Bellatrix noted how the ghostly trees harbored green ivy, and the lush grass was embroidered with various colors of flowers. The atmosphere delivered a sense of peace and serenity. It was the same sensation she felt when she and Eryx were in their secret place.

A woman appeared before them, which caused the couple to jump back in surprise. She was beautiful with long blonde hair and a jeweled headpiece

woven into her locks. Slender and agile, she was clothed in emerald garments.

“Hello, Bellatrix and Eryx, I was wondering when you two would be arriving,” she beamed a smile.

“H-How do you know our names?” asked Eryx.

“We Witches of the Woods know everything.” She roved her eyes over the maiden and her armorer. “Have no fear, we only wish to help.” Behind the witch, a group of enchanters appeared, men and women of various stature and size. “I am Tiahanna,” the witch gestured towards tree stumps for them to be seated. Once comfortable upon a cushion-covered oak ottoman, Tiahanna clasped her hands together, formed her fingers as if in contemplation, and looked through emerald green eyes at the loving couple. As her gaze brightened, light began to emulate through her fingertips.

“Darkness surrounds you both, and your future together is in peril,” she narrowed her eyes whose color deepened.

“Ah, actually that is I who lies in darkness, for I have been hexed,” confessed Bellatrix. “It appears we have received the sovereignty of the Lover's Curse. A spell of the highest powers, and if it is not broken soon, it will last forever.”

Tiahanna tilted her head at the young maiden. “You do not remember why you have been cursed?” Bellatrix shook her head. The Good Witch reached forward and placed the back of her hand to the unfortunate lady's forehead. “A wound to the skull inflicts scars that disrupts the brain from remembrance.”

“I know,” replied Bellatrix, “I have suffered this malady for almost a year.”

“It does no good to break a curse when one cannot remember the reason for the purpose. A young maiden can bring about an unwanted betrothal. Or should I say, your royal highness, Princess of Maldinia.”

A twitch of pain flicked at her brain, Princess of Maldinia? She was not the only princess.

“Princess?” gasped Eryx. “I knew the King had daughters, but I thought they were already married.” The armorer shook his head. “This cannot be. How is it possible that the King would let his daughter go missing for almost a year and not send an army to find her?”

Daughters?

Bellatrix felt as if her brain were beginning to awaken from a long

slumber. The idea of more than one daughter seemed old and new at the same time.

Tiahanna cleared her throat. “In the line of monarchy, only one principle is presented to the realm, the Rule of Order and Peace. What goes on behind palace doors is never meant to be made public. The royal pages who deliver messages from the palace always shield themselves with layer upon layer of veils. Truth is often lost in the mist of good intentions. Within our little hamlet, we are at the outskirts of the realm where news often reaches us long after events have taken place. You have no idea what has been going on at the grand edifice. Evil lies in wait.”

The Good Witch smiled in secrecy. She walked over to a brook that ran through the phantom trees and dipped her fingers into the water.

“In order to dispel the bitterness and hatred that has been projected onto you, we must bring forth the memory that has been lost. To bring the past into now will be the key to saving your souls, your love, your family, and all of the realm.”

Walking over to Bellatrix, the witch placed her hands on the damsel’s head, one hand on the back of the skull and the other on her forehead. “Close your eyes,” she commanded. Bellatrix did as she was told. The witch hummed softly and a purple glow began to surround the two. From behind her closed eyelids, Bellatrix listened to the melody as she felt the warmth from the conjurer’s hands massage her brain. The shadows that had plagued her thoughts for months metaphorized into images of faces that were recognizable, but the names were out of her reach.

Princess of Maldinia,

One of two.

Born under the Hunter Moon.

In Scorpio.

A twin.

Twin?

Sister, sister!

Bellatrix felt the whirlwind of thoughts flood her soul as her brain broke down the barriers of memory loss that had kept her identity captive for so long.

Princess, I am a princess. I have a sister, J-Jaiyana. Jaiyana! Where is she?

A vision appeared before her. She was looking down at hands that

intertwined with hers. Raising her head, she stared into a face that mirrored her own. Jaiyana, her twin.

“Bellatrix, you cannot stay here! You must leave!” cried Jaiyana. “He is coming! Prince Roarke has been betrothed to you. You must leave now or your life will be miserable forever.”

“I will come back,” she felt the words escape her lips as she raced towards the dark woods where she would fall and lose her memory which Tiahanna had now restored.

Jaiyana, my beautiful twin, how could I have forgotten you? Where are you?

With a scream Bellatrix opened her eyes as Tiahanna removed her hands. Tears began to stream down her face as she cried, “Jaiyana! Where is she?”

Eryx gathered her into his arms as he stroked her head. “Hush, my love, do not cry, I am here.”

“Jaiyana,” cried Bellatrix.

“She is safe but must be saved,” answered Tiahanna. “You must go to her, for she is the half of you which will be needed to save both of you. Your sister also bears this curse.”

Bellatrix pulled herself from the comforting embrace of her lover and looked the witch in the eye. “What do you mean?”

“This lover’s curse has not only been placed on you but your twin sister and all future Meadowbrooke women.”

“You have a twin,” whispered Eryx.

Bellatrix nodded. “All of this has been my father’s doing. As King he wanted a young prince.” The memories started to flow back to her mind. “H-He did not want a woman on the throne. He w-was trying to marry me to someone I did not love. I-I do not understand why he would plight my troth without my permission.”

Eryx reached forward and took her hand in his. She gave him a small smile and was grateful for the warmth of his palm against hers.

Tiahanna beamed, “Your memory returns in small waves, but in order to speed the process, I will tell your tale, dear princess. A tale of sadness, but only you can determine the ending.” The blonde witch cleared her throat and spoke

“Long ago in our land of enchantment and great beauty, the ruler of Maldinia was a king with a frozen heart, selfish in his interests, narrow in his vision, unfeeling in his emotions. As a ruler, he meted out judgement with an

iron fist, listened to arguments with a closed ear, and issued sentences of penance with no regret.

“Over time, there was an announcement that his queen was with child, and the people of Maldinia rejoiced. At last an heir would be born who could bring a legacy of change to the realm. The monarchs differed in their vision of an heir. The King wished for a young prince and the Queen only desired a healthy child.

“The King would soon find out that Fate does not always give us what our hearts want. On a frigid October night, the sky was illuminated by the Blood Hunter Moon, a supermoon in the sign of Scorpio. It was under that immense orb of night tinged with red that the queen gave birth to twin daughters.

“Anger filled the King’s heart. He was outraged. How could Fate have treated him this way? He became even more irate when the midwife told him that the queen’s labor had been detrimental to her body. She would never be able to carry or birth children again. The twin princesses would forever be his only heirs.

“The ruler stormed out of the chamber to his private quarters. This was unacceptable. The true monarch was always and ever a young prince. For it was a prince who had the education and was given the desserts of the palace. It was the prince who was given the powers of negotiation and skills of war. Lastly, it was the prince who would eventually take over the throne once the King passed to his reward. Daughters were not worthy of that kind of responsibility. Daughters were unworthy in all respects. In the mind of the King, he would not allow a princess to take over his throne. Maldinia was a land of enchantment, a gift from his own father. He would find a way to place a young man upon the throne, even if it was through the arrangement of marriage. Knowing he would never have another child, the King accepted the fact that a son-in-law chosen by him would be the next best option.

“The queen worried for her daughters’ futures. She knew her husband would never allow a woman to rule the throne. The King would marry his daughters to a prince of a neighboring kingdom with the most wealth, a plan that would expand his empire. He did not care about his daughters finding true love or about their happiness.

“While the King plotted, the queen prayed to The Good Witches of the Forest to keep her children safe. On the Winds of Hope the Witches heard her plea, and they granted the queen’s wish. The mysterious weavers of spells

gave the girls a precious gift: the power of magic.”

A smirk spread across Tiahanna’s face as Bellatrix’s eyes widened. “This is our birth story! It was never told to me. You are saying that I am a witch?”

“You are one of us, child,” replied Tiahanna. “The Witches of the Woods do not grant favors often, but the unfair treatment of women deserves our full attention.”

“Why did no one ever tell me I was a witch?”

“Because they did not know. Your emergence as a woman of magic would come when you needed it most, which is now. I am sure throughout your upbringing, and also lately, you felt a sense of urgency in your soul. An intuition that something was trying to come forth but was not ready.”

Bellatrix nodded. “I still do not know who cursed me.”

“You’re betrothed of course,” replied the witch. “A year ago, in October, you made your great escape from Maldinia castle.”

“Yes, my father wished me to marry Prince Roarke of Centenshire. He was a wealthy heir to his throne, and my father believed it would make the Maldinian empire stronger to combine the two thrones under one ruler.”

“Ah, but what your father did not know was that Prince Roarke was skilled in wizardry. What makes that fact more terrifying is his unrelenting desire to have you as his wife. The night of your escape was also the night of the Blood Hunter Full Moon, the same lunar phase that you were born under. When your escape became known throughout the palace, Roarke was furious that your father had broken his promise of the marriage. He took your parents captive and claimed the throne as his own.”

“What about Jaiyana?”

“She escaped. However, the livid prince was not only upset at the King, but upset with you, Bellatrix, for your disappearance meant a rejection, and no one refuses the Prince of Centenshire. Under the full moon, he uttered a curse that would bar the Meadowbrook women from finding true love and never knowing happiness. Never in their lifetimes could they speak words of love to anyone.”

“How do we break the curse?” asked Bellatrix.

Folding her arms, Tiahanna raised an eyebrow. “In order for me to tell you that, I must ask a favor in return. The secrets to breaking a curse of such magnitude will require you to embark on a journey where risk of life is high liability. If you do succeed and take back what is rightfully yours, then I would like to be rewarded for the knowledge I have bestowed upon you.”

“I agree to your terms. What do you desire?” asked Bellatrix. “I am afraid I do not have much money.”

“Witches have no need for money, witches have magic. Money is less than desirable to a powerful woman like myself,” replied Tiahanna. She turned to the other conjurers who were seated among the trees watching the interaction intently. “The Good Witches of the Woods and myself ask for Recognition.”

“Recognition?” repeated Bellatrix.

“Yes. For many years we have been confined to our home among the ghost trees, for your father had forbidden magic and banished us from the kingdom. That is why we live at the border of the realm. We have many talents that we wish to use to help others and make society a better place, but we cannot help the people of Maldinia because your father has taken away our rights as citizens of the realm.”

“I accept your request,” replied Bellatrix.

“Then I must ask for a token to keep until the promise of Recognition is fulfilled. An object of value.”

Looking down at her hand, on her forefinger was a golden ring cast in the shape of a crown, a connection to her past. Bellatrix’s memory told her that her sister possessed the same ring. A gift to them from their mother. With trembling hands she removed the worldly possession from her finger and placed it into the witch’s outstretched palm. “This is all I have.”

“It will do,” replied Tiahanna as she put the ring into the pocket of her gown, “to hold until the payment of Recognition has been achieved.”

The witch moved her hands apart from each other, and a yellow mist began to form between her fingers. Tiahanna began to speak in a low voice. “This year the Blood Hunter Moon returns again, the same phase that was present during the time of your birth and Roarke’s casting of the curse. The Blood Hunter Moon appears once every eighteen years. However, out of the conjure of magic within the enchantment of the woods, Fate has decided the Blood Hunter Moon will appear for a second year in a row. This creates trouble, for this time it will be a supermoon, when the lunar orbit is closest to our realm. This will occur in the shadow creating a lunar eclipse which symbolizes completion and the height of power. If the curse is not broken before the moon moves out of the eclipse, then the curse Roarke has placed upon you will become permanent forever. One of the enhancements of our blessing upon your person is that your magic will be the strongest, which will

heighten your chances of success in this quest that may end your life.”

“In order to break the curse, you must first find your sister. As twins, your powers are stronger together, and you will need each other to achieve victory. Then you will travel to the cave of Aldenshine. There you will obtain three crystals to aid in your fight.”

“What do we do when we find the crystals?” asked Eryx.

“The answer will come when it is time,” replied Tiahanna. “In order to prepare for your battle, you must learn to use your powers.” She motioned for a young wizard to come forth.

“This is my nephew Grünholz. He is very skilled in the art of magic and will be your guide on the journey ahead. I also have someone else who will be resourceful in your quest.”

A black cat jumped onto the tree stump next to Bellatrix. Its silhouette appeared familiar.

“Jinx!” cried the princess as she cuddled the cat in her arms. She felt a sense of connection to her sister. The emerald-eyed feline had been the twins' pride and joy.

“Bellatrix! I missed you! Easy there! Wow, Princess, your powers have made you quite strong,” Jinx spoke.

The maiden gasped, “You can talk?”

“I always could talk! When you believed in magic, it opened the door for anything to be possible; therefore, now you can hear me speak,” purred Jinx as he rubbed against her arm.

“In order to take back what is rightfully yours, you must connect the past with the present and future,” said Tiahanna, “What better way than to reunite you with your beloved pet since childhood.”

“Thank you, Tiahanna,” murmured Bellatrix.

“You can thank me if you fulfill your destiny. I feel the effects of the growing supermoon and the oncoming eclipse. You must hurry. For when the Blood Hunter Moon rises in Scorpio and kisses the sun, the magic and love of the Meadowbrooks will be no more.”



“I AM A WITCH,” murmured Bellatrix. Her fingertips tingled and her arms trembled. An awakening soared throughout her body, and she felt the magic

within her looking for a way to be released. She held Jinx in her arms and stroked his soft fur.

“A princess witch,” added Eryx as he stepped closer to her.

“I am sorry. This must be quite a shock to you. To think I believed I was one of the village inhabitants who had lost her way during the time I had forgotten my past.”

“To be honest, my dear, I always believed you there was something extraordinary about you. The whole world can see you are truly special.” He leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

“You do not fear my background?” asked Bellatrix.

“I feel I am the luckiest man in all of Maldinia.”

The princess’ heart fluttered, and she opened her mouth to reply when she was interrupted by Grünholz.

“I hate to break up this touching moment, but the ongoing eclipse is only a few days away, and you have much to learn, Princess.” Grünholz was a tall man with dark hair, defined jawline, and brooding expression. He had an air of command about him, and, although he was young, Bellatrix felt he had years of wisdom and magic flowing in his veins.

“Ugh! All this love language is making me sick!” chimed in Jinx as he jumped out of her arms.

“I am sorry, Grünholz,” replied Bellatrix.

The handsome wizard held up his hand, “You may call me Grün, and no need for apologies. With each passing moment, the lunar orbit comes closer to our realm, and once it falls into the sun’s shadow, your chances of love will be marred forever.”

“What do we need to do first?” asked Eryx.

Bellatrix locked eyes with Grün, and a silent knowledge passed between them. “We need to find my twin Jaiyana,” she answered. “B-but I am not sure how.” She picked up Jinx and put him in her satchel that was strung across her body.

Grün chuckled, “You do know. You and your sister are connected to one another. You share the same blood, and the fact you were born under the Blood Hunter Moon makes your connection even stronger. After all, you are the same person descended from one womb. Close your eyes and look inward deeply into yourself; there you will find the location of Jaiyana.

Taking a deep breath, Bellatrix closed her eyes and drowned out the sounds around her. The vision flooded her mind of the last time she had seen

Jaiyana. She was holding her sister's hands as she promised she would return. Her sister stood before her, tall and thin with long dark hair and amber eyes. A duplicate of herself except for the slight limp. Her twin gripped the long gold staff.

"Jaiyana, where are you?" Bellatrix called forth her powers to find her beloved sister.

The scene changed within the eye of her mind, and the maiden found herself standing in the shadow of a stone tower far away in a different cluster of woods.

Through the open tower window, the princess could see a figure inside. Walking with a slight limp, the silhouette passed through the vision, and looked outwards surveying the landscape. In her hand she gripped a golden staff. As Bellatrix drew closer, the face was that of Jiayana. She was safe!

With a gasp, Bellatrix opened her eyes and found herself back in the woods with Grün and Eryx. Engraved in her brain was the exact location where her sister was hiding.

"I know where she is," the witch princess grinned. "She is living in a tower on the eastside of the mountains, deep in the woods."

Eryx scratched his head, "Why, that is about a two days' ride from here, even longer on foot. We will never make it in time before the eclipse."

"Ah, dear armorer, what you speak of is the time it would take ordinary villagers to arrive at the east mountains." Grün snapped his fingers and a speck of red glistened on his thumb. "We have magic." He flicked his wrist and the light extinguished. "By means of spells, we shall be at the tower in a thrice! We will fly through the veils and mists of Time with Princess Bellatrix leading the way."

"I do not know how to disappear and reappear," replied Bellatrix.

"Ah, your powers have been unleashed; there is nothing you cannot do. You simply need to know how to use your own brand of magic," advised Grün. He motioned for Eryx to come closer. "Stand between us," he commanded the armorer. He spread his arms outward and motioned for Bellatrix to take his hands. Once their fingers were interlocked, they formed a circle with Eryx in the middle and Jinx comfortable in his satchel.

"You know in your heart, where you need to go. Close your eyes and envision the location, then ask your powers to bring you there. You are stronger than you think, and I will guard you along the way."

Squeezing Grün's hands tightly, the witch princess called forth the image

of the tower and her sister looking into the distance. A tingle in her feet made her toes grow hot, and the sensation wove its way up her legs to her chest and then spread into her arms. Through the vibrations she could feel her sister's soul in connection with her own. Feelings of sorrow, worry, and wondering filled her heart. Her sister missed her with a sense of loss as powerful as her own.

“Take me to Jaiyana,” she whispered.

From the ground, sparks of white shot up and began to encircle the trio as Bellatrix called forth her magic with Grün's guidance. She felt her body begin to break down as she became one with the wind and air. In a woosh, she was on the coattails of a breeze, light and graceful until her feet made contact with the ground below.

Coming out of the spells, Bellatrix stumbled and had to grab onto a nearby tree trunk for support. Grün appeared at her side, his strong arms encircling her shoulders and keeping her upright as her knees buckled.

“Well done, Princess,” cried the wizard. Bellatrix looked up to see Eryx sitting on a nearby log. His bewildered expression showed he did not find this method of transportation amusing. The princess stumbled over to him and seated herself at his side. Blood rushed to her face, and tremors wound their way freely throughout her body. Her lungs cried for air, and she bent forward to rest her chin in her hands.

“Woohoo! That was fun!” called Jinx from inside the satchel. “I haven't transported in forever! All this excitement has made me sleepy. I think I will take a nap. Wake me when you have found Jaiyana.”

“Are you alright?” asked Eryx.

“I feel ill,” replied Bellatrix. She looked over at her beau. “Are you well?”

“I find this method of journey quite eventful. Strange but a divine method of travel. I believe I could get used to this. Bravo, my darling.”

Jaiyana!

Currents of air whirled around the trio, bringing attention to the strangeness of a place that seemed to be filled with enchantment. Looking around, she saw the shadows that had been in her vision. She realized they were on the east side of the mountains. Jaiyana's tower was not far away.

Feeling a renewed sense of strength, Bellatrix rose to her feet. “I know where we are. Come on, my sister is close.” Taking the lead, the princess walked off with Grün and Eryx close behind. Following a well-hidden path,

the princess brushed aside the briars that attempted to snag her gown.

Jaiyana!

She could feel her sister's soul calling out to her. It had been almost a year since they had become separated, and in a few moments they would be reunited. The path cleared, and discovery lay just beyond the edge of mystery. Within the blink of an eye, a tower stood high above the ground as if competing with the trees for stature over the wilderness. It was made of stone and surrounded by flowers and bushes. Smoke puffed out of the chimney, and there was a delicious aroma that floated from the open window.

"This is it," she whispered, "this is where Jaiyana has been living for the past year."

Elated with anticipation, Bellatrix made a move to run towards the tower when Grün's firm hands pulled her back into the safety of nearby thorn bushes.

"Another piece of advice: be aware of your surroundings. When the mind is not focused, it allows for danger to creep in," Grün pointed towards the front of the tower. Standing before the door was an immense grizzly bear. Lumbering about and sniffing the ground, the great beast's back arched, and its teeth bared as it snorted and huffed.

Bellatrix's heart fluttered, and she grabbed Eryx's arm. "What are we going to do? Can I use magic to remove the bear?"

"No. You need to rest a bit after our demanding flight spell. You are still learning, and too much magic could cause you to exhaust yourself. Eryx and I will take care of the bear. You are going to find your sister." He pointed toward a trellis of ivy and roses that stretched along the backside of the tower from the ground to the window.

Bellatrix nodded understanding the plan.

Leaving the princess to her own devices, the two brave companions headed toward the bear. Grün waved his hand and sparkles of light flickered between his fingers. The bear picked up his head and stared at the two men curiously.

During the moment of distraction, Bellatrix ran out of the woods and leaped onto the trellis. Using all of her strength, she began to pull herself toward the open window as her goal. Avoiding the thorns that clung to the tower stones, she began to climb as fast as her slippers could take her.

At her hip, the satchel stirred, and Jinx began to wake.

"W-what is going on? Where are we? Why are we climbing?"

“To get to Jaiyana” replied Bellatrix

“We couldn’t have just knocked on the door like most folk do?”

The princess ignored the feline and concentrated on her upward struggle. She felt a thorn prick her hand, but she bit back the pain.

At last the open window was within reach. Its wooden shutter waved back and forth in the gentle breeze. With one final push, Bellatrix grabbed the sill and launched herself forward. A grunt escaped her lips as she tumbled into the room.

She blinked, and her amber eyes took in the small living quarters. There was a bed on one side of the circular chamber, and a fireplace on the other. A rocking chair held a comfortable place close to the crackling fire. Stirring the pot on the flames was a cloaked figure who turned around at the sound of Bellatrix’s thud into the room. Stunned by the entrance, the figure froze. From beneath the hood, Bellatrix could see irises that glowed with amber lights exactly like own. Dark locks escaped from the folds of fabric, cascading down to the slender waist. Resting against the bricks beside the grate, the golden staff told her exactly who was cloaked by the hood.

“Jaiyana!”

“Jaiyana!” called Jinx

“Bellatrix!” replied Jaiyana.

Dropping her ladle into a delicious savory stew, the chamber inhabitant raced to her sister. The twins threw their arms around each other in a tight embrace, reunited as one. Jinx jumped out of the satchel and wove in between their ankles, purring and rubbing against them.

“Jinx!” cried Jaiyana, as she picked up the cat and nuzzled him against her face. “I cannot believe you both are here.”

Watching her sister holding their beloved pet, Bellatrix felt at peace.

“Why did you come through the window?” asked Jaiyana. “Why didn’t you just knock on the door?”

“I said the same thing,” added Jinx.

“There is a ferocious bear guarding the door, I thought you were trapped.”

“What? Oh no! That is my friend Aspen. He protects me from harm. He is a sweetheart.”

Bellatrix’s heart fluttered. She glanced out the window and breathed a sigh of relief. It appeared Eryx and Grün had made friends with Aspen, for the large bear lay on the ground while the two men scratched his ears

affectionately.

“How did you find me?” asked Jaiyana as she put Jinx down.

“Magic and the power of being twins,” replied Bellatrix. “We are witches, Jaiyana. Our talents are emerging.”

“Your hand,” whispered Jaiyana. Bellatrix looked down and saw that the thorn which had snagged her flesh earlier had drawn blood.

Taking her sister’s hand, Jaiyana waved her fingers over the open wound on Bellatrix’s palm. Warmth buzzed against her skin, and Bellatrix felt her wounded healing as if being sewn by an invisible needle. In a matter of seconds the cut had disappeared.

Jaiyana nodded, “I know we are witches, I realized that when I escaped the palace. I have been practicing magic during my time here. What happened to you, Bellatrix? I was worried! You seemed to have vanished entirely out of the realm!”

The princess relayed the events of what had transpired over the past year including the curse and the Good Witches’ forecast about the Blood Hunter Moon.. Her twin listened intently.

“My poor sister. I am so sorry you had to suffer the effects of such evil enchantment. After you ran off into the woods, I entered the castle to hear Prince Roarke arguing with our father. I did not hear much because mother grabbed me and told me I had to leave, as well. It was not safe to remain with my father in such an angry mood. She took me to the opposite side of the old wing, and told me that I had to follow the berry path, and upon reaching the end, I would find safety. She would come for me when she felt the way was clear. The trail led me to this tower, and I have been here ever since. Sadly, Mother has never come for me.”

“I have news. Something has happened at the palace. According to the Good Witches of the Woods, Prince Roarke has taken over the castle,” replied Bellatrix,

“What has happened to our parents?”

“That I do not know, but we must break the curse first, for if we do not, I will never be able to speak the words of love to anyone, and neither will you. My beloved and I cannot wed until we rid ourselves of this unfortunate evil.”

Jaiyana bowed her head, “While it fills my heart with joy you have found someone to love, I have given up hope on finding anyone. With my injury, who would want me?”

Taking her sister’s hand, Bellatrix frowned in disapproval. “Jaiyana, do

not think such thoughts. You are beautiful! You have a kind soul, and you are the most giving person I know. Do not speak such thoughts. We are identical twins. If I am worthy of love, then so are you.”

“How I wish to free myself of this limp,” moaned Jaiyana as she hobbled over to collect her staff. “Come, Bellatrix, let us head downstairs so you can see Aspen, and I can meet your lover.”

The twins descended down the spiral staircase with Jinx in tow. They stepped out into the sunshine to where the men were feeding Aspen berries.

“Aspen,” called Jaiyana. The bear ambled over to her, and she scratched his ear. “I am in good hands, my friend. Head home to your family and I will see you soon.” With a grunt, Aspen turned and disappeared into the forest.

“Quite a lovely bear,” said Eryx. “Almost like a dog.” He paused as he looked at the twins who stood before him. “Wow! What a breathtaking scene of beauty that is in front of me! You must be Jaiyana, I am so happy to meet you.”

Jaiyana smiled.

“Sister, this is Eryx, he is my... um.. well...you know,” Bellatrix choked on the words as she attempted an unconventional introduction.

Jaiyana’s expression changed from amusement to curiosity as she laid eyes on the handsome wizard who stood beneath the tree.

“Who are you?” she asked.

Grün stepped forward, and his face displayed the same look of interest as Jaiyana. “I am Grün, and my duty is to make sure you and your sister fulfill your fate, to break the curse, and to take back your kingdom which has wrongly been stolen from you. I will make sure you know how to use your magic to become the most powerful witches in all the land. It is an honor to meet you, Princess.”

Bellatrix narrowed her eyes as she watched the exchange between wizard and witch. With her intuition as a twin, a magical being, and a royal princess, she could sense an attraction between Jaiyana and Grün.

“They make a splendid couple,” hissed Jinx as he rubbed against her ankle.

Sighing, the maiden knew it was imperative for the curse to be broken. For her sister deserved a chance at love just as much as any young woman.

“What is our next step?” asked Eryx.

“According to Tiahanna, we need to go to the cave of Aldenshine and retrieve the crystals hidden there,” replied Bellatrix.

“It will not be an easy task,” interrupted Grün. “Those crystals are the most powerful in all the realm. They are the gems of the past, present, and future. All three planes of Time must be aligned and conquered for you to break the hex. Since the crystals are important, they cannot fall into the wrong hands. They are guarded by a giant fire-breathing dragon. He lives in the cave of Aldenshine and will destroy anyone who comes between him and his crystals. We must tread with caution.”

“I know where Aldenshine is,” replied Jaiyana. “I have studied it in my maps. It is a few miles north from here on this side of the mountain.”

“We can use the magic of our minds!,” declared Bellatrix

“You have that power?” asked her twin, “I was not able to do that until a few months ago.”

“No!” shouted Grün, “We will not be transported in that fashion. Too much magic at once could cause you to exhaust your abilities. You need to rest.”

“Fine! We will walk,” groaned the princess, and the stalwart comrades began their quest into the woods and towards the higher plateau of the mountain.

As they wove their way among the pine trees, anxiety gripped the young maiden’s soul. A dragon. She had never in her life met a dragon, and now she was about to face another obstacle blocking her way to breaking this burdensome curse, a hex that had been thrust upon her by a man she did not love, a man her father had tried to force her to marry. At the memory of her father, clarity filled her head. None of this would have happened had he just permitted the princesses to marry for love. But instead, he wanted control, and he wanted power. He did not care for their happiness. He did not care for true love. He did not believe princesses were good enough to rule his kingdom.

But why? she whispered. Why weren’t maidens worthy to rule a kingdom? It should not matter the gender of the one on the throne, but if the monarch’s heart was pure, that should be worth enough. Where was her father now? Tiahanna had mentioned that Roarke had taken over their castle, but where had their father gone? Surely he would not allow a usurper to take over his kingdom so freely when he still had years left to reign. And her mother. Her heart softened. She had always been kind to them and wanted to see them happy. Where was she?

Grün stopped and held up his hand. The group fell silent.

“Here we stay,” he stated in a deep voice.

Bellatrix looked around. They were at the base of the plateau where the pine trees became scarce and patches of snow began to come into view.

“The cave of Aldenshine is still a way up,” declared Jaiyana.

“Ah, Beautiful Princess, this I know,” answered the wizard. “But this is where we men must halt and wait.”

Bellatrix noted how Jaiyana blushed when Grün called her ‘beautiful.’

“Excuse me?” interceded Eryx.

“The women will continue, for it is their fate, their journey, their battle. They must learn to use their magic and work together as one,” continued Grün.

Eryx looked at the wizard and scratched his head. “You are mad, my good man. There is no way I will allow my beloved to venture into a dragon’s cave alone. I will not disrespect her honor. I must protect her.”

“If you wish to marry and spend eternity with her, then you will do as I say,” replied Grün. “You have no faith in your lover? You do not feel she can protect herself?”

“I-I did not mean it that way,” Eryx apologized. “I know she can protect herself, but I like to take care of her.”

Grün smiled. “I know you mean no harm, dear armorer. All women love a noble and honorable man. These qualities you possess and should this curse ever be broken, I know you will make a wonderful husband for Bellatrix. I know you wish to protect her from harm and hurt, but many times a person has to fight battles alone.”

“I cannot bear to lose her,” whispered Eryx. “My heart could never endure such pain.”

Bellatrix wrapped her arms around the armorer. “Do not worry, my love, I shall return to you.” She gave him a kiss.

“I am coming, too,” called Jinx as he jumped up on a nearby log.

“You may go, as well,” declared Grün. “Eryx and I will stay here and wait for a sign.”

“What kind of sign?” asked Jaiyana.

“When you know, you will send it to us.” Grün reached forward and took each of the princesses' hands. “This is the start of showing the realm that women are worthy to rule the throne. Your father’s actions have hurt you both deeply, but you can take that pain and use it for accomplishment instead of retaliation. Have faith in your powers, your creative intelligence, but most

importantly, trust in each other.” He released his grip, and the twins and their cat took the first step towards the jaws of the dragon.



“MICE AND RATS,” groaned Jinx. “How much farther is it? It feels like we have been walking forever.”

Rocks and pine needles covered the uphill path, making the going difficult for the twins. Jinx had a right to complain. It was a slow walk. Bellatrix noticed that her sister’s limp was becoming more prominent, and she leaned heavily on her staff.

“My breath is heavy and my limbs feel overwhelmed. I need to rest a moment,” she declared and motioned to a nearby log for them to sit on.

“Ugh! This stupid leg,” groaned Jaiyana as she plopped down on the timber. “How I wish I could be like you where you walk with no pain.”

Unsure of what to say, Bellatrix touched her sister’s shoulder. “If I could trade places with you, I would.”

“You do not want this. It is not fun to feel unworthy and utterly lacking in value for others.”

“You are enough for me, Sister,” replied Bellatrix with a kind smile, “and it appears that you are enough for Grün, too.”

Jaiyana poked her head up. “What is this foolishness you speak of?”

“Oh, please, Sister, do not act all innocent, I can see the way Grün looks at you and how you return that gaze.”

“Your inability to speak the language of love is confusing your judgement. Besides, we have more important matters. We are in the midst of trying to break a curse. Then we still have to solve the problem of our destiny as monarchs of our realm. How could father do this to us?” hissed Jaiyana. “We are his only heirs! We are his children!”

“I do not know, Sister, but right now we need to focus on getting the crystals,” replied Bellatrix. She paused. Her powers spoke to her of the location of the cave. “We are close. It is not much farther. And if you and Grün ever want a chance at love, we will have to hurry.”

Jaiyana gave her sister a playful shove, laughed lightly, and picked up her staff.

They rounded a corner and the path ended at a large cave in the side of

the mountain. Bellatrix's instincts had been correct. They had been closer to the cave than they realized. The princess grabbed her sister's hand as she looked at the wide opening descending into darkness.

"Butterflies and bat wings! We are here at last!" observed Jinx. "My dear princesses, I present to you the Cave of Aldenshine, a place of mystery and mythological lore. You must be forewarned, however. Deep within the cave lies a ferocious dragon who is as big as the palace, with tremendous scaly wings and a fire-breathing mouth. Its mission is to guard the precious crystals. These are the Crystals of Past, Present, and Future. When combined together with magic, they allow the owner to reverse spells and alter Fate."

"So we can just use our powers to get the Crystals from the dragon," replied Bellatrix.

Jinx frowned at the princess, "You think if it was that easy more people would have taken possession of such a fabulous prize by now. But the dragon is a weaver of various charms. His own powers will be pitted against yours. And he has never lost a battle."

"We can do this," the maiden nodded to Jaiyana. "We are stronger together."

Entering the cave with caution, the trio observed the walls of the barren cavern as they shimmered in an icy display of greens and blues. Light filtered in from the openings at the top of the cave, and stalactites hung down from the ceiling. But it was the quiet atmosphere that Bellatrix feared most. Anticipation that anything could jump out at them at any moment made her resolve weak and her anxiety strong.

As they trekked deeper into the darkness, a muffled noise filled their ears. The closer they came to the center of the cavern, the louder the noise echoed against the walls. Bellatrix thought it sounded like snoring. Her assumption became true as they rounded the corner to find a large sleeping dragon in the middle of a treasure trove of gems and jewels.

Awe gripped the princesses and their cat as they stood in silence observing the giant beast that lay before them. The creature had red and gold scales that glittered as its chest rose and fell. Its immense wings were folded against its back. Spikes protruded out its neck and down its tail. Behind the dragon in a circular niche was a small mountain of treasure. Heaps of gold, jewels, and other trinkets lay in piles.

Bellatrix's eyes widened. "Dragons have always been known to be protective of their treasures," whispered Jaiyana, "but I do not see what it is

we are looking for.”

“I believe it is there,” offered Jinx.

In the middle of the niche was a large stone. On top of the stone, floating in a yellow glow of circular light, were three fabulous crystals. One crystal was red, another was black and white, and the last one was gray. Each was about the size of a child’s fist.

“Princesses, see if you can get near the crystals. Use your powers to sense if there are any protection enchantments surrounding them. I will make sure the dragon stays asleep.” With rapid steps and his tail held high, Jinx jumped onto the dragon’s leg, then its back, and then patted his way up the neck to the beast’s ear. Drifting into a sweet lullaby that Bellatrix remembered her own mother singing to them when they were small, Jinx whispered the melody in gentle notes. Succumbing to the magic of the music emanating from the cat, the monster’s tail swished back and forth in child-like comfort.

Breaking herself out of the nostalgia, Bellatrix motioned for her sister to follow. They crept over the dragon’s legs and headed towards the glowing light that highlighted the jewels. The twins admired the gorgeous gems that lay scattered over the floor, the bars of gold stacked in a pyramid formation, and the various chests which housed secrets. Peeling her eyes away from the display, Bellatrix focused on the three crystals that floated before them. Looking deep into herself, the princess sent out feelers for any magical hexes that could be protecting the crystals. She felt something but was not sure what it was.

“These diademas are guarded by powerful protections,” chimed Jaiyana who had performed the same examination as her sister. “We will have to break down the enchantments to see if the yellow orb will release the stones. Even then, it is not certain if we will be able to walk away unscathed.”

Bellatrix turned to her sister, “We have to try. We have nothing to lose. Everything has already been taken from us.”

Jaiyana nodded and placed her hands forward. Bellatrix put her palms on top. As their fingers interlocked, they closed their eyes, and magic began to flow between their outstretched arms. The power of sisterhood and royalty circled around them as purple sparkles of light floated within spirals that flooded the space with their beautiful amethyst glow. The purple streaks raced over to the yellow cloud that housed the crystals. Colors combined with purple as the spells began to battle with each other. In their minds, the girls focused on breaking down the barriers of guardianship that kept the crystals

captive. Merging together until they became a shade of brown, the glittering relics flashed a brilliant hue of violet, and all the yellow was gone. Tints of purple vanished and the crystals floated downward and rested on top of the stone.

“We did it!” cried Jaiyana, and she flashed a glance at Jinx who was still singing to the dragon.

Bellatrix reached forward and picked up the red crystal. No sooner had her fingers touched the blood- color stone when a high-pitched sound echoed off of the wall. The gem turned a dark shade of ruby, and the princess felt as if she had touched fire. She dropped the crystal back onto the boulder and withdrew her hand. The vibrations drowned out Jinx’s melody, and the dragon snorted. Steam billowed out of its nostrils. Its lids began to retract backwards, and the creature raised its head. With a loud meow, Jinx jumped off the dragon’s back and scurried to safety in the shadows.

Jaiyana clutched Bellatrix’s arm as the dragon’s pupils took in the two witch princesses who were trying to take what was rightfully his. With a large breath, he shot a spray of flames in their direction. Bellatrix pushed Jaiyana out of the way as a flash of heat blazed overhead and melted the top of the wall. Molten rock began to drip down in red rivers.

The dragon swooped down with its teeth bared, and Jaiyana smacked him on the snout with her staff. Retracting backwards, the monster blew another blast of flames that melted the portion of the floor.

Bellatrix threw out a spell to stop the dragon’s flames, but her words bounced off its scales and were absorbed into the cavern’s wall.

Jaiyana shot a fireball at the dragon’s backside, but the scaly tail smacked the flame away with ease.

“What are we going to do?” cried Bellatrix as she evaded a shower of fiery sparks. It seemed no matter how many enchantments they called forth, nothing stopped the dragon from trying to harm them.

The dragon’s tail lunged and collided with Jaiyana. The twin was hurled forward and landed heavily on her bad leg. The beautiful maiden let out a yell.

Reaching outward, the dragon bared its sharp claws to slash Jaiyana to pieces. Bellatrix waved her hands, and an invisible rope pulled Jaiyana away from the clutches of the beast.

“Are you alright?” asked Bellatrix.

Jaiyana clutched her bad leg. “Ugh! It hurts! I must have twisted it when I

fell.”

A glint of bright light caught Bellatrix’s eye, and she saw it was her sister’s gold staff reflecting the light of the flames. “Jinx, stay with her,” commanded the princess as she snatched up the staff and ran in the direction of the monster.

Bellowing and spraying flares of fire everywhere, the dragon rocked the cave with its wrath.

Bellatrix stopped in front of the monster and yelled as loud as she could. As the dragon turned in her direction, the princess began to wave the gold staff. She remembered her mother telling her stories of dragons when she was a young babe. Dragons were known to love sparkly treasures and were protective of the hoards of trinkets in their lair. The staff caught the light and began to glimmer with a gold brilliance. The dragon paused and eyed the walking stick with admiration.

Using all of her strength, the princess hurled the staff in the opposite direction, and the reptilian creature lumbered after it like a dog fetching a stick. *Dragons are extremely intelligent*, her mother’s voice whispered in her brain. *Their ancient knowledge could be an asset to a young witch.*

As the dragon’s attention was deterred for the moment, Bellatrix began to weave a powerful spell in her web of charms. Not a conjuration of destruction, but an incantation of friendship and compassion. For the witch princess could feel in the core of her being that the dragon lashed out in anger out of loneliness. His days were spent in solitude guardianship of protection to shelter the influential crystals. Always alone, he had no companions by his side and only treasures for comfort. Deep within her heart, Bellatrix did not have the will to kill such a magnificent creature.

She continued to fill the enchantment with all things good. The dragon picked up the staff in its mouth, triumphing in its victory and turned to face Bellatrix. It was at the exact moment that the witch launched a powerful spell that smacked the dragon in the face. The golden walking stick fell with a clunk to the cave floor, and the dragon shook its head, dazed. The expression in its eyes had softened, and it looked around confused as kindness ran through its veins and overtook its heart.

“Who are you?” asked the dragon looking down at Bellatrix. “What are you doing here? Do you not realize I am an evil dragon meant to destroy anyone who takes the Crystals of Time?”

“Do you still feel malicious?” asked Bellatrix as Jaiyana and Jinx looked

on in awe.

Pausing and cocking his head, the reptile looked at her with a new kindness in his eyes. “Now that you mention it, I feel nothing but warmth and good thoughts in my soul. I do not wish to harm anyone. But that still does not tell me who you are.”

“A friend,” replied the princess. “I am Bellatrix. This is Jaiyana, and this magnificent fellow is our cat Jinx. We are here because we need the Crystals of Time. But we also wish to be your friend.”

“Friend?” replied the dragon, “It has been a long time since I had friends. My name is Fengari, and I am the Keeper of this grotto. Do tell me, why do you wish to possess the Crystals of Time?”

Bellatrix launched into the story of the curse, the moon, and true love. The beast listened. When she finished, he spoke. “Ay, a terrible misfortune to bestow upon the princesses of our realm. I feel within the walls of the cave, the past opens itself. I know who you are, Bellatrix, I know your past. I appreciate the secrets you have confided to me. You have approached me with an action of friendship. Most people come to this cavern to kill me and take the Crystals of Time so that they might right their wrongs and possess a future that they once believed would have been unattainable. In return, I kill them because to sacrifice the life of one in greed is wrong. Even though I tried to kill you, Bellatrix, you did not have the heart to kill me. You respected me, and in return I respect you. You have broken the evilness and sadness that lurks in my heart. I no longer wish harm on others, and therefore, I intend to reward you with what you desire. But I ask for two things in return.”

“What are they?” asked Bellatrix.

“The first is my wish to have your golden staff. It will be the perfect object to add to my collection.”

The princess hesitated and looked towards her sister, for that request was not her decision to make. Jaiyana clenched her ankle and winced. Jinx rubbed against Jaiyana’s arm. “While I would love to be rid of my walking stick for good, I am afraid I cannot make my way in the world without it.”

“What ails you, Princess?” asked Fengari.

“A deformity since the time of my birth. I have never been able to walk properly.. This injury makes me unworthy of love or authority over my kingdom,” sighed Jaiyana as tears pricked her eyes.

Fengari lowered his head in front of the princess. “I may be ancient, but

my wisdom is strong. For a person to suffer such a misplaced idea of worth and love is a fool. Beauty has many different forms apart from face and figure. Outside features can conceal a black heart. For every angry person who does not express the same high ideal of love as you, there are a thousand more who do. Never let your perceived deficiencies become your reason for unhappiness, for you are worthy of sunshine and true love.”

Jaiyana reached forward and stroked Fengari’s nose.

The dragon continued. “Since you have been inflicted with agony for too long, I intended to change that. For my powers lay not only in wisdom, strength, and magic, but in healing, as well.”

Fengari leaned forward and nuzzled his snout against Jaiyana’s leg. Steam brushed up against her skin. “This will not hurt,” he continued. With a soft breath he blew tiny flames onto her ankle. The flames crackled against the flesh, but from the look on Jaiyana’s face, it was apparent she felt no pain. The fire began to travel up her leg all the way to her hip, and the glow flickered for a few seconds and then disappeared into her body’s core.

“Now, stand,” commanded Fengari. Jaiyana clutched the wall of the cave for support and stood.

“Put your weight on your leg and walk,” continued the dragon.

Fear flickered across Jaiyana’s eyes as she looked longingly at her staff, which had been an aid for so long.

“You can do it, Jaiyana,” cheered Bellatrix.

Gingerly, the princess put her weight on her leg and moved forward. A look of surprise flashed across her face. “No pain,” she whispered. She continued to walk, and her gait was even, with no sign of a limp. She moved faster and broke into a light jog. She touched one side of the cave and skipped, then jumped, then ran her way back.

“I am cured!” she proclaimed and wrapped her arms around Fengari’s face in a hug. “Thank you!”

“You are welcome,” replied the creature. “But remember, your kindness and good heart are worth far more than any fool’s philosophy.”

Jaiyana nodded her head and reached for her staff. “This is rightfully yours, for I no longer have need of it.”

Fengari took the staff into his jaws and placed it among his treasures. He returned to the princesses “The second thing I request from you is companionship. I do not wish to continue to live in this cave all by myself.”

Bellatrix’s eyes widened in delight. “You can come live with us at the

palace if we are able to get it back. Either way, I am sure Iris would welcome you at her cottage as she did me. We are friends now, so wherever our home is, that will be yours, too.”

Wrapping the crystals in his tail, Fengari dropped the precious stones into Bellatrix’s hand.

“The Crystals of Time are yours. With these gifts, combined with your powers and the lunar eclipse, you can reverse the curse that has been placed upon you. The red stone is the Crystal of the Past because sometimes the errors of yesteryear can haunt us and bleed us into the present and future. The black and white stone is Crystal of the Present. Many times we trap ourselves in our ways, and life can pass us by if we are not careful. The gray stone is the Crystal of the Future because our story has not been written yet, but if we combine our knowledge of the past with the guidance of the present, we can make a better outcome for ourselves.”

Warmth filled Bellatrix’s palm as the crystals glowed.

“How exactly do we use these?” asked Jaiyana.

“You will know when the time is right. Now you must hurry! Judging by the sky, in twenty-four hours there will be the lunar eclipse and the rise of the Red Hunter Moon, your last opportunity to break the curse.”

“We must head to the Castle of Maldinia, but we are too far away,” cried Bellatrix. “We will never make it there on foot.”

“Then it is a good thing I can fly.” Fengari stretched his wings outward, sending a strong breeze throughout the cave.

“Fengari, will you join us in the fight to take back our birthright and dissolve the curse? We could use your help,” cried Bellatrix.

“Anything for a friend. I will be delighted to have the opportunity to vanquish evil.”

Fengari lowered his head and Bellatrix, Jaiyana, and Jinx climbed aboard. Holding tightly to the scales on his neck, the princesses and feline braced themselves as the magnificent beast raced out the cave entrance and jumped off the cliff. Flapping his massive wings gracefully, he took flight.

It was a sensation unlike anything Bellatrix had ever experienced. Up high in the sky, she could see the tops of trees and small villages. They looked so far away. She whispered to Fengari to take them down to the clearing below ,for they had a few people they needed to join them.

The looks on Eryx and Grün’s faces were of pure shock as they watched the princesses and cat descend down to them on top of a giant dragon.

Bellatrix slid down Fengari's back and ran into the arms of the brave man she loved.

"My darling, you are alive! I was so worried. It killed me inside to remain helpless here, but I knew you would conquer this battle," stated Eryx in pride for his amazing beloved princess.

Turning to look at Fengari, the princess smiled. "We did not conquer any battle. We gained a friend. This is Fengari who is going to help us in our fight, and then come live with us afterwards."

Grün turned to Jaiyana and placed a hand on her shoulder. "I am glad you are well, Princess, I could not bear to see harm come to you. And your leg appears to be better."

Jaiyana touched his arm and blushed. "I am cured," she declared. "I am now free to run, jump, and go wherever I please without a staff to limit me."

"Walking stick or none, you are still beautiful to me," whispered Grün in a low voice as he gazed longingly at Jaiyana. He must not have thought anyone could hear him, but Bellatrix did. She expressed a look of joy and hugged Eryx tighter.

"Princesses! Enough of this lovey dovey. What are our next steps?" interrupted Jinx. "The hours are passing quickly."

"Fengari will take us back to the castle. Even though he flies, it will take us a day to get there. Let's get moving!" cried Bellatrix as the group climbed onto Fengari's back, and flapping his wings, the fantastic magical dragon flew into the sky.



A DAY HAD PASSED and nightfall was approaching. Bellatrix could see the highest towers of Maldinia Castle in the distance.

"What are we going to do when we get there?" she asked Jaiyana.

Jaiyana closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Prince Roarke has declared himself King of Maldinia. We must combine our powers so that we may see in the eye of our minds where our parents have been imprisoned."

She grasped her twin's hand.

Closing her eyes, Bellatrix listened to the sound of Fengari's wings as he zoomed through the air. She felt her powers intermingle with Jaiyana, and together they sent forth a spell that traveled at lightning speed to the palace.

Encircling the castle, the enchantment revealed that the King and Queen had been imprisoned by Roarke, and were held captive in the dungeon.

Bellatrix's heart fluttered through her being. Roarke also knew about the Red Hunter Moon, which would appear in a lunar eclipse in just a few hours. Through the whispers of the spell, Bellatrix heard the following words on the wings of magic: *He has been waiting for you. He knows you will come to confront him.*

Fengari landed in the woods, at the edge of the castle. Bellatrix looked through the trees and could see the courtyard where she had held her sister's hands. The last few rays of sun struggled to stay relevant as the ball of fire began to disappear beneath the horizon. Guards were stationed all around Maldinia Castle. Bellatrix never remembered a time when she had seen so many sentinels. It was apparent Roarke was ensuring that no one would ever be able to dethrone him.

"We must find our parents," declared Bellatrix.

"Why?" replied Jinx. "I mean, I can understand why you would want to rescue the Queen. She is a lovely woman. But the King? Ugh! That man deserves to be locked up. Why would you ever want to free him after what he did to you and your sister? Trying to marry you to a man you did not love. Not giving you your rightful inheritance to the throne. His disrespect towards the refinement of ladies as an attitude of his monarchy? His inability to see that women can rule just as wisely as men. Why save a man like that?"

"You see the wolf in sheep's clothing, Jinx. Indeed, our father deserves to suffer. But if we were to do that, we would be following in his footsteps. We are going to show him, we are better. And if he does not give us what is ours, then we will take it from him," replied Bellatrix.

"That's my princess," cheered Jinx.

"How are we going to do this?" asked Jaiyana, "There are guards all over the place. We cannot just walk into the castle and demand our parents be released. We have no idea how powerful Roarke is or what tricks he has up his sleeve."

"Then you will have to shapeshift," chimed Grün. The twins looked at him perplexed.

"Shapeshifting is one of your powers as witches. By using your magic to change form, you will be able to enter the palace unnoticed."

Bellatrix looked out at the castle. The sun had been swallowed up by nighttime, and the clouds obscured the moon which was rising. She turned to

her twin. "I feel equal to this challenge if you are."

Jaiyana nodded. Since Fengari had healed her, Bellatrix noticed a change in attitude in the stride of her twin. Jaiyana was happier and more confident. Taking her sister's hands in her own, she closed her eyes. Feeling her powers rushing around her, the witch princess felt herself begin to shrink. Her legs became thinner, her skin became coarser, her nose elongated, and with a loud pop, a caw escaped from her lips. Her eyes opened and she saw that she and her sister had shape-twisted into ravens!

Bellatrix hopped along the ground and stared at her sister whose new features mirrored her own. They were adorned in glossy coats of black feathers, long narrow wings, and a thick array of plumes that formed a wedge-shaped tail. Her beak was knife sharp, and her plump body moved elegantly on slender legs.

"Impressive!" applauded Grün. "You gentlewomen are talented beyond your years. Go to your parents. We will stay in the woods, survey the perimeter, and find the most powerful center of magic where you can break the spell."

With a loud kaa! The twins took flight. With their wings catching strong currents of air, the princesses felt as if they had been flying their entire lives. The ravens soared through open windows and sailed down various corridors to the first floor. At the end of one hallway, beyond the throne room, were two solid oak doors that led to the dungeon. A burly guard was exiting, and the twins slipped through. They flew down a spiral stone staircase until they reached the underground prison. A long hall of cells decorated with bars greeted their eyes. It was dreary, cold, dark and damp inside those walls, and the atmosphere dripped in misery and grief.

Bellatrix looked into her soul and called forth her true form. Her body elongated, feathers solidified into skin, and her beak once again became her mouth and nose. With a final pop, she had returned to human form. She looked at her hands in amazement, then turned to her twin who shared the same expression. With every day that passed, they were becoming more attune with their magic, and they were growing stronger.

Urgency in every step, the twins hurried down the hall, inspecting the cell openings in hope of finding their parents. The dungeon was barren, and it seemed that Roarke had not imprisoned anyone in a long time. At the end of the corridor there was the sound of movement in one of the small antechambers. Peering into the opening revealed their mother. The Queen of

Maldinia appeared to be a trifle thinner, but healthy nonetheless for her suffering.

With a blanket wrapped around her, the Queen sat in a dingy old chair. Her hair was long and reached down to her waist. The once dark color was now tinged with white. She looked tired and frail.

“Mother,” hissed Jaiyana. “Mother!”

Her majesty looked up and her hands flew to her mouth as a gasp escaped her lips. “My children! Is that really you? Do not tell me the solitude of this prison is playing on my mind?”

She rushed over to the bars that held her captive. Reaching through the iron spindles, she grasped the princesses’ hands and touched their faces. “How beautiful you both have become, my dears! You are at last the true royal heiresses I knew you would always be. Jaiyana, where is your staff?”

Jaiyana flashed her mother a wide smile and beamed. “I no longer need it, Mother! I am cured!”

Tears filled the Queen’s eyes. “Bless you both. How did you two get in here? Please say you have not agreed to Roarke’s demands?”

“We have not! We shaped-shifted into ravens and flew in,” whispered Bellatrix. Then looking at her mother’s perplexed expression, she continued. “We are witches, Mother! We have been given the power of magic thanks to your wishes of protection that were heard by the Good Witches of the Woods.”

Putting her hands together and sniffing back a sob, the Queen flashed a small smile, “Ay, my hopes and requests have been heard. Thank the Forces of Magic for those beautiful Good Witches! I knew they would not leave you unprotected.”

The twins quickly launched into a retelling of what they had been doing for the past year and informed their mother about what was to come.

“Tonight is the night of the Blood Hunter Moon. It is the last chance for us to break this curse,” finished Jaiyana.

With this news, the Queen felt behooved to tell her own tale. “When you both escaped, Roarke was extremely angry. He wanted your father to tell him where you had gone, Bellatrix, but the King did not know. Roarke said that until we could bring you to him, he would usurp the castle and lock your father in the dungeon. He jailed me as well for fear that I would warn you to never return to this place again. But before I was carried off to this cell, I watched Roarke stand on the balcony under the full moon and cast the Curse

of Lovers. My heart was heavy that there was nothing I could do. I am so grateful the two of you have been given powers! Now you can fight him yourselves.``

“That is exactly what we intend to do,” whispered Bellatrix. She waved her hand over the lock and the door to the cell creaked open. “You are coming with us.”

“Where is our father?” asked Jaiyana.

Stepping out of her cell, the Queen pointed across the corridor to the last dim light on the left. Shadows fell like ghosts, threatening harm to the unwary intruder.

Despite their fear, the twins approached the room. Through the opening they saw their father, the King of Maldinia. He sat on a pile of blankets in what appeared to be a make-shift bed. With one hand beneath his chin he stared at the barren wall as if in another world. Grey mixed in his reddish-brown hair and beard. His clothes were torn and had holes. His middle-aged, burly appearance was now thin and sunken. The once powerful patriarch was now basking in the punishment he had so easily sentenced onto others.

As the scene filled her eyes, Bellatrix felt a mixture of feelings flood her body. Her pulse quickened, and her breath became heavy with rage. *Serves him right*, thought Bellatrix. *That is what he gets for thinking women cannot rule and are not worthy. He should continue to sit here and rot.* Yet looking at the man fallen from grace, she could not help but feel pity. *Why did their father despise them for being women? Why could he not have been a father and loved them?*

Why did he feel it was necessary to arrange marriage in order to place a male monarch on the throne?

She felt a wetness around her eyes that she attempted to brush away.

“Father,” she whispered. “Father!”

The King continued to be lost in thought. Jaiyana picked up a stone from the floor and threw it into the cell so it banged against the wall. The King looked up and his eyes widened as he saw the twins standing before him.

“The ghosts of the twins I have killed!” he cried and backed into the wall. “Do not come for me. I repent. I repent!”

“He thinks we are dead?” whispered Jaiyana.

“It appears so,” replied Bellatrix, “He had no faith in us to believe that we would survive the woods and life outside the castle.” She cleared her throat. “Father, you know us. Your daughters Bellatrix and Jaiyana. We are very

much alive, and we have come to free you.”

“Free me?” The confused King appeared to be a bit delusional. “Free me? When I have tried to imprison you in a marriage of no love?”

“You must forgive your father,” whispered the Queen coming up behind them. “The year-long stint in solitude has addled his brain into village porridge. He was upset with the manner in which Roarke locked him away and took his castle from him when he was telling the truth about not knowing your whereabouts. Apparently this is the first time a man has betrayed him. I have been talking to him about his actions.”

Waving her hand, Bellatrix opened the cell, “Father, you are coming with us, whether you like it or not.”

“You are going to save your father, when he was so unkind and mean to you?” asked the Queen.

Jaiyana sighed. “If we treat him in the manner he treated us, then we are no better than he has been. As reparation for his actions, we aim to prove to him women are not only strong enough to save a kingdom but to rule it, as well.”

The Queen beamed. “That is exactly how I raised you, my precious daughters! Maldinia is safe in your care.”

Bellatrix snapped her fingers, and the blankets around the confused King began to rise upward, enclosing him as if he were in a hammock. The blankets floated parallel to the dungeon floor and followed behind the brave princesses.

“Come on, let’s get out of here.” whispered Bellatrix to her mother. “As monarchs of the realm, we will take you to a place where you will be safe with our new ally, Fengari. Then we will face Roarke.”

“Who is Fengari?” asked the Queen.

“A dragon who is going to live with us when the castle is ours again,” replied Jaiyana.

Blinking in surprise, the Queen acknowledged how brilliant her daughters had become.

They began to climb the set of stone steps until they reached the locked doors. Working together with their magic, a flick of their fingers, doors opened, and the princesses peered outward into the hall. Looking around and seeing no one, the twins and their mother stepped forward with their father floating behind them in the safety of blanketed magic.

As the door closed behind them, Bellatrix breathed a sigh of relief. All

that was now required was to get down the hall and outside to freedom.

They began to move at a rapid pace when a voice yelled out, "Who goes there?"

Turning around, they spied a guard bolt out from the adjoining corridor. "Sound the alarm, the King and Queen have escaped!" he shouted.

Jaiyana threw forth a spell, and the guard was thrown up against the wall. However, his warning cry had alerted many of the other soldiers in the palace. Bellatrix waved her hand, and part of the ceiling of the adjoining corridor collapsed, blocking many of the guards. Jaiyana flicked her fingers and turned three of the other guards into ravens.

"Run!" yelled Bellatrix as they took off down the hall. They were almost at the door to lead outside when an invisible barrier appeared before them as if they had run into a wall, but there was no wall, only air.

Bellatrix fell to the floor slightly dazed.

As she began to become more aware of her surroundings, she realized they were no longer in the corridor. They were in a different room. Her mother and sister were beside her, and their father rested on his pile of blankets in close proximity to them. The princess sat up and put her hand to her head. She groaned, unsure of what had happened.

Opening and closing her eyes, she looked around to see that they were in the throne room. The high walls were etched in gold tints, and tapestries appeared before them like ghosts. A giant chandelier dripping with crystals hung above their heads, lit by dozens of candles. A red carpet was beneath their feet, and, directly in front of them were a set of steps that led up to the throne. The chair was covered in red satin and trimmed in gold. Behind it were large paned windows that reached to the ceiling.

"Ah, finally! My queen has returned home," a slick voice sneered. Leather shoes appeared in front of Bellatrix, and she looked up to see Prince Roarke standing over her.

The Prince, who now deemed himself King, wore a tunic with gold trim and a satin sash. His fingers were adorned in gold rings, and her father's crown was perched on his head. He was medium built with a reddish beard and hair. He waved his hand. Bellatrix felt invisible hands lifting her to her feet as she stood face to face with him.

"I am sure you have a good explanation for why you disappeared from me for over a year. Did you not realize we were supposed to be married?"

Bellatrix looked at her sister and mother who stood against the wall. Her

father watched intently from his blankets.

“I am sure you have a good explanation for why you cursed me and my sister,” hissed Bellatrix.

Roarke looked at her twin. “Jaiyana, I see you have healed from your limitation of mobility. You will make a fine wife for another fellow. I know a few princes if you are interested.”

“You’re a pig!” hissed Bellatrix.

“As for the answer to your question,” continued Roarke as he circled around her with his arms behind his back. “It is very simple. If I cannot have you, then no one else can.”

“That is not love,” cried the princess.

“Yes, it is. I love you enough to make sure no man can ever be with you. You were promised to me. We were officially betrothed.”

“I am not an object,” hissed the witch princess, “and I want a future with someone else!”

“Tisk, tisk, a future with someone else, you say? Could it possibly be one of these men my guard captured trespassing into my domain?”

The wizard waved his arm. Through the open doors a group of guards came in holding Eryx and Grün captive. Their hands and feet were bound.

“The man on the right,” continued Roarke pointing to Grün, “also happens to be a wizard; therefore, we had to bind him with special rope making him incapable of doing magic. Now you are telling me one of these men is the one whom you desire?”

“The one on the left is mine,” hissed Bellatrix, “The one on the right is in love with Jaiyana.” Her sister’s cheeks turned pink, and a blush crept across Grün’s face, as well.

“Oh, well, I don’t care about him, then. Put him with the rest of them, but keep those ropes bound,” ordered Roarke as the guard dragged Grün next to Jaiyana.

The wizard stepped closer to Eryx who struggled to get out of the guard’s clutches and loosen his own bonds. “You are the man who has stolen my queen from me,” hissed Roarke.

“He did not steal me!” shouted Bellatrix. She gave Roarke a hostile glare. “He is supposed to be with me.” She bared her teeth as she struggled to get the words out. “Eryx and I are meant for each other. You and I are not meant for each other. Nor is Maldinia rightfully your domain. It belongs to me and to Jaiyana!”

“Oh, is that so?” asked Roarke who stepped closer to Eryx. “Yet you cannot possibly tell me you love this man, a common laborer, an armorer!”

“That is because you put a curse on me that prohibits me from saying it, and I will break that curse if it is the last thing I ever do!”

Roarke sniffed. “You foolish girl. You expect to break a curse from a powerful wizard like myself?” He pulled from his belt a sword. “You princesses are so dramatic. Now I am going to end this man, Eryx, you say? I shall end his life forever. Then you and I shall be wed! And then I do not want to hear any more insinuations about True Love. You are mine and will forever belong to me! Princesses are to be looked at for their beauty and leave the decision making to the men.”

He turned back to Eryx. “Now you will watch as I chop this man’s head, and you can help me bury him. I could have used magic, but this is more personal and brings me more delight.” He raised his sword. “Armorer! How foolish of you to think you could ever take Bellatrix away from me.” The wizard moved to bring the sword down onto the armorer’s neck, but his hands were empty and he stumbled forward off balance.

Using magic, Bellatrix called the sword to her hand and now stood before the wizard with the weapon in her clutches. “You are not the only one who possesses the gift of magic, Roarke! I am a witch, and so is Jaiyana. And I will never be silent. Women are capable of ruling an empire, and all of us can defeat men just as I will destroy you!”

Launching the sword forward, the weapon raced at the two guards holding Eryx captive. The soldiers backed off in fear, and the sword cut the bonds that held Eryx immobile. Then the saber flew over and freed Grün from his bonds. Finally, the sword rested in her mother’s hands.

“I am taking back this castle, and once I do, you will forever be banished from this realm,” hissed Bellatrix. “I will NEVER love you!” Surprised she was able to get the words of negative love out her mouth, the princess looked to see Roarke’s face turning purple as he clenched his jaw.

He waved his arm, and she was turned against the wall as an invisible force held her captive. She felt the heavy weight pressing against her chest, and she struggled to breathe. Eryx ran at Roarke, but using magic, he swatted the armorer away like an annoying fly. “You stupid little princess! You think that just because you have been given powers of witchcraft that you can defeat a magnificent wizard like myself. It will never happen....”

Roarke was cut off as a loud roar echoed throughout the room. The

wizard turned around to see the glass window behind the throne shatter into a waterfall of reflectors as Fengari's head burst through the opening. Riding on top of the magnificent creature's head was Jinx. The dragon snapped his jaw and breathed fire, sending the guards scattering every which way. The moment of distraction caused Roarke's spell to falter, and Bellatrix was able to free herself from the invisible barrier.

"You imbeciles," screamed the prince, and he waved his hands to summon a spell to kill Fengari.

"You will do nothing of the sort," screamed Bellatrix as she ran forward and tackled Roarke with all her might. The spell was deflected upward and sent the chandelier crashing to the ground, spraying broken crystals and candles everywhere.

It was that moment that the room launched into a bitter battle. Eryx and the Queen engaged in sword fight with the guards while Jaiyana and Grün began a war of magic against Roarke's wizard advisors who had come to his aid. Meanwhile, Bellatrix began a fight of supernatural powers against her former betrothed. Fengari attempted to consume any enemies in a shower of flames. Jinx hopped off the dragon's head and began to slash at the sentinels' ankles with his claws.

How long the combat raged, Bellatrix did not know. For every spell that Roarke attempted to fling at her, she shot another back in a fury of rage. She would not let him win.

The throne room filled with bright light as red rays began to stream in through the broken windows. Looking outside, Bellatrix could see that clouds in the night sky had parted to reveal the Blood Hunter Supermoon that was now in a lunar eclipse with the sun.

"Jaiyana! We have to go now!" she screamed. Throwing her hands upward she caused a portion of the ceiling to collapse on Roarke, and then she followed her sister out of the throne room as the chaos of battle continued.

"We have to hurry!" screamed Jaiyana. "The clouds have misled us. The moon has been in total eclipse for quite some time now."

The twins sprinted down the hallway to the outside balcony where they had their encounter a year ago. They burst outside as the rays of light bore down upon them. Bellatrix shielded her eyes and saw the Blood Hunter Moon had taken up most of the night sky. It shimmered in red elegance and black yellow flames from the sun that participated with the moon to create the

eclipse, giving the celestial body a halo appearance.

“Do you have the crystals?” asked Jaiyana as they stepped into the middle of the courtyard. Bellatrix nodded and pulled the three crystals from her pocket. “I know what we have to do,” continued her twin. “Grün gave me the instructions while we were in battle.”

“You care for him, don’t you?” asked Bellatrix.

“I do,” replied Jaiyana, “I really do.” She shook her head, “Place the crystals in a triangular formation and leave a decent amount of space between them. We will stand in the middle.”

Placing the crystals on the ground around them, Bellatrix glanced at the stone dragons on the balcony that appeared to be watching them intently. It was astonishing how a year ago she and her twin had said their last goodbyes before she escaped into a mindless state for the next year. Now they were scrambling to break the curse so each of them could be with their true love.

“Done!” she cried, her chest heaving.

“Take my hands,” commanded Jaiyana. Within the center of the triangular pattern, the twins intertwined their fingers and felt their powers begin to combine. “Now your desire to break the curse and your desire for happiness put forth.” She began to chant. “Tonight under the Blood Hunter Moon, we call on the Power of the Eclipse to right unspeakable wrongs. We take the Evils of the past and combine them with the Goodness of the present...”

As Jaiyana spoke, Bellatrix noticed yellow light begin to form around them, and blinding streaks shot upward from each of the crystals. Red light from the Blood Hunter Moon combined with the white and yellow and swirled around them.

“Using the Crystals of Time, we break the Curse of Lovers and unbind our tongues. For the Blood Hunter Moon rising in Scorpio and kissing the sun, we declare that the magic and love of the Meadowbrooks shall live on forevermore!”

Out of the corner of her eye, Bellatrix noticed a dark shadow coming towards them. In a fast motion she pulled her sister downward as one of the dragon statues narrowly missed their heads.

The twins turned as the colors whirled around them, and, to their horror, Roarke stood in the doorway of the castle. His hands were raised and the wind whipped his cape around his body. “You twins think you can stop me! No! I am the most powerful wizard in all of Maldinia! You will never break

my curse.”

He threw forth a spell, and the twins called forth a matching spell of their own. Swirls and whirls of red, yellow, and white light surrounded them. The two spells collided with each other head on and became locked in a tug of war as to who would overcome the other and reign victorious!

Bellatrix looked at Jaiyana, and their twin minds silently communicated to one another what was to come next. Together they cried their words of power to the night sky.

“Blood Hunter Moon we call upon you to destroy the wickedness that has held us captive for too long. For in the battle of love and war, Love will forever right the wrongs and defeat the Evil that walks among us.”

With every fiber of their strength, the twins called forth the Red Moon’s rays and combined them with the light that circled around them. The strength overpowered Roarke’s spell of hatred and control and swallowed him and his villainous ways. In an ear splitting-crack and flashing phase of light, the twins found themselves alone on the balcony. Prince Roarke was gone, as were the crystals. They looked up to see the moon moving out of the lunar eclipse, and the redness faded into the beauty of the star-studded night sky. At long last, the twins felt their souls fly buoyant and free.

“Are you alright,” whispered Bellatrix as a wave of exhaustion washed over her. She leaned against her twin with their hands still intertwined.

“Yes,” replied Jaiyana. “We did it, Sister! she announced as she hugged Bellatrix.

Their tender moment was broken by the sound of footsteps approaching, and their lovers Grün and Eryx rushed onto the balcony. The twins broke their embrace to fall into the arms of the brave men they loved.

“Jaiyana!” cried Grün. “I was so worried about you. I could not bear to think of anything horrible to befall you.” He cleared his throat and seemed unsure of what to say next. “I am fond of you, Princess, and I hope you would consider the idea of courtship between us.”

Smiling, Jaiyana leaned forward and placed a kiss on Grün’s lips. “I love you!” she cried.

Throwing her arms around him, her smile widened as there was proof that the curse was broken.

“I love you, too,” replied Grün, shocked by her bold manner but clearly enjoying it.

“You are truly a force to be reckoned with,” whispered Eryx, “I was

trying to save your life, but instead, you saved mine! For that I will be forever grateful to you. Any man who believes that a woman is not capable to reign an entire royal kingdom and rule with the wisdom of the wisest judge is a fool. I am truly happy that you love me, for I would never wish to be your enemy. Will you marry me, Beautiful Witch Princess, for I can now say the words I have waited so long to ask.?"

Bellatrix grinned and touched her nose against his. "Of course, I will marry you, Eryx. I love you." The way the words fell freely from her mouth made her soul flutter with joy.

"Oh, be still, my heart!" The couples turned to see the Queen standing on the balcony holding her hand to her chest as tears dripped from her eyes. "This is what I have always wanted for both of you since the day you were born. For you to show the world how strong you are and to allow you to choose who you wished to spend forever with."

"You are mighty strong yourself, Your Majesty," said Eryx. "The way you wielded that sword, I would never want to be in a fight with you."

The Queen blushed. "I know my daughters are capable of handling themselves, but it brings my mind peace to know they both have good men who will love and support them."

"Ahem," the sound of a throat clearing caused the group to turn around. With shocked expressions, their eyes took in the King of Maldinia who stood before them. He wobbled on his legs, and in his hands he clutched a golden staff. Jaiyana's old staff.

"I hate to interrupt this happy celebration. My Dear Queen, would you give me a moment with my daughters?" He spoke in a low voice.

The Queen touched his arm affectionately and turned towards her future sons-in-law. "Come on, Eryx and Grün, let's head inside and check on Fengari. The men glared at the King of Maldinia but knew better than to question the Queen's wishes. Once they had left, the King hobbled forward and stood before his daughters.

"My offspring are now witches," began the King. "I ban magic and now magic stands before me. My daughters are more powerful than I will ever be, and I see the error of my ways."

"Where did you get that staff?" demanded Jaiyana.

"The dragon Fengari tossed it to me. He said I could use this and feel how someone else had felt for a very long time. My stay in the dungeon weakened my legs, and I lost my strength."

“How could you do this to us?” interrupted Jaiyana. “Why didn't you love us for who we are?”

“Why is being a woman so wrong in your eyes?” added Bellatrix.

The King paused and stroked his beard. “I can give you no real explanation other than I am a fool. For generations it was engraved in my lineage and passed down through our family line, that the ruler on the throne should always be a man. My father never showed me love, and no matter what I did, I could never please him. This caused me to become bitter and angry. I projected my past onto you both. I felt if a male heir did not continue the legacy, I would be bringing shame to my family and disappoint my father. But I see now I have been as wise as the court jester and my antiquated way of thinking is irrelevant. When Roarke called me a liar and took away my palace and kingdom, I felt betrayed, for I thought as royals, we were to take the word of the other.

“Prince Roarke treated me in the manner I had treated so many other subjects and locked me away in the dungeons without allowing me the opportunity to defend my innocence. As I sat closeted with your mother, she enlightened me, and made me realize I was suffering the way I had let my own daughters suffer along with the citizens of Malidina. Locked in solitude for a whole year played upon my mind and allowed me to see the ugliness that festered within my soul. I could no longer bear the shame for the hurt I had caused out of my own selfishness, and I began to lose all grip on reality. My sanity faded.

“When you came to the dungeons tonight, you had every right to leave me there to continue my suffering. I would have done the same thing to my own father had he done to me what I did to you. But instead, you chose to free me and save me. This makes you both far better people than I have ever been. The way you took on the male betrayer and guards with strength, determination, and love for Maldinia, showed me that I was wrong to ever think a woman was incapable of rule. You showed more heart and honor for our beautiful realm than I ever did.”

Tears pricked at the patriarch's eyes. “I do not expect forgiveness from both of you. But I am truly sorry for the pain I have caused you both by forcing you to marry, Bellatrix, to someone you did not love, and by not taking more concern at your injury, Jaiyana. I am happy you are healed. If you could give me the opportunity to prove to you I have changed, and allow me to be the father I should have been to you long ago, I would be forever

grateful. I am so very sorry. I am willing to mend this relationship if you are.”

Before the princesses could reply, Jinx scurried out the door and interrupted the conversation. With a straight tail and eyes blazing green, the cat padded over and looked up at the royal monarch. “Does your request for forgiveness extend to the feline population, Your Majesty? You cannot imagine the suffering this member of the royal family has endured over the past year, leaving his velvet basket behind to guide the princesses to victory, it seems I am owed an apology as well and lots of treats!”

“Jinx!” groaned Jaiyana. She picked up the black tabby and cuddled him.

Their pet’s entrance eased the intense moment, the twins looked at one another and silently communicated their feelings. How they longed to have a loving relationship with their father.

“We would be willing to try,” replied Bellatrix, and the two daughters put their arms around the King in a tight embrace.

“I can feel the love!” cried Jinx, “Easy! Don’t squish me!”

Under the Red Hunter Moon, another spell began to blossom, a conjuration of love, forgiveness, and new beginnings.

EPILOGUE



THE KING OF MALDINIA RETIRED FROM HIS DUTIES STATING THAT HIS daughters had conquered the palace and were now in charge. The twins made sure to reverse any rules forbidding magic, and the Good Witches of the Woods were let out from the ghost trees and became healers among the citizens. Fengari became a castle favorite, Jinx lounged in his velvet basket, and Iris was invited to live at the palace and dazzled everyone with her exquisite jams. Most importantly, the princesses formed a stronger bond with their father who made good on his promise to be a better father and a more humble king.

Bellatrix and Jaiyana stood on the balcony, months later as the next full moon cycle took place.

“It feels good to be queen,” confessed Jaiyana. “We make a splendid monarchy.”

“That we do,” replied Bellatrix.

“Good evening, my dears,” a familiar voice called. Bellatrix turned to see Tiahanna standing before them.

“Who is she?” asked Jaiyana.

“The woman who healed my mind and is Grün’s aunt,” replied the princess.

The Good Witch walked to them with her arms stretched outward. “Bellatrix and Jaiyana, I cannot thank you enough for allowing people of magic to be recognized for our healing and helping others. It makes my heart happy to see Maldinia ruled with love and kindness instead of malice and greed.”

“Thank you, Tiahanna. We could not have done it without your

guidance.” replied Bellatrix.

“I come to return what was taken from you in an exchange,” continued Tiahanna. Taking the princess’s hand, she dropped the gold ring that Bellatrix had offered as collateral in the ghost forest. “It is now rightfully yours as is the palace and the realm.”

Sliding the ring back onto her finger, Bellatrix smiled and grabbed her sister’s hand whose index finger bore the same band. “Thank you Tiahanna. You offered us help when we needed it most,” she whispered.

“That is what we Good Witches do! Now thanks to you, the whole realm benefits from our goodness. Ah, my darling friends! I must be off,” she turned and gave a sly smile to Jiayana. “I am grateful to see my nephew has found a beautiful powerful woman like yourself to be his bride. Take care of him, for he sometimes is not all there.” Laughing, she disappeared into the night.

“Never again will Maldinia underestimate the power of a woman,” declared Jaiyana.

Bellatrix nodded. Her sister spoke the words of truth. For no matter how many times Evil tried to take reign, the magic of love and kindness would always stand victorious against the angry tide.

Thank you for reading.

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N.D. Testa is an Italian-American author who lives in the United States. She creates magical realms for others to escape to and enjoy. Her goal is to write stories that bring joy, happiness, and hope to the lives of many.

When she is not hard at work writing, N.D. Testa spends her time riding horses, working out, traveling, snowboarding, and looking for her next adventure. She is fluent in multiple languages, loves animals, and is obsessed with fashion and fitness. She always ends her day with a cup of tea.

N.D. Testa also writes under the pen name N.D.T. Casale.

MY WARLOCK PROFESSOR



CARA NORTH

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Edited by: Michelle Edits

MY WARLOCK PROFESSOR

Some lessons you just can't learn in a classroom.

Peach had spent her entire time as an undergraduate avoiding the powerful warlock professor. As a succubus, her draw to the mysterious man was about more than looks. Her determination to stay away from him was about survival, for them both.

Damian had spent a lifetime happily alone. So why did the reluctant TA make him want to risk everything? His career, his heart, his life. Their union would be cursed. No two ways about it, but sometimes a curse is actually a blessing in disguise.

CHAPTER 1



IT WAS MY FIRST DAY IN MY NEW ROLE AND I WAS READY TO SWALLOW MY tongue and go to the infirmary rather than walk down the hallway and knock on his door. This was not supposed to happen. I had spent five years here avoiding this particular professor like he was patient zero of a magical plague meant to obliterate my kind.

I turned around. My intention was to exit the building and go directly to the administration and beg someone to change my assignment. Again. I was originally supposed to be working in the lab as an assistant for a rather quirky witch doing research on potions.

“Peach?” One of my favorite people in the world, Professor Larson blocked my path to the exit. “Are you lost, Dear? You should be heading that way, no?”

“I.” I gulped. “I uh.”

She looked at the note and then indicated the direction. When I turned again, we were at the other end of the hall in front of the man I was actively avoiding’s door.

“But I uh.”

“Professor Roark.” Professor Emily Larson, head of the entire department tapped on his door. “Your TA for the semester is here and looking for you.”

I closed my eyes and wished I had a different kind of magic. I would just make myself invisible. Cast a spell that would transport me to another building. Something. Of course, if I did have that kind of magic instead of being made from the magic of my species then...I wouldn’t have to worry about being assigned to the most powerful creature I had ever been around. I could catch his scent if he was across within two miles of me. I could taste

his magic—

“Miss Wilder.” The warlock of my dreams stood in the doorway. “I’m right here.” Yes. Yes, he was. Right there. Right within reach. Right in front of me so I could no longer avoid him. I could feel the fight within me. My instincts to feed were never this strong around anyone else. I didn’t know why they were insatiable around him. I just...couldn’t let myself give in. No matter what. Not even a sip. No. Not one little—

“Have a wonderful semester, Peach.” Professor Larson tapped my shoulder, pulling me back to the moment. She smiled and then began moving along the hallway and through the wall she just tapped with her wand.

“That’s her office.” Professor Roark moved back a step and indicated I should follow him inside. He left the door open, and I was grateful for that. I could focus my breathing to pull from the hallway. I was dizzy in his presence. Overwhelmed by his...everything. “At least one of them. I think she has three.”

Made sense. She was always around and never seemed troubled by the weather. I imagined she had a means of moving through the buildings the rest of us did not. She was probably more powerful than this professor, but I never had an urge to so much as sip from her energy. She smelled like nothing to me. Hence the way she could sneak up on me like that without my knowledge.

He took a seat behind the large, dark oak desk and settled his fingers together in a bit of a steeple as his elbows moved to rest on the old-fashioned paper planner that was held down by four leather triangles on each end. I tried to just stay focused on his arms, his hands, but the steeped fingers were covering his lips. Lips that were framed by the mustache and short beard that extended along his jaws to his ears. He had werewolf style hair, meaning it was thick, perfectly coiffed without any effort on his part to make it so. Deep grooves formed between his dark eyebrows and his blue, no green, no grey, no—

“Miss Wilder!” The sharpness of the tone made me jerk back in response. “Are you all right?”

“What a strange question to ask.” I was...not all right.

“What’s strange is your behavior.” He leaned back in the chair and looked at me.

“Excuse me?” I blinked, trying to pull myself together and at least pretend like I had the ability to focus. I looked at the pencil cup on the desk,

not the professor, and that helped.

“I’m trying to form an excuse right now and can’t. Did you hear anything I just said?” he asked.

I went through a series of sounds, but settled on the truth, “No.”

“Why aren’t you looking at me?” he asked.

“I uh. Can’t.” I knew that sounded lame, but looking at him was like looking into the abyss. I got lost so quickly and nothing else mattered. It was freaking me out.

“Can’t?” he asked. “Explain yourself. I don’t have time for games, Miss Wilder and I didn’t want a TA to begin with, so if you want to keep your job and complete this semester—”

“I do!” I looked up at him then and then looked beyond him at the books on the shelves lining that wall. “I...I’m not like other students, Professor. I ___”

“I’m fully aware of what you are.” He seemed frustrated and exasperated. “Just spit it out for crying out loud. This is exactly why I don’t like—”

“It’s you.” I blurted out and then followed it with more truth he needed to understand and handle since he was insistent on me figuring this out right now in front of him rather than later when I could process, ask for a spell, something. “You are distracting me. I...have the deepest instinct I have ever felt before in my life to feed off your dark energy. Like you’ve been hiding ___”

“Stop right there.” He stood up and the door to his office closed at the swipe of his hand through the air.

I was at war again. My internal monster seeking to pull from this man now more than ever before. “Professor.”

“You know nothing about me.” He began to move his hand and the words from his mouth shifted into a light smoke on the air.

It was he who knew nothing about me if this was any proof. I could feel my eyes heat and my lungs expand as I inhaled with a different intention than breathing air. I pulled that smoke into my nose, fed off the magic. Such sweetness I had never known. That meant it was dark magic, forbidden. The best kind because it was also the worst kind. I never got these treats. Most of the paranormal entities at this school were good. This man looked like a hero, but there was no doubt in my mind or body as I rendered his words useless, that given the opportunity, he would become a villain. Again.

Feeling as though I just had my first coffee with espresso, I stood up and

smiled at my professor. “Maybe you should just send me the details in an email, professor. It might be safer for both of us if we communicate through electronics.”

He blinked at me. I knew my eyes were still glowing, but the energy was so good and I had other things I could use it on. Plus, if I stayed here much longer, I may try to take more. I already wanted more. I inhaled again through my nose and made sure I let him feel the air as it pulled past his ear and gathered the scent, the essence, the little bits of magic that constantly floated around this man. I gave my warlock professor a warning, “I’d hate to have to devour you.”

I licked my lips and left his office before I did something really crazy, like try to devour him.

CHAPTER 2



I PULLED UP MY EMAIL AND TRIED NOT TO SMILE. SUCCUBUS AS A SPECIES wasn't good or evil per say, but I was the only one at this school and most people thought I was just another witch with a slightly different aura or something. Most paranormal beings could sense others. Witches had to rely more on time and wisdom, where shifters could usually tap into their animal counterpart and sniff or sense something. The vampires on this campus were probably the equivalent of the goth groups on other campuses. They didn't really socialize outside of their own circle. They consumed blood. I consumed energy. This is why I didn't mind my roommate being a vampire. We both fed on others to survive.

"What the hell?" Nadia went wide eyed as I walked into our room. "Where have you been?"

"Feeding." It was time for me to come clean. We'd been roommates for the past three years and while her studies were focused on research and medical progress for the paranormal, mine were focused on education.

"What the hell did you eat? Your eyes are glowing like an animal caught by a flashlight, but no light needed." Her head tilted and I knew she was going into examination mode. One of the reasons I never told her. I was afraid she may try to experiment on me when I slept.

"I'm not a witch." I gulped. Her brow lifted. A slight tilt of her lips and a snicker she seemed to be trying to contain let me know she was aware of that. "You knew?"

"That you were not a witch? Yeah. That you were a succubus of this line, I had my suspicions about the energy feeding, but you're from an ancient, extinct really, lineage if you got those glow in the daylight eyeballs." She

waggled her brows and then asked, “What do *you* know about your species?”

“Not enough.” I dropped my bag and then my body onto my bed and admitted. “I was adopted by a couple of witches. They knew what I was, taught me the basics of how to handle life and go incognito. How did you know?”

“You talk in your sleep when you’re stressed out.” She shrugged as she sorted through some dusty old books on her shelves. “I found this at an estate sale.”

“Estate sale?” I was pretty sure we were both too young to be shopping estate sales.

“Yes. How else can I find books that are out of print? The magical realm is so worried about some human hacker accidentally crossing portals and tapping into our technological databases that there is not a Project Gutenberg for us to search through. You want to make an 18th Century cloak, sure. You can get that pattern on the witch web, but this? Medical shit that reveals all the strengths and weaknesses of our kind...not so much.”

“I don’t blame them.” That much was true. The more the magical realm mirrored the human one, the more our problems mirrored theirs too.

She blew off the dust and it scattered, making both of us cough and sneeze. I sat up and she moved to sit next to me on my bed. “Here we go.”

The ancient pages crackled as she opened the book. “Even with extra visual powers, that print is tiny.”

She laughed at me and said, “Ah yes. A limitation of your kind. Beyond perfect vision, but not vampire vision.”

I snorted a laugh and she looked over at her desk and the magnification kit she had hooked up to the desk. I was going to make her say it.

She looked at me, at the desk, at the book. I said, “You could just read it to me with your extra powerful eyes.”

“You should read it yourself.” She got up and took the book to the desk. “Several pages and all. You don’t want to listen to me drone on about it.”

I laughed but followed as she put the book on her desk and then moved the magnifier over it. We could both see the print where a human would likely see a book of dusty blank pages. Probably why some recovered books she had showed me in the past that had somehow traveled to that realm and back had markings like a child had been left alone with a book of magic. Nadia admitted as she moved away from me and the book, “I knew you were a bit more when you seemed to be...I don’t know, dreaming, feeding on

someone in your dreams that...well I've left the room more than once in the past year."

I gasped and squeaked out an offended sound, but she was already at the door, giggling and making her exit. I would be reading about my special brand of succubus without her over my shoulder. She knew I hated that, but before I had glow in the daylight eyes, I suppose she didn't care. I settled in and decided maybe my dayglo eyes were a benefit after all.

Three pages into this book and I winced. I got up and went to the mirror. My eyes were back to their plain ole brown. Nothing special. It was how I navigated the world around here. Nothing special. I was as low key as the student body could be. I looked at the sunglasses I bought on a whim one year and had yet to wear since. I picked them up and put them on. Not bad. Still looked cute. Very dark lenses, so hopefully enough to hide the glow if needed.

Not that I would need them. I pulled them off my face and carried them with me. I put them in a pouch and then in my bag as a very unlikely, just in case. I went back to the book and read the text again and again and once more for good measure to ensure I was not reading it wrong. Apparently, there were only two options for my warlock professor. He would either submit and become my mate or I would murder him. That's just the kind of creature I happened to be. So powerful, in fact, the female of the species was known to live several lifetimes, breed once, and would either discard or kill their female offspring because, no surprise here, there can be only one.

Explained a lot about why I never met another me at a school filled with exceptional beings. I didn't think Professor Damian Roark was the submitting type.

Nadia returned with a blood bag for her and a box of fries with a side of ranch dressing for me. "Here. You'll feel better after some fries."

"Thanks." I took the bag and settled in the seat at my own desk. "So."

She smiled and said, "He gave me a B. I vote you drain him like a kid's pool at the end of summer."

"Damn, Nad." I laughed. "What happened to do no harm?"

"We are not humans, and they do and have done plenty of fucking harm. Yeah, give me a B. Impact my whole average." She was putting the book away and mumbling though I could hear her so she was not speaking low enough.

"That was his first year." I remembered that year and that B. The only

grade lower than an A+ she had ever received. Ever.

“And I should have murdered him then. Saved you the headache of all this.” She had a wicked smile on her face when she turned and winked at me before adding, “And I see you don’t just like him in your...sleep.”

I gasped and hated that I could feel myself blushing as she laughed before sipping on her blood bag again. It made her teeth tinge red and gave her just a hint more...something in her aura when she fed. Her eyes didn’t glow though, at least not in the middle of the afternoon because she was feeding. Ugh. I had to grapple with the first of several embarrassing points and ask, “What did I say or do in my sleep, Nadia?”

She licked her fangs and demonstrated why she got an A in theatrics. All overdramatic movement and what I imagine a crazy person would sound like sleeping, she said, “Oh, Damien. You’re so good. So very good. So—”

“So that is enough. Thank you.” I held my hand up. I lost my appetite with her dramatic rendering of my sleep talk.

She giggled and reached for her nearly empty bag of blood. She took a sip as she silently scrutinized me.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing.” She smiled.

“Nadia! Tell me.” I wanted to strangle her.

“I don’t know. I mean. What are the chances that the one person you can’t seem to resist siphoning energy off of is who the all knowing Professor Hansen assigns you to?”

“I was assigned to—”

“An accident prone second year professor? Yeah. We all saw that pink slip coming.” Nadia rolled the bag to get the last of the juice out of it.

“Pink slip?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yup. Fired. I mean you can’t catch the school on fire and not expect some sort of action when no one authorized her to be in there to begin with. Whole scandal in the medical department. I was outside Professor Fang’s office when a few of them were talking about it. They were too caught up in their faculty drama to realize I was in the hall, waiting until it was too late and I had already heard it all. Scandal.”

“What was she doing, then? If not authorized magic. What was she trying to do in there?” I asked and considered she had requested me to be her TA. Was she trying to get me expelled too? Did I just luck out that she messed up before I was involved? Why was this semester turning out to be way more

than I felt comfortable with and it hadn't officially started yet?

"That, my friend, is still the question. Conspiracy theories abound. Everything from trying to get the school closed or discredited to simply seeking revenge on a particular student." Nadia winked at me and I felt my spine go rigid. "Probably not you, per say, but...she did request you."

"I know absolutely nothing about any of this." I held my hands up.

"I know that. You know that. But going from the least experienced professor in the school to one of the most proficient makes a person wonder if you aren't being watched." She kicked back on her bed and looked at the ceiling where a poster of Keanu Reeves from the movie *Dracula* looked back at her. "Or maybe it's just me."

I gulped. She waved at him. I watched the poster just to be sure it did not wave back. After a few moments, I got up, grabbed my bag, and headed out for a walk to clear my head. No way was I a part of any misdoings. I kept myself in check around here. I was a good witch as far as the majority of the campus knew. My roommate had figured out my secret, but she had lived with me for several years now, so it made sense she would know something was different about me.

The dreams though. If I had been a sleep talker our freshman year, I am sure she would have tried to smother me. Nadia liked her sleep. Day, afternoon, evening. The woman didn't need a coffin or a bed. Just a quiet place for more than a few moments and she was able to close her eyes, smile, and sleep like everything was right in the world and as it should be.

I stopped to sit on a bench and closed my eyes. I let the surroundings present themselves to me. I slowly inhaled and tasted the werewolves across the lawn playing some game with a ball involved. The mermaids, beautiful and deadly creatures, chatting by the fountain with their feet in the water. The troll grumbling because he got something on his shirt, ketchup maybe. And... I gulped, and my eyes flashed open.

I couldn't even see him in the vicinity, but he was coming my way. I stood up and rushed in the opposite direction of his scent. I needed to avoid that man at all costs.

CHAPTER 3



MY TA WORK WAS A BIT MORE ADVANCED THAN I WAS PREPARED FOR. SINCE we were down a professor, I was not just assisting and filling in as needed, I was actually teaching two of her classes under the supervision of my warlock professor and I needed help.

“Why are you asking me?” Professor Yoor asked and continued grading the paper on the desk in front of him. “You have a mentor.”

“You teach this class.” I thought that was the best argument for why I was in his office rather than the one at the end of the hall. I knew Professor Roark was in his office. I could smell him, taste him, feel his presence there.

“And you have everything you need to figure out how to teach it also. Good day, Peach. You were my best student when you took my classes. Don’t disappoint me now.” Professor Yoor pointed toward the door.

I breathed out a sigh and exited his office. He was always proud of me for figuring things out on my own. It was part of the curriculum and as a student, that made sense. It was the part of the class I loved the most. As the one teaching it, I wasn’t sure how to instill that kind of motivation in a handful of students who were not getting that fundamentals of magic meant exploring, not just waiting for me to tell them what to do and step by step. It was the most basic of courses and even I was able to master a few spells by the end of it. These witches already knew some spells and they still weren’t picking up on the fact that they had to do work to get better at their craft.

I stood two steps away from Professor Roark’s door and tried my best to push air out of my nose, my lungs, and in some reverse holding of breath, I attempted not to inhale rather than exhale. I stepped forward and into the doorway. He was standing at the bookcase near the window. One book in

hand, another floating nearby, two more on the desk in front of him.

“Are you going to stand there, or do you have a question you think I am unable to answer over e-mail?” He didn’t even look up from the book.

Mistake one, I inhaled air to take a breath and speak. This close with nothing obstructing or mingling with the aura, I got hit with his...essence and already felt the tinges of desire rushing through me.

Stronger this time. Different because it wasn’t just feeding urges. The sensations crawling up my legs, around my knees, spreading through the inner muscles of my thighs and higher had me gasping. What. The. Actual. Fuck. Was happening to me?

“Are you all right?” he asked. Dark brow quirked, he waited for my answer.

“Fine. A little lightheaded from the stairs.” I lied and took a seat in one of the chairs that faced his desk. I needed to sit down before I fell down.

“What can I do for you?” he asked and went back to looking through the book in his hand. The floating book and the ones on his desk also seemed to be turning pages like he was reading them all at the same time.

“Motivation.” I focused on the pencil cup on his desk and counted how many pens and pencils were in it. Four. Just four? I kept looking at the cup. Looking at him was too much. Too risky. I already wanted to eat his energy. Pull it into my body and...damn, not the way to get control.

“What about it?” he asked. Still barely interested.

“I need help motivating a handful of students.” I was aching in places I didn’t know existed. My hands began to shake from the need to touch, to feel.

“Professor Roark.” A student popped in and I was grateful for the distraction. The dilution of the energy in the room tempting me to consume it. “May I speak with you in private?”

The student looked at me and then at him. Professor Roark was about to speak when the student said, “I need to show you something. Out here, Professor.”

He stepped back into the hall and the warlock looked at me and glared. He nodded to the student and said to me, “I’ll be right back.”

Once he stepped past the threshold of the door, I looked for anything to help me ease the aches. I picked up one of the pens from the cup and squeezed it, pulling his touch from the device. Inhaling his scent left in the room. I focused on just the remnants of his magic and found it difficult to stop feeding off old prints.

Still, I was feeling better. Less achy in some places. More in others. I squirmed around in the seat, trying to not feel any friction, but also seeking the release of something I hadn't actually experienced before. Until this man landed on this campus, I had been oblivious to any sexual urges. I thought it was because there was no other succubus for me to even consider mating with, but that was not the case. I simply hadn't found the right magic to turn that switch on.

Now, I needed to find a way to turn it off.

"Of course." Professor Roark entered the room again and asked, "So where were we?" Before I could answer he asked, "Where is my pen?"

Dammit. "This pen?"

"Put it back." He indicated the cup. Why was the whole room cast in a shade of violet? This was weird. Very strange indeed.

I held onto it a moment longer and then put it back where I got it from.

"Hmmm." He seemed to be thinking about something. "Are you hungry?"

Was this a trick question? Where he was concerned, I was not hungry. I was ravenous. Dangerous. I nodded.

"Let's grab lunch then, shall we? We can discuss this motivation problem and eat at the same time." He snapped his fingers and the books all closed and went back to the shelves on their own accord. I did my best not to stick my tongue out of my mouth in an effort to taste the magic on the air.

Magic uses energy and there is always a little bit of residual. His magic, even when doing something as simple and innocuous as closing a book, still had that tinge of darkness.

"After you." He indicated the door. I nodded. His brow went up. I exhaled deeply and then stood up without inhaling. As I passed him he asked, "Are you afraid of the woods?"

"No," I answered honestly.

As a succubus, I had few things around here I needed to be afraid of and top of that list was a grade. I had no known predators and by nature was the most dangerous predator on this campus to everyone else.

"Excellent. Foraging it is." He led the way out of the building and to the edge of the woods.

I was still high from his presence, but with so much activity and energy from the forest, I was able to dilute his scent with that of trees and grass, birds and other creatures, even the air was cleaner, and my focus of breathing

could sort, sift a bit and take in less of him.

“Follow me.” He stepped past the tree line, and it took me a moment to follow, but I did. Once I got past the initial trees, I realized I could not see him anymore. “Follow me.”

His voice was everywhere, and I tried to figure out which way he was leading me. I moved for a few steps one way then another as the words kept coming back to me.

“Professor?” I called back after attempting to hide my frustration. “Where are you?”

“Follow me.” Was all that came back.

I stopped. Was this a test? A lesson? Fine. He wanted to see what he was dealing with; I could follow him. He just might not like it when I get there.

CHAPTER 4



MY TRACKING SKILLS WERE NO JOKE AND PROFESSOR ROARK WAS ODDLY prepared for me to arrive in time for what looked like afternoon tea.

“You made it just in time for tea.” He indicated the table before me.

I was so worked up from tracking him, I wasn’t sure how I was going to take a seat and have lunch like a normal paranormal being. I wanted to keep moving forward, touch him, taste him, devour his essence, his magic, his flesh.

I startled myself with that thought and it was enough to pull me from the hunt to the more rational part of my brain. “Why did you do that to me?”

“You wanted a lesson in motivation. I gave you one.” He rolled his shoulder. “Sit. Sugar?”

“What?” I took a seat across from him at this odd table in the middle of the forest. It was reminiscent of another tea party, but the only ones here were us and I did not fall down a rabbit hole to get here. Or did I? It sure felt like I went through something.

“Sugar? One lump or two?” he asked.

My mouth was feeling dry, everything tasted different, strange. Bitter. “Two.”

“I’ve been doing my homework too, you know.” He lifted his cup to his lips and took a sip of the tea.

I picked up my cup and looked at it. Tea leaves were swirling, making shapes, combining, moving apart. “I think my leaves are trying to tell me something.”

I took a sip and it was so good, I couldn’t just sip once. I drank more. All of it. When I put my cup on the table, he summoned it to him and then looked

inside. He smiled and then began swirling the cup. Was he about to read my leaves? “I didn’t ask any questions or put any intentions toward it. What do you expect to find there?”

“You’ve asked plenty of questions and have lots of intentions. They practically form words over your head like a comic book bubble.” He flipped the cup over and tapped the bottom once. That was a new move. Then he turned the saucer three times and the cup flipped upright on its own once he stopped.

“How do I know, like that cup doing its own flip, that when you tapped the bottom, you didn’t just set up whatever answer you want me to have?” I crossed my arms, focused my breath on all the things around us though I wasn’t as insatiable now. I felt very calm, in control, and his scent wasn’t nearly as potent. I’d dare say it was as level as anything else around me.

He studied the leaves longer than I thought necessary. “Do you want me to read them?”

He glared up at me and said, “No.”

“Well, what do they say?” I asked.

“That you lack patience. That you’re inexperienced. That you are borderline out of control recently.” He gave me a pointed look.

I cleared my throat, crossed my arms, and said, “Go on.”

“These leaves tell me nothing I don’t already know. Nothing you don’t already know.” He placed the cup down on the table and took another sip of his tea as the cup magically made it’s way back to my side of the table and a new cup was poured without either of us touching the pot. “The tea will help. It’s the only thing I know for sure.”

“Help what?” I asked as I put two lumps of sugar in and stirred.

“Help you control the urge to kill me.” He placed his cup on the table. “Though I don’t know for how long.”

I was so relaxed. So chill that I maybe shouldn’t have said anything else. But I did. “I don’t want to kill you.”

“No?” he asked. “What do you want then?”

“I want to devour you. I want to be so close that I could crawl inside your skin and wear it like a coat of armor.” I was such a poet in this moment. “Taste more than just this leftover print on the air.” I inhaled and pulled that into my lungs, felt them process, felt a little less tired. “I feel...all tingly and warm and wanting when you’re nearby. I’ve fought it from the moment I scented you in the student assembly and they introduced you as the new

professor. It was my freshman year. I avoided your courses like my life depended on it, because I thought it did.”

“Wait a minute. Let me get this straight. You don’t want to kill me?” he asked.

I was finished with that cup of tea and said, “Read those leaves. If you dare.”

Out of my head, out of my senses, I stood up and began walking around the little area where our lunch was. I hadn’t eaten a sandwich, scone, or biscuit. I only drank the tea that made me...free. I did a little twirl and that made me feel dizzy in a new way. A fun and exciting way. I began moving, dancing to the sound of the wind through the trees. Like in a movie when the music makes its way to the foreground of sound. “I want to dance. With you. My warlock professor. Taste the bittersweet darkness of your secrets.”

I didn’t feel embarrassed, or the least bit concerned about my grades, my status, anything other than the simmering need that did not fully abate just because of the tea. If anything, my inhibitions were lowered enough I could no longer lie about how I felt. The driving need and urges I had no familiarity with.

When Professor Roark touched my hand and pulled me closer, I looked up and into the kaleidoscope of colors and started to ask a question, but he leaned in and placed his lips to mine. Silencing me.

CHAPTER 5



“MISS WILDER.” HOW WAS HE TALKING AND KISSING AT THE SAME TIME?

“Ahem.” My eyes flashed open.

“Oh shit.” I dropped the pencil.

His dark brows went up and his handsome face held just a hint of blush on those cheeks. “What are you doing?”

“Falling under a spell.” I frowned and picked up the pencil. “Is this your magic stick?”

Oh, I was far from a poet.

“If you’re asking if the pencil you took without asking from my desk has a spell on it, the answer is yes. Everything in my office has a security feature.” He crossed his arms and waited. “Well, what did you see? That particular pencil grants wishes. At least in the mind of the holder. Not in reality. What did you wish for? A different mentor?”

I gulped. Sheesh. “I saw us having lunch together. Somewhere in the woods where you read my tea leaves and...” I was insulting him with that last part if his expression was any indication. “We were discussing the problem I have with motivating students.”

“Are you hungry?” he asked and looked at the clock on the wall. “I’m done for today. Your wish may actually be granted. You seem to have control of your siphoning urges at the moment, so this may be a good time to communicate in person rather than through email.”

Maybe my wishes would come true after all.

“Are we going to the woods?” I asked.

He picked up his bag and opened it. Multiple items jumped inside before he closed it and slung it over his shoulder. “No.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t help the disappointed tone in my voice.

“We are going to my house. I need to be somewhere I can defend myself and not look as though I’m assaulting a student should your appetite for my magic increase. We have much to discuss and the conversation is long overdue Miss Wilder. Don’t you agree?” He indicated the door.

“Absolutely.” I smiled and nodded. I was probably going to lose control at some point and murder him. Solved my problem with motivating students if I would have to pack up my things and escape to another realm. Maybe I’d find another succubus there. Maybe I’d be alone the rest of my life just jumping from one place to the next as a criminal.

I thought of a life on the run as we walked through a portal and stepped into a relatively secluded clearing where a rather large castle stood proud as the focal point. “You live in a castle?”

“It’s a family heirloom.” He indicated the path, and we began walking toward the modest castle.

I looked around, noticed there was nothing else in sight as far as my eyes could see. “You’re alone out here?”

“We.” He looked over at me and was certain his eyes did some kind of swirl of color.

I gulped. Did I just willingly follow a warlock to his castle? Yes. I sure did. Does this warlock know I am a danger to his person? Sure. He does, yes. I tapped into my calm that had settled over me since handling that pencil and tried to just inhale a little bit of the area’s magic.

I stopped walking as I coughed, choked.

“Oh. Yes. That. You don’t want to eat that. Quite rancid for your kind if I understand correctly.” He smiled and then said, “Come along.”

I snorted, coughed, made five different sour faces as I followed him because I also realized the portal that brought us here, was gone. Closed. I was going to his castle one way or another and if I might have just flipped my scenario from being the predator to being the prey, then I was going to give him a good fight. Or at least try to.

Once inside, he hung up his bag and indicated I could do the same. I held the strap and he said, “Really, Miss Wilder. I’m not going to hurt you. And here, you are definitely not going to hurt me.”

“So you planned to bring me here?” I asked and surrendered my bag to the hook that was moving about as if impatient to grab something.

“This castle has been passed down for many generations of my family.

The type of grass, every plant, every animal, the very objects that have been procured through purchase or other means are here for a reason.” He indicated a portrait above the fireplace in the main room similar to a living room. “There. They are the owners of this place. I am merely its current keeper.” He did a slight bow of his head. “She may wish to see you.”

“Like, at dinner or—”

“I never know. They come and go in their spiritual forms as they please.” He motioned with his hand, and I followed him to what may have been a kitchen filled with servants at some point. He moved his hand and began speaking in a language I was not familiar with. The kitchen bustled to life and as if there were ghostly servants doing the work, dishes moved, food relocated, the fire to the oven lit, and Professor Roark said, “Let’s have a seat in the library, shall we? Seems like a good place to spend our time as the food is prepared.”

“I’d like something to drink if—”

A tea kettle screamed to life and the next thing I knew, a hot cuppa was being floated to me. Before I could ask, he said, “Two lumps.”

How the hell did he know that? I accepted my tea and thanked the air as I followed this increasingly mysterious man to the library.

“Have a seat, Miss Wilder.”

This was going to drive me crazy. “Peach. At this point, you can just call me Peach. You know what I am. You know what I want. And you know what happened in that dream I had while sitting in your office, don’t you?”

He accepted a floating glass of a dark liquid and then took a seat adjacent mine. “I do.”

I gulped. “Why am I here?”

“As in on this plane of existence or—”

“In this castle, Professor Roark.”

“Damien.” He nodded and took a sip. “I think formalities are officially over between us, don’t you?”

“I don’t know what to think.” I admitted.

“You know me, Peach. I know you. We are ourselves and yet, there is another life that we have lived before this one.” He took a sip. “I used to think my grandfather was just teasing me. He said I was marked. I would be the one to find you, bring you home.”

I wasn’t drinking the tea, but the warm liquid was touching my lip as I used the cup to shield my response. I finally took a sip and swallowed that

and his information slowly. “Are we.” I thought I had been afraid of myself, of what I could do to him, what he could do to me, but now. I had an even greater fear looming. I gulped and asked, “Related?”

His lips twitched and then he genuinely smiled. He was humored by my question and the longer he waited to answer, the more I could feel the blush creep along my flesh until I thought I was hotter than the liquid in the cup.

Before I caught myself or the chair on fire, he chuckled and said, “No, Peach. We are definitely not related.”

“Why would you wait so long to confirm that?” I asked. If I could throw something at him, I would.

“I like to see you blush.” He sipped his drink.

I felt my flesh burn even hotter.

“I wasn’t sure. I spent most of my life thinking my grandfather was crazy and there was no such thing as a succubus, but then I met one. Not you. Before I met you. You’re different than he was.” He held his cup out to the side and the drink was refilled.

“He?” I perked up. That would make more sense. A mate of my own species.

“Yes. There is an entire species of succubus that get to choose their gender if they choose to gender at all. Some stay ambiguous so they may feed at will and disguise themselves as either. Some have preferences for appearance. Most don’t bother with the human-like features we reflect due to our mixed heritage with that realm and species.” He explained and a few books on the shelf popped out and back in place indicating he had done research on the topic.

He sipped his drink and then said, “And then there is you, Peach. An anomaly born or reborn only once in a blue moon. Literally, you have to be born to a succubus female impregnated by a wizard under a red moon and then you are born under a blue moon and the reason you were given to witches is because the mother cannot survive, not because she will destroy her offspring.”

That book did the same show of sliding out and slipping back into place on the shelf.

“A wizard?” I didn’t know what else to say. It was overwhelming to hear this as a different version of my origin story. I had the book back in my dorm room telling me one thing and this man sitting here telling me I am a reincarnation of the woman in the portrait above the fireplace and he is the

reincarnation of the man.

“A wizard and a red moon have to perform the ceremony, call for her spirit to be born.” He shrugged. “I guess they got word I was around and five years later, there you are, born and raised by witches. Neither of us knowing the other existed. Both of us heading to the same institution. Me, to settle down, figuratively more than literally. You to fulfill your dreams of teaching. It was, as my grandfather would say, inevitable.”

“You sound thrilled.” I pointed out the obvious.

“I don’t like the thought that anything or anyone has been in control of my fate my whole life. Do you?” he asked, and I could read the tone clearly. He was not happy about any of it.

I thought about it a moment and then said, “Maybe. If my fate was bringing me love, family, friends, an education and opportunity to be a part of something when I have always known I was singular, alone as a species. Then yes, I would be happy to let fate take the wheel and guide me to good things.”

I gulped and admitted, “But that is not where we are, is it? You may call to my basic nature, but you don’t want that life. This life, where you are the lord of the castle and I am your lady and a domestic tale of children and pets, laughter and holidays, friends and family travel are not part of your rogue lifestyle or agenda, even as you settle down.”

He tipped his drink and said, “Right you are.”

“So, what happens if nothing happens?” I asked. “What if I...take some of the grass or plants or whatever it is that makes me not want to consume your energy back to the dorm? What if I don’t want to live in your lonely castle haunted by ghostly servants? What if I don’t want you?”

He quirked his brow and said, “You cannot resist my dark side. It’s what you seek. It tastes the sweetest, does it not?”

“There are other people with dark magic in their aura. I can find candy to snack on just walking past the medical department. I could go feed on that energy for days, weeks even when they begin what they call finals, which is really testing on unsuspecting beings in the name of progress.” I had resisted feeding there on principle.

“It won’t be the same.” He seemed nonplussed about it all. His ego was shocking to witness. A bell chimed and he said, “Dinner is served.”

CHAPTER 6



I HATED THAT THE MEAL WAS EXCELLENT. I MEAN, I NEEDED THIS GHOSTLY chef in my life. To override the silent treatment I was giving him, he simply waved a hand and a ghostly string section began playing soft music. The table was set to woo someone, but I was training my brain to hate him, resist his visual charms, his dark magic aura that I knew would taste like bitter-sweet chocolate of the finest making. Much like too much chocolate, he would probably make me sick if I indulged. The longer I was here, the more I could sense, the more I could siphon if I dared risk getting a mouthful of yuck again.

The clinking sound of his silverware being placed on the plate drew my attention. He was finishing his last bite and looking at me as he swallowed that down. It was really ashamed someone so handsome was so bitter and ugly inside. The darkness hadn't fully consumed him, but he didn't hide from it, wasn't exactly ashamed of it, yet he was not so keen on my knowing that was there. It made me wonder, "Can anyone else see your dark side?"

He considered the question a moment and said, "Professor Larson knows who she hired."

Of course. Professor Larson knows everything. Maybe she knew I would want to eat his essence and that is why she assigned me to him. Maybe she wanted me to get rid of her dark spot on the faculty roster. Made sense. The more time I spent with him, the less I liked him.

The awkward silence grew until I asked one more loaded question. "When will you open the portal back to the campus for me?"

I didn't have that kind of magic. I had to buy a portal key if I wanted to speed up my travel or move between realms.

“Not tonight.” He pushed back as the invisible servants removed our dishes. I sat there in shock. “Come, let’s talk some more.”

It was a whisper, but words. “I don’t want to talk to you.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“I don’t want to talk to you.” I looked him directly in his swirling eyes and said, “I want to go home.”

“You are home.” He indicated the castle.

I shook my head. “No. My home is...not here. It’s back there. It’s the dorm and my best friend, Nadia. It’s my parents and the forest I was raised in. It’s my students and the career I have chosen. You said you didn’t like the idea of fate dictating your future. Well, I didn’t mind. Until now. When you seem to think that despite telling me you are not interested in that future, we somehow are stuck carrying it out? No. I will NOT be strapped to a sinking ship. Drown on your own, Professor Roark.”

I stormed out of the castle, not realizing how dark it was. Having no clue where I was going, I did move away from the main entrance and around toward the back. I picked my way through a garden path that seemed to lead toward a cemetery. I ignored the names on the tombstones and finally found the building that likely housed the enshrined bodies of the original owners.

I swatted at cobwebs and wiped away the dust to read names. When I found hers, I knocked on the wall and said, “Hello? Are you here? I know you’re around here somewhere and I can’t wait for you to decide to find me. I need you right now.”

Nothing.

I turned and slid against the stone wall until I was seated. “Of course.”

The tomb was musty, dusty, and didn’t seem to be cared for as it should be. It made me wonder, “How long has it been for you? If you are a part of me, and my appetite is insatiable for this man, then how long has it been since you were reincarnated?”

No answer.

“That long.” I scoffed. “The pencil brought me here, didn’t it? That’s why the tea in the dream made me calmer, less likely to murder him. It’s why that grows everywhere here. I can smell it now. Did you consume your mate?”

Silence.

“That’s it, right?” I puffed out a breath. “He found you, fell in love with you, and you liked that feeling. He wasn’t a good man, though, was he? I can sense that from the castle, the collection. Lots of things that could be fed on if

hungry. And you were hungry because that plant was not here when you first arrived. Probably your first existence.”

A breeze moved through the tomb and the spider webs fluttered.

I placed my hands on the cold stone floor and let the thoughts guide me like a memory buried deep inside.

A girl, young, beautiful. A man, older and dark. He wanted her. Her power. What she could do for him. She was used. Manipulated. Until they came to this castle. Her castle. She killed the owners. She ran the household while he was out pirating and plundering other places.

Then a child. A son. Another. A son. Another. A son. Then a daughter. A daughter that was filled with all the wickedness she had consumed throughout the years. A daughter that, at the age of five, took her first look at her father and devoured his energy like a starving dog devours a meal.

I got up. I snickered. “It’s not you, is it? He’s not the old man either, is he?”

The cobwebs blew again, harder this time, and I got up and followed them, streaming along the cemetery now, leading me through the darkness with a luminescent sheen.

They stopped at a very clean gravesite and I read the name inscribed there, Rose. I asked, “Well, Rosie, I’m here. What do you need to tell me?”

A cold breeze flittered by and then wrapped around me as though it would smother me if it squeezed any tighter. I waited a moment, thinking it was some sort of communication technique, but I realized as the force against my nose, my mouth, my eyelids pressed harder she was not trying to tell me anything. She was trying to get inside of me, possess me.

Oh hells no.

I fought back. Probably looked ridiculous to the entire cemetery of spirits should they have chosen to watch, but I was not going to surrender my body to that bitch. Reincarnation my ass. This was all a lie. A spoiled child lived, murdered her father, and established a lore to eventually bring me here. One of her kind. One. I remembered that from the book Nadia showed me. There can be only one.

“Show yourself, you bitch!” I used the protective magic my mothers, my adopted mothers had bestowed upon me as a gift when I left for school. I had never so much as thought I would need it before tonight. Again, back at the school, I was the scariest thing on that campus.

Here, in this graveyard, the succubus appeared as she fell backwards on

her ass and laughed. “Oh, those witches.”

She knew my moms? I considered her as she moved to stand. “Who are you?”

She indicated the tombstone next to her and said, “Rose.”

I shook my head. “No. Rose is dead. Has been a long time according to that marker right there.”

She winked and said, “Rose was born, but she never died.”

I was holding the amulet my moms had given me and that seemed to matter to this monster before me. “Why am I here?”

“There can be only one.” She indicated the tombstone again. “It’s not entirely a tall tale meant for the men. It’s just...creatively structured so they will obey me.”

Not a bad game plan, but them obeying her and me being possessed by her, not the fate I had in mind. “Doesn’t make any sense. You want to possess me so what? What is your endgame here, Rosie?”

“My Peaches. They really were the best choice to raise you. Maybe too good.” She frowned and then her eyes glowed as she looked at me. “I don’t want to possess you, my Peach. I will become you. Or, rather, you will become me.”

I shook my head. “Nah. I’m good.”

She laughed. More like cackled, but her eyes were glowing brighter. “You see, the key to immortality is having a fresh supply of genetic coding, food, and...a spell book that no wizard, warlock, or witch can resist.”

“He’s not your everlasting mate?” I asked.

“He will be. At least, he will be until I’m bored with him.” She shrugged. As if it were a secret, she whispered, “He has a mark on his hip that was easy enough to add to the lore. His family, like so many others, believe this is their heritage. When in reality, they are simply conduits of dark magic. I adjust the books to appeal to whoever reads them.”

She winked and I gasped. “What?”

“You aren’t the only one who has friends in magical places.” She shimmied. “You’re not nearly as well fed on dark magic as you should be at this age. It appears they have taught you to sip, not gulp. To moderate, not dominate. You...taste disgusting.” She spit out whatever she had siphoned off of me without my knowledge she was even feeding.

“Gross. And FYI, lady, nothing in this area of the realm tastes all that great either.” I indicated the darkness around me as if that encompassed the

whole of the castle grounds.

“FY?” She concentrated. “What does that mean?”

“Wha—never mind. Doesn’t matter. What matters is this, you are not getting into this body. You are not taking over this mind. I’m out.” I flashed her the peace sign and held onto my amulet and began backing away from her and toward the castle.

“You’re not going anywhere.” She lunged at me with superspeed and knocked me backward. I remembered being little and a neighboring boy had thrown an apple and hit me in the back with it. That thing hurt. My moms told me to stand up for myself. He was bigger than me, but they insisted that did not matter. I needed to be prepared to fight someone bigger than me if I wanted to survive in this world.

With that advice, a few tips, and an apple, they had sent me back out into the woods to seek my adversary.

“Apple apple aim it true. Done to me, now done to you.” I smashed the apple that was in my hand against her temple and we rolled. Now I was the one on top and I was not going to get up and run. Unlike that baker’s son who was simply angry at me for winning best baked pie at school that day, this succubus was going to kill me. No, worse. She was going to become me. Which just made me wonder. “Are you in there? Whoever you are, whoever you were. Before me. Are you in there?”

“Don’t you dare try to summon—”

Another little spell my moms taught me came to mind. “Guiding light, guiding true. Follow the light and find peace for you.”

The succubus I was choking with my hands seemed to be choking on whatever it was rolling up her throat. I was afraid to let go. Afraid to hold on, but if there was something, someone inside of her trying to escape, I wanted them to help me. I wanted them to be free. I wanted to stay free.

I turned my head as I loosened the grip, but did not let go as she essentially vomited out an ethereal being. I said, “Whoa shit.”

And then another rolled up and out, and another behind that. I felt a tickling at my shoulder and looked at a girl about my age. Well, looked through a girl about my age. She said, “You can let go now. They are coming. We are leaving.”

“They?” I asked and let go as the succubus on the ground writhed and wriggled as one after the other the victims of her abuse pushed out of her lungs and into the air. When I looked at her shriveled up form on the ground,

she looked nothing like the fierce adversary that had tackled me. I gulped and asked, “Rose?”

“There can be only one.” She looked at me with haunted, hollow eyes. “You must, my Peach. You must.”

“Must what?” I asked.

“Kill her.” A male voice interrupted the whole scene. “You must kill her.”

I wasn’t exactly sure about that now she looked as though she were dying anyway. Only, that old crone on the ground, reached her hand toward him and began to suck in air.

My warlock professor had clear grey eyes. “Peach, help me.”

I looked at her and she was gaining form again. “He’s so powerful. Just like his great great grandfather was.”

“Help him!” the spirits around us cried. “Help him!”

Shit. How did I kill a succubus? I thought back to the book and moved quickly, while her corporeal body was still frail and weak. I punched into her chest and removed her tiny black heart. I crushed it, watched her turn into spiritual dust as she screamed no.

I didn’t blame her. As soon as she was on their plane of existence, all of the glittery energy from the women she had murdered and consumed and become throughout many lifetimes had the ability to choose peace and evaporate into the atmosphere or...like fireflies with light speed, chase her into the night.

I looked to the left and found my warlock professor crumpled on the ground, holding his chest. I moved closer and asked, “Are you all right?”

He shook his head and said, “No. I...was reading in my office. And... how did we get here?”

Oh shit.

CHAPTER 7



I WAS NOT ABLE TO SUMMON THE HOUSE SPIRITS TO MAKE HIM TEA, SO I HAD to figure it all out in that giant kitchen on my own.

“Professor.” I handed him the cup and took a seat in the chair next to him. “How did you know I would have to kill her?”

“Right before you came into my office I met with Professor Larson. She was insistent that I be careful with my visitors today. I’ve...been feeling off to be quite honest. Since the semester began, I’ve felt like there were two people at war in my head.” He sipped the tea. “I should be ashamed to admit such a thing, but...you saw me and you witnessed the creature that had traveled in my mind leave my body to return to its own.”

“What?”

“The woman. The succubus. Your mother, by all accounts. If her thoughts were correct, and I could be muddled here, mind you. She was reproducing an heir when she began to feel weak. When even her mate would falter to bring her strength. Another daughter to destroy. Another mate to live with until she was bored. She would have killed me straight away. I’m sure of it.” He shook his head.

“So all that...cold, detached speech about us...”

“What speech?” he asked. “What about us?”

“You don’t remember any of it?” I asked. “Not the pencil or—”

He scoffed. “I don’t use pencils. What are you talking about?”

After explaining everything that had happened, I looked at a blushing man. A man filled with the energy I had known before, craved. Yes, there was quite a bit of dark magic in his past, but this was like a box of chocolates, many flavors, many layers. I no longer felt the disgusting taste of this place

burning in my nose or mouth. I suspected that was due to her, my mother. Of course I would find the taste of her essence repulsive and she was inside of him. A part of her anyway.

Without her presence, all the heat and desire was coming back to me. “Do you believe in fate, Professor?”

“Damien, please.” He smiled and my insides did a little flip and tickle.

“Damien.” I licked my lips.

“I do.” He nodded. “My grandfather used to say that I was marked for greatness. He wasn’t my biological grandfather, but he played the role. My parents died when I was young, and I was placed with a wizard. You were adopted, right?”

Oh, this all made sense to me. Maybe not to him, but to me. This was how my mother played this game. She manipulated a wizard to provide a child she could takeover and left him a boy destined to become something great as the gift. She then placed her daughter with another family, after all, the wizard was already raising a son and a daughter needed a mother’s influence. Only, this time, I had two mothers and their influence was stronger than predicted. “I was. Two lovely witches I still call mom.”

He nodded. “My guardian died which is why I came to the university. I wanted to settle down some. Maybe...it’s a big castle.”

“That is true.” I looked around the space we were in. “Huge.”

“I thought one day...it would be filled with life again. It’s always felt...haunted. Honestly, this is the first time I’ve been back in what seems like ages. It feels different now. Lighter somehow.” He chuckled. “Or maybe it has only been darkened because of that presence. Always looming in the back of my mind. Pushing me to the more...nefarious of my nature.”

“You’re saying you’re not the villain?” I asked and didn’t resist the flirtation.

“I guess it depends on who tells the story.” He placed his cup to the side. “I know you’re my TA. I know there are rules about these things, but I must tell you, from the moment I stepped on that campus and saw your face...I just...knew...”

“We have the weekend.” I smiled. “We’re not on campus. No one has to know any better.”

“Well, well. The good girl truly is bad when she wants to be.” He stood up. “It’s late. Part of me is afraid if I fall asleep, I’ll awake and you’ll just be that beautiful creature I can’t talk to without losing my job, or my life, right?”

“I don’t think I’m going to kill you.” I winked. “I think I want more than to feed on your energy.”

“Maybe you want to be next to me?” he asked.

I nodded. “Definitely.”

CHAPTER 8



A WEEK LATER...

I inhaled his scent the moment I stepped into his office. He smiled at me, winked, and the door closed behind me. I inhaled again. All that sexual tension filling my lungs and spreading through me in powerful waves. He knew I was doing this so he asked, “Taste good?”

“Delicious.” I could barely contain myself. The weekend at the castle seemed like a million years ago. We had been taking things one step at a time. I had admitted my fear of not being able to stop. He admitted the same fear, but for a different reason. Neither of us wanted to hurt the other, but the waiting, the baiting was agonizing.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked and opened his bag.

“Very.” I might not make it through the portal to the castle at this rate. I needed to feel his hands on my lower back, pulling me closer as his lips touched mine. I wanted to wake up curled against his bare chest rather than his clothed one as I had last weekend.

“After you.” He waved his hand and then opened the door to his office which led us right into the main room of the castle. Such a difference travel makes when someone is not controlling the warlock wielding the power.

I stepped into the castle and inhaled deeply. All of the sour stench was gone. My moms had come by with his permission and a key and cleared and cleaned the castle. My brow went up and I asked, “Banana bread?”

He winked. “You mentioned it was your favorite scent when you were coming home after school.”

“Yeah, but—”

“This is your home now too. I want you to—”

I turned, dropped my bag and reached for my warlock. “Kiss me.”

He leaned down as I tiptoed up and pushed my hands through his thick, dark hair. I was hungry for his power, but more so for his touch. I pushed his respectful hands a bit lower on my hips, then I pulled him closer by his shirt as I tugged at the buttons.

“Peach.” He gripped my wrists and pulled back a moment. “Give me one second.” He snapped his fingers and we were in the bedroom. “I can’t imagine our first time on the cold stone of the entryway. At least here there is a nice, soft bed.”

I bit my lower lip a moment, all the wickedness rising. I touched his lips with my fingertips and asked, “What about our second time?”

His brow went up and I could feel his lips pull to a smile. “Maybe our fourth. After dinner, if you still wish to feel the cold stones against your back, your hands, your knees, we will mark every room in the castle with a memory of us.”

He tugged me along and toward the bed. He knew this was the first time I had done any of this. Without a mate, I hadn’t had any sexual urges until he came along. Those were real. With or without the curse or fate or whatever it was that brought us together, I hadn’t wanted to kiss anyone much less feel them inside of me, as a part of me.

“Don’t be nervous.” He whispered against my hair as his lips moved to my ear and placed gentle nipping kisses along the shell. “Relax and open your airway. Let me fill you up with the energy and myself.”

He tugged my shirt up and over my head, discarding it to a nearby chair when he tossed it that direction. The bra was gone in a snap of fingers. I giggled because he did have that advantage. And more, because he had been with other people in his past. He knew what he was doing. I knew what I read in books.

Lips moved along my neck and his mustache and beard tickled my flesh one moment and then prickled at it the next. The combination of the sensations were interesting as he moved from one side to the next. Neck then collarbones, then breasts where I found it difficult not to dig into his shoulders to pull him closer as I arched and squirmed for more. More touching. More friction. More of him.

I breathed in and all the sparkly bits in the air filled my lungs and made my core clench with satisfaction and intensified need. His tongue slipped into my navel and my thighs tried to crush his shoulders between them.

Strong arms parted my legs wider, held me open as I looked at him and not the sparkling essence floating above us. He inhaled deeply and that took me by surprise. He smiled wickedly and said, “You’re not the only one who wants a taste.”

As his mouth moved from my knee toward my center, I could feel an earthquake rocking along the foundation of my spine, shaking me from the inside out. The warm, wet heat of his mouth placing delicate and then devouring kisses to my pussy had me spinning out of control. I gasped, gulped, and reached for his head to pull him back, stop him, before I could not control the urge to consume everything about this moment into my lungs, my veins.

He would not stop. He added a finger, then two, and I was sure I had to have expelled myself from my own body to look down at us from above because there was no other way to process the energy flowing through me into him, through him, then back into me.

I watched the woman on that bed convulse and writhe in pleasurable agony as he insisted upon throwing her off that cliff again and again until...I was full. I settled into myself as he moved up and pushed into me. It was a different sensation. Still pleasurable, but I was no longer a danger to him. I was blissed out, letting the energy pulse and roll through me, pushing it back against his flesh where some of it permeated and he would groan and make excellent noises that made me want to fill him with power the way he had filled me.

When his eyes opened again, they were glowing back at me. He whispered, “You’re all lit up. Hair to toes you are glowing, Peach.”

I touched his cheek and said, “So are you.”

His hips faltered a moment. “That’s never happened before.”

I pulled him into a kiss and rocked my hips upward. Then this was his first time too in that respect. It took nothing more than a clash of our tongues to get him back to his mission of pleasing us both with his movements. Very skilled movements. I gasped, held tight, and felt myself pulsing around him as he released into me with a groan of pure animalistic pleasure.

He dropped on top of me and then pulled us both to the side to settle that way, looking deeply into one another’s glowing eyes. His lips didn’t move, but I heard him nonetheless. “You are the most beautiful creature I have ever known.”

“You are.” I said aloud and his brow furrowed. “I heard you say that.”

“What did I say?” he teased. When I told him his brows went down again and he said, “Huh.”

“What?” I asked and snuggled in closer to him. Inhaled his scent and exhaled energy to share with him.

He inhaled the sparkling air and then jolted upright in the bed. “Oh shit.”

“What?” I asked.

I could hear his mind flashing through the scenes in his own life. As an infant he didn't look like a human. He still had rather pointy ears, but not nearly as much as they were then. A happy home and then...someone carrying him away. Through the woods as a house burned. The flames were all that he could see. Then, the wizard. The explanation repeated until he believed it. The mark on him, not a birthmark but a burn mark. Magic, magic, and even more magic until he became quite the powerful little warlock. No one questioned it thanks to the wizard.

He looked at me and said, “Has my whole life been one lie after another?”

I grabbed his hand and admitted, “This is the truth. You, me, us. This feeling between us. It's not dark or ugly. It may have started that way. Maybe intended to end that way, but it isn't. Look at us.”

Both of us lit up with a bit of a glow. His a blue violet, mine...peachy pink.

I added, “And you're a warlock. For real. You learned that magic.”

“It's dark magic I learned.” He frowned.

“But you use light magic as well. You didn't get hired because you're a threat to the students, faculty, and staff of the institution.” I reminded him.

He snorted, “Well, they thought they had you. A secret succubus weapon to just devour me if I stepped out of line.”

“Not a secret anymore. I will totally devour you anyway.” I winked. “In fact, in light of this new connection, I think I should start right here.”

I touched his neck.

“There?” he asked and closed his eyes. “It explains why my appetite—ouch!”

He laughed.

“That was a warning.” I kissed the spot I'd just bit him a little harder than necessary. I may not be his first, but I was damn sure his only now, so he didn't need to think about anyone else during our time together.

CHAPTER 9



I SNUCK INTO THE DORM ROOM AND TRIED TO SETTLE INTO BED WITHOUT being noticed, but living with a vampire made that impossible.

“Where the hell have you been?” Nadia asked.

“Studying. Grading. Something.” I hadn’t been a very good liar and she was an excellent detective.

“Bullshit. Tell me or I will force you to tell me.” She held up the device that would blast music I did not like. It was her form of torture and it worked like a charm on me.

“I was with Professor Roark.” That wasn’t a lie.

“Is that where you keep disappearing to?” she asked. “You’re gone all weekend now and I used to worry I would wake you out of your dangerous sleep liaison when I snuck out.” She waggled her brows.

“Who are you sneaking out to see?” I asked. This was totally news to me. Here I had been so caught up in my own mess, I hadn’t even talked about hers.

“I’m making the perfect man. I told you this.” She shrugged.

“Yeah, I know you keep saying that, but seriously. Where are...you... wait.” It hit me like a ton of bricks. “You really are...like...making someone...aren’t you?”

“Mary Shelly is my favorite human author.” She winked at me, and I tried to process that information.

“You are not growing one in a test tube, like from infancy to manhood.” I clarified because that would also be creepy as fuck.

“Nope.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I’m doing it the old-fashioned way.”

“Which would be?” I knew the book, but needed clarity on this situation as the medical department here was prone to questionable experiments on living beings, but I hadn’t thought of anyone doing something to the dead ones.

“Putting him together, part by beautiful part.” She smiled. “Don’t worry. I’m not reducing the student body around here by reducing student bodies. I’m hunting off campus grounds. Well, not even in this universe really.”

“Are you jumping and stealing from another universe?” I asked and she made fake shock and horror expressions. “Nadia!”

She shrugged. “Look, I’m not taking anyone that would be missed. If anything, I’m helping them get rid of some real assholes.”

“And then you are putting together your very own asshole with their parts?” I asked.

“Well, not entirely. I mean I’ve tried and failed a few times, so those bodies just wound up in the fire, but the ones I have right now.” She sort of wiggled over there in her seat. Her fingers crossed and she held up her hand and said, “I hope this is the one.”

“Wha.” I stopped, cleared my throat and asked, “What is wrong with just keeping one of them alive and then...I don’t know, asking a favor of one of the witches or something?”

“Um. Clearly you don’t understand perfection. I can’t just accept a body as it is. I need to ensure it is up to my personal specifications. I don’t want just any man, I want MY man.” She shrugged. “I had to put the last one down.”

“What!” That was not a question.

“Forgot to add the smarts department and while the physical form worked perfectly, the brain meats were already rotten.” She got up and went to the small fridge in our room. She pulled a blood bag from it and then said, “Ugh. Cold blood. So gross.” She popped the top and took a swig and said, “Still. A girl’s gotta eat, right?”

“Right.” I looked at my best friend and decided not to pry any further. She was obviously attempting to create something that did not exist. Perfection.

Sure, I thought my warlock professor was perfect, until he kidnapped me and turned out to be possessed by a part of my mother trying to control him long enough to destroy me and then inhabit my body for another lifetime or two. I learned he was not perfect. He had flaws and vulnerabilities I never

even thought possible.

“You’re judging me. You and your moral code.” She rolled her eyes. I laughed and shook my head. “No?”

“No.” I smiled. “A few weeks ago, I might have judged you. Now. Whose to say what you’re doing is wrong if you’re ridding their realm of bad people? Humans are notorious for not adequately punishing those who harm others needlessly. Here, justice is still served. That’s how you get your volunteers, right?”

She tipped her bag toward me. “Right you are.”

“So. If you want to build your own partner, you have the ability to do that, humans have a better chance of living longer or happier without their problem people at large, then...do you, Nad. Do you.”

“So.” She settled on her bed and looked at me. “Tell me everything. Is he an A or a B in bed?”

“Nadia!” I laughed. “You and that grudge!”

“It is on my permanent record!” She was so offended by that grade. I needed to know more, but not now.

“And you settle for nothing less than perfection.” I smiled.

She shrugged. “Tell me good things so I don’t hate him anymore.”

I could do that. I could tell her lots of good things about the professor. I started with, “He makes amazing pancakes.”

She choked on the drink of blood she just took so it was comical to see her choke it down and also spit some of it out. I laughed. She shook her head and wiped her mouth. “Jerk.”

“I mean it though. He’s a great cook. Very sweet.” I winked.

“Get to the good part! Does he have a...magic stick?” she asked and tried to remain serious but we both cracked up laughing.

“Shame on you.” I shook my head. “He’s very good and a lot of things.”

“And you’re...okay?” she asked and I nodded. “Good. I know you... never really felt those urges and it was kinda weird seeing you siphon magic around the room when you would get to dreaming of him, so I knew you eventually would want to fuck someone. Him, actually, but...I wasn’t sure how the sexy, mysterious, and way too serious professor would handle you.”

“Just fine.” I closed my eyes and thought about it. Then I opened my eyes and she giggled. “Sorry.”

“No. Cheers to you, Peach. You deserve it.” Then she said, “Just like I deserved that A. Stupid new professors.”

We spent the rest of the night catching up on things that did not pertain to our love interests.

When I finally settled to go to sleep, I felt the call from my moms. I got up and grabbed the bowl that sat on the window sill near my desk. I went to the bathroom and filled it with water. I took it outside and found a place to talk in private and not wake the finally resting Nadia or any other creature in our dorms.

“Moms?” I asked and looked at their smiling faces as they crowded the bowl.

“Peach!” They were very excited, happy. “You’re all right!”

“Of course, I’m all right.” I worried they somehow knew everything.

“The locket—”

“Of course.” I nodded and touched the locket. “It saved me. You saved me, but I wasn’t going to worry you with all of that.”

“You should know we will always protect you. Our baby. Our Peach. When you come home, we will recharge the protection spells and ensure—”

“Moms.” It wasn’t like just one of them was talking at a time. They spoke in tandem, one saying one sentence and the other carrying on the next. It was confusing to others, but natural to me. “I’m fine.”

We caught up and when I explained that I was in love, they were insistent, “We must meet him, Peach.”

“Of course.” Once I could get my desire for him under control, that would be possible. Before then, it was all I could do to return to my own dorm room at night and not try to trap him in his office or the faculty housing and...No. Bad Peach. I gave the scrying water to the nearby tree and headed back to my room.

CHAPTER 10



THREE MONTHS LATER...

We were not the same people we were when this semester started. My warlock professor was teaching a class and I was at the very back of it tormenting him with suggestive looks, invasive thoughts, and as I slowly spread my knees apart, he said abruptly, “Class dismissed.”

I bit my lips so as not to giggle. Only a couple more weeks and I would no longer be his TA, I would no longer be just a graduate student. I would be taking over several classes and becoming an associate professor at this very institution. My office was not nearly as close to his as I wished it could be, but I suspected he would make a portal for us to shorten the distance in the hall.

Once the last student was out of the room, the lights went out and then a portal appeared. It was the end of the week, the last class of this day, and I was ready for my weekend warlock and our escape to the castle. I could not wait any longer. We didn’t mess around on campus. Well, not until today when I broke protocol and just flashed him my vagina.

I moved toward the portal and he pulled me in roughly for a kiss that lasted until we were landing on the hard stone floor of the entryway. He lifted long enough to say, “I can’t believe you did that to me.”

“Believe it.” I wagged my brows. “Now. What are you going to do to me, Professor?”

His eyes flamed and his lip pulled back a bit in a more animalistic expression. “Turn over, Peach.”

I had him all wired up and I was feeding off the energy he emitted like it was the only meal I would ever need to eat. He was feeding off my desires

too. One moment I was moving, the next, we were a clash of thrusts and shouts, of rough handling, hair pulling, and movement that would no doubt ache in not so good ways later.

I wound up on top of him, lifting and lowering as he thrust his hips upward to cause the most deliciously deep friction. The air between us was an exchange of energy, twirls of color, bursts of sparkling lights until the crescendo hit us and the explosion of orgasmic bliss doubled in intensity.

Breathless, sweaty, bleeding from scrapes at my knees and palms, I collapsed onto his chest and closed my eyes. This was everything I had ever wanted. Everything I needed.

Well, almost everything. "I invited Nadia for the holiday."

"Your roommate?" he asked.

I nodded.

"She hates me." He chuckled.

"Why is that funny?" I held back my own laughter.

"I gave her a B. Not an F and she acts like I ripped one of her fangs out." He touched my cheek. "Are you sure she wants to be here?"

I nodded. "She does."

"Okay." He nodded. "I do not promise that I won't completely inhale her if she tries to do anything."

I giggled. "I promise, she will behave." Then I asked, "Why did you give her a B?"

"She was phoning it in. She's brilliant, but she saw a new professor, thought she could do half-assed work and get an A while bragging about her real work in the medical department and I...know now that I fed a little bit off that...energy." He shrugged. "I was a new professor. She got a B. Everyone else got Cs and Ds so that semester, it may as well have been an A."

"Have you ever given any student an A?" I asked and readjusted myself to sitting upright on him again. "Say...one who puts in the extra effort for you?"

"I'm not grading your TA work based on this performance right here, Peach." He moved his hands to my hips and I slowed to a torturous up and down that had him moving beneath me attempting to adjust the speed, depth, everything about it. "You're being a witch."

"I was raised by witches. Makes sense. Don't dodge the question, Professor. Do I get an A or what?" I teased and tortured.

“B plus.” He winked and I stopped moving completely.

The gasp of shock and offense was only lessened when he laughed and said, “I’ve given plenty of A’s in the past years. And yes, of course you’re getting an A for the TA work, but not because you deserve an A plus for handling me. You found a way to motivate your students. You handled your responsibilities and personal life without letting them impact your professionalism.”

He considered that a moment, “At least until this afternoon.”

“Jerk.” I laughed and leaned forward to kiss him. “I love you, Damien. You know that, right?”

He pushed a hand through my hair and said, “And I love you, Peach. Even if I have to give you an A minus for your behavior.”

We both laughed and spent the rest of the weekend wrapped up in one another’s arms.

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EARTH WITCH



GINA KINCADE & C.D. GORRI

EARTH WITCH
WITCHES OF WESTWOOD ACADEMY
BOOK FOUR

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EARTH WITCH

Emotions run amok at Westwood Academy when a healer and an earth witch crash together.

Jade Montrose was just an average earth witch living her average life until she arrived at Westwood Academy. Everything changes when she and her roommates discover a magical conspiracy involving The Council of Covens. Now it's up to Jade and her friends to figure out a way to stop it.

Time for this easygoing earth witch to grow something besides plants—like a spine.

After an injury sends her to the infirmary, Jade finds herself irresistibly drawn to student healer, Arlo Glenn. But why would the smoldering blond wizard be attracted to a curvy earth witch? What she needs is a healthy dose of self-esteem to change her outlook. Is Arlo willing to help with that?

Welcome to Westwood Academy. Forget what you know and let your magic run wild.

PROLOGUE



ONE YEAR EARLIER...

“ARE YOU SERIOUS?” Leanna Stolbright gritted her teeth as she waited for the headmistress of Westwood Academy to confirm her next assignment.

How had she sunk so low?

Talent scouts in the magical world were once revered, and the top schools and covens sought the most gifted. Supernatural families had once hired witches and wizards with her gifts to assess the abilities of their offspring, offering a king’s ransom for their service, especially should their predictions offer favorable outcomes. Appearance was everything to those who could afford it—but that was all in the past.

Now, Leanna’s job comprised of finding students with magical potential to attend Westwood Academy. Once upon a time, she’d brought great talent in, believing she was truly making a difference.

Just recently, she’d discovered a water witch living as a normal with the potential to control oceans. Another win, she’d found a direct heir of Constance Fortescue—the *last true air witch*. Not to mention hunting down a powerful fire witch with the potential to destroy whole cities with just a zap.

Those were the witches Westwood Academy needed. The kind who would bring prestige, representing the academy as they went off to join their respective covens. Some people did not take kindly to the emphasis Westwood placed on elementals. But Leanna did not agree with them.

Everyone had a use, a purpose. Oh, she did not believe in the corrupt

vision of her boss, Headmistress Armstrong. But she knew better than to challenge her openly. This last lapse in the older woman's judgment was just one more nail in her professional coffin, as far as Leanna was concerned. The Council of Covens could not ignore the fact the old witch was squandering her talents, wasting them on fools' errands.

"Of course, I am quite serious, Stolbright. Why would I be joking about this?"

Leanna gritted her teeth. She had to keep cool. After all, she did not want to give away her true feelings.

Not yet.

"Forgive me, but a *pigpen*? How is *that* beneficial to our cause, headmistress?"

Silence fell in the office as the headmistress ceased perusing the files on her desk. The flames of the several candles on the side table stopped crackling. The fan stopped whirring. Even the clock seemed to stop its incessant ticking in the wake of the headmistress' displeasure.

Leanna gulped.

"Excuse me?" Headmistress Armstrong's lips formed a hard line as she glared at Leanna.

"Apologies, I only meant, *er*, nothing. My apologies," Stolbright wisely replied.

She knew better than to use insensitive jargon in front of the ex-professor. Helga Armstrong was nothing if not politically correct. She abhorred even an inkling of judgment when it came to her students. Sure, they called each other names like *airheads* and *treaders*, but the staff and faculty did no such thing. Headmistress Armstrong did not tolerate disrespect of any kind.

"Pigpen is a derogatory term, and I will not have my people using it. Understood?" she said calmly and waited for Stolbright's nod of assent.

"Good," she continued. "Earth witches are vital to our world, Miss Stolbright, as they are to all magic."

"But a hand delivered message? Why bother? Her family is magical. They will know what to do when they receive the invitation—"

"Be that as it may, I gave you an order and expect it to be fulfilled. Deliver the acceptance letter in person, Miss Stolbright. That is all."

"Yes, Headmistress."

Leanna took the silver envelope bearing the emblem of Westwood Academy and left the headmistress' office. She took her oath to perform her

duties to the best of her ability seriously. Even if she did not agree it was necessary to perform them. If Armstrong wanted her to hand deliver an acceptance letter to some silly little pigpen, then she would do just that.

The trip to Cape Mystic, New Jersey, a small suburban town right on the Atlantic Ocean, took only minutes, using hidden portals that very few magicals had access to. Leanna arrived on the street where the Montrose family home sat dead center at precisely half past six.

It was an ordinary colonial with cream-colored siding and a front door painted robin's egg blue. The wraparound porch held matching rocking chairs, dozens of planters, and a couple of pairs of gardening shoes on a rubber mat. Next to that was a bucket with a couple of muddy hand trowels, pruning shears, and the like.

Typical.

The second daughter was the only earth witch in residence, but as with others of this element, Leanna expected the entire family had an affinity for gardening and growing things.

Completely useless, save for produce stores.

She sneered at the thought.

The scents of dinner cooking filtered onto the street and Leanna barely gained control over the frown on her face. This family was abysmal. They were just so very *ordinary*. Leanna wondered how anyone inside that house could be so important.

Witches or not, judging from the meatloaf and roasted potato dinner they were about to have, this family had little to no real power. Leanna failed to see what was so special about this family at all.

More importantly, what could Armstrong possibly want with their youngest daughter?

Even her name made Leanna roll her eyes.

Jade Montrose.

Oh, please.

But it did not matter what she thought. Stolbright was there on Armstrong's order, and like it or not, she would hand deliver the acceptance letter. She raised her hand and knocked, waiting impatiently for someone to come. The breeze stirred, and Stolbright sneezed.

Fantastic.

Huge ceramic planters dripping evening primrose sat on the porch. The fragrant blossom had medicinal purposes, she knew, but to Leanna, it only

brought misery in the shape of an allergic reaction.

The night blooming blossoms exuded a pollen that simply did not agree with her.

What was taking so long?

She needed to leave before the hives started to spread across her skin. Already, her arms itched. She knocked again.

“Hurry up,” Stolbright muttered.

“Coming,” someone shouted from inside.

Leanna rolled her eyes, standing straight when the click of the knob turning sounded loudly. A young woman, maybe twenty, opened the door, her curly hair was a frizzy mess on top of her head and there were streaks of mud on her cheeks.

“Hello!” the witch announced cheerfully. “Can I help you?”

Leanna was about to say something rude about doubting the young woman could help anyone—*she could not even keep her face clean*—but then her senses tingled. It was that same power that told her when someone had excellent untapped potential. She might not know how or what an earth witch could do, but there was no doubt about it.

The girl’s aura began to tremble and grow, taking on a greenish glow so bright it hurt Leanna’s eyes. She really had to learn to stop questioning Headmistress Armstrong. The old witch was never wrong about anyone. Made her wonder why she even kept Leanna on the payroll.

“Are you Jade Montrose?” she asked curiously.

“Yes, that’s me. Should I get my mother?”

“Unnecessary. This is for you, Miss Montrose,” Leanna said, handing her the thick envelope before she pivoted on her heeled boot and walked away.

“But what is it?” Jade asked after her.

Leanna did not pause. She knew better than to explain. Besides, she needed to get away from that house and its poisonous plants, and fast. The earth witch had something special about her after all, and shocking as that was, Leanna had done her duty.

Envelope delivered.

She was not required to read the damn thing to the witch. Miss Montrose sure was tenacious, though. She followed Leanna right up to the gate.

“But wait a second—”

“No,” Leanna stated, walking away without looking back. She uttered one last thing before she left.

“Welcome to Westwood Academy, Jade Montrose.”

CHAPTER 1



“I’M TELLING YOU, RIO, HE’S DRIVING ME BONKERS,” I GRUMBLED.

It had been days since I had a little unfortunate accident during my Earthquake Anatomy final.

Fine.

It was all my fault.

I kinda sorta maybe created a mini earthquake in the Tellus Coven Amphitheatre.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, Emma Jacobs, a super obnoxious classmate of mine, pretended to be in dire need of help to get some boy’s attention. In my haste to get to her, I dropped a huge piece of granite on my foot, fracturing the dang thing and forcing me to see one of our student healers.

“Arlo Glenn is a menace,” I grumbled.

I scrolled through my tablet, deleting the seven—*I counted them again, and, yep, there were 1,2,3,4,5,6,7*—alerts I’d gotten today alone about missing my follow-up visit.

What did the man want from my life?

It wasn’t like I had nothing else to do.

“He’s just doing his job,” Rio offered.

“Yeah, right. He’s practically stalking me!”

With summer classes having already started, I had little time for anything but work. Lucky me, to have been selected to attend Westwood Academy, one of the premier schools for advanced witchcraft specializing in elemental studies. Plus, it was one of those magical schools with year long offerings insofar as courses and seminars.

Not everyone did that, and honestly, I hated school, so I was in kind of a

rush to finish. My fellow 563W roomies and I decided to tough it out, staying over the summer. We were hoping to find some answers to a slew of increasingly disturbing facts we'd discovered by accident over the past few months.

To put it simply, we were anything but the average group of witches. Unlike our peers, ours was the only dorm room housing witches from various elemental covens. It was tremulous at first, but I knew we were destined to be besties the first time I set eyes on the lot of us on the bus to the portal in Cape Mystic.

“Awwww, someone has a crush!”

My blue-haired bestie was a water witch and a lousy singer, but that did not stop her from teasing me in a sing-song voice. Ever since she got mated to her big, scary, hulking boyfriend, she'd been determined to pair everyone up.

“A crush? Ha! He wishes,” I grunted.

I pretended to be repulsed, even though I felt my cheeks grow warm. My derisive grunt wasn't nearly as impressive as Rio's mate's growl, but oh well. That was to be expected. The man was a kraken shifter and a sentinel—one of the deadly warriors contracted to protect Westwood.

Was it so obvious I had a major crush on Arlo Glenn?

The wizard was almost finished with school and would soon be an official licensed healer. He'd already finished human med school, and was a licensed Medical Doctor in the normal world, but magical doctors were required to take extra classes and Westwood had one of the best programs in the country, making it not only highly sought after, but super competitive as well.

So, what did that mean for me?

Easy peasy.

I was completely out of my league when it came to the blond-haired hottie.

And worse, I knew it.

I looked down at my curvy figure in the simple peasant dress I wore with my gardening apron tied over it—*yep, I forgot to hang it up in Greenhouse Twelve, again.* I heaved a big sigh. I was a hopeless mess, and unlikely to change. Definitely not the right fit for a rising healer. A wizard like Arlo Glenn would need a certain kind of female on his arm. Someone with something more than I had to offer.

What a depressing thought.

“Jade, you are positively green, girl. What is wrong with you?” Rio asked, feeling my forehead with a cool hand.

“What? Oh, nothing,” I mumbled and placed the kettle on the burner.

Whenever I was in a sour mood, I brewed a pot of my mother’s special blend. There was nothing a good cuppa tea couldn’t solve. At least, that’s what Mom and Nan both preached, and it was what they’d taught me, my sister, Nessa, and my brother, Abel.

Tea was everything to a Montrose. In fact, it was our biggest seller at the farmer’s markets where we sold the produce we grew at *Montrose Farms*, along with homemade baked goods, jams, jellies, organically sourced honey, and our own herbal tea blends.

I was the only actual earth witch in the family, but the entire Montrose clan had a general affinity for growing things. My magic was just amped up, and a little more in tune with the OG Goddess, *Mother Earth*, herself.

“Seriously. Talk to me, Jade,” the water witch insisted.

I appreciated her. Really, I did. It wasn’t too long ago that Rio was first introduced to the magical world, and I had oodles of respect for the way she handled it all.

I don’t know what I would have done in her place. Magic was not new to me. I’d been born into a magical family. Had huge family annals with histories of my early ancestors. We boasted six earth witches in my family tree, dating back to the first Witch Crusades in 654 AD.

My mother and father were a typical class C witch and wizard couple. Nothing too crazy about their powers, though Mom favored gardening. In magic, balance was a must, and many witches and wizards kept gardens on hand to give back to the universe.

It was from both sides of the family I got my elemental powers. Nessa, my older sister, and Abel, my younger brother, were both average practitioners. Neither had been invited to Westwood to study.

Feather in my cap?

Heck yeah.

It was tough being the middle child—even for witches. Especially with the two of them being tall and willowy, and exceptionally good looking, like Mom. I received Dad’s genes; that meant short and rotund.

Sigh.

I was the only Montrose in a hundred years to receive such distinction,

and it was a total mystery to most why I had been given this opportunity. Typical middle child crap again. I already established I was not the prettiest, but it should be noted I was also NOT the smartest out of my siblings.

Plain Jane, *er*, Jade, that was me. Abel had earned an advanced degree in supernatural environmental engineering from *Palmer's School of Occult Technology* when he was just sixteen. Nessa earned her first certification as an award-winning class 6 herb grower—the *top commendation a witch could receive when growing ingredients for potions*—around the same time Abel earned his degree.

They were doing amazing things, and here I was, an actual elemental earth witch, and all I'd done was get into school. Oh yeah, I also passed out now and then, and I got stuck under a pile of rocks.

Fan-freaking-tastic.

“Nothin’ to talk about. Really, I’m good, Rio. Want some tea?” I asked, offering her a small smile.

“Oooh, is it that lavender and green tea blend?” she asked, and her eyes sparkled like seawater.

“Yep,” I replied.

“Score! Yes, please,” she said, and practically hummed with joy.

Gosh, Rio was pretty. Tone deaf, but pretty. Her hair had turned bright blue, along with her eyes, when she came into her power. It seemed like every day new threads of aqua showed up as she learned to control her element.

Maia, our resident air witch, was much the same, only her hair had turned a silvery platinum color along with her increased magical prowess. Tana was a natural redhead, and as the fire witch got better at her craft, her own mop of flame colored waves brightened.

I was the only one who wouldn’t receive a cool supernatural makeover. Brown was brown, and I’d always had brown hair. My eyes were okay, though. They were a pale amber color that looked great in the sunlight. I didn’t mind them so much. Of course, being five foot nothing and weighing in at a buck seventy-five meant I had other things to worry about. Like the fact my ass was bigger than I’d care to admit, and chub-rub was truly hard on the thighs in summer.

Oh well.

Food and playing in dirt were my two favorite things. Not very glamorous, but that was okay. I had no illusions about myself, and I was

typically happy as a clam—*whatever that meant.*

I mean, were clams all that happy?

Who knew?

Maybe Rio would—

Anyway—where was I?

The scent of my mother's lavender tea filled the small kitchen area as I poured the boiling water into the pot to let it steep. Rio clapped her hands excitedly and my magic swirled around me, reacting to her happiness. That was something I was used to.

I liked being happy.

Who didn't?

As I poured tea into two mismatched mugs, Rio grabbed some cookies out of the tin on the counter and joined me at the small table. I wondered where Magnus was but appreciated the time with her alone. Her mate was kinda big and growly. Polite, for sure, but he made me a little self-conscious, being a tall, muscular shifter, and a sentinel to boot.

"Mmm, this smells great," Rio said, and I had to agree.

"Nobody makes tea blends like Mom."

I sniffed the aroma drifting from the cup, closing my eyes to fully indulge in the experience. Tea had medicinal properties, but one of the most overlooked came from the ritual of preparing the tea. Another was the joyful anticipation and mental preparation of that very first sip.

I was halfway to mine when someone knocked on the door, disrupting my little ritual. The sharp *rap rap rap* was followed by a very familiar, very pissed off masculine voice on the other side of the portal.

Double crap.

"Miss Montrose? I know you're inside there. You missed another appointment," the male grumbled and knocked again—*louder.*

"*Oh my gawd, Jade!* You do have a stalker," Rio whispered, her blue eyes wide with mischief.

"Are you kidding me? Can you not take a hint?" I yelled, jumping up from my seat.

I yanked the door open before he could knock again, seriously miffed he'd interrupted teatime. This was my rest and rejuvenation time, for Pete's sake. I stood there, mouth hanging open. I was just so mad.

Fine. I admit, I might have been momentarily stunned by the sheer perfection that was Arlo Glenn.

Holy Goddess.

He was hot.

Like super smokin' red hot kinda hot.

Blond hair, deliciously mussed, brushed across his forehead. It was almost long enough to cover his emerald eyes. Almost, but not quite.

Thank the Goddess.

I mean, I kinda have a thing for the color green—*hello, earth witch over here.*

“What are you doing here?” I demanded, remembering my outrage at what amounted to him basically stalking me to my dorm room.

“You missed your last three appointments, Miss Montrose.”

“So? Judging from your bedside manner at my other appointments, I doubt it mattered to you.”

“You think this is personal?” he asked, a look of bewilderment crossing his handsome movie star face.

“Just saying didn’t think you cared,” I replied, rolling my eyes.

Arlo, the hot boy healer, cleared his throat. He seemed at a loss for words for like half a millisecond.

Good.

Gave me time to ogle him.

Fodder for my spank bank.

What?

Girls had those too. As my sister Nessa always says, *if you denyin’ then you lyin’*. Either that or you don’t know what you’re missing (insert winky face here).

“Professor Payne does not like incomplete charts, Miss Montrose, and since this is the last class I need to finish before I am a fully licensed healer, I can’t afford to allow you to play around with your health.”

“Ah, now it makes sense. You’re here for *you*, not me. Gotcha,” I muttered, ignoring the hurt his words surprisingly caused.

“Yes. I am here for me, Miss Montrose. But I am also here for you. May I?” Arlo nodded his head, indicating he would like to come inside.

I exhaled deeply and stepped aside, allowing him entry.

“We were just about to have some tea. Would you like some?” I offered. Good manners were ingrained in my very soul. There was no way I could ask him in and not ask him to join us. I turned to see Rio was practically gleeful as she watched him take a seat at our tiny table.

Geez.

He was big.

Like BIG big.

Bigger than I realized, but maybe that was because I was surrounded by the hulking shifter males mated to my best friends most of the time. Even Maia's boyfriend, who was a mage and not a shifter, was tall and well built.

Looking at Arlo, he would more than fit the mold. Handsome, long, and lean, but muscular too, judging from his broad shoulders and impressive pecs showing through his tight t-shirt. He was built like a rodeo cowboy.

Pretty face, athletic body, and smart as a whip—basically, he was everything I wasn't. Not that I wasn't bright. I mean, I passed, but I was not all that into my studies. I enjoyed growing things.

I was good at it.

Sue me.

Fact was, Arlo Glenn was my polar opposite. He probably dated girls who looked like waifs. Tiny, pretty, petite things, whose clothes wouldn't fit on one of my pinkies. I had nothing against skinny girls, it's just that I would never be one. Kind of limited my prospects, romantically speaking. I waited for him to answer, fully expecting him to turn me down.

"Tea would be great, thank you," he returned, his eyes focused on me.

"Oh. *Okaaayyy*," I muttered my reply.

Walking slowly on my booted foot to get another mug out of the cabinet, I was keenly aware of him watching me. I hated the stupid thing. It was clunky and uncomfortable, but at least I could remove it when I showered.

I'd been wearing the healing boot for a couple of weeks now, after the hard cast had come off. It was light, if bulky, and I hated wearing it. The dumb thing made my other foot cramp as I tried to compensate for the uneven height.

"You're favoring your uninjured leg," he murmured.

"She's been doing that," Rio added. "I told her to use a roller to stretch it out."

"Good advice. It happens more often than not in these cases where one foot or ankle has been injured. The cast or support boot creates an imbalance, and the patient unknowingly causes injury to the healed appendage by favoring it," he told my roommate, his smile warm and open for her.

Figured.

Rio was so very, very pretty. Men loved talking to her. Not that I was a

dog or anything, but Arlo had never even bothered to look at me the couple of times we actually spoke. Mostly, he barked orders and ignored everything I said.

Typical hot boy wizard.

“Have a cookie,” Rio said, handing Arlo the tin.

I expected him to refuse since he was always talking about healthy habits whenever I was around. Maybe that was just a dig at me though, cause he took a couple of iced lemon shortbreads with no qualms. Huffing out an annoyed breath, I poured his tea and placed it in front of him.

He was still chatting with Rio, animatedly at that, and I felt ten times more annoyed than usual.

Why the heck should I care if he was flashing his pearly whites and laughing charmingly at something Rio said?

She was a great girl. Vibrant and funny. Only natural he’d like her. Of course, she was mated to a big ass kraken shifter who’d likely squash Arlo if he saw him flirting with his girl.

Good.

Now, why did I think that horrible thought?

I gasped as hot liquid ran off the counter, hitting the floor and splashing onto my ankles.

“You all right?” Arlo was suddenly right beside me, grabbing the tea towel from my hand and sopping up the scalding liquid.

“Yeah, fine. Sorry,” I mumbled, taking the wet rag from his hand, and tossing it on the floor to sop up the liquid.

“I’ve got it, Jade. You sit,” he said, placing his hand on my shoulder.

I had to squeeze my eyes tight lest he see the helpless longing in them. He just called me *Jade*. My heart was threatening to pump right out of my chest. Usually, it was *Miss Montrose*. But right now, it was *Jade*, and he was cleaning up the mess I’d made without complaints.

I took his full teacup and placed it on the table as he finished mopping up the spill. Without asking, he tossed the wet towel into the sink, rinsed it, and hung it over the faucet to dry.

I was so busy staring, I did not see Rio gesturing wildly at me. She had to pull a lock of my hair for me to look at her, and when I did, I could not believe my eyes. The usually sophisticated water witch was shimmying and shaking her boobs and hips like a crazy person.

“*Girl, your man is domesticated. YASSSS! Get it! Get it!*” Rio mouthed

the words rather than say them.

Thank the Goddess.

I could have died right there. One, he was not my man. Two, he really was domesticated. Three, I'd never been more turned on than when he touched my shoulder and said he got it—wait, I don't think that was how the counting thing was supposed to work.

Oh well.

Another Jade-ism.

I guess I should probably admit the real reason I'd been avoiding my follow-up appointments at the clinic, even if just to myself. The truth was horribly embarrassing, but maybe once I said it, it would go away.

Okay, well, here goes nothing.

I was in total lust with Arlo Glenn, and apart from an obligatory checkup, the man didn't know I existed.

Squeak.

CHAPTER 2



THE WEEK PASSED BY IN A RUSH OF WARM WEATHER, CRAZY THUNDERSTORMS at the south end of campus, and a wonderful crop of cherry tomatoes from my window boxes I was in the process of canning. I'd been banned from taking Earthquake Anatomy II, but I had other courses for my summer semester and was looking forward to completing them.

My parents sent a care package that had only just arrived, knowing my penchant for canning. They sent me a brand new pressure canner with a set of sparkling stainless steel tools to help speed up the process. They meant well. I know they did, but I preferred older methods.

There was something deliciously therapeutic about doing things the tried-and-true way. Although, I was probably being silly. Old methods were notoriously unsafe, and people often got poisoned from bad canning.

Crap.

Maybe the new pot was worth a second look.

"Whatcha doing?" Tana asked, coming into the kitchen with Brandon on her heels.

"Morning. Just canning some tomatoes," I muttered, reading the instructions on the pressure cooker.

"Yuck. Why?"

"Tomatoes are an entirely underrated fruit," I replied, miffed at her derisive frown.

"Not for me. I can't underrate them enough. Anyway, we are off," she told me, waving goodbye.

Ugh.

Typical fussy eater.

Brandon and Tana were spending every available moment helping her train to control her magic. We all knew there was something funky going on in the magical world, but that didn't mean we could stop our day-to-day activities. Learning to control our powers and hone our talents was crucial for elemental witches, and I had to admit my roommates were lucky they'd found mates who were supportive and downright helpful.

Brandon was a dragon—the guy was fireproof. Tana could not hurt him if she tried. Rio had Magnus, a kraken shifter who was as comfortable in her element as I was playing in the dirt. Enok was a mage, forced to relearn magic since his was stolen in a situation eerily similar to what Maia had faced from her own family. Each of my roommates, aside from Enid, had found the perfect partner.

I envied them, even as I plugged in my new gadget. I'd send my mom a few jars of tomatoes once I finished as a thank you. Everything went smoothly for the first hour or so. I had a dozen pint-sized jars finished. The kitchen smelled sweet and bright—like a ripe cherry tomato should smell.

I was just finishing the last batch when something went wrong. Seconds before I realized what was happening, Enid walked into the kitchen.

“Hi Jade,” she said, her lavender eyes kind and soft as she smiled at me.

“Enid!” I yelled when the sound of electrical clicking reached my ears.

I had only a moment to decide, and it was a no-brainer for me. Instead of ducking for cover, I vaulted over the table, tackling my roommate to the floor as the pressure cooker exploded. Scalding water, boiling tomatoes, and shards of glass erupted from the thing like bullets from an assault weapon.

I took the brunt of it, feeling the boiling contents and bits of broken glass burn my skin and slice through the cotton t-shirt I wore, hurting my back and neck.

Someone was screaming, and it took a second before I realized it was *me*.

I hated burns. To me, there was no worse injury. My skin felt as if it was on literal fire. The glass cutting me so deeply in some places it was all I could do to not reach back and pull it out, but I knew that would be worse.

“Oh gods, Jade! You're gonna be all right!” Enid shouted, crawling out from beneath my body.

I couldn't move. The pain was growing by the second, as only burns did.

Dammit.

I hated burns.

Did I say that already?

Crap, I would have to go to the infirmary where a certain snarky healer worked.

What would he think of me now?

I couldn't let him see me injured like this again. He would think I was the weakest witch ever.

Wait—*what did I care what he thought?*

Oh my Goddess, I was delirious!

Breathing was an effort, and I decided to concentrate on that for a while. It would save me from worrying over things I could not change. One, I was prone to accidents. Two, Arlo Glenn was never gonna like me.

Look at me, counting.

I was so proud I almost laughed, but it came out like a whimper. Enid was scrambling for her phone; I heard her tapping the screen and pictured her longish nails moving gracefully across it.

I was not graceful, but she sure was.

“Hello, yes this is room 563W, send someone quick, there's been an accident,” Enid's voice reached me, and I wanted to tell her not to call the infirmary. I'd be fine. There was burn cream in the bathroom, but the only thing that came out was one word I never meant to whisper.

“Arlo,” I said.

“What Jade? Arlo? Oh, okay, send Arlo Glenn!” Enid told whomever she was speaking to.

My heart pounded, and I grimaced at the mess up. All I'd wanted was to can my crop of tomatoes. It was Saturday. No rush, no fuss. I didn't have big plans like Tana, Rio, and Maia. I was just a simple earth witch wanting to live my best life.

And here I was, covered in burns and glass, likely bleeding all over the floor.

I was finally getting out of the boot on my foot this week, but would now have to contend with a whole new slew of injuries. Worst of all, *he* would know all about it.

Oh well, Arlo Glenn to the rescue again, I thought before passing out.



“THERE YOU ARE,” a familiar voice whispered, and I winced at the bright

light shining in my eyes. “No concussion. That’s good.”

I blinked slowly, aware that I was face down on a clean, semi-hard surface. My muscles tensed as I tried to turn to sit up, but a firm hand held me down.

“No moving, Jade. You’ll undo all my hard work,” he murmured, and I frowned.

Gods forbid I messed up his work.

“Enid?” I asked, ignoring that petty part of me, and focusing on something else.

“Not a scratch. You took the full force of the explosion. Want to tell me what happened?”

“Not really,” I muttered, closing my eyes so he wouldn’t see the tears in them.

“Do you feel any pain?” he asked, blond brows furrowed.

He looked concerned, worried even. But maybe that was pity on his handsome mien.

Damn, would that suck.

As much as I wanted to dislike him, I could not help how I felt about the wizard. Arlo Glenn was ridiculously cute, and really good at what he did.

“No. No more pain. Just humiliated,” I said, opting for truth.

“Humiliated? What on earth for?” He looked truly baffled, and I barked out a short laugh.

Was he for real?

“I don’t know, for a million things. That’s just me, though, always tripping up.”

“Jade—”

“Crap, I’m sorry. I would blame narcotics, but they don’t work on me, anyway.”

“They don’t?”

“Nope. Earth witch thing. I can metabolize right through anything with an organic origin.”

“That’s really interesting,” he said, and I could tell he meant it. “Why don’t you tell me what happened today?”

“For your chart?”

“Yeah, sure,” he replied, and picked up his tablet.

“Well, my parents sent me a pressure cooker. Now, I know I should never touch those things, but my folks swear by them. My parents are always trying

to get me to use modern tech to work my craft, like they use on our family farm. But I'm an old school earth witch. Modern and me don't really mesh," I mumbled and moved one shoulder, wincing as I did.

"I see," he said, tucking my hair behind my ear in a gesture that made the breath catch in my throat. "You know, there's nothing wrong with explaining to your parents that you prefer to do things your own way, Jade."

"I know, I just hate to disappoint them, and I don't want to seem ungrateful. Understanding my element is difficult for them. They love gardening and nature, but I connect to all that on a different level. Canning is a delicate process, and they know I spend a lot of time in the summer doing that. They just wanted to help, I'm sure," I said, willing myself to shut up.

My magic was not exactly exciting. It wasn't fire or water. I could not fly. I was boring. And I was embarrassing myself even more, but I felt so relaxed and calm. Still, it was unlike me to talk so openly with someone—*especially hot boy healer*.

"I understand what that's like," he replied.

"You do?"

"Sure. My parents didn't want me to go into healing. Dad's a lawyer, Mom too. They have a firm with branches in both the human and supernatural worlds. My brothers are both lawyers, and I'm the black sheep."

"Yeah, but everyone wants their son to be a doctor," I replied, totally shocked at this peek into his private life.

"Not my parents. They don't understand why I would want to deal with all the gruesome gore of medicine, as they put it," he said with a grin.

"Oh," I said quietly, wincing as I shrugged.

"Sore?"

"Yeah, feels like it's pulling a bit when I move."

"I had to use stitches in some places where the glass went deep. There will be no scarring, though," he told me.

"Oh. How did you manage that?"

"It's a specialty of mine, actually. I've sort of created a rapid healing salve that minimizes scar tissue," he mumbled and avoided my eyes as if his accomplishments embarrassed him.

Strange.

I'd thought he was something of a bragger. Most boys were in my experience. Especially when they accomplished something so obviously brag-worthy. But Arlo Glenn was not like most boys.

Mysterious.

Smart.

Sexy wizard.

“Wow, that sounds incredible. What did you use?”

“Um, a mixture of your typical herbal remedies. Eucalyptus, aloe, feverfew, rosemary, garlic, St. John’s Wort, tea, and lavender, to name a few —”

“Sounds delicious,” I whispered, baiting him.

Arlo barked out a quick laugh, then gasped as his shocked eyes held mine. Like the sound surprised him too. Must have been the injury making me bold, but I had to admit I liked the way his cheeks went ruddy under my mild teasing.

He always looked so serious, but I supposed no one wanted a healer who told jokes and took things lightly. I wondered if he smiled enough, and suddenly, I very much wanted to be the one to make him smile.

“Yes, well, it’s not perfect yet. I can’t find a way to stop the pain for longer than a few hours at most without the use of other drugs or potions—”

“That’s still amazing.”

“Thank you, Jade,” he murmured, and his green gaze warmed as he watched me.

“You’re welcome.”

My reply was lame, but I wasn’t exactly operating on a full tank. My body was healing, I could feel it like magic, my skin weaving together under Arlo’s salve. There was pain beneath the numbness, but I felt nothing but his eyes on me.

Why was he watching me so intently?

I had no idea, but I heated under that stare, desperate to break the spell he seemed to be weaving on my body and mind, I cleared my throat again.

“When can I leave?” I asked.

“Anxious to run away again, sweet Jade?”

“What?” I asked, certain I’d misheard him.

But he was already backing away from the bed, reading my chart as if we hadn’t just been chatting like old friends. I understood a moment later when someone in a lab coat walked in.

“Mr. Glenn, patient update, please,” the older wizard said.

The badge on his lab coat said Professor Robert Boreas, and I recognized the name from the plaque outside the infirmary. This was the head of the

healing program at Westwood Academy. Arlo must have been very advanced in his studies to be allowed to practice the healing arts on students, and to have the head of his department checking on him.

I barely listened as Arlo ran off a list of my injuries and his treatments. I'd noticed he did not mention his salve, but I figured I would ask about that later. Assuming I would be speaking to him later. He did tend to hunt down his patients when they missed follow-up appointments. They finished their chat, and I closed my eyes, pretending I'd dozed off.

"I'll be back later to check on you," Arlo whispered, tucking me in and closing the curtain around my bed to offer me some privacy.

It was a sweet gesture, and once again I was utterly baffled by the man's treatment of me. Anyway, I must have actually fallen asleep because I woke up a while later to someone poking me on the shoulder, way too close to one of my cuts.

"Ouch!" I yelled.

"Good, you're alive," the snarky voice replied. "No way I wanna deal with those witches you room with if you died here."

I blinked and turned my head, trying my best not to move my back. I recognized the dark-haired female.

"Mabe?"

"What of it, pigpen?"

"What are you doing here?" I asked, watching her warily as she pushed a wheelchair over to the bed. I realized she was attired in her favorite color, black, but she was wearing scrubs.

"Are you studying to be a healer?"

"As if," she grumbled. "No. But unlike you, princess, I have to work to be here."

"What?"

"I can't afford the Academy's tuition. I don't have rich parents doting on me. But it's either here to learn to control my magic or end up at the end of some hunter's sword. Screw all that. Professor Armstrong offered me a shot at a work-study program. So, here I am."

I gulped, swallowing down that huge information dump Mabe just piled on me.

I mean, how often had this witch actually told anyone anything about her?

Her dark eyes seemed rimmed in crimson, and she rolled them as she gestured for me to hurry up.

“Let’s go. I have to turn over this room and you’ve been discharged already.”

“What?”

“Move. Your. Ass. I have work to do.”

The sounds of the suddenly busy infirmary seemed to finally get through to me and I sat up slowly. My back didn’t hurt, and I gasped, turning around to look in the small mirror over the sink in the corner. I peeked through the hospital gown I still wore. No blood seeped through my bandages.

“Good, now come on. I’ll bring you back to your room.”

“Okay,” I said, standing up slowly, only to sit back down in the wheelchair.

Mabe was clearly in a rush, and I guess I was well enough to leave. I didn’t see Arlo and there was nothing for me to sign, so we just left.

And that was when I realized I’d made a huge mistake.

CHAPTER 3



“THIS ISN’T THE WAY TO THE DORMS.”

Maybe I wasn’t paying attention because I was moping over Arlo not coming to see me off. Maybe I was still woozy from the whole my kitchen just blew up thing. I don’t know. But by the time I realized something was not adding up, Mabe had taken a sharp corner at the end of another hallway.

Yes, she’d gone in the general direction of my dorm room, but instead of taking the elevator up, she’d gone down—like way down. In fact, I didn’t even realize there were sub-basement levels accessible through the dorm elevators.

Some subspecies of magical fungi required delicate underground climates in order to grow. I’d had a class last year that focused on such conditions and spent a whole lot more time than I’d have liked on the third sub-basement level of Greenhouse Twelve at the southeast end of campus. But this wasn’t Fungi Growth & Development, and Mabe was not an earth witch.

“Where are you taking me?” I demanded with more vigor.

“Hold on,” she mumbled, and I noted her skin started to glow with runes as she whispered a chant.

“Mabe? Stop right now.

Oh my Goddess!”

I bit back a scream, certain she was going to get us killed crashing into the brick wall at the end of the old, abandoned hall. But instead, the wall gave way, and I found myself in an old room that had been fixed up with a string of lights and a small cot.

Heart pounding, I jumped out of the wheelchair, mindful of the stretching pain of the stitches in my back. A suitcase sat on the floor, books, shoes, and

a half a bottle of soda on the floor next to an unopened packet of crackers. I'd never seen such a pitiful looking room.

"Just take it easy," Mabe said, and I noticed her eyes glowing red around the rims.

"What is this, Mabe?"

"Look, I was supposed to room with you in 563W, but I took off that first day, remember?"

"Of course I remember, but why did you kidnap me—"

"Oh please, you're a little old for kidnapping," she scoffed, and I hated to admit, she was right.

"Mabe," I said, clearing my throat and careful not to step too close to whatever was skittering in the corner of the room. "Why did you bring me here?"

The slender witch closed her eyes and puffed out a breath. I could tell she hated the idea of revealing whatever deep, dark secrets she had that led her to take me from the infirmary, but it was clear she wasn't going to hurt me.

At least, not yet.

"What I told you about Professor Armstrong inviting me to participate in a work-study program here at Westwood is true, but I didn't mention why."

"Okay, so tell me," I said, encouraging her.

I don't know why I wasn't more worried about my safety, but from the look on Mabe's pale face, that witch looked more desperate than I had ever seen. She was thinner than last time and had a haunted look in her eyes.

"What do you know about what is happening to magic?"

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"It's disappearing. I mean, we always knew there was a finite amount, but it was constantly being recycled, replenished, reused whether by descendants of the first user, or taken back into the cosmos and sent here again."

"What, um, what are you saying?" I asked nervously.

"I'm saying something is very wrong with magic, and it's having a really bad effect on me," she whispered.

Her gaze darted down, and I noticed rune-like tattoos circling her wrists. She rubbed them, as though they itched, and the shapes took on a strange fiery glow. I gulped, unsure what they meant, but I was almost certain it wasn't good.

"Mabe? Why are your eyes glowing like that? And what the heck is up with your teeth?"

“Fuck, I’m starving. Shit! Jade, stay back!”

I screeched as I walked backward to get away from Mabe. Suddenly, someone burst through the same magical portal disguised as a doorway and a pair of enormous hands grabbed my waist. I yelped just as Arlo Glenn moved in front of me, for some reason my instincts seemed broken around him. I trusted the big wizard in a way I’d never trusted anyone.

Like when I was a kid and used to believe my Dad hung the moon. It was that kind of naïve trust that could lead to disaster, but nothing was going to make me move from my position, glued to his back the way I was.

Nothing simple, at any rate.

“Stay behind me,” he ordered, and I was too stunned to argue. “What the hell, Mabe? I told you I would talk to her. Have you eaten today?”

“Shit. No. I couldn’t find the t-time,” she stuttered, and I could see her shaking limbs. She looked bad.

“I’m sorry, Arlo, but they were discharging her, and I needed to reach out before she joined her roommates. They hate me!”

“All right, hang on. Here, I brought you this,” the big blond wizard grunted, hefting a bag from his pocket.

“Is that blood?” I asked, completely horrified by what I was about to witness.

“Promise you won’t tell,” Arlo said, his eyes begging me to understand.

I did not know what was happening, but as Mabe moaned, clutching her stomach in pain, I knew something was very wrong with the witch.

“It’s blood. The reduction of magic in the world has taken a heavy toll on her, Jade.” he said, inching forward, careful not to touch Mabe’s suddenly long, black claws.

The witch grabbed the plastic bag, puncturing it with her pointy teeth, fangs, I supposed was a better term, just before she slurped the contents down. A small trickle of crimson dribbled down Mabe’s chin, her black eyes were big, rimmed in red, but she did not cease her drinking—not even as I crumpled to the floor, my name on Arlo’s lips like a faraway scream.

“Jade!”

I guess I was more injured than I thought.

CHAPTER 4



I SNUGGLED DEEPER INTO THE WARM, HARD PILLOW CUSHIONING MY FACE. This was much better than the stiff bed I'd woken up on in the infirmary earlier that day. The steady beating beneath the soft white material had me stilling.

Do pillows typically have a heartbeat?

A nice, rock steady heartbeat that pulled at my own heartstrings and made me feel snugly warm and secure?

I hoped so, but I really didn't think so. Not like I did this sort of thing all the time. And by this sort of thing, I mean snuggle up to a strange, warm, pulsating pillow. It smelled good too. Like peppermint leaves and lemon scented breezes. I knew instinctively this was no pillow—which meant I'd have to move, and soon.

Sigh.

"We have to stop meeting like this," Arlo murmured as I opened one eye to check if I was dreaming.

Nope.

Not dreaming.

I was definitely on top of the sexy, hot boy healer, Arlo Glenn. The back of my hospital gown was open, and he was using a cloth to apply salve to my wounds as I lay across his lap. I was so embarrassed I could have died, but even as I made to get off him, crushing him no doubt with my chubby butt, he held me firmly against him.

"You tore two stitches crumpling to the floor like that, Jade. Don't. You. Move. A. Muscle. Doctor's orders," he growled, and the timber of his voice had me warming in the oddest of places.

That, coupled with the tingling sensation of his very capable, long fingers smoothing salve on my back, and I was damn near purring in his lap like an overgrown kitten. My mind replayed the events leading up to me passing out and him rescuing me—again, and I frowned. He seemed to be taking care of Mabe, and if they were together, I had no business being on his lap like this.

“Can I sit up?”

“Do you really want to?” he countered.

Not really.

Wait.

Did I say that aloud?

Oh my Goddess, I really should not say that out loud.

Like, ever.

Judging from the look on his perfect face, I’d kept my lips zipped. Good on me for not blabbing. I cleared my throat and tried to look like I was totally fine waking up pressed against some sexy as sin body.

Sure, I did that all the time.

Riiigghht.

“Um. What?”

“Here, Let me help,” he grumbled, tying the string at my back, and closing the hospital gown before allowing me to sit up. My panty-clad butt was still in his lap, but that seemed as far as Arlo Glenn was willing to let me go.

“Where’s Mabe?”

“She’d gone too long without feeding, I’m afraid, and made a bit of a mess. She’s in the shower.”

I heard it then, the sound of water coming from behind a door off to the left of the strange little room. I tucked my hair behind my ears, trying not to think of the disastrous state of my curly locks. Okay, so Mabe was in the shower, I was in Arlo’s lap, and the three of us were in some strange dungeon room.

“She was trying to explain something to me,” I began, and Arlo cocked his head to the side.

“You really care, don’t you? About everyone, regardless of what they’ve done or how they’ve acted in the past,” he said, like it was a fact he’d read somewhere.

“Of course, I care. Mabe is a person, a witch, like me. Just because we grew up differently does not make her any more or less important than I am,”

I said without preamble.

“You know, I’ve never met anyone like you, Jade Montrose,” he said, brushing his fingers down the side of my face.

I froze, unsure what I should do. If he was dating Mabe, this was highly inappropriate.

If he wasn’t, then what was he doing in her private room?

And why was he feeding her?

And why was she drinking blood?

So many unanswered questions, but just then I couldn’t lend a voice to any of them. All I could feel was his warmth seeping into my skin. All I could see were his green eyes, blazing like emeralds in the dimly lit room.

At that moment, I wanted him to kiss me.

He was so close I could count his thick eyelashes if I tried.

Was there ever a boy with better features than Arlo Glenn?

How could he be blond and have such thick black lashes?

He was gorgeous.

Sexy.

Hot.

Like totally out of my league cute.

Even so, I really did not want to move off him. I should. I really, really should. But I didn’t want to.

“You know, at first it was just your looks, but now it’s this incredible honesty about you drawing me in. It’s so damn attractive, Jade, I can hardly resist you.”

“Me?” I squeaked.

That was a first.

When had a boy, any boy, ever had a difficult time resisting my chubby butt?

“Yeah, you. You’ve got these incredible eyes the color of warm honey. Wild, curly hair I’m dying to get my hands on, and this body, fuck, Jade, your body is so damn perfect. Not to mention the fact you smell like apple pie, and that is my absolute favorite dessert.”

“It is?”

“Oh yeah, Jade. It is,” he whispered, mere centimeters from my lips.

Was this really happening?

Was handsome healer Arlo Glenn really confessing he liked me?

Like, really liked me.

No way.

Things like that did not happen to me. I was plain Jade. The little earth witch everyone kinda overlooked. It was okay. I was used to it.

“I want to kiss you, Jade. Will you let me?” he asked, but all I could do was stare.

As if he could feel me wavering, Arlo cupped his hand around the back of my neck and pulled me in closer. I was frozen in his emerald stare, half afraid he would kiss me, half afraid he wouldn't. He moved closer, giving me ample time to push off him, but I didn't. I wanted him too much, was far too curious to deny this, deny him.

This is it.

It's finally happening.

I felt near hysterics. Everything I'd ever wanted since I met the guy was finally happening. But it could also spell disaster.

What if he was dating Mabe?

Was this when the witch would walk back in and tear my throat out with her fangs?

Would she want revenge for my moving in on her man?

Heck, I did not think Arlo was the type of guy to two-time a girl, but what did I know besides how good he felt pressed up against me?

The seconds ticked, and he remained a hair's breadth from my mouth, waiting for a signal from me to continue.

I considered moving, but only briefly. After all, Mabe did not come tearing out of the bathroom with murderous intent. Arlo did not pull back and tell me he was only kidding.

Nope, none of that happened.

Instead, I found myself nodding. A smile graced Arlo's perfectly symmetrical mouth for a single, beautiful instant before his lips touched mine. Then, every single nonsensical thought I'd had filling my head fled my brain like a team of wild horses was running behind them.

Mint and lemon washed over my tongue as he deepened the kiss. They were Arlo's flavors, bright and clear, and totally epic.

He's really kissing me.

Arlo Glenn. Is. Kissing. Me.

And it was better than I'd ever imagined.

I don't know how long we stayed glued to each other's faces, but it must have been a hot minute or two. Now, I wouldn't say the earth quaked, but it

definitely moved. The slow rumble shook us and as I moaned and allowed him deeper access, tangling his tongue with mine, I swear I felt my magic bubble and sing inside me.

“Ahem. AHEM. Guys, really?” Mabe’s annoyed voice filtered through the thunder inside my brain, and I opened my eyes slowly.

Uh oh.

We’d been caught red-handed, but Arlo didn’t push me off in an effort to save face with his maybe girlfriend. In fact, he cuddled me closer, and that answered at least one pressing question. Clearly, he was not dating Mabe.

The other question I had was a bit dirtier and for another time when we were alone. Of course, given the hard proof of his attraction toward me throbbed beneath my butt, I suppose I had my answer for that inquiry too.

Arlo wanted me just as much as I wanted him.

Wasn’t that awesome?

I bit my lip, looking down, but my sexy wizard was having none of that. With his hand still cupping my neck, he rubbed my skin until my gaze met his.

“You all right?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Better than all right, Jade,” he murmured, a beautiful grin spreading across his face, and I was struck by how absolutely stunning this man was.

“Okay, well, I’m fucking traumatized,” Mabe growled, running a comb through her cropped hair a bit too rough for my taste.

“That’s quite enough, Mabe,” Arlo said, helping me to stand before gracefully rising from the ground.

He tucked the hospital gown around me before removing his sweater and adding that to my horrible ensemble. I was grateful, since only then did I realize I was freezing.

“How long have you been living in here?” I asked, taking in the damp and dank space.

“Long enough,” she replied with a heavy sigh, dropping the comb into the small duffle bag she seemed to be living out of. “Did he tell you about me?”

My gaze flicked to Arlo, who gave a subtle nod. I did not feel right revealing anything he might have said without his permission. Call me anything you like, but my mother raised me to be polite and use good manners. Having a strong moral compass was something I prided myself on, even if I was not the most powerful witch around.

“He didn’t really say much. Just that you’d gone too long without feeding, and I have to admit, Mabe, I have no idea what that means.”

“I didn’t know what it meant either, until that day I came to 563W,” she began and turned to face me.

“The day I passed out,” I said, just to confirm.

“Yep. And I don’t really know why that is either, except that something about your magic draws me to you. Arlo? You wanna take that part,” Mabe said.

“Yeah, sure. Mabe came to me after meeting you. She was experiencing severe pain, stomach cramping that turned out to be hunger. I ran the usual tests, found nothing, then Elba Green happened to come into the office—”

“Elba is an earth witch. She was in my Forest Cures class,” I mumbled.

“Yes, she is an earth witch and the second she came into the office, Mabe started funneling magic from her. Elba passed out and after securing her in her own room, oblivious, of course, as to why she’d passed out, I got Mabe the hell out of there,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck before catching Mabe’s worried gaze. “It’s your secret, Mabe.”

“You tell her,” she replied in a small voice.

“Tell me what? Come on, stop beating around the bush.”

“When she was invited to Westwood, it was under general acceptance.”

“You mean she has no coven affiliation,” I replied, waiting for his nod.

“That’s right. Mabe is not an elemental like most of the student body here. In fact, what Mabe is, is rather impossible.”

“What are you talking about? What is she?”

“I’m a blood witch,” she whispered.

At first, I thought I was being punked. Blood witches no longer existed. In fact, they’d been hunted to extinction, or so I thought. But there it was, the truth in her red-rimmed eyes and on Arlo’s grim face.

Mabe really was a blood witch.

“Oh shit,” I whispered.

“I believe her powers manifested fairly recently, but there is a catch. She must have a fresh supply of either magic or blood to maintain balance. Because of the shortage of magic, she’s weakening, falling prey to her baser instincts—”

“Which is to feed on blood,” I whispered, recalling the stories I’d read.

“I don’t mean to,” she replied, her voice trembling with emotion.

“I think you might be able to help her, Jade. After feeding on your power,

she went weeks without needing another boost. Same thing with Elba. There is something about earth magic that sates her need for blood,” Arlo explained.

“But if the supply of magic on this plane is dwindling, isn’t it dangerous?”

“It is. But I swear on everything I am, I will never allow harm to come to you, Jade.”

CHAPTER 5



I WALKED INTO ROOM 563W WITH ARLO AND MABE ON MY HEELS. THE latter was nervous as fuck, and I could practically hear her anxiety scratching against my senses.

“It’s all right,” I told her, trying to reassure the both of us as we entered the dorm room.

“Hey Jade—what the fuck happened to you? Why are you in a hospital gown? Holy shit! What is *she* doing here?”

Of course, Tana was the one to greet us and I steeled myself against the angry fire witch. Mabe hissed a defensive sound and the runes I’d noticed earlier on her wrists took on that same fiery glow. Enid came running into the kitchen, the lavender-eyed witch halting when she saw Mabe. Her lips compressed in a thin line, and I wondered if Mabe didn’t make friends everywhere she went.

Sheesh.

“She’s with me, Tana. It’s all right. Look, I swear she is not here to hurt us. I need to talk with everyone, though. Can you send a text?”

“You sure about this?” she asked, and I nodded.

“Yeah. Tell everyone to get here quick. I need a few minutes to get changed. Enid? Can you sit with Mabe? And Mabe, just relax. Don’t go anywhere,” I mumbled.

“I’ll stay too,” Tana muttered.

“Tana, be nice. I promised her she would be safe here,” I said, and the fire witch looked at me, nodding slowly.

Her mate entered the kitchen, his arms folded across his massive chest. Whatever happened, I knew Brandon would try his best to keep the peace. It

was what sentinels did, after all.

As for me, I really needed to take off the itchy hospital gown. I'd had a hell of a day, and I was just starting to feel it. Exhaustion hit me, but now was not the time for naps.

I entered my semi-private bathroom and splashed water on my face, brushed my teeth, and tried to tame my wild curls. A little spray conditioner I'd made from natural extracts and oils helped as I finger combed it into a loose ponytail. I pulled off the gown, turning slightly to see my wounded back.

"Wow," I whispered.

"I second that."

I jumped and saw Arlo leaning against the doorjamb. How long he'd been standing there, I had no idea. His green eyes widened, raking over my half-naked body, and I couldn't move a muscle. I was short and curvy. I knew my faults well. My hips were too wide, my boobs too big, and my belly too soft. But the way Arlo looked at me, he did not seem to mind.

The heat in his gaze told me he thought I was beautiful, and for once, I didn't cover myself in shame or shy away from his searching eyes. I lifted my chin, pushed out my chest, and let him look.

There was something erotic in him watching me.

Something powerful and sexy that made my pulse speed up and my heart thunder in my chest.

"You are so fucking beautiful," he whispered, moving closer as if he could not help himself. "I want to touch you, jade. Can I?"

I nodded, helpless to deny him. Besides, I wanted it too. My body craved his touch. My magic pulsed beneath my skin, eager for his hands. His breath shook as his lips caressed my eyelids first, then my cheeks, next my nose, and finally, my lips.

He moaned when I opened my mouth, and the tremble that racked his tall, powerful frame moved me as well. I'd done that. I'd made this gorgeous man lose control, and it was quite the feeling. With a growl, he wrapped his arms around me, pulling me into stark contact with his body.

"Fuck, Jade," he moaned, kissing me deeper. "You taste like apples and cinnamon. So warm and sweet."

He pulled me tighter against his body, one hand cupping my ass over my panties. I felt power wash over me, his magic mingling with mine. His healer energy was warm oranges and cool blues, they melted perfectly into the

browns and greens of my earth magic.

Someone pounded on the door, followed by a grumbled “*hurry the fuck up*” and I wondered if it was Magnus or Brandon.

“They’re waiting for us,” I whispered, not wanting to stop whatever this was.

“Let them wait,” he growled, dipping me back as he plundered my mouth.

That kiss left me dizzy. When our lips parted, Arlo held onto me for a few seconds longer and I was grateful. I’d likely have melted into a puddle of *take me now goo* at his feet if he hadn’t.

“Get dressed. Come out when you’re ready,” Arlo whispered, trailing petal soft kisses across my chin, cheek, nose, and forehead.

I nodded, unable to use my words just yet. And he left me standing there, in my now wet undies. It took me a few seconds to snap out of my lustful haze, but I managed. After a quick rummage through my drawers I donned a pair of fresh panties, full cotton briefs—*no thongs for this sizeable ass, thank you very much*—and a loose fitting summer dress, then I headed to the kitchen.

The atmosphere was tense, to say the least. I walked over to the window, opening the thing, just so I could breathe.

Arlo watched me from his seat beside Mabe, and I noticed an empty chair on the other side of him. He nodded to it, and I grinned. He wanted me next to him, and that made my heart positively sing a little.

The front door opened and in walked Maia and Enok. The last couple we were waiting for. The platinum-haired air witch took in the full kitchen, eyebrows raised as she turned to me.

I admit, I was nervous. Everyone else had a certain degree of firepower I did not necessarily come with. Earth magic could be violent, for sure, but mine was not. I was a grower. Life thrilled me, filling me with joy. A born nurturer, that’s what my parents said, and though they did not share my elemental powers, they appreciated the nature of my magic.

I looked around, quickly noting that someone had cleaned the kitchen. Tears filled my eyes as I turned to find Enid watching me nervously.

“Before we start,” the shy witch said. “I wanted to thank you, Jade, for saving me from the, uh, accident.”

“No way, you don’t have to thank me. It was my fault. I’m just sorry we won’t have any tomatoes—”

“No, we do have them!” she exclaimed and grinned as she pulled open

one of the cabinets revealing ten unharmed jars of cherry tomatoes.

“You saved some,” I whispered, covering my mouth as I teared up.

It was silly, but it touched me that she took care of my harvest while I was out. She must have sealed the jars I’d packed but hadn’t had a chance to finish the canning process when the pot blew up.

“I hope I did it right, I followed instructions for a simple water bath. I didn’t really trust another pressurized method after the whole kablooeey incident,” she said and shrugged.

“Kablooeey?” Mabe scoffed, and I gave the witch a warning look.

She shrugged, but dropped her gaze and I breathed a little easier. It was going to be a hard sell, getting my roommates to accept the blood witch. Never mind the unflattering lore surrounding such magical beings, but the fact was, Mabe had caused some friction with Tana and her mate at one point. It was my belief she’d done it to get a rise out of the fire witch, and not because she’d harbored feelings for the dragon hybrid sentinel.

“Wise choice,” Arlo murmured and took my hand in his as I settled back in the chair.

That tiny public gesture meant more to me than I wanted to admit. I had no idea what the wizard and I were to each other. Two stolen kisses did not a relationship make, even if he was amenable to holding my hand in front of my friends.

Gulp.

“Okay, so we all know the Council of Covens is keeping a lid on the whole magic problem we are facing,” I began, pausing a moment.

Public speaking was not really my thing, and it was bad enough I had a small complex about the fact these witches, and the men present, were all warriors of a sort. Even Enok Zell, who was more scholar than swordsman, had proven he was up for any battle, especially one where his mate was being threatened.

What could I do?

Ripen some peaches on the vine. Shake a few rocks loose from a hill. My magic was not curated for battle. I was most valuable in a garden or a farm, saving a rain forest or something like that. But I would do what I could to help my friends, and all supernaturals.

If that meant finding out why a blood witch craved my magic, I would. And if it meant expanding my friendship circle and protecting a witch who had no one else looking out for her, I would do that too.

“Those bureaucratic bastards are lying to the whole magical world,” Brandon growled.

“Jade, are you sure you should be talking about this now,” Tana said, her gaze going to Arlo and Mabe.

“It involves them too, Tana,” I replied.

“I agree,” Rio said. “But, Jade, you were just seriously injured. I mean, Enid described what happened. She said you had dozens of cuts on your back, and glass shards from the exploding jars were deeply embedded in your back. How are you not just screaming in pain?”

“Arlo healed me,” I replied with a grin at the sexy wizard, whose hold tightened around my hand.

“He healed you how, Jade? You’re not a shifter, and that was a lot of glass. I can’t imagine how many cuts—”

“One hundred and seventy-two,” Arlo interrupted. “Slices, cuts, and abrasions covered her back, shoulders, neck, and scalp. She had forty-six pieces of glass shrapnel embedded in her skin when she came to the infirmary and had lost a significant amount of blood.”

“Oh my Goddess, Jade,” Enid whimpered.

“I took Jade’s case the second I heard her name and treated her myself, extracting each piece of glass with the utmost care, stitching her skin back together using the smallest needle and thread, and glue where possible. Then I treated her with a special salve I’ve created and have been trying to get a patent on for the past year and a half. It is designed to speed up the healing process—”

“The salve is genius,” I quickly added. “I don’t feel a thing and look at this.” I turned around and tugged on the sleeve of my dress, exposing part of my shoulder and back. Dozens of wounds looked weeks old with shiny, new, pink skin. I was impressed as hell with the healing salve and appreciated Arlo’s efforts, knowing I would have no lasting scars this time around.

“Wow. That is amazing,” Rio said, and the rest of the group agreed.

“I would love to take a look at the ingredient list,” Enok said. “Maybe I can help with the Magical Patent Office,” he added.

“That would be great. It’s almost ready, but I am still tweaking the recipe.”

“Cool. Back to *her*. Why is she here, Jade?” Tana gestured toward Mabe, and the blood witch bit her bottom lip.

“Mabe is a special case,” Arlo began.

“She needs our help. I know we got off on the wrong foot, but I think we should try again. Professor Armstrong had her placed in this dorm for a reason—”

“Yeah, until she knocked you out with her evil eye!” spat Tana.

“I didn’t give her the evil eye,” Mabe said lamely. “What I did to Jade was much worse, and I don’t blame you for hating me. Look, we tried, it’s not going to work—”

“Damn straight, it won’t work. What do you mean you did something worse to her?” Maia asked angrily.

“Ladies, maybe we should just hear her out—” Enid began, only to be cut off by Rio.

“Excuse me, but you know less than I do about magic. Jade is too sweet and gentle, and we just don’t want her taken advantage of—”

“What did you do?” Tana demanded, slamming her hands on the table.

The men wisely stayed quiet, but the shit was definitely about to hit the fan. I looked at Mabe, her eyes were starting to glow, but I didn’t understand why. She’d just fed on the blood Arlo had brought her, but maybe nervousness made her reach out toward my magic.

“Back up, Tana,” the blood witch said between gritted teeth.

“Make me.”

“Stop it, you guys,” Maia said, moving between them.

Tana’s flames rippled down her arm and Maia conjured wind from the window. Rio gasped, raising her arm, and the sink turned on, allowing her to make a water ball from the liquid pouring from the spout. I’d seen the damage she could do with her magic and swallowed down my fear.

What could I do now?

My friends weren’t listening. They were at each other’s throats, and worst of all, they were talking about me like I was some child who couldn’t take care of myself.

What the heck?

It was one thing for me to get down on myself, another for them to have so little faith in me.

I felt a tug on my powers and heard Mabe gasp. Arlo’s gaze was riveted to mine. His lips were moving, and he was saying my name.

Crap.

I was not about to pass out again in front of the boy I was increasingly hot for.

No. NO. NO!

Eyes squinted, teeth gritted, I shoved back with my powers. Suddenly, vines erupted from the window boxes where I grew various herbs and berries, cherry tomatoes included. The strong, thick, green ropes wrapped around my friends, holding them still and terrified.

I was breathing heavily by the time they'd stopped and realized only Arlo and I remained untouched. It seemed Enok, Brandon, and Magnus had tried to free their mates, earning the ire of my plants. They too, were wrapped up tight.

“Holy. Shit.”

Arlo's words echoed in the suddenly silent kitchen, and I stood up slowly, backing away until my butt banged against the cabinet and the countertop dug into my back.

Because it is in the nightshade family of plants, it was once feared by normals. Deadly nightshade, or belladonna, was believed to have been a favorite of evil witches in folklore and myth. It was actually a toxic herb, whereas *solanum lycopersicum*, or the tomato plant, while part of the nightshade family, was, in reality, a delicious fruit-producing perennial, though grown as an annual by many summer gardeners.

That was certainly a mouthful of information, but such was my mind. I had stores of trees, shrubs, plants, herbs, fruits, and veggies completely memorized. Anyway, my magic had somehow turned my innocent cherry tomato vines into something else—*something potentially deadly*.

My roommates ceased their struggling as, one by one, their mix of terrified and pissed off gazes landed on me. I cleared my throat, flicking a glance at Arlo, who'd joined me by the counter. He didn't look pissed or scared, though. The hot-as-Hades wizard looked downright amused.

A giggle slipped past my lips, and I covered my mouth. Arlo tsked and took my hand in his, gently tugging it away from my face. He kissed it as he gestured for everyone to calm down with his other hand.

“Tomatoes really are underrated,” he stated. Something I myself had said many times over the last few months.

“You can say that again.”

CHAPTER 6



IT TOOK A BIT OF CONVINCING, AND SOME THREATS, BUT I FINALLY GOT MY roommates to settle down long enough so we could have some semblance of a normal discussion. I understood how they felt about Mabe, and I knew this new information would make some of them uncomfortable. Heck, it made me uncomfortable. But Mabe was a person too. She deserved the benefit of the doubt.

My sunny personality annoyed many, but I was determined to see the positive side of this. We just needed to talk it out. Now, everyone has different family dynamics. I knew this, but in times like these, I fell back on what I'd been taught.

The Montrose family prided themselves on their communication skills. It was something deeply ingrained in me, and I would never stop trying to make it work with my Westwood family. That was how I thought of my roommates—*my family away from home*.

Rio helped me brew tea, and Enid baked some lemon shortbread while we waited for everyone to get over being bound and gagged by my tomato plants.

“Maybe we should call that plant *Mister Gray*,” Rio asked with a snicker.

“No. Definitely not,” I replied. I could not even imagine my mother’s reaction if she knew I’d named my plant after a smexy book character.

“You ready?” Arlo asked, joining us.

I nodded, focused on my task, secretly thrilling when he carried the tray laden with two teapots, one with a citrusy mint green tea, the other with a vanilla peach blossom blend. Arlo placed the tray on the table right next to the platter of still warm cookies.

“Okay, we have our tea and cookies, now spill,” Tana muttered between bites.

The redhead loved a good cookie.

Who could blame her?

I nodded and stood up. What I had to say required moxie, and I needed to stand for that. Going against popular opinion was never my thing, but Mabe needed me and something deep inside told me she was important to our friend group.

“A few weeks ago, Mabe received an invitation to Westwood Academy, and that invitation included a room assignment here, 563W. Before you interrupt me, please, let me finish,” I said, glaring around the table. Most of my besties looked guilty, except for Rio, who was nodding her approval, and Enid, who looked thoughtful.

“She came to Westwood, maybe a little curious, but mostly unaware of the power inside her. I think she was assigned this room, like we were, because Professor Armstrong knows something about her and us, and she wants us to figure it out on our own, but we’ve missed something, a piece of the puzzle. We’ve been missing Mabe.”

My announcement was greeted with hard silence. I looked at each of them, waiting for someone to dismiss me or call me silly. I got that a lot.

Silly, fluffy little Jade, so sweet and naïve.

But I wasn’t just that. I was more and for the first time in my life, I felt like more. I felt Arlo’s approving gaze focused on me, and it bolstered my courage. I flicked my head toward Mabe, and the witch nodded. That was all the approval I needed.

“Mabe is not an elemental like us.”

“So, she’s like me then?” Enid asked, and I glanced at her white-streaked hair and pale lavender eyes thoughtfully.

Mabe was like her polar opposite, and not just in looks. To me, Enid was airy and light. A little ethereal, truth be told, where Mabe was intense and a little dark.

Yeah, those two were definitely not the same.

“No. She’s something I thought had been eradicated, and the conservationist in me is sort of glad she wasn’t. Mabe is a blood witch—”

A round of growls and gasps made their way around the table, and I waited for everyone to settle before continuing. Mabe’s nervous energy reached out toward me, but I slapped it gently away.

“For some reason, when she was emotional, her magic reached for mine. I’m not sure why just yet, but I’ve been thinking it has something to do with a relationship between earth and blood magic.”

“A blood witch? For real?” Maia whispered the words like they were a curse.

Mabe winced, and I immediately felt bad for her. She was our age, early twenties, but this would put a target on her back.

Maybe they were not aware.

Maybe I had to tell them.

“This knowledge is dangerous, and yet, she trusted me with it, knowing telling you was the only way I would say what I am about to say next. Mabe is supposed to be here in 563W. She’s been staying in—another room.”

One look at her and I knew she did not want me to say, so biting my tongue, I continued.

“I vote she moves in right away. We can watch her here, and with Arlo’s help, we can make sure she is never driven to siphoning blood or magic from anyone out of desperation,” I said.

“I’m sorry, I know I am new to all this, but what’s the big deal about a blood witch?” Enid asked.

Everyone quieted down, and I swallowed hard, trying to think of something to tell Enid that wouldn’t scare her. But someone else beat me to it.

“Blood witches were hunted for hundreds of years, thought to be the scourge of all magic. I know Enok worked with you on this and you know that magic is finite, but what that means is there is always a fixed amount in the universe at any given time. When a blood witch uses magic, it does not return to the ether, it gets completely absorbed by them. They’re dangerous to us all,” Tana said, but before I could refute her claim, she continued. My fiery roommate wasn’t done yet.

“But that’s what we’ve been taught. It was how the Council justified the assassination of the last known blood witch some years before the Second Witch Wars. Brandon and I’ve been reading through a lot of the old annals. A witch named Marjorie Benoit was put to death, in 1934 I think, for being an undocumented blood witch. They released a statement claiming she was responsible for siphoning magic from an entire town in the French countryside, but that was what the old Council reported. Who knows what really happened?”

“What are you saying?” Mabe asked quietly.

“I’m saying *stay*.”

“What?”

I felt Mabe’s confusion as I watched a wide grin spread across Tana’s face. The fire witch wasn’t a fan of Mabe’s before, but maybe she saw the same thing I did. Something was going on in the magical world and the more people, *the more witches*, we had on our side to figure it out, the better.

“I second that motion,” Rio said immediately, and by the end of the vote it was unanimous.

“I’ll go get my stuff,” Mabe said after the tea and cookies were finished.

“I’ll come with,” Enid told her, and the two left while Arlo helped me load the dishwasher.

“That went well,” he said, adding a tiny cleaning pod to the plastic dispenser.

“I know, right? I’m shocked,” I replied, putting away the glass jars I’d taken out of the cabinet, holding my special tea blends.

“Why? Are your friends usually difficult or something?”

“No, it’s not that. They’re great. Really powerful witches with promising futures and amazing pasts. I’m lucky to know them, but I just don’t have that, um, *you know*.”

“Enlighten me,” he said, amusement dancing in his emerald eyes.

“I’m just not like them. I don’t lead or make decisions for us as a whole. Look, now that you know what we do about what’s going on now, with magic and all, it’s not a secret. Tana, Rio, Maia, and likely Mabe and Enid, all have important roles to play in this.”

“Don’t you, as well?”

“I will do everything I can to help, but we both know that’s not much. My role is tea maker, friendship glue, or something like that. Ugh. I really hate saying this stuff out loud. But you know what I mean. My magic isn’t the same—”

I shrugged, exhaling sharply. I didn’t know why Arlo was being obtuse about all this. My magic was fine and good for growing things, moving some rocks, and maybe forcing my friends to listen to each other, but that was it.

The fate of the world was not in my hands.

“I think you are selling yourself short, sweet Jade.”

When had he crossed the room?

Arlo’s fingertips lifted my chin, and I shivered at the warmth I saw there

in his singularly focused stare. His lips were a dusky shade of pink, plumper and more defined than any boy's mouth had a right to be. I recalled how it felt, kissing him, and I wanted it again with everything inside of me.

My body swayed toward him, and I had to steady myself with my palms flattened on his chest. He was lean and muscular, handsome as sin, and I could not recall a single person I'd ever been more attracted to. I waited for him to make the next move, but just as I thought he would, he stepped back.

Disappointment flooded my system. I may have even moaned aloud as my hands dropped to my sides.

Maybe I'd read him wrong.

Maybe he was not as attracted to me as I'd thought.

"I have to get back to the infirmary to check on some patients."

"Oh, yeah. Okay," I muttered idiotically.

"I'll check in with you tomorrow. Goodnight, Jade."

"Sure. Goodnight."

I tucked my hands into the pocket of my dress, smiling tightly as he walked to the door. At the last minute, he turned, and I thought maybe he'd changed his mind. He walked back to where I stood.

Hope was such a fickle, cruel thing, as it sprang to life inside my chest.

The halo of his blond hair framed his face, emphasizing each feature for the perfection they were. The wizard never had a single strand out of place. Odd for a man who worked so hard, but even when he ran his hands through it, his luscious locks simply fell back where they were. Something wicked inside me wanted me to reach out and mess it up good.

"I almost forgot. Here, you'll want to put some on before bed," he murmured, handing me a jar of salve.

"Oh," I said, frowning for a moment before I recalled my manners.

"Thanks."

He nodded and turned back to the door, leaving without another word with his hands fisted at his sides. I don't know why, but it felt like I'd done something wrong.

A few minutes later, Enid and Mabe returned with her meager belongings. We sat down for a little while, trying to figure out how to divvy up space. With three of us mated, and having regular sleepovers, that left one room for the other three.

"Hmmm," I began. "Okay, so, this suite has a common room with a mini kitchen, breakfast nook, tv area, and four bedrooms, one of which is a double."

But there are three of us now.”

“I can just crash on the couch,” Mabe said, but I was already devising a plan.

“Actually, I have an idea.”

And that was how I added construction witch to my list of not so impressive magical talents.

CHAPTER 7



“MISS MONTROSE, YOU WISH TO APPLY FOR A PERMIT TO DO WHAT NOW?” Clyde Pierce, head of the Office of Magical Residence Life at Westwood Academy, asked.

Mr. Pierce had been employed at Westwood for more than a hundred years, as the framed clipping on his wall, showing him hefting a pickaxe toward the ground on what would later become Greenhouse Two, suggested.

I cleared my throat, tucking my curly hair behind my ears—a nervous habit of mine. Smiling, I offered the plate of caramel brownies I’d baked, infused with an amenability enhancing spell, to the burly half-troll.

“I would like to use a simple expansion spell on room 563W—”

“563W? Let me see,” he grumbled, turning to his computer screen.

The keyboard, I noted, was full of symbols, both Roman and Trollish. I could not understand half of the runic keys, but he seemed to have no trouble at all, punching in commands until what appeared to be a blueprint of the building where my dorm room was located popped up.

“Hmm. Miss Montrose, how many people are assigned to this room?” he asked, rubbing the long beard on his face.

“Six,” I replied.

“And why do you need an expansion spell when there are eight bedrooms?”

“Eight? There are only four, Mr. Pierce, I should know—”

“Four on the first level. 563W is a duplex, Don’t tell me you’ve never noticed the stairs?”

My mouth hung open as he showed me a staircase that appeared to be hidden by a panel just off the living room area. I thanked Mr. Pierce for his

time and rushed back to 563W. My course load was pretty light since it was summer, and I had loads of free time.

I shot off a message to my dorm mates, emergency meeting because, *duh*, why hadn't anyone noticed this secret stairwell before?

It took a few minutes, but I made it back just as Rio came racing down the hall.

"*Ohmygawd, Jade!* I got here as fast as I could. So, what's the matter?" she asked, and I noticed she was wearing a bathing suit and dripping water everywhere.

Uh oh.

Maybe I should not have marked the message urgent.

Too late now.

I shrugged and motioned her inside. I was a bit winded, came from being a chubby chick and jogging up the last few flights of stairs. Stupid airheads were messing with the elevators again. I hated those derogatory names everyone gave the elemental witches, but sometimes the monikers fit. Toying with elevators was a way for air witches to test their power with air currents, but it seriously messed with everyone else. Not like they cared.

Grrr.

"Everyone come here," I yelled, hurrying into the living room.

Well, that explained why we never noticed the stairs, I realized as I stood in front of a huge bookshelf. If memory served, the fully stocked shelf had been delivered for Maia on move-in day.

"What's going on?" Mabe asked, her black hair wet and a towel wrapped around her petite body.

"No more couches and doubling up," I grunted, trying to move the shelf.

"Let me," Magnus rumbled from behind me.

I got out of the enormous sentinel's way and shook my head as he easily slid the shelf over despite me breaking a nail trying to get it to budge.

Ugh.

Nothing like a big hulking shifter to make a witch feel puny.

I shook my head as everyone gasped and pointed at the semi-hidden door. Decorated to match the wall, but with a telltale built in handle, the panel gave way with a simple push, revealing a short stairwell that led to another level of 563W.

"Another surprise in this freaky-ass dorm room?" Tana muttered.

But she was the second one to run down the stairs after me. I could hardly

believe my eyes. Three more bedrooms and a second living room area filled the space. It needed some dusting and airing out, which led me to open one of the bedroom doors. I gasped as I took in the space and the enormous floor to ceiling window that opened onto a tiny wrought iron terrace.

“How did we never see this from outside?” Rio murmured, having followed me inside.

“Because we’re facing the south tower,” Magnus replied. “Look, this window is just pointing at a brick wall.”

He might be right, but I didn’t care about the brick wall. My mind was already racing with ideas. I mentally cataloged which plants would flourish with the perfect mix of shade and sunshine. There was so much potential, I was ecstatic.

“So who wants what room?” Mabe asked, having walked inside with everyone else.

I answered immediately. My magic had already bonded with the space and I was positive it was fate.

“This room is mine,” I said, claiming the one with the terrace.

Mabe snorted and walked off to take another. We spent the rest of the day moving our belongings, including the bookshelf, so we could go up and down at will.

I was making some iced lemonade and a dozen grilled cheese sandwiches. We’d all earned a treat, and I was too pooped to hike it down to the cafeteria.

The new lower level of our dorm room had a mini fridge and a microwave, but any real cooking would have to be done upstairs. I was fine with that since I liked it when we all ate together. Since I cooked, the others cleaned. We were all pretty fair about divvying up chores.

Arlo hadn’t called, and I felt sort of embarrassed by my desire to talk to him again. I really had to learn to read signals better. A kiss or two wasn’t anything to build castles on, and yet, I had. I excused myself from the others and went to my new room.

I kind of missed the double upstairs, but it was getting kind of crowded with all the mates unofficially moving in. Not that I minded. I mean, I wanted my friends to be happy and trying to keep mates apart was not the way to achieve that. However, there was something to be said about having not only my own space, but more of it.

After moving all my belongings from the upstairs double, I spent hours

scrubbing every inch of my new room. I finally had the perfect window for the long gauzy curtains I'd made on a whim once upon a time, and they looked great, the golden-hued fabric looked lovely against the sage walls. After that, it was just a matter of making the bed, placing my little knickknacks about, and putting my clothes away in the long dresser that sat against the wall.

It was hard work, but my room now sparkled. I was kind of grimy, though, so I took a shower, scrubbing and shampooing until I felt clean as a whistle—whatever that meant.

Were whistles clean?

Didn't they have, like spit, and other manky stuff on them?

Oh Goddess, I must be more tired than I thought. My mind always wandered when I'd worked hard or been at something too long.

The warm water sluiced over my aching body, and I frowned, thinking I would need help, putting the salve on my healing wounds. Maybe Enid or Mabe wouldn't mind doing it.

Sighing, I exited the shower stall and wrapped a towel around my body, careful to leave it loose. Too tired to care much for my usual after shower routine, I finger combed my curly hair and walked into my bedroom, humming softly.

"You have a pretty voice, sweet Jade."

I jumped. Arlo was crouched down by the window. He'd been looking at the various herbs and flowers I'd placed in planters to reap the benefits of my new shady window terrace, but now his eyes were on me, and they were glittering like the emerald earrings my mom favored.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, frozen in my bath sheet.

He stood up and walked toward me. I could not help backing up and bumping into the bed. Head cocked to the side, Arlo followed, undisturbed by my retreat.

"Thought you could use some help," he murmured, raising his hand to show the salve.

"Oh! Right," I replied, and turned around.

His warm fingers touched my shoulder, and I shivered. The fact I was naked beneath the oversized towel was heavy on my mind, but Arlo had been giving me so many mixed signals I wondered if he was even aware of that fact.

What would he do if I dropped the thing?

Would he politely ignore it?

Ask me to pick it up?

Tell me to lose weight?

Unfortunately, the latter had actually happened on one of the few dates I had ever been on. The young wizard was the son of one of my father's business acquaintances. He'd asked me out after a business dinner, and I'd agreed happily.

I was flattered and excited, my first real date.

We dated for a while. He was attractive, and at first, he'd paid me lots of attention. He was my first. After that, things went downhill. He was shallow and cruel. It ended horribly, of course.

"What are you thinking about so loudly?" Arlo asked, taking a dollop of salve on his fingertip as he started to tend my wounds.

"Nothing. Just memories."

"Good ones?"

"Hardly," I replied, and snorted in the worst possible way. Arlo laughed and shook his head. I couldn't see it, since I was facing the other way, but I heard his collar rustle with the movement.

"Tell me about it," he said, tugging the towel lower in order to reach more of the semi-healed scrapes.

"I was thinking of my first boyfriend," I said, feeling him still behind me.

"Oh? Pining for your lost love?"

"Lost love? Um, No. The relationship was doomed from the start. He was a real bully. Halfway through it, he started giving me orders. Like grabbing my food from me when we were out, even with friends, telling me loudly I shouldn't finish this or that. It got really embarrassing. At the end, he told me I was pretty enough, but way too big to take seriously as a girlfriend."

"What? Are you serious?"

"Yep. He was the son of an important wizard, someone my Dad did business with."

"No one should ever belittle the person they're dating to feel good about themselves."

Arlo had a point. I understood that now, of course. I mean, I was younger when it happened, inexperienced. It hurt at the time, but it didn't break me.

"Did he give an excuse for being a dickhead?"

"He said he needed a certain type of woman on his arm. I'd thought he was special, but he wasn't. He was just messing around with me, wasting my

time until he told me what he really wanted—”

“And that was?”

“For me to change. He wanted me to lose weight, dress differently, straighten my hair—a million other little things all just to suit his needs and feed his ego,” I whispered.

Arlo’s hands stilled on my back, and I instantly missed their warm progression. I don’t know why, but I always seemed to confess the most intimate things around this wizard.

As if he cared or something.

“Listen to me, that guy had a ton of issues and not a single one of them was on you. From what I have seen, you are nothing but kind, patient, caring, brilliant, and so beautiful it hurts to look at you.”

“You don’t have to say things like that to me,” I began, my pulse racing.

“I don’t have to, but I want you. You’re beautiful inside and out. That boy wasn’t for you, sweet Jade.”

“I guess not. But he was the first boy I dated. The first boy I slept with. It hurt at the time, but I got over it. He wasn’t the only one to say things like that. The last guy I dated had the same sort of criticisms. I make great friend material, and I sure am a good lay. Cute, fun to play around with, but not made for serious dating,” I confessed.

“Is that how you feel about yourself?” he asked.

I frowned.

Why was I even telling him these things?

Did I want him to pity me?

To give me a sympathy bone?

And was he right?

Did I think these things about myself?

Well, apart from me being cute and a good lay, there was only one answer.

Heck no.

“No, I don’t,” I told him. “I’m not looking for a quick fling or insincere compliments.”

“What are you looking for?”

I turned to face him as the temperature in the room seemed to spike.

“I don’t know. I mean, I know my strengths and my faults. I’m not perfect, but who is? And I thought I knew where I fit in with this group, this coven we’ve built, but I am starting to wonder.”

“Wonder what, Jade?”

“Well, my friends are important. They have these great destinies, and for some reason, here I am, right in the middle of it. But you’ve been running hot and cold with me since day one, and I’m too tired tonight. I guess I am just trying to ask you—why are you really here, Arlo?”

“That’s easy. I can’t seem to stay away from you, sweet, sweet Jade, and I have been waiting so long for you to notice.”

“Waiting for me?”

“You can’t see it yet. You’re still talking about your friends’ destinies like they have something you don’t. But don’t you get it? You are one of them, Jade. Every bit as powerful. Every bit as special. Even more beautiful to me than all the others combined. To hell with those guys you dated. They didn’t deserve you, Jade. You don’t have to change a damn thing about yourself. Not for anyone. Definitely not for me,” he growled, and cupped his hand behind the back of my neck, pulling me closer.

I gasped, eyes wide, shocked to my very core at the intensity in his voice. My skin tingled from the places we touched. I cursed my towel and his clothes for separating our bodies. I wasn’t a virgin, but I felt like one just then. Need and desire coursed through me, all I could think about was getting my hands on Arlo Glenn and having my earthy way with him.

Sexy, commanding, badass boy.

Hell’s bells.

The man made my knees go weak and my girly bits scream for attention. There was a certain sensuality to practicing earth magic. Right then, I wanted to revel in it—with him.

“Fuck, Jade, you keep looking at me like that and I won’t be held responsible for what might happen if I don’t kiss you right fucking now.”

“Right now?”

“Yes,” he hissed, inching closer, closer, so damn close. “I promised myself I would wait. That I’d give you time to be ready. To learn to trust yourself. But I can’t stop this, Jade. I don’t think anything can.”

“Can’t stop what?” I asked, ready to start begging.

His warm breath tickled my lips, and I was so gone.

To hell with waiting.

I wanted his mouth.

Now.

Right now.

“This,” he replied, and crushed his lips to mine.
Thank. The. Mighty. Goddess.

CHAPTER 8



SPENDING THE NIGHT WITH ARLO WAS EVEN BETTER THAN I'D IMAGINED. THE few times I'd fumbled in the dark with boys my age, they'd been just that, boys fumbling in the dark. But with him, everything was different.

Maybe it was the way our magic seemed to mingle as we undressed each other slowly in my dimly lit room. I had fairy lights crisscrossed against the ceiling—not the tiny little copper wired things that normals used, but rather floating little lights created by actual fairies that lent a soft fantasy glow to the room. I'd gotten them ages ago, and the magic was not due to wear out for decades yet. Fairy magic differing from witch magic, of course.

He took longer to undress, seeing as how he was wearing actual clothes. But it was like unwrapping a birthday present, and with every inch of warm, pale skin, I was greedy for more. My needy sex pulsed with a steady desperation I'd never felt.

Knowing most of my friends were all having the best sex of their lives with their mates had made me curious what that must feel like, and while Arlo might not feel that way about me—at least, not that I knew for sure—it was time I admitted it to myself.

I was in love with the big, blond healer.

He reached his hands between my legs, and I hissed at how good he felt sliding between my slippery folds. His tongue curled around mine, plundering in time with the thick digit he slid inside my tight channel. Threading my fingers through his thick hair, I held on while he lowered me to the bed, never once stopping his sensual assault.

I bucked against him, opening my legs to cradle his hips while he traded his hand for his long, thick cock. He pushed in slowly, spreading me wide to

fit his girth, and never once did the man stop kissing me.

“Fuck, sweet, you feel so good,” he grunted, pressing all the way in with a deep, guttural moan.

I was beyond words, scratching his back as he pounded into me with relentless fervor. Never before had I felt so thoroughly touched. Arlo’s passion was as insatiable as mine. I’d always been embarrassed of my neediness in the boudoir, but I was so owning that part of me now.

Thank the Goddess, Arlo was the kind of man who did not need to be in control all the time. After one blissful threshold was met, he took me to another, higher one, and even better, he welcomed it when I rolled us over, riding him reverse cowgirl until stars exploded behind my eyes.

“Fuck. Sweet, you own me,” he grunted, cupping my sex, and flicking my clit as he lifted my hips and slammed them down again. “Take it. Take me. Sweet, my sweet Jade,” he grunted, arching up and filling me with warmth.

I was on the pill, not worried about pregnancy, and our magic was such that STDs were not something we worried about in our world. Hours later, and fully sated, Arlo remained in bed with me, his arms encircled my body in a lasting embrace that made my toes curl and my chest squeezed tight.

Questions filtered into my brain. I wanted to ask him what this meant, what I meant to him, but that would ruin the moment, and to be honest, that was something I could not even fathom. Right there and then, I felt more complete than I ever had, and it was all because of Arlo Glenn. Maybe I could push aside my questions for the night and just relish the moment.

Already decided, I snuggled further into his arms, loving the feel of his strong body wrapped around mine. His tender hands gentled, rubbing my skin, and I melted into his touch. It was like he knew I adored being petted and loved on, and even in his completely sated state he was determined to deliver what I wanted, what I craved.

Had a man ever paid so much attention to my wants and needs?

Not hardly.

I’d thought it before, but now I was certain I loved this man. I was totally and completely head over heels. Whether he felt the same remained to be seen, but I was naïve enough to have faith in that. I might not be the most powerful witch of room 563W, but I was damn loveable.

He stayed the entire night, woke next to me the next day with his impressive sex hard against my thigh as sunlight filtered in through the gauzy curtains. I had class that morning, but I did not care if I was late.

Arlo grinned as he kissed my shoulder, then my breast, and my belly. He slid down the bed, draping my thighs over his broad shoulders as he sipped from my sex, lavishing so much attention I couldn't stop my moaning if I tried.

Why bother?

I'd already cast a *silencing spell* so no one outside the room could hear us.

I rocked my hips against his mouth as my first orgasm hit me. I knew it was the first because so far, Arlo had not failed to deliver in that department. The second the first ripple started, he moved up my body, fitting his hips to mine as he pressed deep inside my core. He held his magnificent cock still, just feeling my pleasure squeeze around him as if he couldn't get enough of it, of me.

Then he started moving, and I lost track of all rational thought. Something was different this time as we moved in unison together. Arlo's emerald gaze never wandered from mine, and I felt a pull I could hardly describe with words. We were completely bare to each other, arms and legs, feet, hands, touching every possible way.

He lowered his head, kissing me, and Goddess, it was fantastic. Emotion poured through me, and I felt my magic rise to tangle with the cool blue and warm orange power that was an innate part of him. Tendrils of that energy wound around mine, oranges and blues mixing with greens and browns—the palette of our magic.

It was beautiful.

I gasped as the tendrils heated against my skin, wrapping around us as Arlo set an impossible pace. He ground his pubis against my clit, his movements jerky and erratic as pleasure stole over the two of us. This time, when I fell into ecstasy, he was right there with me. Our magic tightened its hold, heating and bonding us in ways I'd never imagined possible. Before I could stop myself, the words slipped out.

"I love you."

"My sweet Jade," he replied, his smile brilliant as he cupped my face and kissed me hard.



TWO DAYS HAD PASSED since that first night after we'd opened up the rest of 563W, and Arlo had not stayed again. He was working a double shift at the infirmary, and I felt bad knowing he'd gotten little to no sleep during that forty-eight hour period.

After he finished work, Arlo messaged me. He'd gone back to crash at his place and would see me later. I was disappointed he didn't come straight to me, but I understood. It was just, well, a girl might feel a little self-conscious when a man didn't call after they'd been intimate, and she'd kinda sorta shouted her love for him out loud.

Totally normal to be anxious, right?

"He didn't say it back," Mabe unhelpfully pointed out as I walked with her to my first class.

We were all intent on keeping her secret, but that meant making sure she blended in. Mabe had her own lessons to attend and, as unlikely as it seemed, she was determined to excel. The former bad girl witch was taking her stuff seriously. Maybe it was because she felt time running out.

I hadn't forgotten the ticking time bomb that was the question of the future of magic hanging over our heads. The six of us were somehow embroiled in a situation much larger than us. We needed to work together and in the spirit of that fellowship, we'd established a truce.

But it was more than that. Some of us already felt it, and for the rest, well, we were on our way to real friendship. Maybe it was my relentless optimism hoping for the impossible, but I didn't think so. Heck, I saw Tana crack a grin that very morning when Mabe rolled her eyes at whatever gooey babble Maia and Enok had been spouting over muffins and coffee. The two of them were adorably obnoxious.

Of course, that made me think back on Arlo. He had to feel something for me.

Right?

Crap.

Maybe I'd scared him.

"Earth to Jade? Hello?" Mabe had stopped in front of the infirmary. She had a shift today, part of her work-study thing.

"Sorry. You off?"

"Yeah, gotta go punch in. See ya later."

"Bye," I murmured.

So lost in my own reflections, I ran right into a solid wall when I turned

the corner for my *Reading the Rocks: A Lesson in Gemology* lecture. Big hands clasped my shoulders, and I couldn't back away fast enough. I really did not like being manhandled.

"Easy there, pigpen," the stranger sneered, and I looked up into a pair of taunting yellow eyes.

"Don't call me that," I replied, moving around the big oaf.

"You know, you elementals think you're all that, but we all know the truth. Freaks, every last one of you," snarled the wizard.

"That's great. Thanks," I said, trying to move around him.

The student body at Westwood comprised two types of magicals—not wizards and witches, but rather, *elementals* and everyone else. I stopped in my tracks since the big jerk blocked my way and looked at him.

Crap.

I knew him.

Jeremy Thrumble.

Total jerk.

He was my very first boyfriend. The one who gave me all my firsts.

First kiss.

First sex.

First heartbreak.

When had he started going to Westwood Academy?

I thought for sure his Daddy had hired him straight from the womb to work in his prestigious firm.

Whatever.

I really did not care one way or other. But the angry look on his face was a bit much, considering we'd never gotten past that terrible first date. He looked me up and down, and I wanted to squirm under his stare. It made me feel dirty, like he could see right through my clothes. Oh, I was totally covered, wearing a modest, mid-length summer dress. The sneer never left his face.

"Still eating too much at dinner, I see."

"That is really one of your business. Excuse me, I have to go." I pushed past him, but he grabbed my elbow, forcing me to turn around.

"You should really learn to respect your betters, *pigpen*, or should I just call you *pig*?"

"Get. Off."

"What's going on here?" Professor Boreas, a delightful old wizard whose

lecture I was actually looking forward to, came slowly down the hall.

Anger coursed through me, and I tore my arm away from Jeremy, greeting the professor with a tight smile. He didn't deserve any disrespect from me.

"Nothing, professor. Just saying hello to an old friend," Jeremy lied.

The old wizard was no fool, though. He took one look at us and offered me his arm, which I gladly accepted. I did not like confrontation, but I was practically seething with fury. That jerk and his name calling were completely out of line.

"Miss Montrose, how wonderful to have you in my class again. I was very glad to see your name on my roster. Now, shall we?" Professor Boreas asked, and I nodded.

We ambled down the hall together, and the professor began talking about gemstone recovery and the importance of crystals in the craft as we know it today. The lecture was surprisingly good. It was mostly earth witches, like me, but a good number were standard witches and wizards looking to earn the right credits, so they'd be taken into whatever covens they were applying to at the end of their learning.

The magical world was complicated, to say the least. After WWII, the Council started regulating covens, making them accept wider-abled witches and wizards not usually affiliated with them. Elemental covens were notoriously difficult to get into, though that was the specialty at Westwood Academy.

The WA program was renowned for sending the very best in elemental witch and wizard craft out into the world. Not everyone fit the bill, but many tried. Of course, downplaying the importance of elementals was something everyone did. With less and less elemental witches and wizards being born, it was no wonder.

Hmmm.

That was an interesting thought.

Could the low numbers of elementals be part of the problem with magic?

I would have to remember to bring that up with my roommates. The problem was with only half of us being born into magical families who knew the basics of our world, it would be a difficult discussion. Maybe Arlo and the rest of the boys could weigh in on it.

I met up with Enid and Rio after the lecture and we decided on eating in the caf with everyone else. The others were late getting there, but Jubilee, our

favorite sprite, was already bringing out our favorites without us even ordering. Rio was the one who'd started this relationship with the pink sprite.

When I'd first met the chipper pink sprite, I'd been shocked as all get out. Sprites never talked to witches or wizards. Like many other species, they simply kept to themselves. It was just another one of those things we all accepted and never questioned. At least, I never did. Not until I was assigned to room 563W.

Anyway, now we were friends, and I was super happy about it. While everyone else ate the same food served up by the kitchen staff, our friend Jubilee worked on bringing us our favorite meals, with a touch of home. For me, that meant grilled vegetables with farm fresh goat cheese and an herb dressing to die for.

"That looks good," a deep voice rumbled behind me, and I turned to see Arlo hovering over me.

"Hey," I said, feeling my cheeks heat.

"Hey, sweet Jade," he murmured, leaning down to kiss me in front of everyone.

My roommates made catcalls and wolf whistles, but I didn't even mind. My smexy as sun hot wizard boyfriend—I *think he was my boyfriend*—was claiming me in front of the whole dang academy with his kiss and I was so fine with that. He slowed the kiss, ending with a loud smack and nuzzling my nose before tugging on my ear with his teeth.

"Damn straight I'm your boyfriend," he said, and I blushed even harder.

Jubilee appeared then as my friends made room for Arlo, pushing an empty chair next to me. The pink sprite placed a dish of food similar to mine with an additional piece of grilled salmon. Arlo thanked her and I swear the girl blushed an even brighter shade of pink. I guess he had that effect on all species of women.

Impossibly gorgeous, sexy, blond, movie star hunk of man—and he is all mine.

CHAPTER 9



AFTER THAT DAY, I STARTED SEEING JEREMY EVERYWHERE. IT WAS POSITIVELY uncanny.

Did the Goddess hate me or something?

What had I done to deserve this kind of abuse?

And it absolutely was abuse. He was rude, whispering nasty things whenever I was within earshot. Still, I did not want to make a big thing of it.

So, I ignored him.

Or tried to.

“There she is, *queen of the pigpens*,” Jeremy taunted.

It was halfway through the summer session when Jeremy found me watering section A of the garden patch outside Greenhouse Twelve. This was part of a semester long assignment given to me by the head of the department, and the most senior witch of the Tellus Coven herself, Margaret Fairchild.

I’d been tasked with splicing herbs and creating genetic hybrids to be used in potions by my fellow earth witches, and as I toiled, I’d come to another conclusion. Arlo’s salve was incredible as it was, but it could surely benefit from some of the techniques I’d used with the herbs here.

If I could splice and blend plants used in the ingredients for his salve, maybe I could help him find the lasting effects he was trying to manage. So deep in my own thoughts, I didn’t hear Jeremy and his idiot friends approaching. I should have been better prepared, but that was me.

Naïve Jade.

Simple earth witch.

No threat to anyone.

I hated that.

What did people know about anyone else's potential, anyway?

But I'd been categorized as non-threatening for so long, I guess I believed it. And that was messed up. I shouldn't believe things like that about myself.

The same way I should never believe I was *less than* because I carried some more pounds than others. Arlo thought I was beautiful. Heck, he told me so all the time. But it was more than words. He showed me I was beautiful every time he talked to me, touched me, kissed, made me lose my mind with wanting him.

Jeremy Thrumble and every bullying boyfriend like him was not worth the time. Not mine, anyway. Whatever insecurities or mommy issues he had were not my responsibility. He and his baggage could take a freaking hike right on out of here and away from me. I had bigger things to worry about than my less than stellar ex.

"What do you want, Jeremy?" I asked, concentrating on the small budding vine I was tending.

It was a cross between raspberry vine and hops. When I'd initiated the experiment, I had this idea of brewing a sweet, fruity beer with a hint of summer. My younger brother had already started making IPAs as a hobby—one my parents thoroughly approved of. With Mom's gardening skill and Dad's business sense, he was sure to be a success. I loved my family, supported my siblings, and we'd often discussed the benefits of magically enhanced hops before.

This part of campus was usually snowy, but Greenhouse Twelve was in a perpetual loop of spring, summer, and fall. We were always planting, growing, and harvesting here—with the timeline magically sped up, of course.

Arlo was finishing a double shift and I would see him later tonight. Mabe was supposed to meet me here, I was giving her magic transfusions once a week to stem her need for blood, though Arlo supplied that for her as well from the infirmary stores.

Every evening, my roommates and I called a meeting of the Novus Mobilis Coven, that was what we secretly called ourselves. Interestingly enough, the two Westwood Academy sentinels mated to two of our own had been reassigned to guard the six of us. Their own Watchman sanctioned the changes.

No one questioned their presence when we walked by, or asked why a

mage was suddenly rooming with us. Other mated students lived in apartment-like dorms, but there were few. That supernaturals were highly sexualized was probably the reason, but I needed Enid to explain for me to understand why she'd been so scandalized by it. Normals were prudish as hell.

"All alone out here, pigpen?" Jeremy asked, licking his lips in a way that made me cringe.

"Hey, Jer, why are you bothering with piggy for when Emma is waiting?" one of his companions asked.

"Emma Jacobs?" I asked, stilling as worry poured into me.

"Yeah. She is way finer than your ass, even if she is a pigpen too. Been riding my jock all summer," Jeremy said, as if it would make me jealous.

Emma Jacobs was not my favorite person, but she was a fellow earth witch. I had a duty to protect her reputation. At least, that was how I saw it.

Jeremy Thrumble was a total POS.

"That is a disgusting way to talk about a woman, Jeremy. Why don't you just get lost?"

"Get lost? Ha ha ha."

"Oh, *get lost* she says. Yeah, Jer, wanna get lost?"

I ignored his loser friends, careful to appear nonchalant as they circled me. I took in my surroundings. Greenhouse Twelve was too far from any building for anyone to hear me if I screamed. The Winter Forest bordered the south side of the fenced-in plot of land where I was working, but it was a good twenty-minute walk to Bryn Lake, where I knew Magnus and Rio were swimming today.

Go away.

Just leave me alone.

No matter how much I wished for something, it would not happen. I was not that kind of witch.

Jeremy stepped closer to me, making me cringe and giving me the willies. How did I ever let this creep touch me?

I supposed hindsight was twenty-twenty, and now that I had Arlo, most other men looked like total toads beside the handsome-as-sin healer. He was almost finished with his courses and was going to be a certified healer by the end of summer. I was so proud of him, I could burst. It was thrilling to have something to be happy about in light of everything else going on in the world.

Stuck up, snobby wizards like Jeremy took that sort of thing for granted

or as their due. I knew he had a grudge against elementals, though I did not know why. But that would have to wait. I had way too much on my plate to worry about the inner workings of this cretin's mind.

"Looks like you need a lesson on how to treat your betters," he said from way too close to me.

I didn't start or gasp. I finished watering the fifth row of hybrid vines and placed the watering can on the ground. Then I straightened, wiping my damp hands on the front of my overalls. I looked cute as heck today in a cropped tank top and my denim overall shorts, paired with hot pink Crocs, and I was rocking the gardener look hard.

Some might be turned off by my colorful and comfy attire, but Arlo liked me as I was. And that was all I really needed. I didn't tell him I loved him again. Not yet. I was kind of hoping he would say it before I did.

My mind on my boyfriend, I wasn't paying attention to idiot Jeremy, who was now so close I could smell the alcohol on his breath. Typically, magicals did not get drunk unless they mixed their drinks with one or another potion to counter their supernatural metabolism.

"Are you drunk?" I asked, exasperated, as he tugged on my overall strap.

"Think you're so cool with your fire witch friend, and those other elemental sluts," he growled, unfastening the strap.

"What the hell? Stop it," I said, slapping his hand away.

"You bitches are bleeding our magical stores dry. You need to learn your place!"

I backed up, wide-eyed at the hatred he was spewing. Even his friends looked uncertain as he kept coming, handsy as ever. The fucker was really getting on my nerves, and I looked at the three wizards, hoping they would interfere. I should have known better.

"What are you doing, Jeremy? We barely know each other anymore. Back off."

"Oh, you think now you're banging that wizard, you can just brush me off," he growled.

"Are you just going to stand there?" I asked his friends, and two of them answered by running away.

Cowards.

The third stood there, breathing out of his mouth, eyes glazed over with whatever potion they'd imbibed to feel the effects of the alcohol they'd drunk.

I gulped, stepping back, but careful not to appear like I was running away. Jeremy was breathing hard and looking at me like a predator watching his prey. I did not need to give him any excuse to act on his questionable impulses.

“What’s going on here?”

I whipped my head to the side and saw Mabe bearing down on us. The blood witch’s eyes were rimmed in red, and she was pale and a little twitchy. She got that way when her hunger rose too close to the surface.

“They were just leaving,” I blurted. “Get out of here, Jeremy. Last chance.”

“Ha! I think we can take down two bitches. Don’t you, Hendrick?”

Mabe grinned, and I winced. Poor Hendrick did not know what he was asking for when he advanced on an angry Mabe. The blood witch looked so petite and fragile. Totally misleading, she pouted her lips and clasped her hands in front of her, tilting her head to the side like she was some weak thing.

I wondered had I not been thinking about Arlo, if I wouldn’t have heard Jeremy coming. Then this whole mess could have been avoided. But no, I would not take credit for the jerk’s idiocy.

Keeping steady, I cast a glance at Mabe, who was reeling in the other wizard like a lure with a big-mouthed fish on the end. She was ready for a fight. I could tell by her easy stance.

The question was, was I up for one?

“You wanna teach me a lesson?” she asked the inebriated asshole, biting her lower lip and looking all helpless and tiny.

“You a pigpen too?” the second asshole asked Mabe.

Sweat was beading on his brow as his beady eyes stared at her small, firm breasts in her tank top. Her eyes were glowing red, and I knew from experience, that meant trouble.

Crap.

Oh crap.

“Look, Jeremy, my friend is sick. You need to leave with your buddy over there now. Like, right now,” I warned one last time, my gaze flicking to Mabe.

Weeks of working to earn everyone’s trust and keeping her secret would go right out the window if she went all sucky-bloody on these two idiots—even if they deserved it.

“Shut up, little piggy. Know what? I think I’ll teach you a lesson right here. You used to love my cock, didn’t you? Fucking slut. How would you like it now? I’ll stuff you so full right on this precious dirt you love so much,” he threatened, shoving me hard in the shoulder.

Of course, I fell down, but it was honestly the best thing for me. Furious at the vile things he said to me, with my hands in the dirt, I did the one thing that came more naturally than breathing. I channeled my powers and begged aid from the original Goddess herself.

*Mother Earth heed my call,
As your servant,
my will to thee,
rid this place of those,
who seek to revile your bounty,
with evil deeds.*

I’d only recently started adding verbal casts to my spells, and I was getting better with the rhyming, believe it or not. But earth magic was different from the rest. My magic was not a wave of powerful water like Rio’s, or a flash of fire like Tana’s. It did not propel me into the air, like Maia. Turn me into a weapon like Mabe. Or make me see things like Enid.

But there was something I could do. I’d done it before, and that situation was not half as dire as this one. And I did not mean because Jeremy lunged for me again, evil intent plain as the nose on his face. That loser was not important. I was more worried about Mabe. If she gave in to her bloodlust, there was no telling what would happen to the blood witch.

“Come here,” Jeremy grunted, grabbing my ankles, and pulling me toward him.

I kicked out with my rubber clogs, hardly making an impact, but it didn’t matter. It was a stalling tactic. I had my fingers in the soil and was connected to the earth—*my one true happy place aside from Arlo’s arms.*

I found the plant I was looking for, still so young and new to this world. I pulled on my magic stores, thanking the Goddess for giving me plenty. Earth magic was separate from the magical world in that my Goddess, Mother Earth, controlled what we used. Yes, I had inherited stores, and yes, it was finite, but my Goddess could give and replenish as she chose. Right then, she chose me. I, in turn, used it to make a certain vine, one I’d spliced with a formerly thought extinct woody vine, and planted against the back of Greenhouse Twelve section A, grow.

And grow.

AND GROW.

Come on progymnospermaic solanum lycopersicum—or as I liked to call it, Jurassic Mater—don't fail me now!

CHAPTER 10



ONE MINUTE JEREMY WAS RIPPING ONE OF MY OVERALL STRAPS, THE NEXT, that assface was swinging upside down from one very pissed off giant tomato plant. Mabe's tormentor was next, but that was as much for his sake as hers. She'd been seconds away from ravaging his neck, her fangs already protruded from her gums.

"Ha ha! That's what you get, you piece of shit," Mabe shouted before doubling over as hunger pangs took hold of her.

"Jade! JADE!"

I heard Arlo yelling my name as he ran across the field. I waved him over, quickly telling him what happened as the others joined us.

"She needs blood or magic. We have to get her away from here," I told him as he lifted Mabe off the ground.

"Back to the dorm?" he asked, and I nodded.

"Yeah, but I will need a few minutes with the sentinels. Rio called Magnus and Brandon, but others are coming as well, since this is a campus safety issue."

"Don't worry, sweet. I'll see she gets what she needs. Then I need to take care of you," he said, and his eyes glowed with power.

"Yes. All right, thank you."

"Jade?"

"What?"

"I'm so fucking glad you're okay. If he hurt you—" Arlo shook his head, unable to finish, and I grabbed his face, kissing him hard, careful not to jostle Mabe.

"I'm good. I got him."

“I know you did, and I am so damn proud of you. You weren’t sweet Jade out there,” he growled, fire lighting his eyes.

“I wasn’t?”

“Hell no! You were motherfucking superstar Jade Montrose. Mother Earth’s own badass warrior. Be sweet for me alone, Jade. And when you have to, you go on and kick everyone else’s butt.”

“I really was a badass, wasn’t I?” I whispered, stunned at the revelation.

“Hell yeah, sweet. I am so proud of you.”

Arlo nodded, a grin splitting his face and his emerald eyes filled with an emotion he had yet to utter out loud. But it was there all the same, and my heart swelled with joy.

“She’s fading into hunger,” he whispered, eyebrows furrowed.

Mabe moaned pitifully, and we both turned our heads at her gaunt, pale features. She was fading faster and faster each time her hunger struck. According to the old blood witch journals Enok had found in the library with Maia’s help, this was not a good sign.

“Go. Take care of Mabe. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“All right. Be careful,” he said, and hurried off with my friend in his care.



THE NEXT HOUR was spent going over in detail what happened outside between Jeremy and his asshole friends. In my version, there was no Mabe. Just me and four drunk wizards, who were obviously under the influence of some potion or other to make them think stalking one of their exes was a good plan.

“I am horrified by this behavior. The four wizards in question have been expelled, effective immediately. Westwood Academy does not tolerate the abuse of its students, not by anyone,” Headmistress Armstrong announced.

I sat in a chair in her office with Maia, Rio, Enid, and Tana. The four wizards who’d hunted and attacked me while I was alone and tending my garden were in the infirmary. They should only be glad Arlo was busy treating Mabe, lest my boyfriend feel the need for vengeance.

Actually, I was relieved he was not on shift right then. The fire I saw in his gaze brokered no argument—that wizard would hurt Jeremy given half the chance. Lucky for me, I was a witch who could rescue herself. I would

never want Arlo to lose sight of that part of him I adored so. He was a healer and part of his vows was a sacred oath to do no harm.

“I knew Jeremy before Westwood. He was a jerk, but he was not like that,” I told her, needing to know more.

“Yes, well, from our initial investigation, I can tell you Jeremy Thrumble and his friends have been imbibing an illegal potion of Fae origin. It’s rumored to boost magical abilities, but winds up siphoning them—”

“A magic sickness?”

“I am afraid the problem is becoming rampant. Magic stores are dwindling.”

“So, people are noticing,” Tana whispered, eyes wide. Headmistress Armstrong nodded once.

“Is anyone doing anything to stop the sale of that stuff? I mean, they could have really hurt Jade and Mabe!” Maia hissed.

“Luckily, they did not. Rest assured, the authorities are on it, ladies. Speaking of, you seem to be missing one of your dormmates,” Armstrong said, eyeing me in particular.

“Mabe is studying, Headmistress,” I replied, looking down so the lie would not be so obvious.

Thank the Goddess, she was not a shifter. Those creatures could actually smell lies, while witches could not. Either way, I was certain Armstrong knew I was lying. Whether she was aware of Mabe’s secret, I did not know for certain. But it was not mine to tell. I would guard Mabe’s powers as long as she needed me to.

“I see,” she replied with the same natural authority that seemed part of every word she spoke. “Have you made any progress on our *project*?” she asked nonchalantly.

“We’re working on it,” Maia told her.

“Good. That will be all, ladies. Oh, one more thing. Miss Montrose?”

“Yes, Headmistress?” I asked, turning to face the older witch.

My gaze went right to the amulet she always wore around her neck, but for the first time, it seemed to call to me. The power emanating from the rock seemed familiar somehow, and I wanted to touch it, but refrained.

“I believe this is yours.”

The five of us, my roommates and me, turned to see an enormous tomato, four feet in diameter, wheeled in on a cart. My mouth dropped right open. Jurassic Mater had delivered, and big time.

“Shall I send it to the cafeteria for the sprites after it has been weighed, photographed, and measured, or did you want to have it sent to your room?”

“Oh, um, the caf can use it,” I replied, gulping loudly.

“Holy cow, *I mean*, tomato!” Rio giggled, and the others followed, clapping me on the back and congratulating me on my overachievement.

I said a small prayer of thanks to the Goddess before I headed back to our dorm room. My anxiety level was working overtime, and I just wanted to see Arlo. Truth was, I needed to process everything that had happened, but that could wait.

We had unfinished business, him and me.

CHAPTER 11



I TOOK THE STAIRS TWO AT A TIME, AND BELIEVE ME, THAT WAS SAYING something. My fluffy butt did not see that kind of workout on a usual day, but today had been anything but usual.

Enok was sitting at the table in the upstairs section of 563W, and I waved as I ran for the stairs leading to the lower level where Enid's, Mabe's, and my bedrooms, were located.

I heard him before I saw him. Arlo's rich voice was deep and steady as he spoke. I wasn't paying attention to the words, just the sound of him. Knowing he was there was enough. All the anxiety that had built up over the last hour and, however many sum odd minutes had passed—*poof*—were all gone.

I leaned against the doorjamb, having paused in my hunt to watch him in action. Arlo was talking to Mabe about a new blend of blood, and she was sitting in bed, an IV attached to her arm.

"You gonna come in or hover there like a hummingbird?"

"Hey, how are you feeling?" I asked Mabe.

"Better now that your boyfriend rigged it, so I don't have to drink from a blood bag like some sort of Vincent Price special juice pouch," she muttered, rolling her eyes at her own gory description.

I was happy to say they were back to their regular dark color, and not the *glowy I'm going to suck your blood* kind of red-rimmed they got when she was low on magic. I walked in, leaned down, and gave my roommate a squeeze. I knew she wasn't big on the whole touchy feely thing, but I didn't care. I was.

At that moment, I needed to hug Mabe.

Arlo smiled as he watched us, no judgment on his movie star gorgeous

face, and yeah, I fell a little harder for him. But I'd get to him in a minute.

Now was for Mabe.

"You stood up for me—" I started, but she was already interrupting.

"Like I was gonna let that turd talk to you like that and put his gross hands on you—easy there, Doc, your girl is fine," she reminded Arlo, whose power surged, bringing a sharp orange zap from his fingertips.

"Sorry," he mumbled, nodding his head as if to tell me he'd wait inside.

"I'll be there in a minute," I said, kissing him quickly before he left to give us some privacy.

"Look, go be with your man, I'm fine now—"

"I figured it out. Why you only go for my magic when you're hungry," I whispered.

"What?" she asked, her eyes were wide, and she gulped.

I knew this had been a huge worry on her mind, and I wanted her to know it was okay. In fact, after I told her, I would let everyone know what I'd discovered today.

"You know, of all the elemental witches and wizards, earth magic gets the most readily dismissed. Sure, we have some control over rock and soil, but not enough in ways that would make us feared. The fact is earth witches are the forgotten ones. The whole magical world needs us to grow the herbs needed for magic potions and salves, ointments and casts, but still, we're always treated like the easygoing mothers, the silly maiden aunts, or the cheerful grandmas."

"OMG, you're not pregnant, are you?"

"What? No! You dope." I laughed at her lame joke. "Anyway, what everyone forgets is that everything starts with sacrifice. The first witches and wizards needed food. They hunted, sure, but their craft could not be forged without the same ingredients we use today. Plants, herbs, spices, and more."

"I don't understand what you mean, Jade—"

"I mean, those first witches and wizards offered blood sacrifices to the Goddess, to *my Goddess*, Mother Earth."

Mabe's eyes rounded as realization dawned, and I squeezed her hand.

"You weren't trying to hurt me. Your magic just reached out for mine because all earth magic started with a blood sacrifice. Those rituals gave the earth, the soil, I mean, what it needed to sow the seeds our ancestors reaped. In turn, we ate those fruits and vegetables, taking them back into our bodies. The earth hasn't forgotten the blood sacrifice, Mabe," I whispered into her

glistening dark eyes.

“But I don’t want to suck you dry. I won’t bleed you of all your power,” she whispered like a frightened thing.

“You couldn’t if you tried. Earth magic comes from the Goddess, and where witch and wizard magic are finite, hers is not. My power comes from her. I share in her well,” I confessed.

Tears spilled over her eyes, running down her cheeks and mine too as we wept together. Happiness and relief coursed through us. Mabe was going to be okay. I was going to see to it. Together, we were going to help the others find out what was wrong with the magical world.

I left her to rest and went in search of Arlo. He was standing by the terrace in my bedroom, gazing up at a streak of silver moonbeams filtering through the clouds.

A more handsome man had never been born, at least not to me. His chiseled jaw was even more pronounced as I stared at his profile, backlit by the pale light streaming in through the curtains. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“You always smell like apples and cinnamon to me, sweet Jade, with your luscious, perfect body, your genuine, fearless heart, and your honest, wholesome soul,” he whispered reverently before turning to face me.

“I love you.”

Those three words had never had such an impact in history, I was sure of it. I covered my mouth, trying to muffle the sound of my gasp as I broke down into hysterical sobs.

Arlo ran for me, pulling me into his arms, cradling my head and kissing me everywhere he could. His mint and lemon flavors flooded my senses as he repeated those words over and over again, forcing me to take them in.

“I love you. Do you hear me? I. Love. You.” Arlo reiterated with a desperation I’d never felt from him.

It was poignant and deep. Honest and so damn powerful, it rocked me down to my toes. My magic burst from me, mingling with his, as we rejoiced in our connection.

“I love you too,” I replied between gasps.

“Love you so much, my sweet, badass Jade,” he said, finally lifting my face and kissing me so hard our teeth clacked before he gentled his lusty exploration of my mouth.

Arlo was like a man obsessed. He undressed me quickly, lifting me in his

arms before I had his pants halfway off and walking me backward to the bathroom. Turning on the shower, he stepped inside, kissing me as he rubbed me with soap until I was all full of slippery suds.

I moaned and groaned aloud under his delicious healer's hands as he kneaded my flesh. It was like he knew instinctively where I needed him. He found every single inch that ached, every muscle that burned, and he took care of me, spreading his attention everywhere.

Not once did he stop kissing me—

Well, that wasn't entirely true.

He stopped when he washed my hair, and hot damn, the man knew how to give a head massage. I was so not complaining.

My sex was throbbing, the empty ache growing until I could not stand it anymore. Taking matters into my own hands—literally, I dropped to my knees and palmed his balls while taking him deep into my mouth.

Arlo grunted, fisting his hands in my hair as he rocked his hips, taking my mouth the way I wanted him to.

Some girls did not like this kind of thing, but I was all about earthly pleasures, and giving my man ecstasy was as good as getting it, and then some.

By the time warm jets of his passion filled my mouth, I was well on my way to my first orgasm, my fingers buried between my folds. Only, I never got myself there.

Arlo was too fast.

He pulled me up, and lifted me in his arms, claiming my mouth with his as he nimbly stepped out of the shower and laid me down on a clean towel.

Before I could even speak, he had his head buried between my thick thighs, his tongue licking me until I was incapable of thought. He didn't dally, Arlo was all about the endgame, attacking my clit with single-minded pleasure—*mine, of course*—firmly on his mind.

I'd never been much for dominant males, but Arlo's possessive display was such a turn on, I had my fingers threaded through his golden locks, tugging him closer as he licked me into oblivion. The floor was hard against my back, but suddenly, it disappeared as I started floating toward the bed—wait, not floating, I was being carried.

Arlo laid me gently on top of the covers before covering me with his warm, hard body. He touched me everywhere with firm, seeking hands. He couldn't seem to get enough, never tiring of exploring my curves and valleys.

He nibbled at my mouth, and I tasted myself on him, it was earthy and sweet, and so damn good, my heart was damn near exploding from my chest.

His prowess in bed was absolutely swoon-worthy, but tonight was different. Our magic lit up the room, granting an ethereal glow as we fed love to each other, expressing it with our mouths, and hands—our entire bodies.

Healing magic was related to earth magic, I should have guessed that already, but it did not explain why I felt so completely attuned to this man.

“I love you,” he whispered, hands on my face, lips brushing mine as he slid into me with one slow press of his hips.

This wasn't sex, for sex's sake. It wasn't two bodies mindless with the need to come. This was making love, and it was the first time I had ever felt such attention and devotion from another being. Tears pricked my eyes as we moved together, pushing the threshold to the next level of communion—and that's what this felt like.

It was a mutual sharing of bodies, hearts, and souls. A constant consumption of emotion and a feeding of power. A more honest and personal exchange than I had ever known. I finally understood what he meant when he'd whispered I owned him during sex. It wasn't possession like with a car or a piece of furniture. It was a complete surrender of being. A total giving of oneself. Arlo said I owned him, and right then, as we peaked in a symphony of skin slapping, bodies straining, hearts bursting, and panting breaths mingling, I knew he owned me.

Body, heart, and soul.

CHAPTER 12



THE NEXT MORNING, I WOKE UP SAFE IN THE ARMS OF THE WIZARD I LOVED. My body felt deliciously sore, my heart full, and my magic stores plenty. My theories about earth magic were proving true, and after I'd discussed them with Arlo late last night, he seemed to think so as well.

Witches and wizards did not mate like shifters, but our magic had bonded us, and it was kind of the same thing. That said, I fully intended to ask him to move in after I discussed it with my roommates. The idea of being away from him physically hurt.

We showered and dressed, he in a spare set of clothes he'd been smart enough to bring over, and me in a flowery skirt and cropped t-shirt. I was owning my curves more and more with each passing day.

How could I not?

Arlo looked at me as if I was the most beautiful thing in the world.

"You are incredibly beautiful, my sweet Jade," he whispered, reading my mind like no one else ever had.

Just more proof we were soul mates.

I spared a thought for Jeremy and wondered what could have made that entitled bastard think he could behave that way. I swear it made no sense. I hadn't seen or heard from him in years, then suddenly he'd shown up at Westwood with the sole purpose of torturing me.

Odd.

Very odd.

"Breakfast!" Maia shouted from upstairs, and Arlo and I were the last to arrive at the round table.

We'd added mismatched chairs as more of us seemed paired up, and the

table itself seemed a bit bigger. Enok grinned guiltily, and I wondered what magic the mage had used to stretch it.

“We made a frittata!” Maia enthused, and I grinned at the air witch’s newly gained cooking skills.

We were all taking turns making at least one meal or snack a day so we could really bond as a dorm and a coven. It was something that had started rather informally, but I wholeheartedly agreed it was a great idea.

Besides, what better time to make announcements?

“Hey guys,” I said, grinning as Arlo filled my plate, adding frittata, fruit salad, and some spinach salad to my dish. My man was a healer, after all. He supported healthy habits, for sure. But more than that, he paid attention to what I liked, and veggies and fruits were my jam.

The others were doing the same for themselves when I explained my findings. Mabe remained quiet, sitting on my other side between Enid and me. She was worrying her lip with her teeth, currently not pointy, which was a relief, for sure.

“So, you were never trying to hurt Jade,” Tana said after I explained my suspicions.

“No. I wasn’t. Look, I realize I come on a bit strong, but please understand it’s a defense mechanism. I didn’t grow up like a lot of you did. I knew magic existed, of course, but my family, well, they were not the supportive type.”

“I don’t know what that’s like, to not have a support system,” I began when the quiet became too much as we all took in the sad truth of Mabe’s life.

“Oh, it’s not so bad,” she tried joking, but we all knew it really was that bad.

“But I can promise you have one now, Mabe. We know your secret and have all promised to keep it safe. Now that I know giving you earth magic will sustain you and not deplete me, I will share it whenever you need it. I’ll be your support system,” I promised.

“So will I,” Arlo added.

His statement was immediately followed by the others, nods, and verbal affirmations. My heart swelled as I realized these people, my coven, were so damn amazing. I was finding my place with them, and for the first time, I felt as if I was much more than just good friend material. I was an integral part of the team—more important than simple tea maker or ingredient grower.

“Me too.”

“And me.”

“Me as well,”

“*You got me, and I gooot youuuu, Mabe*—get it?” Rio sang off key, referring to a famous Sonny and Cher song that was probably way too old for most of us.

Mabe was laughing so hard, tears were running down her face as the rest of us snorted and shook our heads. We ate and chatted, and I mentioned to everyone Arlo would be hanging around more.

“I will, huh?” he whispered, wrapping his arm around me. He had a big, cocky grin on his movie star handsome face, and I nuzzled his nose with mine.

“If you’re lucky,” I told him, knowing he liked it when I was confident.

I was not putting on a show, however. With Arlo, I felt my confidence soar. He was good for that, good for me. We talked about everything and nothing, and there was no need to fill silences with inane babble. When we were together, that was enough. He soothed my soul, like a balm to a wound. Made me feel brighter, stronger, more put together than ever before. He completed me, and I loved him to the soles of my feet.

“Hey Jade, I have some questions for you,” Enok said while Magnus and Rio cleared the food from the table.

We each took turns cooking and cleaning up after meals when we were not using the caf. We did that with other chores as well, and I was happy to say the guys more than pulled their weight.

“Sure,” I replied, indulging in a second cup of orange pekoe tea.

“Before you get started, walk me to the door, Jade?”

“Yeah,” I said, standing up.

“So, I have to get down to the infirmary for my rounds,” Arlo said, pulling me into the hallway.

He clasped his hands around my waist—something that would have made me pause and tense before, but not now. Arlo loved my body and made no secrets about it. If he wanted to put his hands on my soft waist, dragging my curvy body against his, then he could have at it. The sexy hot boy healer I’d been crushing on for weeks was finally mine, and even better, I was his.

To me, the contrast of his hardness to my pliability was absolutely delicious. He leaned down, and it never failed to surprise me how tall the man was, at least a foot more than me, as he claimed my lips in a firm,

passionate kiss away from the prying eyes of my roommates.

“I can’t wait to see you later,” I told him, smacking lips one more time.

“Me too, my sweet Jade. I love you. Be the badass when I’m not there,” he told me proudly, pure joy dancing in his green gaze.

“I will. I love you too,” I said right back, feeling that love wrap around me surely as his arms were.

We kissed again before dragging ourselves away and I went back inside to find Enok had a pile of books on the table. He was wading through them when I rejoined him. I sat down and waited. Sometimes, it took the mage a minute or ten to refocus after losing himself in reading. It was cool, I could wait.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, then looked at me. “Explain the earth magic thing again.”

“Okay, well, it’s not a secret exactly, but I think perhaps it’s misunderstood. Earth witches and wizards pray to the Goddess whenever we perform casts or spells during harvest and sowing seasons,” I began, explaining the rituals earth magic practitioners had engaged in for centuries regarding praying to and thanking Mother Earth for her bounty.

“I don’t think I ever realized what it is earth witches do, Jade, and I apologize for that,” Maia said, having joined us.

She was not the only one. I looked up and saw everyone had joined us and were listening intently—to *me*. The only one who’d ever done anything like that had been Arlo, and one could argue that was to get in my pants. Not that I minded. I liked the man best when he was getting into my pants.

Where was I?

Oh, yeah.

“It’s not your fault, Maia. The entire magical world looks at us like we’re the *Jolly Green Giant* of witches and wizards everywhere.”

“Kinda like how fire witches became the candle makers,” Tana added with a sneer.

“Exactly like that. In fact, I have a theory,” I began, my voice low.

“Well. Tell us already,” Maia said, and I laughed.

She was definitely the brainier of the bunch of us, but I was learning to accept the fact I did not have to fit any mold. None of us did. That was the beautiful thing about being us.

“Elemental witches and wizards have been told, mainly by the Council of Covens, which is run by Headmistress Armstrong, what it is we are meant to

do ever since the last battle of the Second Witch Wars—right? Everyone agree?”

At their nods, I continued with my theory. Explaining what I believed, and what I needed help with. It was a long, winding road, but I think I finally had everything laid out once the questions started.

“*Oh my gawd*, she’s right,” Rio blurted. “I knew nothing about magic except what I was told about the evil curse haunting my family, but when I came here, it was all cut and dry. Like stayed with like. Elementals with their own because that was who they were likely to wind up with when they graduated and moved on to covens.”

“That’s right. Only, I think it is *wrong*,” I said, shaking my head. “We know now that there was a coven of mixed elementals, the Mobilis Coven.”

“I mean, yeah. They were badass. It’s why we call ourselves the Novus Mobilis Coven, right? I mean, we kind of proved we can work together just by living together, right?” Tana added.

“Well, that and all the times we’ve saved each other’s asses,” Rio said.

“Truth,” Enid murmured. “I’ve been doing research on Westwood. It used to be a place for all magical creatures to come and learn, but after the first Witch Wars, it changed. Other creatures were no longer welcomed as students, and it became a place for witches and wizards only. When WWII happened, Westwood Academy changed again.”

“Yes,” Enok said, nodding his head. “It became focused on elementals. On reining them in and controlling them,” he stated ominously.

“But how can that be? This entire school represents the five covens. Even the buildings. Why do all that if they didn’t believe in elementals?” Maia asked.

“I think he’s right,” I replied. “Look, as far as we were told, the main mansion is connected to the other towers through five corridors representing each of the 5 elemental covens.”

“Five?” Enid asked.

“Yes. As far as we know, but honestly, I would not put anything past the Council. They have already hidden the Mobilis Coven from us, who knows if there are others?”

“What are the five?” Enid added, her lavender eyes wide.

“The Cumatilis Coven is for water magic,” Rio said.

“Caelum is for air,” Maia added.

“The Incendo Coven is for fire witches and wizards,” Tana stated.

“And Tellus is earth,” I replied.

“What’s the fifth?” Mabe asked.

“The Somnior Coven,” I whispered, eyes wide.

“Somniaor?” Enid asked.

“It was the coven for spirit witches. They are extinct, I am afraid,” Enok said, frowning. “I’ve been searching for more information on the sigils for the five covens and came across this. I think you should all see it.”

I leaned forward as Enok opened an old leather-bound book. It was enormous, taking up most of the table. As he turned the pages carefully, I had to stifle the urge to sneeze. The words appeared to be in Latin, inscribed in gold ink. It was beautiful, but I could not read it.

When he finally stopped, the pages revealed were full of hand-painted sigils. There were over two dozen that I could count, each with a lengthy text, maybe a description, next to it.

“Well, I’ve seen some of these hanging on banners in the school,” Rio whispered, Magnus moving closer to her.

“We all have,” I agreed. “But there are more.”

“A lot more,” Enok murmured and turned the page.

Holy. Crap.

The pages with hand-painted sigils went on for a good portion of the book.

Were they all elementals?

What could this mean?

I was shocked and curious, and I wanted to tell Arlo what we found.

“So, what do we know?” Rio asked.

“Well, the Council only acknowledges five elemental covens, even if I’ve never seen any mention of the Somnior Coven anywhere,” Mabe offered, twiddling her thumbs nervously.

“Makes sense if there aren’t any more spirit witches.”

“Maybe,” Enok said, and his gaze flicked to Maia. My roommate shook her head slightly, and he pressed his lips together as if to stifle his next words.

“But if there are so many more covens, why only acknowledge five?”

The tension in the kitchen grew as we all pondered the reasons behind the Council of Covens’ actions.

What were the most common motivations for anything?

Sex, money, and power.

In this case, I was sure it had to do with power. Magic, to be specific.

“You want to know why the Council has only acknowledged five elemental covens? Want to understand why they’ve been training us for the ‘good of the magical community’ like worker bees in a hive? That’s easy,” I muttered, shaking my head as red fury wound its way through me. Everyone froze, eyes riveted to me as I slammed my hands down on the table.

“To control us. To control everything.”

EPILOGUE



I MARCHED DOWN THE HALL TO HEADMISTRESS ARMSTRONG'S OFFICE WITH my five roommates. Angry was not a good look on us, but I was pretty damned miffed at being played.

"Excuse me, you can't go in there!" Armstrong's secretary tried to stop us, but we were not having any of that.

"Yes, I would need the delivery to arrive forthwith—excuse me, Chambers, I will call you later."

Headmistress Armstrong hung up her call and faced us expectantly. She steepled her hands on her clean desk, eyebrows raised as she waited patiently for us to speak. I inhaled and stepped forward, noting the look of surprise on the headmistress' face.

Earth witches were not born leaders, and though there had been no vote, the compulsion to stand in front of my sister witches was great. I felt their power surge through our bonds, even Mabe's, whose magic was unstable, and Enid's, whose powers were unknown.

"Well, I take it you have something to share?"

"Actually, we have something to demand. You're not only headmistress of Westwood, but you are the leader of the Council of Covens, correct?" I asked, waiting for her to reply.

"I am. For now," she added.

"The Coven has removed all records of the Mobilis Coven from our texts and histories, we want it back."

"What purpose would that serve if not to simply confuse the masses? Your job is clear. The directive I gave you, simple. Save magic. That is your task."

“You call that simple?” Tana scoffed.

“Don’t you even care what we’ve been through?” Maia asked.

“Of course, I care,” she replied too quickly. “The assignment I gave you is not easy. Not entirely. But I know what you six can do, even if you don’t,” Armstrong said, the ever present medallion around her neck pulsating softly.

There was something different about her. I could not put my finger on it, her braided coil sat atop her head, same as ever. The long robe she wore was perfectly ironed and fell into place around her compact body. She looked the same, but not.

It was right there, I realized, in the tight smile, the wrinkles at the corner of her eyes, and the broken blood vessels from too many nights gone without sleep. Armstrong was clearly staying up late.

She was worried.

Nervous.

Interesting.

“Be that as it may,” I interrupted before the two of them could go at it. “We need to know more than the basics. The Council can’t just remove an entire chapter of our past without repercussions. Ignorance is our enemy, Headmistress. Surely, you can see that?”

Armstrong’s jaw tightened.

She was clearly not happy about this, but what did she expect?

Magic was more than a wish and a will. It took research, skill, and patience. Just like growing things did. The older witch could likely benefit from some time in a garden, I mused.

“The Mobilis Coven was made up of the most powerful elementals. Air, Water, Fire, Earth, Blood, and Spirit—”

“Blood?” Mabe blurted, but Headmistress Armstrong continued as if she’d never spoken. The arms on the clock ticked by, and I hardly took a breath for fear I’d miss something significant.

“They kept all others in check and worked together to create phenomenal magic that fed all stores, continuous replenishment for our entire kind.”

Armstrong emphasized each syllable until I felt them ringing in my head like bells.

If the former Mobilis Coven did all that, why had they been disbanded?

“I can see your mind churning, Miss Montrose, and I can tell you this, the Mobilis Coven grew too powerful. Many feared it. They did not want to have to beg magic from elementals. Corruption ran amok.”

“And we were put in our place,” I whispered.

It finally made sense why the most powerful witches and wizards in the world were reduced to making candles, blessing air currents, and growing herbs—*power*. It was always about who held the power.

“Can you unlock the spell wiping the histories?”

“I cannot. It’s not my spell to reverse,” she told us through tight lips.

Tana growled, and I felt her magic rise with her anger. I did not blame her. She had lost much because of the jealousy and power hunger that led to both Witch Wars.

“Can you tell us anything else?”

“Here. Take this card and contact Roald Dusek. He is the Lorekeeper. He will have the information you seek. Now, if you will excuse me, ladies, I have work to do,” she replied.

We filed out of the office and agreed to grab some grub before heading back to our dorm room. Something had happened inside that small office. I’d assumed a leadership role I never thought I’d want, much less take. And even crazier, everyone seemed fine with it. I glanced over at where Tana, Maia, and Rio were speaking animatedly, then to Enid and Mabe, who looked more worried than excited about what went down. Still, no one called me out for taking charge of the conversation in there.

I walked slowly behind everyone, looking deep within myself.

Where had this newfound moxie come from?

Magic tingled inside me, and as I passed one of the large mirrors, I paused.

Holy. Crap.

Gasping, I reached up with my hand and touched my sun-kissed cheeks. I looked different. It was like I was glowing.

“What’s up?” Tana asked, coming back to stand beside me.

The others quickly followed her, and they all waited while I touched my glossy thick locks and gaped at my positively glowing amber eyes.

“Well, I always thought earth witches didn’t get that cool hair and eye thing the rest of you do,” I murmured.

“Are you kidding? I noticed days ago,” Tana said. “You look great, Jade. Really.”

“Uh, thanks. I mean, I don’t mean to be shallow,” I said quickly, cheeks heating as I continued to check myself out.

“What’s shallow about liking how you look?” Maia scoffed. “Besides,

love will do that to you.”

“So will magic.” Rio winked.

I received pats on my shoulders from my pretty spectacular sister witches. Even got a half-hug from Enid, whose graceful beauty was just dazzling. They were right, love, power, just having confidence was enough to bolster anyone’s looks, and it was nothing to be ashamed of. I liked how I looked.

Loved it, in fact.

Even more so, I loved how I *felt*.

Closing my eyes, I searched for the source of my newfound confidence and esteem. It was no surprise Arlo’s love was the first and strongest thing I felt inside me. Our bond was a combination of our auras, all blues and oranges, greens and browns. The colors of our palette, healer and earth witch, meshed beautifully together. Just like we did.

Next, I saw the strong, silver bonds of my coven bolstering me. Six strands woven into one powerful rope, fortifying our connection to each other. Some parts were shadowed, hidden, but it was only going to get better. I not only believed it, but I knew it for a fact.

Just beyond that, I saw the leafy, dark brown vine that linked me to the magic of my Goddess, Mother Earth herself. She really was the OG deity and her love for me, one of her many daughters, was unconditional. I felt it filling my veins, strengthening my stores, and guiding me how to use her plentiful earth magic for the benefit of her most precious gift to us—the earth itself.

Finally, I saw the soft yellow of my familial bonds there, pulsing steadily as ever. I’d been pampered from birth, loved by my magical family, and taught to be the best I could be with their acceptance and support. I had it better than many people, and I was ever grateful for their example and the multitude of their love for me.

We sat down in the caf, joined almost immediately by Magnus, Enok, Brandon, and my sexy hot boy healer. Arlo’s smile lit up the room. Hell, it lit up the entire world for me. Others stared, as they usually did when he walked by, how could they help it? But that glittering green gaze was on me alone.

My heart thudded heavily in my chest, anticipation dancing along every nerve ending. The second he was within reach, he wrapped me up in his arms, embracing me tightly and mashing his mouth to mine.

“Damn, I missed you, sweet Jade.”

“Me too.”

“You hungry?”

“Always.”

I smiled up at him, sipping from his lips once more before the catcalls started from our friends. He was always calling me his sweet Jade, and I had to admit, I liked being his.

“Strawberry watermelon salad with feta?”

“Yes, please,” I replied, loving how well he knew me. Loving him, really.

Lunch was loud and full of laughter despite the seriousness of our mission. It was important to do these things right, and I appreciated everyone’s efforts to take mealtimes together.

Looking around the table at old friends, and new, my heart warmed, and I felt Arlo wrap his arm around me. He kissed my head, and I leaned on his shoulder. It was all right to do that. Didn’t make me less or weak. In fact, I had never felt stronger.

No, I was not plain Jade anymore. Arlo had been right when he said there was more to me than I knew. But I’d been right all along too.

I am not like my friends, but I am a great friend.

I am capable of giving and receiving love—curvy butt and all.

I am stronger than I look—a motherfucking badass if Arlo is to be believed.

I flove tomatoes.

I am an earth witch, daughter of the Goddess.

My part in this is bigger than I thought, and I am ready for the challenge to help my friends and save magic for all witch and wizard kind.

Thank you for reading Earth Witch.

Keep watch for book five, Blood Witch, in the continuing saga of Westwood Academy by Gina Kincade and C.D. Gorri.

If you enjoyed this installment, please leave a review. Even a few words can mean the world to an author.

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If you enjoy powerful heroines and loyal heroes who face relatable problems in supernatural settings, journey into the Grazi Kelly Universe today. You will find sassy, curvy heroines and sexy, love-driven heroes who find their HEAs between the pages. Werewolves, Bears, Dragons, Tigers, Witches, Romani, Lynxes, Foxes, Thunderbirds, Vampires, and many more Shifters and supernatural creatures dwell within her worlds. The most important thing is every mate in this universe is fated, loyal, and true lovers always get their happily-ever-afters.

For a complete list of C.D. Gorri's books visit her website here: <https://www.cdgorri.com/complete-book-list/>

Thank you and happy reading!

del mare alla stella,
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USA Today Bestselling Author Gina Kincade spends her days tapping away at a keyboard, through blood, sweat, and often many tears, crafting steamy paranormal romances filled with shifters and vampires, along with witchy urban fantasy tales in magical worlds she hopes her readers yearn to crawl into.

A busy mom of three, she loves healthy home cooking, gardening, warm beaches, fast cars, and horseback riding.

Ms. Kincade's life is full, time is never on her side, and she wouldn't change a moment of it!

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HEAVEN KNOWS



ARIEL DAWN

HEAVEN KNOWS
LOST SOULS
BOOK ONE

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HEAVEN KNOWS

When Heaven & Hell Collide...

Hell-born demon, Endor, longs for a life beyond processing souls in Hell's Admissions Department. He wants to stretch his wings and roam the earth as a Contractor Demon, to hold souls in the palm of his hand.

The days are endless in Heaven for Valory, an angel who dreams of the kind of romance she reads in the books she borrows, waiting for someone to sweep her off her feet.

When a lost soul comes between Heaven and Hell, Endor and Valory must put their differences aside and learn to work together all while fighting against their celestial duties... and their darkest desires.

CHAPTER 1



ENDOR

I HATE MONDAYS. I mean, I guess everyone hates them, really, and I get that. Waking up from the weekend, having to go back to the grind, and traffic jams when you're already late. A no smoking sign on your...

Okay, okay, you got me. I guess I don't really know about either of these things, considering I've spent my entire life in Hell—and I don't mean figuratively. I mean *literally*.

I've never been anywhere above the melting lava pools that I call home. I was born here. Bred and born to do one thing—work.

Mondays are the worst here in the gallows of Hell's Admissions Department, or HAD, because that's when all the shit piles up from the incompetent bastards who work the weekend shifts.

Incorrect forms, missing information, fucking doodles of dicks scribbled on my damn desk because they think it's funny to vandalize my property when I'm not around to tear them a new asshole.

I sigh as I pick up the phone, pressing the button to connect me to Roche, the woman who is technically my boss, though she never likes to admit it. Which is why I like to remind her every chance I get that she's just as fucked in this worthless existence as I am.

“What?” She doesn't even bother with “Hi,” or “Hello,” or even a “How was your weekend, Endor?”

So, I don't bother feigning interest, either. I'd like to get this day over

with and it has barely started.

“Are you going to send someone down here to clean this shit off my desk or do I have to check the work logs?” I ask, and she immediately sighs.

“You need to lighten up. They wouldn’t do it if you weren’t so bloody easy to rile up,” she says sharply.

“So, I have to go through the logs, then. Okay, fine.”

“Endor...” She groans. “It’s five-thirty in the morning. Can you hold off on berating the new hires for like, an hour? At least, until my coffee kicks in.”

“A man’s workspace should be respected, Roche.”

“We’re in Hell, Endor. Pretty sure respect is at the bottom of everyone’s list when it comes to HAD. Not all of us are dying for a promotion like you.”

Her words shouldn’t cut through me, but they do. She’s right. I am dying for a promotion, because a promotion means I get to leave my desk in this endless maze of cubicles and see some sunlight. A promotion means I can finally get out of here. Out of admissions and into contracts, something I’ve always wanted.

Contract Demons get to be in the field. Above Hell. They get to collect the souls that then get sent to admissions, and in order to do that, they need permission to fly between realms—which they get.

Though, such a position comes at a cost. It’s not like you can apply to be a Contract Demon. You have to be recruited. Recommended.

I’ve done everything by the book here in HAD, gone out of my way and above Roche’s head on more than one occasion. I stay late, come in early, pick up everyone’s slack, and fill in when the assholes decide getting their dicks wet is more important than their fucking job.

At the last HAD meeting, Lexor, the head of the Demon Contractor Division—the DCD—told me they’d been watching me after seeing all the *promising* reports Roche sent in.

Out of our department, I am the only one with an unmatched number of admissions. No lost souls. Not one.

My track record is flawless, and if I keep up the good work, I know it will only be a matter of time before the DCD brings me into the fold, and when that happens... I’ll spread my beautiful black wings and fucking fly out of here so damn fast.

“Just send someone down here and quit bitching,” I say with a chuckle, hanging up the phone before she can protest further.

The mountain of paperwork on my desk that's been left is insane. Lately, it seems there's quite an increase of souls. People die all the time, but the amount seems to be increasing. Not that I mind, really. As far as I'm concerned, that's just job security. It also means the day goes by a hell of a lot quicker when it's one after the other.

I pull up my chair, take a deep breath, and dive into the first stack. I doubt the asshat weekend workers actually categorized this stuff the correct way, so I know the task ahead of me is going to be daunting, but that's life.

This is Hell, after all. What else would I be subjected to?

CHAPTER 2



VALORY

I DON'T KNOW what I expected Heaven to be like, but I didn't expect something so close to... what I'd left back on Earth.

All the books, the movies, the psychics who claimed to have near death experiences, they all described an idyllic paradise with big fluffy clouds, lots of light, and pearly white gates. Church always painted Heaven as this perfect land where everyone you love exists, your pets wait for you while angels pluck gold harps, and God welcomes you with open arms. Imagine the shock of opening your eyes, and instead of white, fluffy clouds... you're standing in front of a large white building that reads APD. Which I learned stands for Angelic Placement Department.

A building, that in a strange twist of irony, looks a lot like the DMV back home. This building, though, is bigger on the inside, with rows and rows of people. Unlike the DMV, the APD is clean and shiny—practically sterilized with holy water. Everything sparkles and glistens like it's been thoroughly scrubbed with a toothbrush.

I don't know how long I actually waited in that massive room before moving to processing. Time is more fluid in Heaven, like one long stretch of day that bleeds into the next. Night never falls. The sun just sets into a warm mixture of ocher and orange, until it becomes bright again.

When they finally called me, I think I was more nervous than I'd ever been when I was alive. I had no idea what Angelic Placement meant. I could

only imagine it had something to do with where I was going to spend my afterlife.

Fun fact: it had nothing to do with where I was supposed to go to bask in my personal paradise, and it had everything to do with what I'd be doing up here. That's the thing that disappointed me the most about Heaven. While it is beautiful, and full of so much love and wonder... it isn't all that different from Earth.

Up here, I have a house, a dog, and a job. I also attend a book club with some of the other angels in my quadrant. Everything is perfect, built to resemble the life we always wanted, but also resembling the life we had. This is probably to make the transition easier, so it feels like we never left. So it feels as if we're still alive.

Working at the Pearly Gates Annex does not make me feel alive. In fact, it makes me feel like I'll never escape the monotony of this life.

In my mortal life, I'd done everything I was supposed to. I had a steady job in a hotel as a front desk concierge, never took sick days, always on time and always available to come in when needed. I went to church every Sunday and helped run Sunday school, volunteered on the weekends at a local retirement home, and managed to have dinner with my family once a week. I loved my life, even though everyone around me seemed to think it was meaningless because I was alone. I was Valory Kemp, thirty-one-years-old, single, and a virgin. In the eyes of God, I was pure and perfect, but in the eyes of society, I was a freak.

But I'd been okay with being a freak—at least, I thought I was. I'd tried to find someone, but nothing ever felt right. Every time I had to have that conversation... well, I got tired of always being disappointed by people who didn't value the gift I had to give. My heart, my body, and my soul.

So, I stopped trying and found I was no longer disappointed. I took solace in my peaceful, perfect life.

And then I died.

The doctors thought I'd grown out of my arrhythmia when I was six. Subsequently, what was a worry for my family when I was young became a distant memory. They'd prayed and prayed, and it seemed to do the trick.

Until that fateful morning, when it all just stopped. I was used to headaches, so I attributed the nausea to nothing more than eating a bad serving of eggs from the café I'd visited prior that morning. I'd never even thought it was my heart telling me it was time.

Now, it seems time is all I have. Angels don't need to sleep, but many still do—including myself—out of habit. There are no clocks or time markers in Heaven. The only way I can measure the days—since it's always a balmy seventy degrees and sunny—is by the beginning and end of my shift at the Annex when Matthew comes in. When I started here, I was afraid I'd never be able to get through the amount of paperwork that seems to stack up all too quickly, but I soon learned that much like my concierge job, it's easy peasy.

After the souls come in from APD, I enter their Angel Number into the system, bring up their initial documentation they filled out with the APD, file the proper paperwork, and send them off with a printout of The Angel's Guide to Heavenly Habitation to the HHD—Heavenly Housing Department.

Sign, punch, print, send on their way. No different than signing guests into hotel rooms.

The plethora of souls that have come through the Pearly Gates, as of late, at least, make the day go faster. The Pearly Gates Annex isn't too far from the APD, but it's enough of a distance that those who show up at the Annex are often tuckered out, in need of a comfortable chair to rest in and some chocolate chip cookies for a sugar boost. Though we don't need to sleep, it doesn't change the fact we still get tired or need a jolt of energy every now and then.

APD stops processing souls at sunset.

Sunset around here is quite beautiful, casting a warm glow over everything and turning the plants and lakes beautiful shades of red and gold, sometimes pink. Though it doesn't get dark around here, sunset is pretty commonly understood as dinner and rest time, so when APD closes for the day, that means no wandering souls for the Annex, and when there are no wandering souls for the Annex...

I get to go home.

Flipping through the last page of my book, a sweet romance my neighbor and friend, Delilah, lent me, I barely even notice when Matthew, my boss, stops in front of the desk.

“Reading on the job again, are we, Valory?” he asks with a smile. Like most of the angels up here, he has a golden glow to him. His soft blue eyes sparkle as the lines pull up in the corners, showing his age.

Like me, Matthew died suddenly. Brain aneurysm at the ripe old age of forty-two. Why people actually consider that “old” is beyond me. I can't help but roll my eyes at his tone and my thoughts. I'm not sure how he ended up

being my boss at the Annex, considering he is most certainly one of the least organized angels I've ever met.

"Must be closing time, Matt. There hasn't been anyone for a while."

Matthew shakes his head, a small laugh escaping his throat. "When will you give up with this time stuff?" he asks, sliding his hands into his navy blue slacks, his golden-blond hair falling into his face. We do this every day. It's another part of my routine. Matthew always comes in to relieve me of my duties, and always finds something to say about my choice in books. He's never been disapproving, only humorous. He doesn't understand the draw of romance, not like my neighbor, Delilah, does. Then again... he's a man. An angel, but still at the base of all things, a man.

"When you decide to stop irking me about my literary escape," I say as I raise an eyebrow at him.

"Fair enough." He shrugs.

I roll my eyes, letting out a sigh and close the book.

"You know the drill. Grab your things and shut the lights off on your way out." He nods as he turns, the motion giving me a rather pleasant view of his rear.

Heat flushes in my cheeks as I realize I'm staring. Maybe he's right. Maybe I am reading too many of these romances and they're rotting my brain. I shake off the strange feeling, nodding even though he can't see me. "Yes, of course," I say sweetly.

Matthew takes his time walking down the corridor, and a part of me is thankful, if only for the prolonged moment to appreciate the view.

CHAPTER 3



ENDOR

I BARELY LOOK up from my desk, my mind going a hundred miles a minute as I finally file away the last paper on the last stack. Time moves slowly here, especially when I'm locked indoors with no windows for several hours.

Not like we need windows, mind you. It's not like it's ever light out. Hell is eternally night. The lava pools and the ever-glowing ember rocks that pepper the barren desert landscape down here are the only thing we have as a light source. Because of the natural rocky exterior, the glow from the rocks and lava pools hovers, creating an almost golden haze over everything, but it also keeps the heat locked in.

I'd kill to know what a true seventy degrees feels like. Sixty, even.

The fans in the office give little comfort, their breeze more like a dilapidated sigh of breath rather than an actual chilly breeze.

A knock on my door makes me jump, and then I see it's just Roche. She stands in the doorway, all long legs and arms, her dark black hair pulled up into a ponytail that spills over her thin shoulders. She's wearing a dress; one with lacy black trim at the edge of leather, and her long, sinuous legs are covered in fishnet stockings that taper down and disappear into sleek, black stilettos. Combined with her rather large tits and pouty lips, the look is actually semi-pleasing. Enough to stir my cock in my slacks, anyway. Not enough to make me want her spread all over my desk like a buffet.

Though I give her plenty of kudos for trying, day after day.

It's not like I've never thought about fucking her. Or anyone, for that matter. Sex isn't a big deal down here in Hell like it is on the surface. Problem is, I don't like what's readily available to me. Fucking demons doesn't... *do* anything for me.

It feels physically good, sure.

At the time.

But how can I truly enjoy it if there's no challenge?

I know if I said the word, Roche would be on her knees ready to suck me off, right here. The thought should thrill me, but it doesn't.

Instead, it just irritates me.

"Long day at the office?" she asks with a twist of her lips, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

I fight the impulse to look. I can smell her arousal from here, so I know her nipples will be stiff as peaks, visible even through the leather.

She bats her long, thick eyelashes at me.

"Did you come to clean up this mess?" I raise an eyebrow at her as I lean my arms on the desk, crossing them in front of me. The motion pushes me forward, making my shift in the chair look unnoticeable. Why my dick chooses this moment to wake up, I have no clue.

Maybe Inar is right. Maybe I do need to let out some pent-up aggression. In a healthy manner, of course. Blow off some steam, get myself back to neutral.

Roche pushes off the side of the wall, sauntering over to me slowly. Every step she takes, the sound of her heels on the wooden floor echo in the room.

"Is that what you want? Me to get on my hands and knees with a damn toothbrush and scrub away all the dicks so you don't have to look at them?" she asks with humor as she comes over and leans against my desk.

My eye twitches as I notice she's dangerously close to upending the stack of papers I just sorted. Her hip rests at my eye level, and though I don't want to look, I do. I notice how the lace trim of her dress against her smooth thighs rides up when she shifts, just enough to show the slight curve of her ass, and I get another wafting of her arousal.

Technically, Roche is what they call a Succubus: a demon of lust. Like me, she was born here, raised in this world of hustle and grind, and taught, like most Succubi, that their power is inherent to the pleasure they can elicit from their victims. Desire feeds them the same way desperation feeds the

Crossroads Demons. Sex is a Succubus's default. They can't help themselves, much in the same way a human can't help that they need to breathe.

"Roche," I start as my gaze fixes on the stack beside her. She sets her hand next to it, and I see the papers shift just an inch.

"You get too worked up over things, you know. You can't control everything." She leans her head back, the motion pushing her monstrous breasts out in front of her, and I cave.

I look and curse under my breath. I was right. I can see the outline of pert nipples through her leather dress and my cock twitches.

"I admire your tenacity, Endor, really I do," she says darkly as she opens her legs just a fraction, her scent hitting me all over again.

I can feel the heat surrounding us, and I know I should leave. I should just get up and walk away and leave her here.

But I'm a demon, and I'm weak.

So, fucking sue me.

I slide my hand up her sun-kissed thigh, ever golden from the long-term exposure to the light from the lava pits and rocky embers down here. I dip my thumb just below the hem of her dress, feeling the soft lace between the pad of my thumb and my forefinger.

So delicate, and yet...

A deep sigh escapes my lips as I let it go and instead, wrap my arm around her hips and pull her a few inches farther away from the stack of papers.

She must take that as a "please proceed," and slides her hand over the top of mine before angling herself in front of me, blocking my view from the entrance of my doorway.

I stand face to face with her, putting my face right in front of her sweet smelling pussy, and my body seems like it has a mind of its own. I slide my hand down from her hips, palm settling on her ass. And right before I fall into the depths of what I know will be a terrible decision, a soft squeak draws both of our attention.

"Oh my God! I'm sooo sorry!" a sweet voice says hurriedly.

The moment is all I need to regain my clarity and I push Roche aside. She grumbles something unintelligible, and I set my gaze on a short, five-foot-four brunette with big brown eyes, and a look of utter confusion and slight embarrassment on her face.

Roche turns, adjusting her dress, crossing her arms angrily. "And you

are?” she bites out.

“I, uh... I’m Mercedes,” she says as she swallows nervously. Her eyes dance between Roche and me, and her cheeks redden when she looks back at me.

“B-but most people just call me Mercy,” she says.

Roche rolls her eyes. “What are you doing here? HAD is closed for the day.”

I don’t miss the frustration in Roche’s voice, and suddenly I’m acutely aware of that fact. She’s right. Roche only comes by after everyone has gone because I’m the only person crazy enough to stay past the end of the day. She always comes by when everyone else has gone, which I know she enjoys.

“Oh! I, uh... I have paperwork, I—” She starts digging around in a messenger bag I hadn’t noticed she was wearing until this very moment.

Roche pushes off the desk, casting a glare at me, her entire demeanor shifting back into the person I know better than the one who was just trying to reel me in for dinner.

“Take care of her, Endor, and then see to it you close up shop, yeah?” She stalks out of the room, not even bothering to look back at me.

I sigh, and Mercedes—Mercy—stumbles over something, knocking right into my desk, upending the stack of papers all over the floor.

Great.

Just when I thought this day couldn’t get any worse.

CHAPTER 4



VALORY

I SHOVE my book into my purse, bringing out my iPod and placing the earbuds in my ears.

I have to admit, when I first came to Heaven, the last thing I was expecting was access to pretty much every song ever made. It's one of the coolest perks, I think. I've loved listening to all the different eras of music, really dissecting them.

Then again, currency up here is a lot different than on Earth, and things like music don't cost anything. Music, movies, even books—all forms of entertainment—are readily available to us, free of charge. All we have to do is apply for an "Ace" Card—an AAV card—or more specifically, Angelic Audiovisual Card. The thing's better than any earthbound library card, I swear.

Mr. Sandman, the original, fills my ears, and I let out a sigh. It's almost dinner time and I'm starving.

Slinging my bag over my shoulder, I reach over and shut off the computer, straightening up my desk before I turn around and head for the door. Not looking where I'm going, I run right into a solid mass, the force knocking my earbuds out, and I jump back.

"Matthew, I—" I never finish my words as I find myself staring face to face with a short brunette. She holds onto her chambray messenger bag, little pins and buttons decorated all over it, chewing her lip. Her brown eyes look

up at me, filled with anxiety.

My heart sinks as I realize this girl can't be more than sixteen or seventeen. Technically, the place is closed but... I can't just leave her here until morning. She must have come through APD at the last minute.

"It's Mercy, actually," she says with a smile. "Well, my friends call me Mercy, anyway. Mercedes just makes everyone think of the damn car."

"Mercy," I say, shoving my earbuds into my purse as my brain tries to figure out how to handle this situation. "I'm sorry, but the Annex is closed," I say in my most professional voice.

She glances all around the room, her fingers tightening on her strap once more. "What is this place?" she asks in awe.

"The Pearly Gates Annex," I answer.

"Whoa, like *thee* pearly gates? Am I like... in Heaven?" Her eyes widen at the word.

A part of me wants to spare this poor girl the truth. If she doesn't know where she is, she may not remember what happened to her. How she died. I've been trained for a lot of things in my lives—both here and on Earth—but death has never been my strong suit.

Though, despite my disdain, I side with the truth. It's the right thing to do, not the easiest.

"Yes. You are in Heaven."

Mercy's eyes sparkle at my admission, a smile crossing her face.

"I knew it! I knew Heaven existed!" she squeals happily.

I'm confused, shouldn't she be...

"You are not upset?" I ask as I step closer to her.

She shakes her head. "I knew it was my time." Her words hit me right in the chest, and suddenly grief hits me all over again.

The profound way in which she says the words is so undeniably full of faith. As if she's truly made peace with her life before accepting death. And I realize, at this moment, that I envy such faith. When death came for me, I was not as astute as she.

"So, are you like my guardian angel or something?" she asks, her gaze finally settling on me once more.

I blush at the connotation. Guardians are on the top floor here. It takes years of rising in the ranks to even be considered for guardianship. Guardian Angels have to be good at a lot of things—possess lots of different skills—and they have to be able to compartmentalize themselves and their feelings,

because they have to work on Earth, quietly, with humans. They protect and guide their charges, a job that is of the utmost importance. Fending off demons and monsters that threaten the charge's lifeforce before their time has come.

It's an admirable, rewarding job I hear, but in the hierarchy of Heaven I am not much more than a basic clerk. I am as far from a Guardian Angel as the stars are from the Earth's crust.

"I am not, sorry." I'm not sure what I'm apologizing for, but this girl, this Mercy, seems to bring about a strange motherly feeling inside of me I'm not quite familiar with.

"Oh," she says, her gaze falling.

"I um... I just work the desk. When the Annex is open," I add.

Mercy twists her lips. "Oh. Well, can you take me to my Guardian Angel?" she asks innocently.

My heart falters again. "Unfortunately, I can't do that. All I can do is—" I look at my computer a few feet away, then out the window. The sun bathes everything in its golden light, and my stomach grumbles.

Mercy fishes around in her messenger bag before producing a Mango-Pineapple Fruit bar. She waves it at me, and I feel frozen.

"Go on, take it. I never cared much for the mango stuff. I wasn't looking when I grabbed my snacks this morning, and I thought I grabbed the blueberry one..." Her voice trails off, and it's like something's unlocked within her, but as soon as it is there in her eyes, it's gone. Replaced once again by a soft smile. "It's the least I can do for obviously thwarting your plans," she says.

I take the bar, not knowing quite what else to do. It would be rude of me to refuse a gift, even one such as this. I set the bar down on the counter as I make my way behind the desk, firing up the computer again. It takes a minute to come back to life, but when it does, I pull up the system.

Mercy wanders around the small lobby, touching the couch, the paintings, the little knick knacks—everything. A part of me wants to tell her to keep her hands to herself, but I push that notion aside. It's not like she'll hurt anything, and Matthew doesn't have to know.

"You said your name is Mercedes?"

"Yeah. Mercedes Rose James."

My lips turn up in a smile. "That's a beautiful name."

"What's your name?" she asks as she stops in front of a large painting of

a waterfall.

“Valory. V-a-l-o-r-y,” I say as I type her name into the Recently Deceased Records.

“Oooh, like Ross Valory?” she asks curiously.

“Who?”

“The bass player of Journey.” Mercy turns, raising an eyebrow at me like I’ve grown two heads.

“I don’t know who that is...” I admit. The only song I know by Journey is *Don’t Stop Believing*, as I wasn’t allowed to listen to much Rock ‘n’ Roll because my parents said it would rot my brain.

“More like the word. Valor, you know... great courage in the face of danger,” I say with a smile as I comb through the records. I’m seeing a lot of Mercedes James, so I decide to filter the search. “How old are you, Mercedes—I mean, Mercy.”

“On the edge of seventeen.” She smirks at me.

Is this another musical reference?

I blink, and she rolls her eyes. “Really? No Fleetwood Mac, either?”

I shrug. “I prefer the oldies.”

“Pretty sure Journey and Fleetwood Mac are considered oldies.”

“Oldies like The Chordettes or The Penguins,” I say, looking up at her briefly as she pushes around some magazines and pamphlets on an end table.

“Who the hell are they?” She instantly clamps her hand over her mouth. “Oh shit, can I say that?” she asks, her cheeks reddening as she realizes she swore again.

I let out a little laugh. “Of course you can.” Her expression makes me want to laugh. “I wouldn’t recommend going around dropping the f-bomb or anything publicly, though.” I wink at her and she eases up.

“Oh, so like cursing in private. Got it.” She laughs, and the sound is sweet like wind chimes.

I turn back to my computer, still not coming up with a Mercedes Rose James, age seventeen.

“Birthday?”

“July 25,” she says as she peeks her head into the waiting room.

I enter the date, taking a moment to do the math with her current age. I continue this line of questioning and punching in details, but nothing comes up. Then again, I’ve never tried to use the computer after APD and the Annex has been closed, so maybe the system isn’t working properly.

So I do the next best thing.

I assign her a temporary placement with HHD, Heavenly Housing Department. Just for the night. In the morning, I'll talk to Matthew and we'll get her sorted properly.

See, that wasn't so hard.

Just as I get ready to bring up HHD's temporary visa paperwork, I hear a crash. I look up to see Mercy has knocked over a rather ornate white glass vase, one that always holds a beautiful collection of white lilies and carnations.

"Oh my Go—gosh." She catches herself, her gaze darting up to me. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to, my bag just—"

"It's okay," I say as I finish typing in her name, age, and birthday. I get up and head over to the mess. I smile as I bring my hands in front of me, a part of me excited to actually be able to show her one of the perks of being an angel.

I breathe the ancient words, snapping my fingers, and it's like a scene from Fantasia. Like Mickey and the broom. The dustpan and broom from the corner dance to the center, sweeping up debris.

Mercy's jaw drops open. "Wow, neat trick," she says in awe.

I magic the discarded flowers into the trash, feeling a sense of pride. "You'll learn soon enough. I just have to fill in a couple more spots and get your printout and you'll be on your way," I say with a smile.

Mercy just looks at me. "You mean you're not coming with me?" The sadness in her voice isn't lost on me.

"Unfortunately, no. I can't. Once someone is placed, that's the end of it for me. Unless you somehow end up in my department, we likely won't see each other again." The words make my heart ache for some reason.

Mercy just nods. "I guess that makes sense."

I hate to leave her here like this, with this weird energy between us, but I have to wrap this up. I have a home and dog who's probably wondering where the hell I am. I'm not usually late...

"Don't worry, I'll give you directions where to go." I head back to the computer, punching in the last bit of information before I hit submit. The printer whistles and whirs as the paper slowly prints out. I don't even bother to look at it, just hand it right over to her.

She takes the paper from my hands, staring at it for a moment before looking back up at me. "Thanks for everything, Valory. Hopefully, I'll see

you again someday.”

I do my best to appear happy and excited, even though I feel a sense of sadness as well, because this may be the last time I see her.

“One can only hope, sweet Mercy,” I say as I walk toward the door and open it for her, waiting for her to take that first step.

And when she does, when she steps foot out of the Annex into the glow of the setting sun, I pray she is right.

CHAPTER 5



ENDOR

MERCY STANDS THERE, clutching her paper to her chest as I make haste picking up the papers strewn about the floor. I'll have to sort them all over again...

"I'm so sorry, I didn't—"

"It's fine," I grumble. "What does your paperwork say?"

"It says temporary placement HAD..." she answers as she bends down to help pick up a few pieces.

I pick up the last few strays, my eyes meeting hers as we both stand, and in them, I can see many things, but fear is not one of them.

Who is this girl that is not frightened by the mere sight of a demon?

Does she not know where she is?

Or what I am?

The wording makes me blink.

Temporary placement?

There is no such thing as temporary placement in Hell. It's one way only. You don't vacation in Hell and get to skip back out of here.

We both stand as I set the stack of papers on my desk, accepting that I will have to sort them again tomorrow. I grab the paper from her, scanning it carefully.

The form looks like one of the ones the angels use, but sure enough, it says HAD under placement.

Mercedes Rose James.

I look back at her for a moment, debating what to do, and sighing when I realize what I should do.

“Come with me,” I say as I hand her back her paper, not even bothering to wait. I’m sure she can figure things out.

I hear her footsteps behind me quickening as she follows me.

“I didn’t catch your name, Sir?”

A smile tugs at my lips at the polite tone of her voice. It isn’t exactly the first time I’ve been called sir, but it is the first time someone’s used the title in a polite manner and not a depraved one.

“Endor,” I say with absolutely no inflection, hoping this tidbit will be enough to satisfy her and end the small talk.

“Wh-where are we going, Endor?” she asks as she comes close to my side.

I press the glowing red button on the panel, watching the arrow as it stops on each floor, waiting. “Home, Mercy. We are going home.”

CHAPTER 6



MERCY

JUST BREATHE, Mercy.

You got this.

To say today has been an utter day from Hell is absolutely an understatement. I still can't believe that just this morning I was eating Pop-Tarts and watching cartoons with my best friend, Miles.

Everything was so... normal.

The last thing I truly remember was Miles reaching across the console, setting his hand on my thigh, and the way he turned to me with that smirk, I just... knew.

I knew what he wanted to say, but he didn't get the chance. Because in seconds, my entire world went black, and the next thing I knew...

I was in the darkness, cold and alone.

I don't know how long I was there until I decided to move, to search for warmth. My mind kept replaying that one scene in Frozen 2 when Anna is lost in the cave and she wants to give up, but then, she says what's basically become my motto in life: "Just do the next right thing."

And I knew the next right thing was to keep moving. Eventually, I'd find what I was looking for. Then, I saw it. The light. It was just a crack, not the all-encompassing light everyone makes it seem. It was just a sliver of light in the darkness, and I made reaching it my goal. I walked and walked until the silver became larger, and I realized it wasn't a sliver at all, but a door.

A glowing, heavy white door.

I've seen all the horror movies about opening freaky doors in the middle of nowhere, but I had the strangest feeling in my stomach that whatever was on the other side of that door would hold the answers to what happened to me, where I was...

Where Miles was...

Curiosity got the better of me and I set my hand on the door, and I just... pushed.

It opened, and I didn't think twice about going in. But all I saw was expansive fields and more light. More walking.

I don't know how long I walked until I came upon the Pearly Gates. Then, I found Valory. She seemed nice enough, though a little distracted. I guess wandering in at closing time will do that to a person, but I wasn't sure I had yet grasped that I was in Heaven. Not until she confirmed my suspicions.

I'd died.

The world going black meant I was no longer a living, breathing entity. I'd found the light, and I was dead.

So why didn't I feel dead?

Nevertheless, I faced this new development with the same poise my grandmother always tried to instill me. *You can't control the situation, Mercy. You can only control how you react to it.*

Valory seemed to think there was something wrong with my information, as she kept asking me questions, trying to locate me in Heaven's computer system or something. I didn't quite understand it. After all, the idea that Heaven has a computer filing system is still slightly bonkers to me. I always expected Heaven to look like it did in the movies, but it looked nothing like that.

I'd followed Valory's directions on the printout, directly from the Pearly Gates to the door that read HAD. It didn't look as well kept as the other doors, and I looked over the paperwork two, maybe three times, to make sure I was reading the golden letters on the distressed ebony door correctly.

H-A-D.

I took a deep breath and opened the door, and found myself in a long, expansive hallway. The walls were dark burgundy and the floor was black, with little bits of silvery glitter. It looked like a cross between my bedroom at home, and an elite banker's building.

There were plenty of doors and elevators in the place I ended up. I walked

around in the silent emptiness in search of anyone who could tell me if I was in the right place and where my room was.

Which was how I ran into Endor in the first place. The door to the office space he was in was the only one I'd come across that was open, and upon seeing what I did... even the thought now makes me blush.

I probably should have knocked, but I assumed it would be a dead end, what with how my luck was going.

Then, his girlfriend got pissy—I knocked over a bunch of papers—and Endor basically grabbed my printout, and commanded me to follow him like I was nothing more than a kid.

Every ounce of feminism in my body wanted to argue with him, to light into him with a “*you don't talk to me that way,*” but something in my bones told me that wouldn't be wise, and it wasn't because Endor was a six-foot, tattooed dream of a man with dark eyes that could probably bring a woman to her knees.

No.

No, my instincts told me it was something else.

Something deeper, something... more.

I should be afraid of this man who is demanding I follow him, who is undoubtedly taking me home to his murder pad.

But what choice do I have?

I could keep walking, maybe try to find his girlfriend?

Maybe she could be of more help?

My stomach turns at the idea when I remember how she looked at me: with fire in her eyes like she wanted to ruin me but decided not to. Probably didn't want tall, dark and handsome to witness her wrath or something.

The elevator finally dinged on the floor, and Endor waved me in. “I believe it's ladies first, right?” he said with a crooked smile, and I realized I'd completely dissociated.

“Oh, uh... yeah. Thanks, I guess,” I said as I slowly stepped into the elevator. The inside walls were all red velvet, and the buttons black with gold numbers, mirroring the look of the door I'd opened that read HAD.

Endor slides in not a moment too soon, the doors closing on us, and suddenly I feel hot from my head to my toes. I don't look at him, that weird feeling in my stomach keeping my feet bolted to the floor.

“There is no temporary housing in Hell,” he says matter of factly.

Hell?

That's enough to make me turn my head.

I thought I was in Heaven...

"I thought I was in Heaven?" I ask, confused.

Endor doesn't look at me. "I'm afraid not," he says plainly, before running a hand through his hair and sighing. "Though your paperwork looks... different. There are some things I'd like to look into, perhaps you may provide me with the details and we can get this all sorted out."

I nod, at a loss for what else to do. "Uh huh. Sure."

Endor turns to me, raising an eyebrow. "I will not harm you, Mercy. You are safe with me, right now."

He says the words like they are nothing, and I know I should believe him. But the way my stomach flips, the way my blood heats under his gaze, the way goosebumps rise on my skin tells me that I am the furthest thing from safe.

But I have no other options, so I do the only thing I can think of.

I pray.

I pray to God or whatever angels can hear me that I make it until morning, and then I pray that I will find peace wherever it is I am going.

CHAPTER 7



ENDOR

THE UNWAVERING BRAVERY Mercy displayed earlier in my office seems to have disintegrated.

Of course, when you first see Hell in all its glory, that is to be expected. The desert-like ground, the glowing rocks and lava pits, the god-forsaken heat. It's a lot to take in. Never mind the demons or creatures prowling about. Hell spawn come in a variety of shapes, sizes, colors, and of course, species. Basically, a variety of everything.

Hell is home to more than just demons and darkened souls, after all.

"Stay close to me," I say as I come up beside her, whispering in her ear.

She nearly jumps five feet off the sandy ground.

I'm not obtuse, I know my appearance is quite menacing, and I've taken many measures to ensure it stays that way. I prefer to be left alone, lest I am engaging in satisfying my desires. Life is better lived alone, there are far less disappointments and casualties that way. With my goals of leaving this Hellhole in which I've been enslaved, it is best I have no attachments, no matter how trivial they may be. For when I finally get my position as a Contractor Demon, I won't need the company of demons like Roche to satisfy me.

The fragile balance of holding life in my hands will be enough.

"And if I don't?" she asks, her voice clear as a bell, void of all fear despite her body language.

“You are a lost soul, Mercy, something we don’t see much of in these parts. Your light will appeal to others who may not be quite as... chaste or honorable in aiding you.”

She turns to me, her eyes glistening with concern. “A lost soul?” she asks, her voice barely a whisper.

“I suspect so, yes.”

“B-but... you don’t know for sure?” She swallows nervously as we pass a band of young demons, and I don’t miss the flicker of interest in their eyes as they rake over her appearance, forked tongues licking their lips.

“That is what I intend to find out when we arrive home.” I slide my hand around her waist, careful not to give too much sensation as I do so. The movement makes her shift, but she doesn’t fight it, though I can see the heat in her cheeks rise as I do.

“What are we going to do exactly?” she asks as she swallows nervously.

I fix my gaze on her for a moment, thinking about how to answer her. My cock twitches—only minimally—at her suggestion. No doubt a leftover longing from what had almost transpired in my office with Roche. Thank God we’d been interrupted. That would have been quite a blunder.

Though Mercy is quite attractive, I prefer my sexual trysts to be a bit more seasoned. Teenagers don’t have a handle on their pleasure yet, many are just dipping their toes in the water of desire. Such things make them pliable, amenable to making contracts, to selling their souls. There is no challenge, they are simply too emotional and uneducated in all matters to make informed decisions and reap the consequences.

But a woman who has experimented, who has spent ample time discovering her body, what pleases her, a woman whose boundaries need to be pushed, challenged, whose pleasure is in dire need of expansion, in need of someone to help them flourish and discover their lustful power... Well, that is more my speed.

Sadly, good girls do not exist down here, and even though demons and succubi are more than capable of channeling innocence, they lack the realness. The true ability to understand what it means to be tainted with darkness—they have been bred in darkness, after all.

“We are going to have dinner, and then I am going to investigate your claim and we will assess you to find out if you are indeed what I think you are.”

“And then what? If I am a lost soul, what happens then?” she asks as she

leans into my side just as we pass a hellhound who looks to be dining on the carcass of an animal that I can't quite distinguish from the mangled mass of blood, bone, and muscle. Saliva drips from the large beast's fangs, and I feel Mercy tremble.

I run my hand against the small of her back, hoping to quell her fear at the moment. Hellhounds can smell fear.

"We will find where it is you belong, Mercy. That I can promise you."



MERCY SITS down in one of my dining room chairs, looking quite small against the high, ornate backing.

"You've got some serious style, Mr. Endor," she says as she gapes at the ceiling, her gaze fixed on the black chandelier.

Amber light fills the already dark room, and I have to fight a smile. I don't bring many people back to my home, therefore compliments on my Gothic decor is quite an anomaly, but for some reason her words make me feel a slight twinge of pride.

"I am glad my home amuses you so." I grab the tray of chicken and potatoes from the oven, my mouth watering at the sight. I could cook if I really wanted to, but I don't particularly see the point. I live alone and have very few demons I actually consider friends, and going to the grocery store down here means having to socialize, something I see no need for.

Which is why I opt for pre-prepared meals delivered by the Imps.

While on earth one might pay money for such a service, but currency is different down here. Hawthorne and his family are indebted to me. I'd freed one of their own after buying them out from the battlegrounds they were forced to serve.

While Imp battles are a frequent form of entertainment around here, this particular Imp was not the best of the bunch, and I did not see it pertinent to keep them on the roster if they did not add any value. I purchased the Imp's freedom, an act for which his family kindly repays me with whatever I need.

Fortunately, all I need is a home-cooked meal, a hot shower, and clean sheets. I am a simple man.

I don't waste time as I prepare our plates, and Mercy quiets down. When I set the dish in front of her, her eyebrows furrow and she looks pained.

Maybe a little sick.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

“I uh... I should have said something, but I guess I wasn’t paying attention...” She twists her hair around her finger nervously. This girl needs to stop these nervous habits. It is unbecoming.

Instinctively, I reach out for her hand and pull it down, my gaze fixed on her. “Spit it out.”

“Uh... I don’t eat chicken. Or any meat, really,” she admits as she cowers in her seat.

I shut my eyes, my lips pursed. Great. Not only has fate dropped a lost soul in my lap, but she is also a vegetarian. I sigh, dropping her hand and opening my eyes.

“This would have been helpful knowledge, yes,” I agree.

“It’s fine... I’ll just...”

Hearing her speak this way makes my gut twist with an innate understanding. Being a creature of Hell myself, I recognize the behaviors, the tells of individuals who have been berated, mistreated in one way or another.

Mercy’s body language, the tone of her voice, her inability to meet my gaze. Her insistence to put her own discomfort aside to alleviate an argument or a problem all tell me this sweet, lost soul has likely been emotionally abused.

The notion pains me, making my chest swell with anger, something I was not expecting to feel. I shove the feeling aside, focusing on the moment at hand, on how I should handle this situation.

What is the right thing to do?

“I will prepare you something feasible for your palate,” I say evenly.

Her gaze darts up to me, and I don’t miss the surprise in her eyes. “You don’t have to do that,” she says in the sweetest voice of defeat.

“Nonsense. You are my guest. For the time being, anyway. Until we figure things out. Which we will do... tomorrow,” I say as I disappear around the corner and into the kitchen again, looking for something suitable.

“Thank you, Endor,” she calls after me.

“Don’t thank me yet,” I grumble as I pull out a pan of vegetables and pop it into the still hot oven, turning it on once more.

Don’t thank me until we get to the bottom of how a lost soul got into Hell without drawing any attention...

CHAPTER 8



ENDOR

MY HAND HOVERED over the send button on my computer screen. A part of me didn't want to admit that reality to anyone. Didn't want to admit there were things out of my department, that I wasn't equipped to handle because it wasn't my job. After all, the higher ups were still watching me.

What if this is the final straw?

What if my alerting Roche about Mercy being a lost soul is the thing they choose to settle the score?

I stare at my computer screen in thought before looking down the dark hallway. After a decent helping of potatoes, steamed vegetables, and pasta, I'd shown Mercy to the bedroom and bathroom, urging her to get some rest.

Lost souls tend to feel more exhaustion because so much of their energy is put toward simply existing. Yet, it's drained because there isn't a clear "choice" of where they will rest.

Heaven and Hell are two sides of the same coin. It doesn't matter what religion you're raised in, or what kind of spiritual mumbo-jumbo you're into. It's less about following the rules or choosing sin, and more about weight of character, the power of your choice. And we all have a choice, I realize as I sit in front of my computer, faced with the first one I've ever felt truly conflicted about.

If I do nothing, what will happen to her?

Lost souls aren't something that are freely talked about, even here in Hell.

We're told they exist, told the basics of why they are lost—because they belong to no specific place. They simply have not made a choice. But no one's ever said what their fate is, if they never decide.

Mercy seems like a decent kid.

Kid.

The word makes a strange swelling feeling in my chest. It tightens like a vice, making me feel guilty—wrong even—to consider my fate more important than hers. Measuring my own personal goals is more important than that of her soul.

It's a startling moment of clarity I never thought I'd have, and I press the button without another question, wondering if I've just punched my ticket to staying in HAD the rest of my demonic life.

I guess I'll know in the morning.



THE INCESSANT BUZZING of my alarm clock reverberates through my brain, and I groan from the stiffness in my muscles. I've never slept in the guest quarters until last night, only opting to give Mercy my bedroom because it had the en suite shower.

I stretch, but it does nothing to relieve the ache in my back. Running my hand over my face, I set my feet on the cold tile just as there is a pounding on my door. I groan, forcing myself from bed. I walk through the dimly lit hallway, glancing into my room as I go to make sure Mercy's still here, that I didn't completely imagine the whole thing.

Sure enough, she's there, tucked in my large bed, snoring away.

The pounding continues and I half worry it will wake her up. I finally get to the door, taking my good, sweet time. When I fling it open, Roche is standing there in a form-fitting red dress that hugs every curve, the fabric tight against her like a second skin. Her dark eyes are rimmed with black liner, smudged out to the edges, making her eyes look like pits of despair. Her hair falls over her shoulders in thick waves, and I feel a stirring in my pajama pants that aggravates me.

This is not what I need right now...

"Can I help you?" I growl.

"Where is she?" Roche asks as she takes a step toward me.

I hold my hand up and it collides with her chest, her ample cleavage brushing against my fingers. Soft, pliable, and... FOCUS!

“Sleeping,” I say as I gently push her back.

“You didn’t...”

“Of course not, Roche! What kind of monster do you think I am? I’m not that sex deprived!” I say angrily.

What the fuck?

“If you would have let me finish instead of fucking interrupting me, you would have heard the rest of what I was trying to say.” She crosses her arms, her steely gaze fixed on me with annoyance.

Oh, this should be good.

“Well then, Boss, by all means, cunt-inue,” I enunciated.

Roche rolls her eyes. “Let me in, Endor,” she demands.

“Only if you ask nicely.”

Roche looks almost as if her head is going to explode, and I have to admit the sight makes me feel more than content.

“May I come in, Endor?” she grits out through her teeth.

I wave her in, smiling graciously, and shut the door after her. I do not bother to offer her anything, instead making my way to the kitchen to brew a fresh pot of coffee for myself and my guest—the one who doesn’t annoy me.

Vegetarians drink coffee, right?

Roche continues to follow me. “I saw your search logs,” she says solidly.

“What do my search logs have to do with anything?” I ask as I pour the grounds into the coffee filters.

“Mercedes isn’t in the system here. Nor is she in Heaven’s system,” she continues.

“Yes...”

“Which makes her a lost soul. You know this.”

“I do. And I filled out the proper paperwork to report it,” I say, feeling a wave of guilt at that admission.

“She was assigned to HAD for temporary housing, right?” Roche leans against the wall, continuing her spiel.

“That’s what her paperwork says.”

“Except you know very well Hell’s Admissions Department doesn’t handle housing placements.” She sighs, and I can hear the strain in her voice, and it’s almost as if I know what’s to come, but not wanting to hear it any more than she wants to say it.

“Spill it, Roche.” I turn in her direction.

“HHD—Heaven’s Housing Department does.”

I close my eyes at her words. Of course, it makes sense. HHD, HAD. It’s a simple error, a typo. A typo that some stupid, ditzy angel made that sent this poor lost soul directly to Hell.

Which means Heaven fucked up.

Great...

“You know what this means,” she says with an annoyed tinge in her voice.

I do, but I don’t want to say it. All I can do is nod in disbelief as the coffee starts to percolate.

“It means we have to convene with that god awful asshole, Matthew, and tell him one of his angels screwed up, and that means...”

“We’re going to Heaven,” I say plainly.

“Yes, Endor. I just got Meticulous Matthew’s email. We’re to bring the girl and meet him, and the angel in question, for a meeting in three hours.”

Fuck.

Could this day get any worse?

CHAPTER 9



VALORY

ONE NEVER REALLY NEEDS AN ALARM CLOCK IN Heaven. Though, like many things that make up this paradise, some angels still use them.

But who needs an alarm clock when I have Chance?

His velvety smooth tongue steadily licks my hand until I wake from slumber, and I wipe it on my linen sheets.

“I’m up, I’m up,” I say sleepily as I stretch my muscles and make my way out of bed. Sunlight pours in through the windows, little streams of light hitting the gray-white wooden floors. I make my way to the kitchen, Chance’s toenails clicking on the wood behind me as he huffs and puffs excitedly.

I never had a dog growing up, or up to when I reached adulthood. In life, I was allergic to pretty much everything cute and fuzzy, so pets were never a part of my life. When I discovered you could have pets in Heaven, I was thrilled. I’d gone and picked out Chance that day, completely giddy about the whole thing. He’s probably one of my favorite things about this afterlife.

Just as I’m filling up his food bowl, there is a knock on the door. “Are you in there, Val? Open up, come on!” Delilah’s voice carries.

I sigh but figure it’s no use letting her stew outside. She’ll only make more of a fuss. When I open the door, I raise a brow and she just smiles innocently. Hazel eyes gaze back at me with excitement as her perfect pink lips curve into a smile, her bright-red curls bouncing with each step she takes,

walking in without a care.

“I have to give you the tea!” she says as she makes herself comfortable on my couch.

I don’t bother to argue, just shut the door.

Delilah is like a hurricane and it’s easier to let her travel on her path until she ultimately fizzles out. I suspect she was what they call *neurodivergent* in her life. How we wound up as neighbors is a mystery, considering most of the angels in my neighborhood tend to be of the same caliber. We all work the front line. Some work in the Annex with me, while others work in HHD.

Delilah is the only one in the neighborhood with a position in Guardianship. Though, she’s not a full-fledged Guardian Angel yet, since she hasn’t taken the final exam. She’s an Assistant Guardian. All that means is she can do everything a Guardian does, but she can’t make any of the decisions. She’s an angelic babysitter.

But hell if she doesn’t love getting to watch all the Guardians’ charges like it’s some sort of reality show. Which in a way, I guess it kind of is.

“Good morning to you, too, Delilah.”

Chance runs up to her, licking excitedly. She pets him, ruffling his fur as she touts, “Good boy,” to him sweetly while I make my way back to the kitchen.

“Oh my God, Val, this guy I was watching yesterday... seriously. This girl he’s been crushing on from across the hall in his apartment complex literally showed up at his doorstep dripping from head to toe because a pipe burst and...”

“Let me guess. They took one look at each other and realized they needed to run off into the sunset together,” I tease, knowing all too well how much Delilah actually loves that sort of thing. Her plethora of romance novels she keeps in her house somehow seems to continuously build, and I am worried the stories have warped her brain. I’m not sure if that is something that happened before death or—

“Would you let me finish?” she bites, crossing her legs as she settles back on my couch. Amidst all the white and gray, she stands out with her vibrant, red hair and bright blue velour tracksuit.

I sigh, relenting as I motion with my hands for her to continue. Just as Delilah opens her cute little mouth, another knock disturbs the space. Chance perks his ears up, and Delilah’s eyes furrow.

“Who could that be?” she muses as she turns in her seat.

I push off the counter, some stray blonde hairs falling out of my messy bun from the movement as I make my way back to my door, which seems quite busy this morning. I'm not sure who I expected to see, but it definitely wasn't my boss. Matthew never makes house calls for anything.

"Good morning, Valory," he says with a swift smile, but something about it seems... off.

At the realization that I am standing in my doorway in my pajamas, my cheeks heat. "Oh, uh... good morning... Matthew," I say, hiding my embarrassment.

"May I come in?" His voice is plain, solid as it usually is, which only makes me feel more on edge.

What the Hell is he doing here?

"Of course." I open the door further, waving him in.

Delilah looks positively alive with excitement at this bit of "tea," no doubt.

"Can I get you a cup of coffee, or..." I ask as I push the stray strands of hair back into their bun. I feel fidgety, if only because the presence of Matthew in my house makes me nervous. I've never had a man in my house before. At least, not since I've been in Heaven.

Not to mention Matthew is...

Hot.

And my boss.

I push the thoughts away, focusing on making myself a cup of coffee instead.

"No, that won't be necessary. I'll make this quick," he says as he slides his hands in his pockets, while standing in the doorframe between my kitchen and living room.

"Oh, okay then..." I say, but Delilah chimes in with the worst timing.

"I'll take a tea, piping hot, please!" She whistles and I roll my eyes.

"Please ignore her. I promise she's harmless," I say as I focus on the scent of percolating coffee.

Matthew's lips turn up in the corner just a smidge, his blue eyes lighting up for a moment as he steps closer to me.

"How did it go yesterday with the girl?" he asks in a low voice. The timbre of it is different, smoother than usual, but also carries a hint of secrecy. From this proximity, I can feel the warmth of his breath on my collarbone, and my heart starts to race.

“I took care of things,” I whisper back, confused. “I couldn’t find her in the system, but I assigned her a temporary HHD visa and sent you a memo, and—”

Matthew’s lips draw into a thin line. “Yes, you submitted the paperwork, and I got your memo. Except there was an error on your form.”

My blood runs cold.

There was a what now?

“That’s impossible, I-I don’t make errors, I—”

“I know, Valory. You are a good employee and you are good at your job, but no one is perfect. Sometimes things happen,” he says softly.

I know things happen, but not to me. I follow the rules; I do what I’m asked. I don’t make mistakes or break protocol.

Ever.

I run over the scenario in my head, walking through the moment she arrived when I’d handed her the papers for HHD and gave her directions.

“Did you escort her to HHD?” Matthew breathed.

“No.” That wasn’t protocol. My job at the Annex was to fill out the paperwork, assign the numbers, and give the newly deceased their onboarding orientation packet. Never in all the time I’ve been here have I escorted anyone off the premises of the Annex to the HHD, so his question is alarming to me.

“I see. Well, there is no way to sugar coat this,” Matthew says before taking a deep breath.

I watch as he swallows before speaking, his blue eyes gazing into mine. The intimacy of his stare coupled with his close proximity makes me shiver.

Matthew reaches out, his fingers brushing my arm in the lightest of touches, trying to relax me. His touch on my skin feels odd, not like I’d imagined it would all those times I wandered off into daydreams fueled by reading too many second-chance romances.

“Valory, your error sent a lost soul to Hell.”

My eyes widen in surprise. No, that can’t be...

“But I specifically typed HHD...” I stammer as I try to remember everything exactly as it happened.

Matthew grabs my hand and squeezes. “Mercedes is being escorted by two demons from HAD. The director of the department, and the demon who processed her has been keeping her in custody. Like you, he realized Mercedes was not in the system and filed the proper paperwork. But her

papers were certified by Heaven...”

“He had to contact you,” I say, my voice but a whisper.

Matthew nods. “Get dressed and meet me at headquarters as soon as you can.” He releases my hand.

My mind spins with all that this could mean.

Will I be punished?

Lose my job in the Annex?

What kind of repercussions will Matthew or his bosses have for me?

“Breathe, Valory. We will figure this out,” he assures me, and I realize I have been holding my breath.

“Yes, yes of course.” I force a smile as Matthew turns to leave, nodding as if nothing had even happened.

“Good day, Delilah,” he says as he waves at her on the way out.

When the door shuts behind him, she looks at me expectantly.

“A demon is coming to Heaven?” she asks, her eyes about to explode out of their sockets.

“How did you hear that?” I ask, my nerves getting the better of me as I slide down the wall, my hand in my hair.

“Because in another life I’m ninety-nine percent certain I was a bat with exceptional hearing.”

Her attempt at humor isn’t lost on me, and I can’t help but let out a chuckle.

“I messed up, Delilah, I—”

“Hey...” She gets up from her spot on the couch and joins me against the wall, wrapping her arm around me.

“You’re only human.”

I scoff at her words. “No, I’m not. Not anymore.”

“We are just humans with wings, Val. We’re just as capable of screwing shit up as anyone else. Doesn’t mean you are a bad person—a bad angel.”

“I sent her to Hell!” I look at Delilah, tears forming in my eyes.

“Yeah, that does put a damper on the whole afterlife thing. I hear it’s pretty humid down there this time of year. Probably not good for her hair.”

Again, I can’t help but crack a small, pained laugh at her attempt to make me feel better.

“What am I going to do if they pull me from the Annex?” I ask, my voice full of worry.

“Whatever they decide, Val, we will handle it. You won’t have to go

through it alone. I promise,” she says, this time her voice is serious. She hugs me tightly.

“Okay,” I say as I regain my composure.

“Okay,” she agrees as we both stand. “Now, let’s go find a suitable second-chance suit for you, eh?” she suggests as she heads for my walk-in closet.

CHAPTER 10



ENDOR

THE TRAVEL from realm to realm isn't quite as simple as it seems. Hell is designed to keep us in, which is why the doors only work one way. For special circumstances, and if you have the clearance to travel between realms, transportation is much more... dramatic.

Mercy all but hangs over the side of the boat as Roche fidgets in her seat next to me. Her long, sinuous legs go on for days in the getup she's wearing, and I can't deny that the sight appeals to me on some level. Though, not enough that I can take my mind off where we're going or what's going to happen when we get there.

Heaven and Hell have a treaty. We have for almost a century now. We mind our own business, unless special circumstances should arise, such as this. In such an event, both sides will convene for mediation first, and if a solution cannot be met, we will have to go before the Spiritual Council and plead our cases, giving them the ultimate ruling decision.

Lost souls have been a topic for ages. No one seems to know much about handling them. The rarity of one ending up in Hell, after somehow finding their way to Heaven, is a special circumstance indeed.

A part of me is thrilled at the idea of stepping foot in the proverbial *cloud land*, while the other is slightly nervous.

Will it hurt?

Demons, like myself, are designed for living in this environment, and

while I know enough about Heaven to at least have an inkling of what to expect, I don't know if it will be a painful experience. Rumors, gossip, and old legends talk about burning, smiting, and evil perishing in the face of God's beautiful real estate.

But no demon has set foot on Heaven soil since the Dark Ages, so there's nothing to really weigh it against, nothing to confirm or deny the suspicion.

After all, a demon is the epitome of evil, isn't it?

"Try not to look so morbid, Endor." Roche shoulder bumps me, drawing me out of my head and back to the present. She sets her hand on my thigh, rubbing lightly.

Mercy is still transfixed on the foggy and alternating neon colors of the ocean waves beneath our boat. I suppose it is quite mesmerizing if you take the time to watch how the water shifts from pink to blue to green and so forth. Her excitement both makes me smile and feel a tinge of fear.

"Don't lean too far," I say, causing her to turn and look at me with those big, expressive pools.

She smiles back. "Promise I won't fall in," she teases.

All I can do is nod, but the concern does not alleviate.

"I am a demon, Roche. Looking somber and morbid is in the job description."

"You've wanted out of HAD for as long as I can remember. Aren't you even the least bit excited to see Heaven?" she asks as she lazily draws circles on my thigh.

I push her hand off of me and she huffs in annoyance. Now is not the time. To be honest, I'm not sure there will ever be a time.

"I am intrigued to see what all the fuss is about, yes."

Roche lets out a sigh, turning from me toward the horizon where the greenish-yellow sun awaits. Once we are at the horizon line, the waters will shift and we will pass from Hell into Heaven's territory.

"Mercy, please get back from there," I snap as I realize we are closer than I thought.

She purses her lips, the look on her face says she wants to argue, but she does not. Instead, she does as I say, no pushback.

The ferryman—if he can be called a man, being nothing but a skeleton—steers us directly toward the sun, and Mercy tumbles backward onto the floor. I don't think twice about vacating my seat next to Roche, and I make my way toward Mercy and pull her to me, wrapping my arms around her as we sit.

Her cheeks redden again, and I can feel her heart race beneath the pulse in her wrists I hold.

“Brace yourself. We are about to pass through the realms,” I tell her softly in her ear.

She nods in understanding. “Can I keep my eyes open?” she asks, and I can hear her voice catch.

“Yes, if you wish.”

She nods again and settles against me, just as we collide with the veil itself.



“Wow. It’s prettier than I remember.” Mercy gawks at the shore we have landed on.

My eyes feel as if I am going to go blind. Everything is so... bright. A light breeze rustles my suit jacket, and I feel strangely warm.

“Hot?” Roche asks, her lips twisting in a devilish smile as she and Mercy vacate the boat.

I follow, feeling the sweat start to form from the onslaught of sun. “A bit.” I don’t lie. This air is rather stifling.

“I told you, you are overdressed,” Roche says. My gaze settles on her, and I note the way she looks against this idyllic... beach. Her red dress and long pale legs stand out against the bright glow, and she looks every bit the sinful Succubus I know her to be.

Mercy picks up shells on the beach, tossing a few into her messenger bag.

I slide my suit jacket off, rolling up my shirtsleeves, which make me feel only slightly better.

“I am simply making a good impression,” I tout.

Roche sidles up closer to me, and I can see her dark eyes lighting with excitement. “You don’t have to work to impress me, Endor. I’ll give you a glowing recommendation any day,” she says wickedly, her gaze falling to my lips.

The idea of two demons getting hot and heavy on Heaven’s soil does sound like a rather intriguing experience and my cock agrees. But I am less inclined to engage in more depraved sexual acts with a minor present and in my care.

Only a few feet away.

This is not what we came here for.

I put a hand up between Roche, and I gently push her away. “We have bigger things to worry about, Roche,” I say, just as a classic Rolls Royce pulls up onto the sand.

Mercy perks her head up, and Roche turns as well.

“It seems our ride has arrived,” I grumble as I leave Roche standing in the surf. Wrapping my arm around Mercy, I lead us toward our chauffeur, further toward the resolution.

CHAPTER 11



MERCY

I KNOW my fate lies in the hands of the people—angels—that we will be meeting in just a bit, but a part of me feels sad that this is the end of the line as far as Endor goes.

He is a demon, and I probably shouldn't trust him as far as I can throw him, but my instincts tell me I can. Not to mention, he's been nothing but caring, sweet even, since I met him.

It doesn't hurt that he's hot as hell, either. With those dark features and the sleeve of tattoos that span out across his freaking sinful chest...

Sigh.

I did get quite a nice look while he was walking around shirtless this morning, talking to that other demon... Roche, I think he called her?

Not entirely sure what the deal is between them, with the way she keeps looking at him and flirting with him, but he doesn't seem to be interested in her at all. Maybe he's gay. That would explain a lot. I mean, she looks like every teenage boy's wet dream, how could he not be attracted to her?

Yup, probably gay.

Still, gay demon or not, I think I'll miss him and his grumbly dad-vibe.

I'm not entirely sure how I got to Heaven in the first place. There's a lot I don't remember. Roche assured us this meeting with the angels would determine what was to be "done" with me. As if I were nothing more than a number or a line of a sheet of paper, something that needed to be categorized

and handled. I understood it, but I didn't like it. I'm not some number, some cog in the machine. I am Mercedes Rose James, K-Pop fan, Pop-Tart addict, and future freshman of Syracuse University.

Except, I'm not those things.

Not anymore.

The realization hits me all over again. I'll never get to go to a BTS concert, never eat a S'mores Pop-Tart dipped in Nutella again. I'll never see freshman orientation at Syracuse.

Endor must sense my distress as he leans over to look at me. "Hey," he says softly.

I look up at him, his gaze making me feel a fraction better.

"Hey."

"We'll figure this all out, don't worry," he assures me, and all I can do is nod

CHAPTER 12



VALORY

I SMOOTH out the fabric of my dress, which, in my opinion, is probably a little too gaudy for a work meeting, but Delilah insisted I wear it to “*fit the innocent vibe.*” I’m not sure what my “vibe” has to do with whether I keep my job, but it was pointless to argue with her.

My fingers fidget with the pearls adorned on my ivory dress, and I catch Matthew sneaking a glance at me, which stupidly makes my heart skip a beat. Maybe this dress wasn’t a bad idea after all...

Then, I feel it.

The shift in the air, like death is coming.

The scent of fire and brimstone accompanies them, and as they walk through the room, I can’t help but gape at the sight of them.

I’ve never seen a demon before. Sure, I’ve heard stories, both when I was alive and being up here in Heaven, but I didn’t expect them to look so... human.

The woman is dressed in a tight, red dress that hugs every curve of her body. Breasts that swell, giving the most ample cleavage and legs that look perfectly smooth. Her dark hair falls over her shoulders and coupled with the blood red lip, she looks like a vampire from a romance novel rather than a demon.

Mercy strolls in with the other demon and my heart catches. His arm is around her waist, and she looks all too trusting, too comfortable with him.

He's tall, like the other demon, and has the same dark features. Black hair that is swept back to look oddly reminiscent of the Greaser styles men wore in the '50s. His suit is well tailored, though his jacket is draped over his free arm, and I take note of how his shirtsleeves are rolled up to the elbows. His arm around Mercy boasts a full sleeve of tattoos and a well-defined bicep muscle, and I find myself wondering where his tattoos begin and end.

My gaze travels upward to meet his. He looks at me like he can see right through me, past my flesh and blood, and right down to my soul. The realization is both terrifying and strangely... satisfying.

I shake my head, trying to rid myself of the weird onslaught of feeling, and focus on the task at hand. I'm just out of sorts today, and I need to get back to square one.

"Roche, how lovely to see you again," Matthew says as he motions for her to sit.

Again?

Does he know this demon?

"Uh huh," she says nonchalantly as she collapses in her office chair, crossing those long legs, swiveling back and forth.

"This is my associate, Endor. Endor, this is Matthew. He's basically the angelic equivalent of me."

I watch Matthew's lips tighten and his shoulders tense.

"My job is of higher importance," Matthew says sternly, and I don't miss the smile that plays on Roche's lips.

"So high and mighty you can't even keep track of one little lost soul," Roche taunts, and I think this demon has quite a lot of nerve.

Matthew huffs and nods toward me. "Valory is more than a capable employee. I trust her with the utmost authority. Her error is the first. Unlike you, who has made several errors, mind you."

Roche snickers as Mercy and Endor take their seats next to her.

"You didn't complain when those errors were made, if I recall correctly."

Her implication isn't lost on me, and my eyes widen in surprise as I gape at Matthew. He looks like he's going to pop a blood vessel.

"This is not personal, Roche."

"It's always personal, Matthew."

I take my seat next to Matthew, waiting for him to begin. A part of me wants to reach out to Mercy, to tell her I'm sorry and that we'll fix this, but before I can speak, Matthew breathes out a sigh, signaling the inevitable.

My stomach twists in knots, knowing what is coming. The conference room is just as white and gray as the rest of the interiors, and Endor and Roche look quite out of place.

Mercy swivels back and forth in her chair, taking everything in just as she had in the Annex. She's seen so much in a short amount of time. I suspect it is quite daunting.

"Then I will not keep you any longer than is necessary. While Valory admits her error, and your demon—"

"My name is Endor," the demon speaks up, and his voice makes my insides turn to liquid.

I've never heard a voice like that.

Deep.

Dark.

Sinful.

I press my legs together and sit up straighter.

Matthew looks annoyed, but he continues. "Since Endor has done the research for us, we know without a doubt, Mercedes here is a lost soul. Given the information in the treaty, lost souls must be reunited with their body. There is a slim chance the body may be still alive, in which case, the soul may reenter and continue its path. In the case the body has been deceased, the soul must reenter the body and answer the immediate call to which the soul is destined to reside."

Mercy perks up. "So I need to find my body to... find out if I get to live or die?"

The room quiets. My heart aches for her. If only I had gotten the letters right, perhaps we'd already have found her body, perhaps she could be living already...

Matthew nods. "Yes. Although the circumstances being what they are, it is not as simple as letting you go in search of your body."

"It's not?" Roche speaks up, looking slightly worried.

Matthew shoots her a glare. "You may have showed up in Heaven, but you have also been to Hell. You are in both systems now, which means both realms must be involved in the process of finding your body."

We all yell and holler, "What?!" at once, clearly surprised by this notion.

"What the hell do you mean Hell needs to be involved?" Roche spits.

"I do not like this any better than you do, Roche. Believe me. If I had my way, we'd take over this matter and make sure there were no more errors."

“It is your angel who fucked up in the first place!” Endor growls.

“Language!” Matthew hollers.

Endor has the audacity to flip him off, and I can’t deny that kind of defiance is... intriguing.

“What does this mean, Matthew?” I turn my gaze to him, if only because I’m worried Endor might notice my staring and decide to flip me off, too. But the thought of that doesn’t sound terrible...

“It means, that per the treaty, a demon and an angel must accompany the lost soul in question on the journey to find her body and assist in the final choice.”

The final choice.

The choice of deciding where to spend your afterlife.

I understand the words, but I’d always thought there was no choice. You either went to Heaven or Hell. Your soul was sorted for you based upon your life, your decisions, your faith...

The words trouble me, but I have no time to dwell on them right now.

“You mean to say Endor and Valerian Root over here are to accompany the lost soul... on Earth? Between the realms!” Roche looked as if she was going to have a heart attack. “No demons or angels walk among Earth except the Contractor Demons, the Reapers, and the Guardian Angels...”

“I have looked over the treaty with a fine-tooth comb. That is what must happen. And it must happen quickly. Time is of the essence. A soul is at stake.”

Roche scoffs. “And how do you propose they locate her body? Do you have an idea of where it is?” she bites.

Matthew turns to Mercy. “We do not. That is where your help will come in, Miss James,” he says softly.

“Me?” Mercy looks worried.

Matthew nods and continues. “It is not uncommon for lost souls to experience partial loss of memory due to the event in which their soul was disconnected from their body. You need to try and remember whatever you can to assist your chaperones in finding your body. Your body will be trying to communicate with you, all you need to do is listen to it. Endor and Valory will guide your visions, your body’s call.”

“Oh, okay. That sounds like a piece of cake,” Mercy grumbles.

“How long do we have?” I ask quietly and everyone turns to look at me. I can feel Endor’s gaze like fire on my skin and my stomach flips with anxiety

and promise.

“If the body is alive... a few days, tops. If you cannot find her body and return the soul so it can right its journey, she will become a lost soul forever. She will become a ghost.”

Matthew’s words hit me in the chest like a brick, and I feel a sense of urgency, of responsibility. This is all my fault. If I would have paid more attention, if I— I shake my head. No, I can’t think like that. I have to focus on the present and what I can do to make this right, because I *need* to make this right.

I can do this. I *will* do this. If not for myself, then for Mercy. Because if there is a chance her body is still alive and waiting for her... we have to do something about it.

Not all of us are given a second chance, and I will be damned if I let hers go to waste.

CHAPTER 13



ENDOR

ROCHE LEANS against the marble bureau, crossing her arms.

“So that is it, then? You’re just going to... agree with this?” I ask as I focus on Mercy who is still talking to Matthew and the angel supposedly responsible for this mess in the first place.

Valory.

“I don’t like it any better than you, but Matthew is right. The treaty specifically states—”

“I do not like this,” I say plainly.

“Well, you do not have a say in the matter. You are my demon, and you will do as I command.” Roche’s eyes catch mine, and in them I see the hint of mischief. She’s toying with me, enjoying lording her command over me here in this bright-as-shit popsicle stand.

Because she knows back in Hell it’s a different story.

I shift my stance and move toward her, effectively encasing her against the wall.

A slow smile spreads across her crimson lips.

“You may be my boss, Roche, but you do not own me.”

Her tongue darts out along her lips and a dark chuckle escapes. “Oh, what I could do to you, Endor, if you weren’t such a pain in my ass,” she says with a wicked grin as she sets her hand on my forearm. She leans close to my ear and whispers, “If you know what is good for you, you will listen closely.”

My lips tighten, but I know from the tone, the edge in her voice, that what she's about to say is much more important than my disdain for her.

"I am listening," I breathe.

"To assist Mercedes in her final choice, you must do whatever you can to pull her to our side. Make her see an eternity in Hell is... desirable." Roche's breath is hot on my neck, and the way she says the last word—desirable—sends a shiver down my spine.

I don't like her implication. I glance across the room to Valory, and I can almost bet Matthew would likely tell her the same thing, that it is her job to make Heaven the be-all, end-all for the afterlife of your dreams. Which already puts us at a disadvantage. Everyone is told their wildest dreams and wishes are in Heaven, and Hell is full of assholes, evil demons and sin.

Sure, it is full of all those things, but not everyone's version of Heaven is white walls and gray Home Depot flooring with a standard ficus in the corner.

Some people dream of the dark, the depraved, and the deadly; and judging from Mercy's messenger bag pins and contents, I'd say our sweet Mercy isn't as sweet as she pretends.

Which means Hell and I have a good chance of carrying out such a request.

My gaze falls back to Roche's ruby red lips. "And what is in it for me, hmmm? Or do I just get to live another blissful day in the office dealing with incompetent demons who can't draw a proper dick?"

Roche brings her lips closer to my ear, close enough that their silky texture brushes my skin. "Do this for me, Endor, and I will see to it you never set foot in an office again. I will write the glowing recommendation to the Contracting department myself, and *that* is a promise." She pulls away.

"Can I have that in writing?" I ask, knowing full well what she is implying is beyond anything I could have hoped for. A shot, a real shot, at leaving HAD. Something I thought wouldn't happen because I submitted the reports and did what needed to be done for Mercy.

Roche moves to take my hand, turning it over so my palm faces the sky. She whispers words I know all too well, and I fight to keep my face expressionless. I can't let her see such a thing move me, let her see that she holds an inkling of power in her hands over me. Just as she brings my palm to her mouth, brushing her lips across it, I feel the stoney gaze of the angel across the room.

I look up, catching her amber eyes staring again. When I give her the slightest hint of a smile, I can't help but smile back when I see her cheeks flush. Though she doesn't look away, just... bites her lip. This makes my cock instantly harden, my mind flooding with images that make no sense, given the fact I've just met the woman.

Images of her looking up at me from below, on her knees, those big brown eyes begging me for—

Roche lets out a contented sound, bringing me back to the reality of the moment. Her lips pull up into a sultry grin, probably figuring my twitching cock against her thigh is because of her. But her lips are the cold shower I need to rid me of my momentary lack of control.

I feel the searing edge of fire as her lips burn the seal into my blood.

Though most contracts are for the ownership of mortal souls, it isn't completely uncommon for demons to make contracts and pacts with one another for certain things. We all have our vices, and we live in Hell. Trust is not afforded easily.

I drop my hand just as Matthew speaks up, and we both turn to face the angels and the lost soul in question.

"It will be an hour or so until we get everything in order, and as you know, time is of the essence. I ask, given this time, that you two get whatever affairs in order you need."

Roche tosses her hair behind her, which smacks me in the face.

I purse my lips, feeling irritated by her attitude. She acts as if this is all some big joke.

"Our arrangements have been made. Endor is ready to assist the lost soul and your angel, and I am confident if I leave him in your care, he will come back to me in one piece," Roche says, raising an eyebrow at Valory, who takes a moment to realize it is she Roche is talking to and not Matthew.

"Oh," she stammers, blinking with fresh understanding. "Of course." She straightens, holding her hands in front of her. Her long blonde hair is straight and sleek as it falls over her shoulders, her tanned skin standing out amidst the bright ivory of her garment. I can see the anxiety in her eyes, but she stands tall, determined.

I do not need anyone to mind me. I can take care of my fucking self and Roche knows it.

"Then it is settled. Valory must make her own arrangements, however. It is up to you, Valory, if you wish to let the demon and lost soul accompany

you while you do so.” Matthew turns to her, his expression softening.

She smiles slightly, and the momentary burst of confidence seems to diminish in the presence of the man before her. Her eyes dart to the side before she looks up at him demurely, and I can’t help the twitch in my chest.

I have never truly witnessed innocence. The meek, shy, quiet appeal of someone so... pure. And it is plain to see the angel I’ll be spending however long this quest is to last, is all of those things.

And though it should disgust me, irritate me... it only intrigues me. It only makes me want to see how far her innocence, her purity, is rooted and if I could perhaps, sway more than one soul to the dark side.

CHAPTER 14



VALORY

“BEFORE YOU HEAD BACK to your humble abode, I wish to speak with you.” Matthew’s words are whispered, his hand lightly grabbing my arm.

Something about the touch feels strange, but I brush it off. Endor and Mercy are talking, and I watch as he points something out to her, and feel a surge of concern, of worry.

He is a demon. I know it was said he’d been watching over Mercy since she arrived in Hell, but still, the idea of a demon having any kind of watch over a poor, lost soul like hers... it spurs all sorts of things in my brain. Demons aren’t to be trusted.

I look away from the two of them, back to Matthew. “Yes?” I whisper as he lets my arm go.

“Mercedes’s soul is of the utmost importance, do you understand?” he asks sternly. I nod.

“Of course, I—”

“The demon will likely try to persuade her against choosing Heaven, and we cannot let that happen.”

“Do not be absurd. Why on God’s green earth would she choose Hell to begin with? It’s full of nothing but monsters, and sinners, and—”

Matthew’s smile lifted to his sparkling blue eyes. “Teenagers can be impressionable. But I should not fear, as I know you will do the right thing, no matter what. Won’t you, Valory?” His voice darkens, and I don’t miss

how his gaze dips to my lips or the shimmer of gold that crosses his irises.

Angelic power.

“Yes. I promise I will take care of Mercy and her soul.”

“No matter the cost,” Matthew says coldly.

“No matter the cost,” I promise him, and he lets me go just as Mercy and Endor come over to us.

“You will need to meet with Roche and I back here in an hour,” he says, as if our conversation had not even happened.

Roche groans, tapping her long nails on the table’s edge. “For fuck’s sake, Matthew, what do we need to hang around here for, now?” she asks with grievance.

“Valory must make her arrangements, and then, we will go over the Earthbound Protocols, of course.”

Another grumble of disdain leaves Roche. “Can’t we just unfurl their wings now?” she asks with a huff, the same time Matthew pointedly exclaims, “No!”

Unfurl our wings?

I must look surprised, because Endor just smirks. “What? Did they not go over that in all your onboarding training?” he asks with sarcasm.

Instantly, my expression falters, and I can feel my guards go up.

Typical demon smart ass.

“Last I checked, demons didn’t even have wings.”

“Only those deemed relevant, sweetheart. Contractor Demons get their wings when they get the job.”

I watch Roche as she glances at Endor, then back at me.

“I believe there is a similar process for your... Guardians?”

Matthew nods before I can speak. “Yes. Those who do not work in the Guardian Sector and who have no godly reason to be on Earth... well, you still have wings but they are clipped.”

“Clipped?” I ask, taken aback.

“Well, we can’t have you flying around without clearance,” Roche says with a twisted smile.

Endor grunts something unintelligible and I decide to let it go, for now.

“Go home, make your arrangements with Delilah,” Matthew says, his brow furrowing slightly.

I want to ask questions, and demand that both of them tell me what’s going on, and why my wings are clipped and now why they are... unfurling.

What does any of that have to do with Mercy and Earth?

But instead of asking questions, I only nod my head in agreement, knowing Matthew is right. I do need to get my affairs in order with Delilah and ask her to take care of Chance and my house while I'm gone.

I don't even know how long I'll be gone. Matthew seems to think it will only take a few days, but I'm not entirely sure I believe him, even though I know I should. He's an angel. We're the good guys, after all. We don't lie or cheat or steal. Not like demons. Truth and honor are our virtues.

"Would you like them to wait, or—" Matthew starts, and I blink, remembering my current company.

"They can come with me, if they wish. I won't be long," I say as politely as I can at the moment.

"Oooh, does this mean I get to see more of Heaven?" Mercy asks, her eyes widening, smile forming.

The sight stirs a warm feeling in my stomach and a smile of my own spreads across my face. "Why yes, I believe it does."

"Fabulous. I hope wherever you are dragging us has a decent cup of coffee," Endor says as he crosses his arms. The sight draws attention to their slender, yet defined form, and he raises an eyebrow at me, almost as if he is annoyed.

What the hell did I do to you?

"I can assure you there is no better coffee than that which is served in Heaven," I say sweetly as I brush past them all to move toward the door, and they follow me through the pearly gates into the HHD.



WHEN I ARRIVE HOME, Chance immediately starts barking when I open the door. He nearly knocks Mercy and I over as he licks us with excitement. Delilah slowly saunters toward the door as I hurry Chance inside.

"Make some new friends, Val?" she asks as she takes in my newest comrades.

"I have been tasked with a quest. Matthew himself told me I must do this," I breathe out as Mercy leans down and pets Chance. I feel Endor's presence behind me, watching me. I turn, seeing him leaning against a tree, which keeps him in the shade, looking mysterious and brooding. Like one of

those heroes from Delilah's romance novels...

"What kind of quest?" Delilah asks, her eyes lighting up with excitement.

"The kind that involves you keeping quiet," I tell her.

Delilah rolls her eyes. "Really? Not even gonna give me a little bit?" she asks as she nods toward Endor under the tree. "Is tall, dark, and sexy part of this quest?"

My eyes immediately widen. "Delilah! He is a...demon! How could you —"

"Even better..." she says with wide eyes and a smirk.

The look makes my stomach twist, and my blood boil. "Yes, he is part of the assignment, but he is most certainly not an ally."

"Enemies to lovers is my favorite trope, you know." She snickers.

Now it is my turn to roll my eyes. "There will be none of that where we are headed, I can assure you."

Delilah waves me off. "You really need to learn to live a little, you know." I watch as her eyes soften. "How long will you be gone?"

"I'm not entirely sure, but I was hoping you would watch Chance and the house and—"

"Say no more. Of course I will."

Relief floods me, and I feel a sense of appreciation for my friend. Growing up, I had friends, but none who I ever felt I could truly count on. It is a shame I could not have such a bond on Earth when I was alive, but my former self feels content with our current friendship and bond.

"Thank you," I say as I hear a growl behind me. I turn toward the sound to find Chance growling at Endor, who looks bemused.

"Chance, down boy!" I command. I watch as my boy's ears slide back and he obeys.

Endor raises an eyebrow, and I can see the faint hint of a smile tugging at his lips as he lets out a dark chuckle.

Mercy lets out a laugh of her own as she scratches Chance behind the ears. "Who is a good guard doggo?" she says innocently, and Chance licks her face.

"You are most certainly welcome," Delilah says as she whistles for Chance. "Come, boy!" she says sternly, and Chance actually listens, coming to her beck and call.

"What all do you need to gather?" Mercy asks as she walks slowly toward me.

“I just need my purse and a few things. I won’t be long, I promise,” I tell her.

Still, I can see the curiosity in her eyes.

“Can I... Can I come in?” she asks.

I nod and enter the house after my dog and bestie. “Sure, come on.” I wave her in. I stop on my doorstep, ready to close the door, but take one last look at the shadowed man under the tree. His gaze on me is like laser beams, and I suddenly feel acutely aware of everything. The blood rushing through my veins, the sun’s heat on my skin, and the feeling pooling in my stomach under his gaze.

So, I shut the door and I leave the demon outside my house, hoping he will be there when I am good and ready.

CHAPTER 15



ENDOR

I ALMOST CONSIDER STEPPING inside the angel's abode, as a *quick* stop seems to drag on endlessly. I'm not entirely sure how much time has passed, but with the suggestion that we only have about an hour, I'd like to not waste it.

Just as I ultimately decide to go in search of the angel and Mercy, they both walk out of the doorway, laughing and smiling. Looking like chummy old friends. I'd think the sight was nice, cute even, if I didn't know the angel in question, Valory, was likely just as invested as me in winning Mercy over to their cloudy sky prison.

Heaven isn't something we talk about much down in the pits of Hell, but it's understood that despite its elegant PR, it's just as constricting and governed as Hell is.

The only difference between the two is one has nicer decor.

Those in Heaven can't leave. Not unless they're Guardians or assistants to the Guardians. The angels make every effort to make the place appealing, make it so the souls that are confined don't want to leave, so they never question if they can.

Paradise and all that.

In Hell, we know our place. Many of us don't like it. Those like me who were born and bred in Hell, feel gypped that we pulled the short end of the straw. But there are souls that choose to be in Hell, whether by their own volition or through their actions and desires, lives lived in sin, choices made

and contractual obligations.

I've never been the most pro-Hell demon, but it seems the situation presenting itself to me would be more than just a challenge to obtain Mercy's choice.

My own freedom depends on it.

It seems I would have to make Hell... desirable. Make it compete with the clear, airy aesthetic of the '50s rip off that Valory calls home.

Everything about this place gives me the fucking creeps. It's beautiful, don't get me wrong, and the weather is much nicer than in Hell, but it's nothing more than an illusion of grandeur, built to placate the souls that believe Heaven has everything they want.

But it's soulless.

Too perfect and pristine.

Who wants a fucking house with a white picket fence, a dog, and a meaningless job punching numbers until you die?

Who wants to continue that after you die?

There's more to life than being a cog in the machine, even though I know that, and I'm a greased cog in a very oily machine who longs for more.

"Are you ready, Mercy?" I ask as she pulls on her messenger bag, amber eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Ready as I'll ever be," she says with confidence, and I can't help but smile, and as I do so, I notice Valory is staring at me.

"Take a picture, it'll last longer, sweetheart," I say as I wrap my arm around Mercy and scuttle her to my side. She wraps hers around my back, and I don't waste time as I head toward the direction whence we came.



ROCHE STANDS BEHIND ME, the same position Matthew has taken behind Valory.

Like most demons, I was born with wings, but they were clipped at birth.

This, I knew, and it was always one of the things that pissed me off the most about the short straw. Everything since the time of my birth has been designed to keep me in Hell. Including the clipping of my wings. Only contractors and reapers get to gain the *right* to fly. It's something that is earned, something gifted by the fucking assholes up top who get to decide

who becomes a Reaper or a Contractor Demon.

So when Roche's long fingers trace across my shoulders slowly, I don't expect to feel a shiver, or a slight shake.

She lets out a dark chuckle. "If I would have known all it takes to excite you is to pet your pretty wings, I'd have done it a long time ago," she whispers.

"It does not excite me. It just... feels odd," I answer back. I hear a gasp come out of Valory and it's likely she's experiencing the same thing, but I don't look at her. Instead, I look ahead at Mercy biting her lip in anticipation.

Roche massages my shoulders, letting her hands run over my shoulder blades before digging her nails into my skin, and then I feel it. I feel them, my wings pushing against my skin, begging to come out.

Roche whispers in my ear, her lips brushing my skin, and it's like I'm someone else. I feel a surge of energy coursing through me, emanating from where her nails dig underneath my shoulder blades. It hurts, but it's a relieving kind of pain.

My body shakes just a little and then I feel all that power, all that energy, ignite like a burning fire and whoosh.

I can feel my wings... unfurl.

Opening up for the first time, stretching.

An audible gasp leaves Mercy's lips. "Whoa..." she says in awe.

I turn my head to the side to see them. Long, feathery black wings stretch out beside me, practically knocking into Valory, who is staring once again.

"Like what you see, angel?" I ask, feeling cockier than usual at the giant wingspan, which looks pretty badass if you ask me.

She huffs as Matthew presses his fingers into her shoulder blades, which causes her to yelp. The look of pain on her face makes my cock twitch, but then again, that could be from the juice running through me right now. I feel more alive—more powerful—than I've ever felt before.

Like I could do anything with these wings.

It isn't long until the whoosh echoes around us and large, white, feathery wings bump into mine, pushing them back. As if they have a mind of their own, mine bristles from the touch, and I can feel a sensation throughout my entire body as her wings touch me. It's warm and relaxing, but also makes my cock twitch again and floods my body with... desire.

How strange...

In an instant, her wings retract, sheathing to her back, while mine still

remain out for all of us to see and gawk at.

I could definitely get used to this...

“Okay, now that your wings have been unfurled, you need to know how to sheath them,” Matthew says plainly.

“Sheath them?” I ask, concerned about flooding my being. I just got these things, I don’t want to stow them away again...

“Mercy is a lost soul, therefore, she will be invisible to the world below. The two of you will guide her visions and memories to help her find her body, but there will be times when you need to be visible to the world around you in order to help her,” Matthew explains.

Roche is running her fingers through my feathers, and the sensation is strange to adjust to. I can feel it like someone’s touching my skin, like a light tickle.

“You’ll need to be visible, much in the way a Contractor Demon or a Reaper would. To be able to converse and interact with the mortals,” Roche says, her voice full of awe.

“And mortals can’t see you if you are walking around with gigantic wings,” Matthew finishes.

“Ah, yes. God forbid the mortals know angels and demons actually exist,” I grumble.

Mercy’s eyes fall, a hint of sadness in them, and I wonder what she is thinking. She’s remained too quiet for my liking.

“To sheath your wings, you need only to will them shut. Find something to ground you, to pull you back to neutral, so to speak,” Matthew explains.

“Right, makes sense.” Valory nods in understanding, her wings still held tightly together.

The exercise is quick, and I’m able to sheath my wings easily, focusing on none other than my sole desire to get the hell out of HAD, and remain on the surface with unclipped wings for good. The same thing is what helps me unfurl them again, and I grasp onto this quickly.

Valory, however, struggles to unfurl her wings once more, but she eventually does.

Well, this may be a piece of cake after all.

CHAPTER 16



MERCY

I'M STILL NOT ENTIRELY sure how any of this is going to go because there are so many questions I have, but as Roche and Matthew arrange the angel and demon around me, I know there is no time to be curious.

Endor slips an arm around my waist, which causes me to blush. I know crushing on a demon isn't the smartest thing to do, but hell if I can't help it.

Though, I suppose it's not really him doing anything to stoke the desire intentionally. He just happens to be hot as sin, warm, protective... It's not something anyone has afforded me before, except maybe Miles.

I try to recall the memory, feeling like it is on the edge of my mind, but I come up against a wall.

But why can't I remember...

Another touch circles me, this one much softer, more delicate. Valory's not as warm as Endor, but the feeling of relaxation and peace overcomes me, and I feel like if I shut my eyes, I could take a long, well-deserved nap.

"No, no, no. No sleeping on the car ride down," Endor teases me, his voice edged with sarcasm, but also humor.

"Descent will be quick, but you may experience some disorientation upon your landing," Matthew says, his eyes on us.

Something about the way he looks at Valory, then at me... makes my skin crawl. There's something familiar about the way his gaze lingers, but I can't quite place where or why...

What does it say about me that I trust the demon more than I trust the angel?

“Understood,” Endor answers solidly, and I catch Valory looking back at Matthew, a look of determination on her face, and then, a cold breeze surrounds me.

Valory’s wings stretch out around us, one behind Endor and me, and the other in front. The air chills my skin, and without thinking, I crawl closer to him, needing warmth. My mind tries to make sense of the sudden jolt, the sudden terror that floods me at that one word.

Cold.

Everything is so cold.

But before I can even grasp the wisps of my own thoughts, Endor’s wings stretch around us—his long, soft, black feathers curling around me, battling against Valory’s, and the air becomes much more potent.

“Close your eyes,” Valory whispers in my ear as my fingers grab on tightly to Endor’s shirt. “And hold on tight. We’re ready for takeoff.”

Endor’s deep, sarcastic voice soothes something inside me, and I don’t think twice. I listen to both of them. After all, what choice do I have but to trust them. They’ve both given me no reason not to, and if what Matthew and Roche said was true... I’ll need to trust them with my life.

Trust they will help me find my body, and then...

My mind goes blank as the thrust of the atmosphere moves against me, against us, but I still feel it as it shakes me. Though their wings protect me from the harsh wind, the chill. When the deafening sound of breaking the barriers stops, my ears ring and I feel lightheaded, and suddenly, sleep seems like a really good idea. Against the warmth of a sexy demon, it’s too hard not to fight, and I give in.

“Good night...” I mutter as I let slumber overtake me, and the last thing I hear is Endor cursing.

CHAPTER 17



VALORY

“FUCK,” Endor curses as Mercy goes limp, her fingers letting go of the chunk of his shirt.

I move forward, my wings breaking her fall as if they have a mind of their own. “She’s out,” I say as I cradle her in my wings. “The trip must have been too much for her,” I mutter.

Surprisingly, he lets her go, looking me up and down as I pull her close. Her breathing is shallow, and her coloring slightly paler than it was in Heaven. I brush a strand of dark hair from her face and look up at the brooding demon before me.

“No shit, Captain obvious,” he grumbles, and I can’t help but feel incensed.

“What is your problem, huh? You’ve had an attitude since you strolled into Heaven this morning and—”

“Strolled? Baby, I don’t take long walks in Heaven for the fucking fun of it,” he says as he runs a hand through his hair, looking around at our surroundings.

It’s then that I notice we’re in a very dark area. A corridor or alleyway of some sort. The air is humid and thick, and smells of forgotten sandwiches and moist earth.

Deciding to let his attitude go for the moment, I switch the conversation. “Where are we?” I run my hands through Mercy’s hair, feeling her skin. It’s

not hot or sweaty, which is a good sign, and she looks to be sleeping peacefully.

Steam wafts up through the vents in the ground, blowing around trash and debris in the alley, and I hear a groan.

A human groan.

Endor must hear it, too, because his gaze settles on the heap in the corner from where the sound came.

My own anxiety flashes, a lifelong fear instilled in me even in the afterlife: I am a woman with a child, and we are in danger.

It's a strange sort of instinct, given I've never had children of my own. Hell, I haven't even had sex, period—which makes the danger that much more profound.

The man under the mass of newspapers and blankets looks up at us, his bright blue eyes standing out against the dismal, dreary walls like the sun on the horizon.

“Angel...” he says in awe, and Endor's wings stretch out, all menacing black feathers and his eyes narrow on the man.

“You should not be able to see us.”

The man looks from Endor to me. “I shouldn't be able to see a lot of things, son, but it's God's will.”

Endor scoffs, his feathers bristling as he closes in on the man.

“God did not send me, and I am no angel.”

I can't deny the shiver that runs down my spine at the tone of his voice. The way his shoulder blades tense, the way his wings shimmer in the low light of the streetlamps...

I feel a warmth in my core that begs to spread further and wants him to turn around. I want to look into his eyes and see the glow I know he must be emitting. Angels have a golden glow, much like Matthew did earlier. Though, I've never engaged in such things myself—never thought to.

I wonder if I would have that same glow, and I find my thoughts wandering to what a demon's glow would look like, what it would feel like...

Get a hold of yourself, Val!

Mercy shifts in my hold, and it's enough to break the weird spell I'm under, enough to bring me back to the here and now.

“Endor, stop. He won't hurt us,” I say as realization overcomes me. The man looks at me with tired eyes and I can see the aura around him, and it's... peaceful.

My heart suddenly aches for this man, not knowing what circumstances led him in this alley, but feeling a duty to provide him the grace I know he seeks.

“Please, sir... I... I mean no ill will,” the man speaks, his voice tinged with fear and awe.

Endor lets out a growl, but he does not retract his wings.

“Then what is it you want?”

The man’s voice shakes. “I just want to... live.”

His words hit me like a ton of bricks. It isn’t money, or shelter, or a drink. It’s life.

I watch as his aura flickers against the dark walls, fading in and out.

This man is dying.

Endor turns for one moment to look at me, and I see it.

A question, a moment of contemplation, and then, he turns back to the man and speaks.

“I will make a deal with you.”

The man looks at me, frightened, but I cannot move. Holding Mercy to my chest, I am torn.

“Endor, we are not here to—”

Endor holds his hand up to proverbially shush me, and the action flares my anger. I feel a rush of power surge through me, through my wings, and it makes me feel... alive.

“I will grant you an extension, if you give me what I need.”

The man gulps, fright in his eyes as he looks up at Endor looming over him. All tattoos, dark hair blowing in the wind, and long, sexy black wings stretched as far as the eye can see.

“What can I give you?”

“Information,” Endor says darkly. “You’re going to tell me everything I need to know about where we are, and then, perhaps, I will grant you what you wish.”

My brain finally comes back on circuit as I realize what he’s doing, and I can’t let him.

I can’t let this poor man make a deal with this demon, to sign away his soul to Hell.

“We are...”

“No!” I shout, and the power ripples through me, outward like a wave. It hits Endor, making him stumble just slightly, but when it covers the man and

he looks at me with tears in his eyes, a peace overcoming him, I know this is the right thing.

We can figure the rest of this out on our own, I know it. I will not let this demon collect contracts on my watch.

Not today, Endor.

Not today.

The light engulfs the man, and Endor curses again, a wave of power emanating from his wings as he turns and looks at me with fire in his eyes.

“The light is so beautiful,” the man whispers, just before he falls into slumber, a golden-white light protecting him from the darkness that stands before us.

“What the fuck was that?” Endor asks as he storms over to Mercy and me.

“I will not let you spread your demonic lies to the innocent.”

“That man was not innocent, Valory. He has killed people.”

“You don’t know that,” I counter. Mercy snuggles against me, Endor’s eyes burning like brimstone.

“Yes, I do. Comes with the territory of being a demon. I know the sins people have committed. I can see it in their eyes.”

“Whatever he’s done...”

“We could have used the information. Which he would have given us easily. But now...” Endor slams his fist against the wall. “Now, what’s the point? There’s no bargaining chip because you got your fucking panties in a twist and wanted to play guardian fucking angel.”

“Says the demon who wanted to play contractor,” I bite back.

Endor pushes off the wall, his wings folding back in, and as they start to fade, I just know what he’s doing. He’s sheathing his wings. He’s going invisible...

“Endor, where are you going?” I ask as I scoop Mercy into my arms bridal style, attempting to follow him.

“To find us some fucking answers, Val,” he growls, and with that, I watch Endor disappear into the night, leaving Mercy and me alone on the edge of the alley.

This is going to be a long journey.

I look at Mercy, and as frightened as I feel, I know none of that matters. Because in my arms I hold a lost soul, and if this moment has taught me anything, it is that I am more than capable of guiding the lost into the light.

As I wait for Endor to return, I make a promise to myself and Mercy that I will do everything in my power to save the lost.

Even if it means I have to go up against Endor.

Thank you for reading!

Continue the Lost Souls series in book two, Hell Everlasting, coming in 2023!

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PREVIEW

Endor

I clench my jaw as I wait for the attendant at the La Quinta hotel to finish whatever the fuck she's doing on the computer that's taking damn near eternity.

The walk through Pine Ridge was needed, especially after Valory's little act of heroism.

Just who the fuck does she think she is?

Shooting first and asking questions later, that is supposed to my job. Not the pretty little angel's.

All angels are just trigger happy, if you ask me. Pent up in the big castle in the sky all the time, having to follow orders and law without any chance of deviating. I should have expected Valory to flex her angelic power the first chance she got when dear old daddy, Matthew, wasn't watching her like a hawk.

I bet it felt good, too.

The thought makes me wonder if she's susceptible to falling off the bandwagon, and just how much it would take to push her... Perhaps I can add more than one soul to my roster to really cement my contractor deal. No demon's ever pulled an angel to the dark side before.

Finally, the sloth passing for a person looks up from her computer screen and hands me two key cards.

"Your room is on the top floor, hope that won't be a problem," she says with a pop of her gum. She sucks her bubble inward, chomping on it so loud, I think the sound itself is like nails on a fucking chalkboard.

I take the keycards from her, grumbling a thank you as I slide them in my pants pocket. Once I exit the hotel, I find my way around to the back parking lot. It isn't late by human standards, only about eight pm. But by the darkness that blankets the sad little town of Pine Ridge, New York, it feels like midnight, which I'm rather thankful for.

I make my way behind the dumpster, unsheathing my wings. It feels so fucking good to let them out, let them stretch, and I am swept up in their magnetism once more. It doesn't take me long to reach Valory and Mercy, who is still sleeping peacefully in Valory's arms like some stray kitten.

Valory looks at her like she is the sun, moon, and stars, with so much wonder and awe, I feel like I'm intruding. Her golden hair falls over her tan shoulder, her skin practically glowing against the white and ivory dress that looks far too regal for the back alley of some side street. She looks beautiful, like a true angel.

I realize I'm staring, and shake it off. It's not like I've never seen a beautiful woman before, they're a dime dozen where I come from, so I see them all the time in Hell. But I've never really looked at angel up close before.

I fold my wings down, but I do not sheath them. The sound of the light flapping alerts Valory, breaking her awestruck gaze and the weird spell that's fallen over me.

"I didn't hear you arrive," she says, her eyes shifting from awestruck to cold and panicked.

I shrug as I take my time striding up to them. Carefully, slowly.

"Surprised you stayed put. I would have thought you'd be rushing off to save the day again."

Valory purses her lips. "Well I would have, but that would defeat the order that we *work together*, wouldn't it?"

I slide my hands in my pockets as I reach her. Her wings flutter, covering her legs, covering Mercy, but even in the low light reflecting off the puddles I can see they go on forever. Thoughts of what they'd look like wrapped around *my* waist threaten to push forth, but I resist them.

For now.

I will poison this angel soon enough, but right now my only concern is the lost soul she's so enamored with.

Valory looks up at me, her blue eyes ablaze, cheeks flushed as she takes in the sight of me in my grandiosity. I flex my wings for good measure.

Go on and get a good look.

I know they are badass.

“This *partnership* will work best if you listen to me and let me lead.”

Valory moves to stand, careful not to wake Mercy.

“This partnership will work best if you keep me in the loop. I did not know where you were going, or what you were doing, and—”

I hold up the key card in front of her and she shuts up.

“I believe the words you are looking for, angel, are *thank you*.”

Valory sighs, pausing dramatically if only to aggravate me so. The desire to make this woman kneel, listen to my word, is overwhelming, but I know now is not the time. I need to get Mercy to the hotel, where she will be safe. Where she can sleep off Heaven’s jet lag.

“You have not done anything deserving of my thanks yet.” She holds Mercy in her arms, taking one step forward toward me. She nods in the direction I had arrived from. “But the day isn’t over yet. Lead the way, Endor.”

I scoff at her attitude, but my cock clearly has other ideas and I have to shift as to not to draw attention.

“As you wish, Valory,” I say smoothly as my wings flex themselves once more.

“I do hope you can keep up.” I smirk as I let my wings carry me up, into the dark night. Soft flapping sounds behind me, echoing my own wings, and I can’t help but feel like the night will be never-ending.

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ABOUT ARIEL DAWN

USA Today Bestselling Author Ariel Dawn grew up as an avid reader and is a creative soul.

Ariel writes plot driven paranormal romance, urban fantasy, and reverse harem and hopes to venture into many other genres in the future. When she isn't writing, she can be found cosplaying, attending conventions, swimming with her mermaid tail, creating all sorts of artwork in her studio, or editing photos for her photography business. A self-professed geek and foodie, she loves hanging out with family and friends and playing video games and board games with her retro gamer husband.

CURVY AND THE CURSED



JUDE COCAIGNE

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Edited by: Word to World Traduction

CURVY AND THE CURSED

It takes curves to break a curse.

Rowan's an interior design student, not a waitress, but the pay for that super select one-night job promises to be epic. She shuts down her nerves when she gets in the limousine and two masked people tell her to put a blindfold on. The night's gonna be long.

As the party blows and she stumbles upon a demonic ritual she was not supposed to witness, Rowan crams her curvy ass out the window and into the surrounding woods. But when the armed guards who were chasing her double back, Rowan soon finds out why nobody's ever come out alive from this cursed forest.

CHAPTER 1



IT'S ALMOST TIME. I FIX MY SMOKY MAKE-UP AND MESSY PIXIE CUT ONCE more, and pull on the hem of the skirt, again. This outfit is awkward. Outrageous, some might say. It fits my plump curves well enough, and the blue of the plaited fabric complements my purple hair, but the skirt is way too short for my comfort. I mean, come on, my panties show every time I take a step. And the shirt's buttons are barely holding together against my boobs. One wrong move and I can get arrested for flashing. The tie's a fun touch, though. Very schoolgirl gone wrong. But I'm not sure about the heels. How am I supposed to serve properly all night long on heels like these?

I received strict instructions for tonight, and frankly, it all sounds super dodgy. A knot grows in the pit of my stomach, threatening to turn into heartburn, but I push it back into the depths whence it comes. Fuck unease, I need the money, so... to hell with conventions!

I still jump as the door slams open, letting in my flamboyant flat mate and best friend, Nola.

"Rowan Henley, your carriage awaits!" she announces with an over-the-top curtsy before straightening, a madwoman's grin sprawled on her face. "Oh, it's such a mysterious event, so exciting! Are you excited?"

The frown creasing my foundation says it all. "I'm skeptical. And nervous."

That's enough to worry Nola. "But why? Come on, you trust me, right? I would never put you up to a job that could cause you any harm. It's the most talked-about event of the year. Gwideon Malevant's Mystery Ball!"

Her eyes twinkle like stars as she mentions the name of the most influential zillionaire in the world—who also happens to be very secretive

and, though super handsome, has the deadeast peepers I've ever seen. I shudder as Nola resumes. "Everyone who's anyone will be there! And I'm not talking little TV starlets you've never heard of, no missy. CEOs and billionaires and people you actually want to network with, that's the jam!"

I regain some confidence at these words. I do, somewhat desperately, need to connect with people who would indeed be interested in my designing talents and could afford my ambitions. No way I'm gonna be a waitress all my life after all. That's just to pay for my studies.

"Yeah, okay. It's just..." I check outside the window. A black limousine with dark windows is waiting in front of our house. "Don't you find it odd that they're sending a limo to fetch me? I mean, are they for real taking me to a mysterious place dressed like a call-girl to do some waitressing? I don't even know where I'm going! And they were crystal clear. I'm not allowed to take my phone with me. My phone! What kind of event is this?"

"The fancy schmancy super exclusive kind, my dear, where there won't be press or selfies to dampen the mood." Nola takes my hands in hers. They're so soft against my clammy palms. "Relax, Roro. You're gonna be just fine, even without your phone. And you're gonna get loads of money to pay the rent and your school fees, isn't that awesome? Besides, you might meet someone interesting who'll sweep you off your feet and take you away from this dump and give you the life you deserve! What d'you say?"

I smirk. "I say you're a lunatic, Nola Green. But I love your enthusiasm."

The car honks twice.

"Shit, I gotta go. Wish me luck?"

"You don't need luck, love. You're awesome enough. Have fun!"

I grab my leather jacket and emergency backpack and run down the stairs, stilettos in hand. As I hold the front door open, I put them on, losing my balance and almost tripping, but the doorjamb helps me regain some composure. I close the door, straighten my skirt, and march towards the ominous car with all the grace of an offended cat trying to save some dignity, but failing miserably.

The blinding headlights make me squint, and I'm unable to see the face of the driver, or anything else really. The unmistakable pop of a car door lets me know someone opened it, expecting my immediate arrival, so I trot on. In my haste to embark, I lose a shoe. I snatch it just in time before the door slams shut in my face as the car bursts into life and revs down the street.

In the gloom of the back seats, I make out two dark silhouettes in black

cloaks and silvery venetian masks sat opposite me. One of them grabs my bag and rummages through it, I guess to make sure I didn't sneak in my phone against their recommendations. The other one fixes their veiled gaze on me. Without a word, they hand me a blindfold.

“For me?”

A nod.

I tense up and frown. “Erm, that's super weird. I mean...”

“Put it on, now. No questions. No talking. Do your job, get paid, go home. Understood?”

I squirm in my seat but nod. I have no choice now, do I? The door's probably locked, and even if I could open it, the car's driving way too fast to jump out of without killing myself. A heaving sigh sails through my lips as I put the blindfold on. It's going to be a fucking long night.

CHAPTER 2



AFTER WHAT SEEMS LIKE HOURS, THE CAR STOPS AND THE DOOR POPS OPEN.

“You can take the blindfold off now. Go to the back entrance. Show your ID to the guards and find the maître d’. He’ll give you your assignment for the night. Work well and you’ll get an even bigger reward. Have a good night, Ms. Henley.”

I unfold the fabric with great care. Now’s not the time to ruin my make-up, though thankfully, I’ve taken my kit for touch-ups. Always come prepared, eh?

What I’m not prepared for is the sight greeting me as I step outside the car. I’ve seen grandiose mansions in magazines and renovated castles in the countryside on my travels. But this? It’s the stuff of dreams and fairytales—if Wonderland was an episode of *Grand Designs* and your fairy godmother’s name was Kevin McCloud.

A massive grade I listed Tudor manor, complete with turrets and a keep, rises from the impeccably manicured grounds, the longstanding Ancaster stone ashlar giving way to modern window panels and intricately designed glass doors. A perfect blend of old, contemporary, lavish, and fucking wealthy. How on Earth has the owner bypassed the legal protections and severe restrictions in place regarding renovations and transformation of such a building is beyond me. The stonework gives me an inkling of where we are, though. Lincolnshire. Quite a long way from London and home.

Determined to make the most of this evening, I march as best as I can towards the back entrance, my stilettos sticking into the gravel path more than once. I pass the guards and find the maître d’ in the bustling kitchen. Other waitresses dressed like me, and busboys with even more scanty outfits,

are waiting for instructions.

The maître d' stands in the middle of the room and clears his throat. He looks like a penguin in his black and white livery but gives off so much confidence and poise that everyone listens. "Serving staff, please gather around. Good evening and welcome to this very special event. We are counting on your professionalism and discretion tonight more than ever, and I weigh my words." He lifts his nose even higher, eyes closed as though he's reciting Shakespeare. "You will witness some affairs, overhear private remarks, and will be required to forget everything at once. What happens in this house tonight stays in this house, tonight and forevermore."

He raises the bunch of paper he's holding over his head. "Here are non-disclosure forms you will have to sign before you take your service. Fail to abide by the rules and you will pay. Wages will be withheld, *a minima*." His ominous stare pierces every one of us.

I shift, unease and disquiet overtaking my whole body with a vengeance. What trap is this? I don't mind being a waitress to pay for the bills and my studies, but I can't say I love the job. And I never signed up for this kind of portentous shenanigans.

The maître d' continues his threatening speech, but excited whispers behind my ears catch my attention more.

"I hear that it's an orgy or something, very hush-hush, but so many rich people!"

"Yeah, all the big moguls are here to make important transactions while having loads of fun."

"And I heard," a third one adds, "there're magic rituals involved, too."

I shake my head. Too much information; not at all what I ordered. I'm just about to make a run for it when someone passes me a form and a pen.

"One last thing," the maître d' shouts over the hubbub. "If you feel you cannot respect your contract, please announce yourself now, and you will be escorted back to your home, no questions asked."

My instincts are screaming for me to leave and walk back to London if I must. My eyes linger on the paper. A non-disclosure contract, with a number at the end. The amount of money I could make for this one and only night. Quite the colossal figures, too. With that money in hand, I could focus on my studies for a while without having to do odd jobs anymore. I could even get that tablet and the program I need to design my dream spaces and interiors.

Reason—or is it greed?—reinforces my determination. One night. Eyes,

ears, and mind shut. *Just do the job and never think about it ever again.* Except when I play with my little designs on that awesome tablet. It'll be worth it, I'm sure. Right?

A hefty sigh sails through my lips as I sign the form before my doubts and growing disquiet could win the fight. The maître d' takes it from me at once and places a simple black mask in my hand instead, his predatory glare devouring my frightened face, complacency trickling in his smirk. I've probably only imagined that last part because of the restlessness icing my veins. It's been like signing my soul to the Devil himself.

"Masks on. Everyone, take a tray and go to your assigned location. The guests await."

CHAPTER 3



THE INTERIOR OF THE MANOR RIVALS WITH THE FAÇADE IN DISPLAYS OF wealth and grandeur. Under the dim chandelier lights, I focus on the exquisitely carved stucco ceilings and roman colonnades to avoid burning my eyes on scenes the reddish half-darkness could never erase from my mind.

I've never considered myself to be a prude. Quite the opposite, in fact. I've proudly modelled in the nude for sculpting artists, and I know no shame when it comes to showing off my curves and perfect imperfections. Once my weakness, my rolls and awesome love handles have become my best allies over the years. Oh, and I sure don't shy away from sex; I love sex. Experimenting is fun, and I could talk about positions and toys with my closest friends and even strangers for hours. But this...

Well, for one thing, I'd never, ever, have expected *this*. Had I known, I would probably have refused, just because the idea of witnessing well-known people take part in erotic ribaldry makes me uncomfortable. I mean, I may be a bit of an exhibitionist, but I've never considered myself a voyeur. And now that I'm facing the concept, I find it all sorts of gross. What I'm witnessing is like what I'd imagine my parents doing in the bedroom, but worse. Not that I'm judging the people themselves; whatever works for anyone, right? Just the overall current situation really... and the dudes who think it's okay to touch me while they're jerking off on others.

My professionalism's dying away fast.

"Come here, baby. Give us a kiss."

The man's saggy, glistening skin and purple nose make me gag. I wrestle away from his grasp with a disgruntled scream, dropping my platter in a deafening clang and clatter of broken champagne flutes. People stop for a

second to assess the mayhem. All eyes on me. Ugh.

I don't even bother to pick up the mess. I storm out of my section and head back to the kitchen, determined to get away from this nightmare as fast as possible. Anger and disgust blind me, and as I get downstairs, I can't remember which way to go. Too many corridors, and they all look the same.

I take a right, and another, open a few doors and follow more dingy hallways, until I find myself in too deep—literally. This part of the basement looks like it's been carved directly in the rocks. The electric appliances have turned into torches burning in holders pinned to the uneven walls. How very dungeon-like. I don't think I should be here. Truth be told, I need to get out even more now. I don't want to witness some old farts' BDSM fantasies being brought to life.

Chanting reaches my ears as I'm about to turn around. A low hum at first, turning into the creepy soundtrack of a gothic movie. I should leave, like, right now. But, of course, I follow the macabre melody and sink deeper into the underground tunnel.

Darkness surrounds me, but there's a light at the end, taunting me now that I've gone too far and can't go back, since everything is pitch black behind me. I'm so fucking stupid sometimes.

The chanting intensifies, accompanied by frantic breathing and moaning. Images of porn movies flood my mind, but I'm so far off. As I reach the end of this interminable hallway, the creepiest vision offers itself to me. Everywhere my eyes fall, sweaty, oily bodies mingle and masked faces kiss, grotesque grimaces full of tongues and saliva.

As I get used to the flickering light emanating from the torches perched on the circular chamber's wall and columns, I realize what makes this scene disturbing: the sheer proportion of inhuman features. In the sea of diverse bodies getting their freak on in front of me, some of them have literal fiery eyes, others sharp fangs, or lizard tongues and scales, actual fur, tails, or even pigs' noses. It's a whole *The Devil's Advocate's* fresco vibe when it comes to life at the showdown. Except the demons look better in the movie.

My eyes catch a flash of metallic light, and my attention turns to the center of the slimy pit. On an altar fit for an Egyptian pharaoh, set above the swarm, a chanting, naked man with glowing amethyst eyes holds a knife over the body of a young, nubile woman. I can't tell if she's aware of the danger she's in. What I can say is, this is the super mogul billionaire dude who owns the place—so, technically, my boss. And he's about to murder this girl. The

gasp escapes my mouth before I can stop it. And fuck, of course, he heard it.

“Get that girl!”

I don't know who he gives the order to, since I'm already running the fuck out of this fucking tunnel; just that his voice booms over the orgiastic noises, echoing past me in the darkness, and rushing footsteps immediately follow me.

As I exit the maze of corridors, I hide behind the first door I can open, hoping whoever is chasing me won't think of looking behind closed doors. Heavy footsteps approach my hiding spot fast. I hold my breath, sweat pearling on my temples. My chest hurts, my heart is about to stop, and my lungs are on fire. Not a peep, though. Please, Roro.

A doorknob rattles close by. And another. I tried them too; none of those doors opened except the closet I'm in now. A third doorknob gets handled. I'm next. Shit. My heart skips a beat as I close my eyes and prepare to meet my fate.

“Paddy!” One of my pursuers is just in front of me. I see the shadow of his feet under the door. I'm fucking done for. “Stop wasting time! I'll go upstairs, you go right.”

“Did you even see what she looks like?” The Paddy guy is approaching.

“No fucking idea. But she can't be far, and she'll be dodgy as fuck, so look for any bitch that's sweating like a pig.”

They run away; one upstairs, the other to the right.

I gulp in the stale air by the liter, my chest heaving like crazy. I sit on the floor of this fateful closet and recuperate. My brain wants to make sense of what's just happened, what I've seen—or think I saw? Was any of this even real? I'm in this fucking closet, aren't I? Yup. Real enough. I don't have time to think. I need to get out of here and quick.

The coast seems clear, so I take my chances and slide out of my hiding place. The stupid stairs face me, the same ones that led me to that nightmare of a dungeon. Well, I'm not going back up there, nor the other way, that's for sure. So, right it is.

I make my way back to an area I recognize and to the fucking kitchen. I go straight for the staff quarter to get my stuff then head for the exit, but the maître d' stops me before I can reach it.

“Where do you think you're going?”

“Out of here! I didn't sign up for whatever the fuck is happening in this hell of a place.”

I try to leave again, but the man presses a single hand on my shoulder, and the sheer urgency of the gesture compels me.

“You can’t leave now. They’ll stop you. They have guns, and they value their privacy above everything else.” It’s not a threat, but a warning. “Besides, where would you go? We’re in the middle of nowhere.”

I heed his words for a second, appreciative of his concern, though he has no idea what I’m up against. An inebriated guest chooses this moment to barge in and grope every waitress in his vicinity. Behind him, a bouncer pops his head through the open door, obviously searching for something. Most probably me.

The maître d’s tall build only just hides me; I sure as heck can’t stay here any longer. “I don’t care. I need to get some fresh air anyway. A run would do me real good, too.”

I step towards the staff entrance, careful to remain out of the bouncer’s sight, only to be greeted by two heavily armed guards barring the way. They pierce me with suspicious glares.

“Sorry, wrong door,” I mutter with haste.

Plan B it is, then. I back away and head for the toilets.

Bingo. The window above the sink opens and looks big enough for me to slither out. At least, I hope. But first, let’s be practical. I take off my heels and slip on the sneakers hiding in my bag. I knew they’d come in handy. Always be prepared, right?

I test the sink’s sturdiness before climbing on it. The task is arduous. Heights of any kind are not my friends, and the sink does not appreciate my weight at all. It creaks and wilts under my feet. I reach the window as fast as I can to ease the burden and hoist myself onto the sill, wiggling over it like the most ungracious caterpillar. I make it through in one piece, though I scrape my thighs and land rather heavily on my ankle. But adrenaline’s rushing through my veins by now, and the approaching footsteps of loaded guards press me to set the pain aside and search for shelter.

The grounds are devoid of hiding spot. But thankfully, the night is as dark as a pot of freshly brewed coffee. Well, this may just have been the oddest thought I’ve ever had sober and fleeing, but I roll with it. I can’t roll on the ground though, as I’ve seen so many action movie heroes do to save their skin. All I can do is hurdle myself across the grounds as stealthily as is possible for a five-foot seven curvy woman with purple hair and a slight limp.

“Freeze!”

Shit, the guards. My blood freezes alright, but I don't turn around. I skedaddle as fast as my hurting ankle allows. A wheezing sound passes me by, followed by another. Flying objects lodge themselves ahead of me in the grass, and only when one of them hisses so close to my ear that I stumbled next to one do I realize they're fucking bullets. Those guys aren't playing.

CHAPTER 4



STUNNED AT FIRST, MY SURVIVAL INSTINCTS PUSH ME TO CRAWL FURTHER. Keep on moving, they say, until my fear turns into more adrenaline. I jump back on my feet and zigzag through the pain towards the edge of the forest. My nerves tell me I should be safe there. And it's my only shot at escaping, anyway.

I make it in the nick of time. The guards are fast approaching, their aim getting dangerously close to scoring. One last surge of adrenaline helps me sink into the undergrowth and deeper into the forest, leaving any remnants of light and direction behind.

Footsteps scurry after me; the guard screams for me to stop; bullets zoom past my head, ricocheting off the trunks, until one scrapes my arm and I fall headfirst in the brushes. Disoriented and scared as fuck, I stay on the ground, muffling my panicked breathing as best as I can while trying hard not to scream from the pain invading my whole body.

"Shit, we've lost her," one man says.

"I told you to take your flashlight," berates the other.

"Yeah? Where's yours then?"

"Oh, fuck off."

They grunt, then turn on their heels.

"She won't go far, anyway. Those woods are cursed. She'll be back..."

"Yeah, or she'll be dead by morning."

The voices fade as the two men retrace their steps back to the property's grounds. When I can't hear them anymore, I sit up and let out a massive sigh of relief before excruciating pain takes my breath away. I wince as I massage my arm where the bullet has grazed me, then my swollen ankle. I'm bruised

all over and everything hurts, but I can't cry, not yet. My head is still buzzing from the rush.

These woods are cursed.

"Yeah, I bet they are," I whisper to myself, scanning my surroundings. "This whole fucking night is cursed."

I get on my knees and brush leaves and dirt off my ripped shirt and skirt before pulling on a low branch to get up. I test my ankle, but the pain is too strong. Back on all four, I feel around in the damp moss and crunchy ground for a stick that I could use as a cane. No luck. Well, fuck. I'll have to bite through the pain until I find something.

"OK, Rowan, time to get a move on."

This I do, almost entirely sightless, even as my eyes have gotten accustomed to the night. Dark as a pot of freshly brewed coffee indeed. I stumble my way through the dense undergrowth, bumping into thick trees and rocks, advancing come what may on an altogether uneven terrain. Determination has taken the reins and gives me the patience to go slow but ever onward, because let's face it, there's no way on Earth I'd go back now. What the heck was, anyway? Armed guards firing crowd control ammo? And for what? Just so I wouldn't leave?

"These people are sick," I mutter to the endless darkness around me.

Silence answers me, stiff, oppressing. Not an owl hoots, no rodents scurry. I used to spend nights in the woods as a kid, camping with my dad. There were always sounds, weird noises that freaked me out. Knocks on wood, animal cries, leaves crunching. But now, nothing. Or rather, an absence of everything, which is somehow worse.

These woods are cursed.

A shiver runs down my spine. The ominous atmosphere doesn't bode well at all. Maybe I've been rash. Would they shelter me now, after my rebellion? I look back but have no idea where I am or where I've come from. I can't even tell how long I've been roaming without aim either.

"Stupid girl... You had to go and do it, didn't you? Always the impulsive one... Well, look where it took you this time." I glance around, unease clutching harder at my guts.

A distant rustling hits my ears, followed by more leaves crumpling. Seems like I'm not alone after all. My instincts tell me to run, because if I can hear it from this far, then it means it's something heavy and big. And it's coming my way.

A sudden howl blisters the silence, curling my blood. The rustling becomes more pressing; it comes closer, faster.

Adrenaline shoots through my veins once again and survival takes the helm of my body and mind. I run. Forward. Fast. The rustling's approaching. Faster. My hands hit trunks, branches lash at my face. I fumble and stumble, but I move as fast as I can in the dark, strange woods. Until I fall on grass.

A meadow, and above, the stars, their light a beacon after the obscurity of the woods. Overhead stands a building, and I crawl towards it. No light shines through the windows, but the imposing edifice looks sturdy and safe. Safer than here, now. Growls slither through my ears directly into my brain. UP. RUN.

The double oak door keeps on getting further, or perhaps it's my brain playing tricks on me. I reach it panting, breathless. My heart pumps in my throat and pain lingers underneath my fear, ready to pounce. I batter at the gate with all that's left of my might.

"Let me in! Please let me in!" Tears slither down my cheek in rapid rivulets.

The door's locked, and no sign of life comes from inside. But the growls are fast approaching.

"Help! Please! Open the door!"

Exhausted and losing hope fast, I break into sobs and crumble against the wood panels, just about ready to give up. But my last shreds of determination—or is it just masochism?—push me to face my impending doom, so I turn around, as steady as I can muster to be. Well, nothing has ever prepared me for the sight meeting my tearful eyes.

A beast not unlike a wolf but standing on hind legs, hands and feet as gigantic as paddles with humongous claws gleaming in the starry light. I make out the fangs in its maw against the backdrop of the forest, white and glistening with saliva. Its eyes shine a vicious red.

The monster pauses only a few feet away, assessing me, sniffing my scent. As it licks its chops and prepares to leap, I know my death has arrived.

CHAPTER 5



BEADS OF SWEAT AND TEARS BLIND ME AS I CLAW MY WAY BACK ONTO MY feet and turn my back on the monster, battering the doors, sobbing and whining like a newborn babe.

“Please... Let me in...”

The creature’s growls draw closer. It’s taking its sweet time, making the grass quiver under its approaching footsteps. It’s on the porch now, its heavy claws scraping the wood. Its breathing is shallow, rasping, almost on my neck.

I fall on my knees and lean against the door, tears flooding my face.

It unlocks and opens. Balance eludes me, but I catch myself in time and scramble inside as fast as I can, closing the door and pushing against it with all my weight. I brace myself, waiting for the beast to destroy the wood panels, but everything’s still. No growls, no rasping breath, not a sound comes from outside—or inside.

I quiet my breathing and dry my cheeks. As my eyes accustom themselves to the pitch darkness, I check my surroundings. I make out black-and-white tiles on the floor and a long rug running all the way down the corridor I’m in.

A flicker of light appears at the end of the hallway.

“Hello?” I mutter.

Not a sound, but the orange glow grows ever so bright, casting shadows on the paneled walls. The distinctive scent and crackling of freshly lit pinewood reach my senses, but I hesitate still.

“Hello?” I say again, a little louder, still to no avail.

Fear grapples with my brain, but compared to what I experienced

moments ago, it's too weak to resist the compelling promise of light and warmth. I get up and limp towards whatever expects me.

I find an antechamber that looks like a waiting room, but cozier. The walls closest to the entrance are covered in bookshelves full of leather-bound books, while across the room stands two massive half-moon windows, and in the middle of them, a baroque fireplace. A velvet-clad wingback armchair complete with a throw invites me to snuggle by the hearth, while a leather Chesterfield sofa and its matching chair surround a mahogany coffee table.

I check behind me but see no sign of anyone or anything. I venture into the antechamber, pick up the throw and nestle into the wingback's inviting arms, unable to resist Morpheus' call.

Commotion somewhere inside the mansion wakes me up with a start. Daylight's peering through the shutters; specks of dust dance in the beams. I prick up my ears, but no more noise troubles the watchful silence. After a few seconds, my body brings me back to the grim reality. I stretch my sore neck and aching knees and assess the state of my ankle. Resting has improved the pain, but I still can't put too much weight on it.

I hobble towards the corridor and go in search of whoever let me in last night. The hallway ends on an arched double door that I open inch after inch in case there are people on the other side. There is none, but the view that greets my eyes leaves me speechless: a gigantic chandelier casts shadows and beads of light on a marble hall. Marble staircases on each side of the room lead to an overlooking balcony. Colonnades grace the walls on every side, and between every column stand Renaissance statues of goddesses and heroes.

The sheer decadence and marvel of this room dizzy me to the point I must lean against the door jamb and breathe deep, soothing breaths. In awe, I approach the busts and statues one after the other. They're all dusted and clean, but the half-closed shutters on the windows of the gallery grant them shadows of desolation. This is a hall fit for celebrations, but something's amiss.

People. Life.

A clatter makes me jump. It comes from the right, behind an ajar door. With heart pumping and thumping, I tiptoe towards the noise. With each step I take, I become very much aware of my trespassing, but I want to thank the person who saved my life. I push the door slowly, and a whiff of freshly baked bread assaults my nostrils. Right on cue, my stomach grunts so loudly,

the sound echoes in the hall. I wince, mortified. Not the classiest way to be discovered when you're trespassing. I wait for the metaphorical hammer to fall, but nothing happens.

I pluck up the courage to follow the mouth-watering aroma to the kitchen, taking care not to be found, but again, there's no sign of life, save for the still steaming loaf of white bread laid in the center of the kitchen table and surrounded with various delicacies: jams of all colors and tastes, cheeses, cured and smoked hams. A whole feast, seemingly for no one. Or is it all for me?

"Erm, hello?" My voice comes out shaky. I clear my throat. "Is it okay if I eat some of this?"

When no reply comes, I tentatively tear a piece of bread. Stop, wait. The only retort I receive comes from my stomach rumbling some more, so I bite into the warm crumb and melt onto the closest available chair. I rush to add butter and jam before stuffing my mouth with the piece of delight. Then I wolf down some brie and cured ham with more warm bread. I've never eaten such succulent food. I serve myself a glass of fresh orange juice and find a pot full of fragrant coffee, whose flavor makes my body shiver with pleasure.

Realization dawns on me that my aching has subdued. I get on my feet and test my ankle. No pain. Wait. I can walk? Dance even! I improvise a little jig to prove it to myself. Jam-covered bread in hand, I twirl in the kitchen, oblivious to anything but the pleasure this breakfast is procuring me. But the view from outside the kitchen window stops me dead. A beautiful garden spreads all the way to the forest, azaleas stealing the show from hydrangeas in a bed of trailing red roses. But the colorful flowers can't distract me from what has stolen my attention in the first place.

In the undergrowth leading to the woods, the monster is watching me. And in the light of day, it's even scarier. Especially as it stands on its hind paws and charges at the window.

CHAPTER 6



I JERK BACKWARDS AND HIT THE TABLE, SCATTERING THE JAMS AND CUTLERY, and dropping the orange juice jug onto the floor. It crashes into thousands of glass pieces and juice spills everywhere, making me slip and fall. I scamper on my bottom to the furthest corner of the kitchen, as far away from the window as I can, crushing glass on my palms in the process.

The pain's nothing compared to the fear that crumples my guts. There is no way to stop the beast from coming for me now. I stare wide eyed at the window, expecting the dreadful creature to crash through it any second. My vivid imagination pictures the glistening fangs tearing at my throat while the sharp claws rip me apart. The waiting is just as agonizing. Warm tears stream down my cheeks; my chest heaves painfully with every terrified gulp of air.

A minute passes before I pluck up the courage to get on my feet. I totter towards the window and risk a glance outside, but there's no sight of the monster, not a trace of it. I let go of the heaviest sigh and turn to the mess I've made. Did I imagine the attack? Did I even see the creature? Sunshine spreads on the table, casting my shadow amongst the rubble. I'm going mad.

Jolts of pain assault my right hand. As I lower my gaze, I witness the blood spilling in thick drops on the ground. I rush to wash myself in the sink. The wounds are superficial, but the sting of the water jostles my memory. The fear was genuine enough; I'm certain I didn't hallucinate the monster.

After the bleeding has stopped, I clean up the table and floor with a wet cloth. I'm halfway through the ordeal when I hear someone approaching. My instincts scream for me to hide, but I remain frozen, orange juice dripping from the cloth inside my hands. The footsteps draw ever closer in the nonchalant stride of someone who knows their way around the place.

Through the kitchen doors enters a beautiful blonde woman, her long, wavy hair falling down her shoulders and covering half her face. She wears unflattering flannel pajamas and fluffy slippers and is wiping her sleep-ridden eyeballs. She pauses as she discovers the mayhem and the stranger standing in a pool of orange juice, before assessing every inch of the place. At last, she locks eyes with a stunned me. Her countenance remains impassible, but her stare hardens. She stays on the threshold and scrutinizes me in complete silence.

At once very aware of what I'm holding, I fumble to the sink to let go of the wiping cloth and clean my hands. "Hi, er," I blurt. "I'm so sorry, I—"

"What are you doing?" the woman says in an impassive tone.

I've extended my hand to shake hers, but apparently, she's not interested; I swiftly take it back and fidget with my fingers instead. "Sorry, er. I'm Rowan. I... Thanks for letting me in last night."

"I didn't." She focuses her attention on the table, still not moving.

"You... Erm, okay." I follow her gaze. My cheeks burn at once. "I'm so sorry for the mess. And I'm sorry I ate half your bread. I was so hungry. And then I got super scared and—"

"No worries."

Two-words blondie ambles towards the fridge to take another jug of orange juice. She disappears into the larder and comes back with a fresh loaf under the arm and some chocolate spread. She clears a space on the table and sits down to eat.

I rush to tidy up the rest of the table, then focus on cleaning the remaining juice on the floor.

"Leave it," the woman says, mouth half-full. "It'll get cleaned later."

"But surely I can't let someone clean up after my mess."

"As you please, but it'll get cleaned anyway."

My brain strives to make sense of what's happening, but the sheer awkwardness and surrealism of the situation just makes me sigh. I get on my knees and wipe the juice. I need an outlet to help my thoughts focus, and there's nothing else to do. From time to time, I take a gander at Goldilocks, whose features remain hidden under the curtain of blonde hair. I only just figure her single visible eye is some shade of blue.

Once I'm done, I turn to her again as she's getting up. "I'm really grateful for the help last night. I got lost and..." The memory of what had found me makes me shudder, but I push it away fast and swallow hard. "I know I've

trespassed but thank you for helping me. I'll be on my way now." Without pause, I strut towards the door. I can tell when I'm not welcome.

"You can't leave."

I stop in my tracks and turn. "What? Why not?"

"There's a monster looking for you. You're not safe out there."

I falter. I hold on to the doorjamb as my head spins out of control. Before I can say anything, the woman passes by me and stops just outside the kitchen, her back to me.

"You are welcome to stay here until the danger's past. There's enough food in the larder to splurge if that's your thing. Find yourself a room upstairs. There'll be clothes. And if you need to inform someone..." She turns her head just enough for me to see the sheer azure of her eyes gleam in the scarce light of the corridor. "There's no cell reception here, so I hope they won't worry too much."

On that ominous note, she saunters back to the main hall, slippers clip-clopping on the marble floors, hands in the flannel pockets of her pajamas, leaving me stunned and scared at the kitchen door.

CHAPTER 7



A FEW MINUTES LATER, I'M OUT THE DOOR, RESOLVED TO FIND MY WAY BACK to civilization and leave this crazy night and place far behind. The sun, high over the canopy of trees, welcomes me with warmth and light. I inhale the fresh, mossy air. It's not so bad out here after all. The memories of last night rapidly fade away in the view of such natural beauty.

The undergrowth shivers to my right. I calculate my position and decide that it's the exact direction whence the monster appeared this morning. My body tenses at once and I hold my breath as I slowly turn my head towards the noise. When a doe jumps out of the bushes into the open grounds, I scream and run back inside, slamming the door shut and leaning against it, out of breath, sweat dripping from my forehead.

Okay, that's not gonna work. I reach for my phone, remembering too late I left it at home yesterday. Great. There's no way I'm going back out there, so what now? I peer around me at the wooded corridor leading to the marble hall and resign myself. If I'm to stay here, I'll make the most of it.

The place looks like a designer's nightmare—or most amazing dream if said designer could revamp it. The wood-paneled walls of the corridor could use a touch of varnish. Better yet, a complete make-over to give it a more welcoming, homey feeling—add some paintings or pictures, a few potted plants, a designer bench here, and over there an antique console table. Ideas dance in my mind to the beat of my imagination.

Then there's the parlor I spent the night in, all dusty and gloomy. I go to open the shutters, but they're stuck. How long have they been closed? The books are coated in grime. Gods, this place needs a good cleaning. My thoughts wander back to the amazing food in the kitchen. Surely, if there's

such a wonderful cook around, there should be a janitor too. The great hall is tidy enough, so is the corridor. The overall aspect of the place seems sanitary, but not exactly clean. Just like the statues in the hall, this room's furniture looks dusted but not polished. The leather of the Chesterfield sofa is worn, and the coffee table lost its varnish a long time ago. But objects like the books on the shelves have not been given any attention in months, maybe years.

I frown. I'm not particularly house-proud or fussy about cleanliness, but as a future interior designer, I expect places like this manor to be well kept, with lovingly looked-after fixtures and decorations. It's all about tender loving care, and this place cruelly lacks any of it. I'll have to do something about that.

Across the corridor from the parlor, I find a masked door neatly concealed within the wood panels. Its knob is missing though, but I make a mental note to find out what secret could lurk behind. I enter the great hall again and make my way upstairs, stopping on the balcony to admire the hall from above. Visions of parties and balls that may have been thrown in this magnificent room cross my mind's eye, and I imagine how the warm light of the chandelier would make the statues look alive.

A scratching sound makes my skin crawl, and I jump, turning around slowly, heart pumping in my chest like crazy. A beautiful long-haired cat, a grey Persian with sparkling blue eyes, is sprawling and clawing at the frayed rug near the windows.

A loud sigh of relief sails through my unclenched lips. "Hey kitty!"

I approach the cat to pet him, but he skitters away at my attempted touch and runs down the right aisle. He stops in front of a door and stares at me with the least interest it could muster, then meows and rubs against the doorjamb.

"You're playing hard to get, huh? Or are you trying to get me into trouble?" I hesitate. Goldilocks downstairs told me to find a room, but there are dozens of doors on either side; I don't feel like intruding any more. "Then again, it's not like I have better things to do, eh?"

Obviously, I succumb to curiosity and follow the cat, opening the door to find a desolate room with broken furniture thrown around and wallpaper peeling off. I frown and look for the feline, but he's already trotted further down the hallway, purring against another door. I close the door and go on with the game, finding a room with furniture covered in white sheets this

time, a perfect picture of interior design frozen in time.

The cat continues the charade with a few other rooms in various states of disarray or abandonment, taking me into the other aisle of the mansion. At last, he settles on the bed of one charming, well-kept bedroom overlooking the garden and the forest. The sun's peeping through white curtains flowing whichever way the breeze blows from the open window. The atmosphere here is cozy and inviting, unlike the rest of the mansion. There's an adjoining bathroom, and sure enough, the wardrobe's full of clothes ranging from comfortable to downright dressy.

"A ballgown, really?" I ask the cat.

He closes his eyes in reply. I shake my head and shrug. Well, I could do with a good soak and a different outfit for sure. My white shirt's muddy and torn to shreds, and my skirt stopped being even halfway decent a long time ago. Into the shower I go!

The cat stays on the bed all the time, making himself at home, and when I return with a fresh black V-neck t-shirt and denim slacks, he purrs.

"Glad we agree. It's not exactly my style, but it'll do. So, what next?"

The cat jumps from the bed and scratches at the door. I open it and follow my new guide, only half-astonished that it seems to understand me. This place is weird and wonderful, so much so I almost expect Tomkitty here to talk at this point.

He strolls back to the balcony and down the stairs to an ornate double door with golden handles and gilded frame. I've barely touched the handles that both panels open wide into an exquisite reception area. Everywhere my eyes fall, gold and burgundy fight for attention: in the shelves full of leather-bound books and the old-fashioned tapestries, the tattered Persian carpets, and the Louis XIV furnishings half-covered in white sheets. Utterly entranced, I enter the room and examine every inch, not once resisting the foreign impulse to uncover everything as I go.

The light slithering through the dusty windows grows brighter every time I toss a sheet aside, and by the time I am done, I witness the sheer magic of this place. Everything looks spotless, shiny, replenished and almost new, as though my mere presence and actions breathed life into the room.

"How dare you?"

The tone's ice cold, venomous, sharp as a knife. The spell breaks at once.

I turn to face the woman from earlier. Livid doesn't even begin to describe her countenance. She looks raving mad. My delighted smile

disappears in a flash.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what took over me. But this place—”

“Leave it alone! You got no business being here!” Blondie spits out, her bulging sapphire eyes and entire demeanor altogether too bestial for my comfort.

Without warning, she lunges at me and snatches the sheets from my hands. As she frantically puts them back on every piece of furniture around her, I dodge her and rush back into my room to grab my bag and make it out of the mansion as fast as I can.

“There’s no way I’m staying here one minute more. This chick is crazy as heck...”

I glance at the surrounding forest, remembering the monster lurking somewhere in there; but the adrenaline and anger pumping in my veins won’t let me reconsider. I run towards the undergrowth without a glance back.

Where am I going? I haven’t the foggiest idea, but I’m determined to get as far away from this cursed place as possible. The forest must end at some point, right? I walk in as straight a line as possible, daylight helping me spot the treacherous roots and stones that would otherwise make me fall.

The forest isn’t as scary now; I even stop to take in the beauty of my surroundings. Birds are chirping and bees are buzzing. A small river gurgles somewhere nearby, and the sun shining through the green summer leaves dances with the breeze on the bark of the trunks.

I inhale the scent of moss and soil, losing myself in the simple pleasure of being surrounded by this beautiful nature. What was I even afraid of? The dark, mostly. The beast? A product of my imagination after everything that’s happened last night. A metaphor for the depravities I witnessed. Yeah.

Realization dawns on me then. The birds have stopped singing. The atmosphere has suddenly turned heavy. The hair on my nape raises and prickle, and I hold my breath.

Rustling in the nearby undergrowth makes me start, but when I turn, there’s nothing. The sound comes back from behind me, and I veer again, looking for the fang-heavy snout and the glowing red eyes, my body so alert it aches. Terror overtakes my brain as the rustling continues left and right. I back away from the noise, but there’s nowhere to go.

I’m surrounded.

CHAPTER 8



FEAR SMOTHERS MY BRAIN AND I REMAIN THERE, SENSELESS, PARALYZED, terrified. Talk about a deer in the headlights. Why the fuck did I leave this fucking house? There we go. I'm gonna die here and now. And all because of that stupid woman and that stupid party and that horrible, horrible monster.

The rustling intensifies. Someone's running at me. The beast. Except, it's coming from everywhere around me, all at once. How is that even possible? My body aches all over from the tension; fear is about to make my head explode. Death by aneurysm would actually be preferable, right? Not ripped apart, torn to shreds, slaughtered like an animal. Sweat drips from my forehead into my eyes. Or are those tears? I'm losing myself in the ruckus approaching from all around. Are there several beasts?

They're closing in on me. I can hear them grunt, snort, laugh. Wait. Since when do monsters laugh? Or talk?

"Over here!"

I know that voice. I know that face emerging from the undergrowth. It's the guard, one of those who chased after me yesterday. He's pointing his gun at me, and is soon joined by the other one, and a third dude I've never seen. They're all armed and ready to fire at me.

"Hello kitty..." the first one purrs, as the second meows sarcastically.

"Good thing we planted a tracker in everyone's bag, am I right?" says the third asshole.

They did? What the fuck?

"After the last debacle, it was necessary," replies the first one, zoning in on me like a predator assessing his prey.

I'm stuck, utterly unable to move. The shock of the situation mixes with a

relentless questioning. Why is this even happening? Who are those guys? Who hires the fucking military to go after runaways from a wackjob billionaire's party? Are these fuckheads even military or just hired guns, up for anything just to get their kicks on? What happened last time?

"Guys, I think we've lost her," the third one muses, an evil grin cutting across his face. "Maybe we can have some fun before we bring her back. What d'you say?"

He's dancing around me now, touching my face, playing with my hair. I'm frozen, wincing at his touch but unable to defend myself even though my life surely depends on it. Why? Why am I being so weak? They've got weapons, that's why. It's three against one, and even if I could scratch his face and kick him in the nuts, I'd be dead in a minute. Fuck.

"I'll scream," I hear myself retort. Good one, punk. Who's gonna pick it up anyway?

"Oh yeah?" The predator's grin grows wider. His eyes bulge in defiance. Demented bastard. "Go on then. There's no one around here. No one but us."

At these words, the other two squirm, unease drawing lines on their foreheads.

"Well, the beast could hear though, mate," says the least stupid of them all.

Worry stops the rape-thirsty cunt short, but his arrogance gets the best of him. "Then she'll die anyway."

"Yeah, but so will we. She's not worth me dying. Let's get it over with and go back." Asshole number one looks around, fear growing on him by the second.

Asshole number three hesitates, then tisks. "Nah, I'll take my chances."

As he moves closer, eyes shining with lust, carnal grin ready to bite, moist hands about to grab, something in me breaks: the seal on my survival mode. Fear turns into rage, and I belt the most wholesome scream I've ever belched. The three fuckers block their ears and wince, but soon enough, they regain control of their senses and their hands. The first shot is fired, and it flies right past my head. Something silky brushes my shoulder as it falls onto the ground. I stare down in awe. A lock of purple hair. My hair.

Time slows down like in the movies, but it's my life we're talking about. More shots. Instincts take over and I duck. I need to run, but my feet are jelly in molasses, so I lose my balance instead. I can't even leave this place, and the assholes' utter inability to actually touch me, although appalling, won't

last long now that they're literally inches away, their guns in my face.

I cross my hands over my face in a desperate attempt at protecting myself and see the blood. So much blood. Where's it coming from? The radiating pain shooting up my leg at that precise second gives me a clue. I can't leave because I've been shot in the leg. But wait. Why is my belly hurting so bad?

I hear them snicker and whisper among themselves. No. The sound is muffled because my brain can't process it anymore. I glance down, trying to assess the damages they've made to my body, but I can't see much anymore. Blood drips in my eyes.

The end is nigh, as the weirdo on the corner of Covent Garden wrote on his cardboard pane. Why the fuck am I even thinking this? I'm dying. I should be seeing my life fly by, and instead I'm just thinking of that homeless dude I always give a nickel to because he's a weirdo like me. And his cardboard pane. The end is nigh. I'm dying.

Commotion to my right passes through the barrier of my sudden deafness. I turn my head and focus as hard as I can to see wolf's feet. Huge. Too big for a wolf. Other feet in lacerated boots dangling in my vision field. Floating. Doesn't make sense. I'm tired. Can I sleep? My eyes close.

More noise to my left. I'm not deaf, yet. No, I'm not dead yet either. Eyes open. Blood. Not mine, is it? Too much of it. Or maybe I lost too much. Don't know. Should I care?

That's it. My body floats. I'm ascending to the heavens. Or something. I don't believe in Heaven. But I'm flying still. Not flying. Lifted. Carried? Moving, not upward but forward. I want to see. I will my eyes to open again, even a smidge. To see.

Fur. And above, maw. Drizzling. Beast. I'm dead.

Am I dead? Eyes open again, I think. It's looking down on me. Sapphire eyes. They were red, weren't they? Fur against my cheek feels like skin now. How? My eyes dart upwards again, and gold inundates my vision. A door closes somewhere behind us. Hurts. My head... Everything.

Out.

CHAPTER 9



THE THROBBING IN MY LEG WAKES ME UP, JOINED IMMEDIATELY BY MORE agony from my kidney region. I squirm and scream as I reach for both wounds at the same time to appease them, only to make the pain worse. Stupid bitch, stop moving! My skull is pounding, too. I recline onto the cushion that nested my head a minute ago, squeezing my eyes shut against the light inundating the room I'm in. Slowly, I unclench my eyelids and fight the nausea to make sense of where I am.

It's the room I chose for myself... When? Are we still today? How long have I been out? How did I get back here? Flashes of my dreadful encounter with the three guards flood my brain and I slam back on the bed, burying my face in the pillows to put an end to it. Then comes the memory of the monster. Well, I think it was the creature who—what? Saved me? I'm still alive, aren't I? And I definitely remember the wolfish maw and the fur... But then... Why did it not kill me? Why am I back in this accursed house?

The Persian cat jumps on my bed and I startle, exacerbating the suffering in my abdomen. He stares at me with the most nonchalant gaze as I cry out and sob uncontrollably. Fucking cat. I hate you too. Fuck, it hurts so bad. I sit up through the pain—when it's on, might as well use the ride—and assess the damage. Bloody bandages cover my belly and my left calf. The fuckers got me good, after all. Well, looks like I'm not going anywhere in a hurry. One more flash hits me like a fucking bouncing ball I can't dodge: the dangling feet, and all the blood underneath... Guess I won't cross paths with those guys anytime soon.

A knock on the door makes me turn my head too fast, and a dizzying spell takes me by surprise. I faint, but it's not the pillow that cushions my

fall. Arms. Soft but strong.

“Easy there, don’t go breaking those stitches I gave you.” The voice is almost pleasant, albeit contrived.

I lift my chin and focus my gaze. Two amazing cerulean pools are staring back at me, framed in golden locks. It’s that gorgeous bitch of a woman, except she’s nice now. She looks concerned, worried even. She deposits me delicately on the pillows and fluff them up around my head. What a sweet gesture, tender. Kind.

“I brought you food. You need to eat. It’ll help you heal faster.”

I remember breakfast that morning—was it this morning? The way I could dance again after eating. I think she means that literally.

“How long have I been...” My voice sounds raspy, like I haven’t talked in a while.

“The attack was two days ago. You needed rest.”

She brings in a tray and places it on the nightstand. I turn my head to gaze in enchantment at its content. A platter of pancakes smothered in maple syrup and drowning in blueberries, a glass filled to the brim with orange juice, and another plate with rashers and scrambled eggs. A breakfast fit for a champion. Who does she think I am? Just because I’m curvy doesn’t mean I eat like an ogre... Though I must admit I’m ravenous...

“The kitchen went a bit over the top, I think,” the blonde beauty says. “Eat what you can.”

I catch her before she leaves. “What’s your name?” It is, after all, the most basic thing to know if I’m going to be spending time with her, right?

She barely turns her head towards me. “Bella,” she whispers before leaving the room without a single glance back.

Well, that she is... At least I can stop calling her Blondie or Goldilocks now, or the bitch with gorgeous eyes. Still, what a weird woman. One minute she’s detestable, and the next, she’s almost caring and sweet. And then she’s aggravating again. I hoist myself up on the pillows and test the pain. I wince, but I force through to get to the pancakes. *The kitchen went a bit over the top.* No shit, but they look so scrumptious. I grab one, sticky syrup gliding down my fingers, but there’s no using the cutlery at this point. My position prevents it.

My tastebuds jump with joy and swoon with delight. I’ve never eaten such an amazing treat in my entire life. I sit up slowly and grab my fork to try the eggs and rashers, and no lie, they’re just delicious and made the way I

love them best. I engulf the whole plate and eat the berries by the handful before finishing the pancakes and throwing the freshly pressed orange juice down my throat.

As always, remorse consumes me after I clean through the tray's content. I hate stuffing myself up like this. Then again, I haven't eaten in two days, have I? As that realization dawns on me and appeases my stupid society-bridled brain, I also appreciate that my wounds don't hurt me as much as they did when I sat up. Food that heals, huh? Take that, guilt and shame!

The cat nudges my elbow, so I caress him. His purring soothes my thoughts and invites me to lie down and rest some more. But as I lay on the fluffy pillows and continue to scratch Tomkitty's ears, I can't resist thinking back on the events of two days ago. My memories are all blurry and imprecise, and the flashes are no help. Though one thing haunts the recesses of my mind, and as I focus on it, clarity hits me like lightning. The beast's blue eyes. Somehow, I seem to recall the beast changed into...

Could it be? No way. I reject the mere idea insinuating itself into my thoughts. I've seen some shit lately, but that would take the cake. I roll over and try to catch some Zs, but the would-be truth pounds on my noggin and just won't quit. I exhale through clenched teeth and sit up on the edge of the bed. Huh, that was easy. My ribs don't hurt so much anymore; neither does my tummy. I stand slowly to test my leg. It holds my weight with little pain. I smirk. Wish I could remain here forever and indulge in all that fantastic food with no reservation.

The cat takes me standing as his cue to scratch the door.

"You've got better things to do than stay here with poor ole me, is that it?"

He's out the second I rack it open.

"Yeah right, leave me here alone with nothing to do, you heartless feline, you!" I shout at his bouncing butt skittering away from me with the nonchalance of a sunbathing cheetah. "Oh, fuck it."

I follow him once more, completely aware that I'm barefoot and wearing only a t-shirt and my undies. Who cares? What are the chances that the blonde bi—Bella—catches me like that? And what if she does? She's probably the one who stripped me of my clothes in the first place anyway, so...

A flutter of desire runs down my spine, and my skin explodes with goosebumps. What was that? I've only imagined her stripping me down...

and the touch of her fingers... the faint scratch of her perfectly manicured nails... Another wave comes up this time, and I shiver. Okay, I'll admit it, she's fucking hot. And I wouldn't mind if our forced proximity led to some sensual encounter. Anything really... I'd love to forget that the last action I've seen in months was an orgy of demons. And a beast ripping off some jerks' guts...

I stop in my tracks and heave, catching my breath to avoid throwing up on the raggedy carpet. Can I go back to the fantasy instead of remembering reality, please? That was nasty. Still, those dudes were on a mission to hunt me down and kill me with a side of rape, apparently. What kind of psycho cult leader have I pissed off to deserve that? And what's Gwideon Malevant up to in his expensive hell cave?

With my mind busy recalling the obscene rictus of the devilish billionaire as he ordered his troops to capture me, my legs lead me straight back to the library I discovered that other fateful day. The door is ajar. I risk an eye through the opening and glimpse the desolation I've already witnessed before. Dust and sheets cover everything. One thing stands out this time, though. A gorgeous, tall, slender, blonde woman lounging on a frayed chaise longue. Her mesmerizing eyes are closed, her hand lies on her forehead. She's either asleep or plunged deep into her own thoughts.

I hesitate, painfully aware of my near-nudity, and cautious about risking a fight like last time. Then again, I have nothing to do, and all the good books are here, so to the wind my caution goes! I knock and slither through the gap, careful to remain as discreet as possible. Bella doesn't bat an eye. She must be asleep. As silent as a panther, I approach the nearest bookshelf and rummage through the leather-bound tomes. Some remarkable classics of literature share the limelight with philosophical treatises and scientific essays. I pick up a simple blue volume of what turns out to be a collection of fairytales and make my way back towards the door.

Bella's voice startles me. "Andrew Lang's Blue Fairy Book. Great choice."

I freeze in shock and slowly turn around. She's not even moved, let alone opened her eyes. How does she know?

"Yeah, I love fairy tales," is all I can think of saying.

Yeah, I love fairy tales. How lame am I?

She sits up and stands in one fluid movement before covering the distance to the door with no more words, her hands in the pockets of brown linen

shorts that show off her perfectly shaped legs, her visage shrouded in mystery behind the curtain of wavy, golden hair. She is exasperating, being so gorgeous yet so utterly anti-social. Or is she just utterly anti-me? I want to pull at her locks and make her stop and look at me. How juvenile... She awakens way too many weird feelings in me. Instead, I watch her pass me by once more.

Not without a fight.

“Thanks!” I blurt before she leaves.

What an outstanding confrontation... Ugh.

“What for?” She doesn’t even bother to turn.

“Saving my life.”

“Don’t mention it.” She hesitates, then tilts her head to show me the luminescence of her sapphire eyes and the hint of a smile through the curtain of gold. “Glad you’re feeling better.” And off she goes.

My heart pounds in my chest. I’m alone again, and she left me wanting more. More of her presence, more of her sparse words. More of her. I nibble at my lower lip, deciding whether the urge I’m having is worth the risk. It probably isn’t, but I’ll never know unless I go for it. I leave the room running after her.

CHAPTER 10



I FIND HER IN THE KITCHEN. SHE'S HAVING A DRINK OF WATER BY THE SINK, her stare lost in the garden outside the window.

“Still half-naked, I see,” she says through gulps without even glancing.

“How do you do that?” I sound a bit exasperated. That’s because I am. How the fuck does she know stuff without looking at me?

“Do what?”

For the first time in what seems like ever, she faces me. Only one semi-closed azure eye and the corner of her lips are visible through her cascade of blonde hair. As though she realizes it bugs me, she grabs the long locks away from her visage, heaving the heaviest sigh. She’s doing me a favor, and it’s costing her. She fixes her indifferent stare on me. I shiver, anticipation meeting desire with a jolt. Then I see it. A scar, crossing her left eyebrow and jaw. Three claws that miraculously spared the eye but ripped the flesh apart.

Taken aback, I stammer, but hold my gaze firm, if only a tad puzzled. “The... thing where you... you know stuff without even watching...”

She snorts. “You can say I’m innately observant.” She grins, the way a kid playing silly would do, her eyes suddenly wide and full of glee. “Or maybe I have eyes behind my back!” She explodes in laughter; genuine, unhindered bellows.

I’m not sure I get the joke, but I’m not gonna ask. My nerves tell me I should be terrified right now. I mean, she’s a freaking lunatic, apparently. But something in her smile at that very second makes me like her more. She looks like she’s needed that laugh for a long while.

As fast as it’s started, the laughter stops. Her stare widens as she realizes how she’s just shared something intimate with me, and she whirls around to

hide the embarrassment reddening her cheeks. Too late, honey, I saw it.

A grin draws on my lips. I want to laugh, but she might take it the wrong way. I remain as serious as I can. “For real, though,” I resume. “Can we start over? If I’m gonna be staying here a while, it’d be nice to have your company.”

I half expect her to storm out of the kitchen, or rather, amble away in her laid-back, couldn’t-care-less attitude. She remains glued to the sink, her hands clenched on the shiny ceramic, her back tensing under the thin layer of her dusty pink cotton t-shirt.

Has my request upset her? I mean, sure, she seems to be a total hermit, but you’d think she’d welcome a bit of company now and then. Especially when said company doesn’t have a choice, is completely lost, and really needs human contact. My heartbeat bolts, my breathing shortens. I shouldn’t be making this about me, but here I am, going into panic mode at the thought of being rejected by her yet again.

“You’re right.”

She turns around ever so slowly. She enjoys the drama, this one. I do too, though my neck and shoulders hurt from the shock of her response. My breath remains locked in my chest, and I dare not release it for fear it’ll break the spell she’s cast with those three words.

“I am?” Awe and incredulity trickle through my words.

The corner of her lips shoots upward through the veil of hair covering her face again. “Don’t expect too much of me, though.” Her voice is suave, albeit tinged with bitterness. “I’m not good at people.” She rakes her hair back once more, uncovering her scar and her gorgeous eyes, though she keeps her stare settled on the table between us. “But I’m willing to make an effort for you.”

Her gaze suddenly fixes on me, piercing me through and through. She’s daring me to prove her right—about her misanthropy, her utter lack of social skills, her love of solitude. No. It’s something else. She wants me to show her what she’s missed, shut away from society, shunned, unloved, uncared-for, alone. I want to take her in my arms, answer her plea with all the resonance screaming in me. My heart and guts know this feeling all too well.

I’ve been used to being alone for way too long. I’m curvy and bodacious, and apparently, that’s enough to deserve to be the good friend or the one-night stand. Never the love interest. But that’s okay. I love myself the way I am now, and those who don’t dare go beyond my appearance are the losers. I want to tell her that, though I feel her loneliness and pain go deeper than

falling short of society's physical standard.

"Thank you," I simply say. "You won't regret it."

Half a smile lingers on her lips, and the twinkle in her eyes rekindles.

"But maybe you will."

CHAPTER 11



COLOR ME DISNEY AND PLAY THE CORNIEST SONG DESCRIBING IN FLUFFY details how we've just spent three days getting to know each other and how I'm totally falling for the woman. She's even taught me how to play chess! Chess! For the umpteenth time, I reel in my bed, utterly unable to find sleep because of all the excitement.

She's also got the most amazing book collection on art and architecture. I gush and swoon just to think of it. I can't believe she's letting me revamp the place! Though come to think of it, I have no idea how she's getting the paint and tools I need since we never go out and nobody comes close to the manor.

Meh, I've learned to roll with it. Food magically appears in the fridge and the pantry; full meals cover the table when it's time to eat, even though nobody seems to cook; the bed is made every morning, and clean clothes fill the wardrobe with fresh fragrance. I've asked Bella many times, but she always deflects, taking me on an intellectual or artistic ride that has me forget about anything else.

I can't sleep. Summer is upon us, and even the breeze flowing in through the open window won't lighten the heat radiating from me. Thinking about Bella has this effect on me. I'm all hot and flustered. I need a drink. I toy with the idea of going to the kitchen wearing only my undies, but that would be asking for trouble. I turn to the wardrobe. Its mysterious content might have something I can put on easily.

Amid the ball gowns and other dresses, I find a golden, flowing robe made of the softest silk. I slip it on and bask in the luxurious feeling. It's like feathers dancing on my skin. I make my way to the kitchen, enjoying the sound of the textile flapping in the breeze of my movements. I feel like a

movie star, gliding down the stairs barefoot in my golden gown.

I stop short in the middle of the staircase. Bella is in the great hall, dancing in the soft light of the chandelier to a music she alone can hear. Her hair flows in a cascade of gold with every twirl and ballet jumps. Her face is the picture of bliss, eyes closed and a soft smile stretching her lips. I watch her lose herself in happiness as she performs a choreography to the beats of whatever music soothes her heart.

Her eyelids suddenly fly open, and she spots me at once. She freezes, eyes widened with the same embarrassment that reddens her cheeks. She shies away at first before standing tall and defiant as she takes off her earPods.

“Don’t stop on my account,” I implore her as I rush down the rest of the stairs. “You’re so gifted!” And gorgeous. So fucking gorgeous.

She turns away, and I fear I’ve offended her. Fuck. I thought we were past that. I thought we had a connection. Shit. She doesn’t leave, though. Instead, she goes to one of the statues and tinkers with something hidden behind it. At once, music floods the hall. Classical, a waltz or something. She swirls towards me and holds out her hand.

“Oh, er... I don’t really dance,” I utter. I’m a klutz and a half when it comes to dancing with a partner. Except slow dance, but anyone can do that. I’ve got moves on the floor on my own, but it takes coordination to tango with someone else. And trust. Also, intimacy. My cheeks burn just to think of it.

“Come on, I’ll lead you. Do you trust me?”

Ha. There it is. Do I? It’s me I don’t trust not to flunk it all; the dance and whatever budding relationship we have. Still, I give her my hand.

Bella pulls me against her at once. She’s so strong. It’s impressive, because she seems so fragile sometimes, almost breakable. She’s athletic, skinny really. Not the kind of body you’d think holds much strength. But her grasp is firm, and she makes me twirl and bend like I’m weightless. Her leadership is natural, and I follow her soft impulses with no restraint. Her stare is mesmerizing, and I lose myself in it, letting her body guide mine as our souls make contact.

The silk of my gown glides on my legs as we waltz through the hall, and from the corner of my eyes, I realize things have changed. I glance at the marble hall. Everything shines as though it’s just been polished. The statues seem animated, if not alive. The glow from the chandelier is stronger and the

crystals glitter like a thousand stars, shimmering on the walls and the velvet curtains in myriad diamond-shaped rainbows. The golden contours of the library's door appear more solid gold and less frayed paint. The gloom has been cast outside the sparkling clean giant windows, and I can even spot the moon in the sky just above the dark tree line.

I stare back into Bella's eyes and find something different there, too. Desire and longing burn in her cerulean irises. Her hand on the small of my back presses me even closer. We share breath, and I'm suddenly very aware of my short, scattered breathing. Also, I hope to all the gods it doesn't smell funky. She doesn't seem bothered. Not by that, anyway. Her gaze becomes more insistent. It's like she wants me to make the first move, but I can't. I'm not in control of myself anymore.

As if my subconscious heard my plea, I find myself leaning towards her. We watch each other closely, both unsure of what should happen; then our lips touch. Just a brush, but it sends jolts of desire down my spine. I don't know who kisses who, but our lips lock and my eyes close in delight as our tongues intertwine.

Everything from that second is just pure paradise. She crushes me against her, passion leaking through her kiss. Her fingers grasp every inch of my skin through the golden silk until she lifts one of my legs and rests it on her hips, taking a firm hold of my butt in her amazingly powerful hands. Fuck yes! I've had dudes do that to me, thinking they were starring in a hot B-Movie, but none of them could hold a candle to this goddess. Her strength is exhilarating. I'm a big woman, no shame about that, but she looks so delicate. And yet... She's tall, though; I realize that now as she towers over me and plunges her stare into mine. Ugh, could she be more gorgeous?

Her hair caresses my denuded right shoulder. That long lock that's hiding her scarred eye. I let go of her nape to move the strand of gold aside. She freezes but lets me. As I observe her miraculously unscathed eye, I draw closer and kiss the scar—above, under. I could cut the intensity of her stare with a chainsaw. I stand there, watching her, seeing her, the music drowning in my ears. I can't believe how lucky I am to have found her. And that she seems to want me as much as I want her.

In a flash, she lifts me off the ground effortlessly. I grab her nape for comfort, but I have no doubt she can hold me. She ascends the stairs, and all I can do is drown in contemplation of her. Soon, we're in my room. As she lays me down on my bed, I realize we haven't said a word at all since we've

started this fantastic dance. Maybe I am dreaming, but if that's the case, I don't want to wake up. Ever. I'm under her spell, and I fear the slightest misplaced breath could ruin everything. I won't stop breathing though because her smell is intoxicating. Cinnamon and berries. I'm in heaven.

She unfastens the belt of my night-gown and lays the pans aside. My panties are nothing sexy, but she doesn't care. She takes them off without a second thought. I love her energy. She knows what she wants, and she goes for it. Usually, that would be me in a girl-on-girl session. I'm the assertive one. It makes up for my fear of being judged. If I seem aggressive enough, the other girl won't figure out that I'm scared she won't like my body after all.

But that's not why Bella acts like this. I'm her prey. She has me under her thumb, but she's not playing. Bella goes straight for the kill. She licks me first, smelling my skin and tasting the goods. She nibbles on my tits and bites at my neck, squishing my butt in one hand as the other grabs at my hair.

I push her away. Her quizzical look amuses me, but I'm not mean. I take off her t-shirt because there's no way I'm letting her have all the fun. I want to taste her skin too and play with her perfectly perky boobs. I think she gets it, because a smile tugs at her lips when I pull her pants and undies down in one move. She leans down and kisses me, a deep and longing kiss, and I take her down on the bed with me, skin on skin, her weightless body shifting featherlike against mine.

Her fingers dance on my tits as her tongue plays with mine, and soon, they make their way down to my clit and dance there too, faster, smoother, with more insolence. She's a master at it. I had an inkling when I saw her play the cello yesterday. Now I know the fantasy playing in my mind as I listened to the soulful music wasn't even close to the reality hitting me in waves of pure pleasure.

I arch my back and moan, ripples of delectation awakening my skin in myriad spikes of goosebumps. Bella grins, voracious, avid for my flesh. She sinks her teeth into my neck, gently enough that it doesn't hurt, beastly enough that I moan louder as more jolts of desire scour my entire body. I'm at her mercy.

I don't want her to stop. She doesn't. She keeps going, her fingers penetrating me, searching for that spot inside that makes me go nuts. She finds it, titillates, twirls, her thumb doing a number on my clit at the same time. I give in; resistance is futile. My moans grow wild, my body takes on a

life of its own, twisting, arching, jolting. My breath evades my control, galloping like horses on the beach, free, fast. It soars, and so do I. I sing, exploding in a firework of pleasure and bliss.

Bella's towering over me, taking in the result of her work. I know I'm a mess, sweaty, out of breath, eyes darting this side and that, completely blown out of my mind, my body shivering with the aftermath of this incredible orgasm she gave me. But she glares at me with such pride, such gentleness too. She's made me come like no one ever has, and she knows it.

"Hey there," she whispers before licking her fingers.

"Hi," is all my breathing turmoil allows me to reply.

I adore her, and I need to let her know. In one move, I grab her waist and bring her back to me. We kiss and I use this opportunity to take the high ground.

"Your turn." I lick my lips in a hint at what's coming her way.

"You don't have to," she says, rolling her head to the side so her hair covers her blushing face.

I flinch. I can't help the fear from looming closer. I may love my body and have exorcized most of my demons, I still second-guess others' motives for desiring me. I've been there before. Used, abused, then rejected, as if I wasn't good enough, or worthy enough, to give them a taste of Nirvana. Like I should feel grateful they'd even consider taking me there before leaving me on the bed, as wet and ashamed as a used handkerchief.

But that's not it. She's not ashamed of me. She's just not used to receiving any kind of affection, let alone be the focus of someone else's desire. I hover over her and rake that lock of hair away from her magnificent jawline. Taking my time, I kiss it all the way up to her temple, then down onto the side of her nose. She smiles.

"It tickles."

Good. My lips butterfly their way across her cheek and the scar, a thousand flutters that bring out restrained laughter from her half-sequestered mouth. Then I aim for her neck, just under her ears and down to her collarbone. She sighs. Not relief, no. Pleasure. I know it because I love it there too. As my mouth and tongue go on to play with her nipples, I caress her arm and side. More sighs, deeper pleasure. Goosebumps raise the tiny hair on her forearm as my fingers glide on it. I lift my chin to look at her. She's biting on the closest pillow, failing to repress the vocalization of her pleasure.

I let my fingers swirl down to the bush between her perfect thighs and explore her intimacy like she did mine. Then I go down on her, my tongue licking and lapping and twirling and sucking. She gulps and gasps, her body convulsing to escape the infinite pleasure I'm giving it, but I'm not having it. I aim to please. I aim to have her scream like she made me. I double the intensity of my strokes; my tongue is a brush and I'm painting a paradise on her clit. My fingers play inside of her while my other hand is busy pinching and massaging her tits and scratching the small of her back. She's swallowing air like she's a fish out of water, trying to grasp at anything within her reach.

“Don't stop. Don't stop!”

I don't. I'm here for it, gorgeous. I'll hear you scream.

CHAPTER 12



MORNING DAWNS ON US WITHOUT A WARNING. WHAT A NIGHT! I WATCH Bella's smile soften her tired features as I caress her arm, playing the big protective spoon to her athletic frame. She turns towards me, and the pale rays of barely awoken sun glint in the sapphire of her eyes, specks of gold shimmering around her dilated pupils.

As I'm about to profess my adoration for her, my belly grumbles like an empty sinkhole. We both laugh.

"Let me get you some breakfast," Bella offers, already halfway out of the bed.

I grab her wrist. "Can we have it outside? I want to see the sun rise over your amazing garden and—"

She stiffens and pulls her arm away. Her mask of apathy is back in a flash as she grabs her clothes on the floor.

"What did I say?" I ask, pushing the covers away like they're a nuisance. "Bella? Why are you like that again?"

She turns to me, her face a sullen facade, her shoulders slumped, like she's bearing the weight of the universe on them. But she's on edge underneath. I've hit a nerve.

"It's nothing. I'm grabbing something to eat. You're welcome to join me if you want."

She makes her way to the door, but I stop her before she can open it. "Talk to me. Come on, Bella. After last night, I think you can let me in a little, can't you?"

She pierces me with her most glacial stare. I flinch and let her go. She stops on the threshold though, and whispers something.

“Sorry, what?” I’d do anything to keep her here. I’m so scared she’ll disappear again in this gigantic mansion with so many rooms. I don’t know where hers is. I can’t find her if she goes. So, I hold on to anything she gives me.

“I never go outside.” And she’s off, ambling down the hallway towards the grand staircase.

I ponder for a second on her words. Then I run after her.

“That’s not true.”

She glares at me over her shoulder. “Are you saying I’m a liar?” Disappointment and annoyance lace her question.

“You saved me.”

She halts, her back to me, stiff as a locked door. “It wasn’t... I didn’t.” She walks off again, faster, fleeing.

“You did. You said so yourself.” I wait.

Bella’s at the top of the staircase, but she’s not taking another step.

“I thanked you for saving my life,” I drone on, “and you said welcome. I don’t remember much of that day, but I do remember your eyes in my slumber as you carried me past the threshold of—”

It hits me. A memory, a fucking flash piercing through my brain like lightning. Her eyes, the lock of blonde hair shining in the entrance’s light. But a second before, I was huddled in furry arms, lulled against a furry chest. The threshold brought about her transformation.

Her hands are white against the marble balustrade, knuckles tight, veins protruding. Fear has drained her cheeks of any color. Her face is gaunt, her eyes haggard.

“You’re the...” My breath hitches. The word remains stuck in my throat. She can’t be. And yet...

“Say it.” Her voice sails like a ghost ship through her lips. Gloomy, raspy, subdued. “Go on. Say it.”

I hesitate. After those few days, do I really care if she’s the monster I feared when I first came here? She never harmed me. She saved me. She made love to me. Heck, she worshipped me last night. I look at her, and all I see is a lonely, hurt woman desperate to be loved and, above all, understood. I can relate.

“You opened the door for me that first night,” I simply reply, and it works. She relaxes just a smidge. “I was so scared. I thought you wanted to hurt me. But you didn’t. And not only that. You offered me a haven for the

night.”

She heaves a heavy sigh. She appears defeated, but more serene. “It wasn’t me. It was the house.”

My brows furrow. “What do you mean, the house?”

Another sigh, a long exhalation appeasing her. She ambles to the middle of the balcony and leans against the barrier, studying the walls and the ceiling. “This house. It protects me. And yet, it let you in. You weren’t even supposed to find it. Nobody can see it.” She hunches over, chin on her forearms. “But you did...”

I shift closer and lean on my elbows right next to her. She doesn’t move. “Care to elaborate? Cause I don’t really get what you’re trying to explain.” I stare at her sideways and she meets my gaze at the same angle.

“Fuck it. OK. But breakfast first.” She stands up again, puts her hands in her pocket and ambles back towards the stairs. “But not outside.” She glances at me over her shoulder. “You coming?”

CHAPTER 13



THE KITCHEN TABLE GREETES US WITH A DISH FULL OF PANCAKES AND ITS assortment of maple syrup, jams and other spreads, complete with fresh strawberries, raspberries and blueberries. The round smell of freshly brewed arabica fills my nostrils. My stomach grumbles in anticipation.

Bella attacks the plate of pancakes directly, unbothered to add anything to them. I serve myself a giant mug of coffee and offer to fill her cup as well, but she covers it with her hand and shakes her head. She gets up, her mouth full of battered goodness, and goes to the pantry as I sit and smother a couple pancakes with whipped cream, assorted berries, and the most exquisite maple syrup I've ever tasted. Bella comes back with a steaming cup and takes her place again, across from me. Our feet touch. Neither of us moves them.

"Hot cocoa," she says before blowing on the steam.

"Instantly hot?" I pinch my mouth and flutter my eyes. I mean, she's been there less than a minute. How is that even possible?

"You could say that."

Here we go again. Mysteries and one-liners. Not this time, lady. I need answers.

"Okay, spill the beans. What's up with this house?" I hesitate, sucking in my lower lip between my teeth. Here goes nothing. "What's up with you?"

She sips on her cocoa, taking her time to ponder on what to reply. She sets her cup on the table, holding it with both hands and playing with her fingers on the rim. "You want the short version or the boring one?"

"I want the full story."

"Full story, huh? I hope you have all day."

I grin, stuffing my mouth with more pancakes submerged in chocolate

spread now.

“OK... Story time.” She inhales deeply, then drinks some more cocoa. “Right. Let’s do this.” One more sip.

I’m on the edge of my seat, chocolate dripping from my forked pancake, mug of coffee in the other hand. Her sip lasts until she’s emptied her cup. She sets it on the table, stares inside, hesitates.

“Come on already!”

“OK, OK! Sheesh, you don’t let go, do you?”

“Never!” I murder the pancake.

“The full story... Well, once upon a time—”

“Oh, that’s gonna be good!”

“Stop interrupting me!”

“Sorry, do go on.”

She hawks theatrically before turning serious as death. “Once upon a time, there was a witch living in a mansion in the heart of a beautiful English forest.”

“That’s you,” I scream, excited as a kiddo at Christmas, “you’re the witch!”

“No shit, Sherlock... Do you want to hear the story or what?”

I zip my mouth shut. She glares at me for a second, then sucks in a deep breath.

“Once upon a time, there was a warlock in love with a witch.” She stares me dead in the eyes. “Yes, I’m the witch. And I couldn’t care any less about that wealthy psycho across the forest who had his stone-cold piece of crap he calls a heart set on me.”

My eyes widen. “You mean to say that weirdo who sent his guards to kill me is a—”

“Yup. Gwideon Malevant. He’s bad news, Rowan. But for whatever reason, the world adores him.”

“He’s richer than Croesus, that’s why.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Melancholy taints her countenance as she stares out of the window. She heaves a heavy sigh once more, then resumes. “Anyway, he wanted me to love him. Probably thought that since we both had magic powers, we could rule the world or something. But how could I love such an atrocious creature? Besides, well...” She eyes me up, half a smirk drawing on her lips. “I like boobs. He doesn’t have boobs.”

I chortle, and so does she. We burst into laughter, and suddenly, the sun

shines through the window and illuminates everything in the kitchen. She takes my hand across the table and strokes my fingers, all pensive and serious again.

“He didn’t appreciate that I refused him, and being the selfish, entitled jerk he is, he decided I was better off cursed and unlovable if I couldn’t be smart enough and accept his offer.”

“Malevant turned you into a beast?” I whisper in a trembling voice as I fight off the tears threatening to flood my cheeks.

Bella nods, shoulders hunched, eyes on the floor. “I managed to transfer my powers to the house before it was too late. That’s how we get the best food in the whole wide world. How I can still be me when I’m inside its protective walls, and how nobody’s ever supposed to find the place.”

Bella stands and goes to the fridge, where she takes a jug of freshly pressed orange juice. Magic. I can’t even imagine how it works, nor do I really want to know. I prefer the mesmerizing immersion and that tingling sensation every time something whimsical happens.

She pours herself a glass, offers me some, then sits again to sip on the juice. It seems like she’s taking comfort and courage from the pulpy liquid. I also have a clever contraption that notifies me when someone steps on my grounds. That’s when I go for a walk and make sure the trespassers find their way out of my forest and back to that mucky village outside of my property. I’ve never harmed anyone. Never voluntarily, that is.” She stops, sips, sucks in soothing breaths. “Well, until the other day. They had it coming, though. I couldn’t let them hurt you and get away with it.”

Her brow is furrowed, her eyes focused, determined. She’s territorial, and protective. She didn’t just save me that day, she came to protect me.

“I can’t imagine what it was like for you to kill those bastards,” I whisper, filled with anger and sadness. She became a killer for me. But had she not done it, I would be dead now. Worse, she could be dead too. “Thank you.”

She glances up at me, resolute, sultry. “I’d do it again if I need to. They have no right treating anyone like they did you. And that asshole in his dreadful mansion should not be allowed to do what he does. What he did. To you, to me, to so many other girls. He’s the monster.”

Tears stream down her cheeks, and I can’t help but move closer and take her in my arms. I kiss her face, kiss away the pain, the anger, the resentment. I try at least. She kisses me back, then pushes me away, albeit gently and not too far.

“I hate him so much.”

“So do I,” I chime, remembering the knot in my guts when I stumbled upon the ritual he was presiding. So many other girls have been his victims. Where are they now? Dead? Lost? Transformed? I don’t know which is worse.

I shudder as the chilly thought freezes the blood in my veins. A wild interrogation makes its way through my brain. I know how the stories go. “Wait. Where there’s a curse, there’s gotta be a way to reverse it, right?”

Hope trickles through my words, but her glare dries it up fast. How naïve must I be?

“No true love’s kiss can dispel this bastard’s magic. I’m not even sure killing him could help.” She rests her chin on her forearms and stares ahead like a dog waiting for a treat that’ll never come. Her hope is long gone.

“Why did I find the house, then?” Mine is ever reloading.

She lifts her head and cocks it. “Beats me.” She studies the kitchen, just about ready to tell it off for betraying her. “It heard your plea, though. When you asked for the door to open. I didn’t do it. It did.”

“But you led me to the house, though.”

“I didn’t. I tried to lure you out of the woods, like I’ve done for all the others.”

“Yet somehow, I found the house.”

We stare at each other quizzically, then around at the walls and beyond. I want to laugh at the ridicule of the situation, yet the unanswered enigma sends thrills down my spine. The hair raises on my neck.

“Anyway,” she breaks the silence so abruptly I jump on my chair, but she doesn’t see. “That’s the full story of what’s up with the house and me.”

One mystery remains. “Can I ask about your scar? Who did that to you?” I think I have an inkling, but I want to hear it from her.

“I did. I was in the forest when I turned into the beast you’ve stumbled upon. When I saw my reflection, I thought I was going mad. I clawed at my face to make it untrue, but no luck there. The house did what it could to save my eye, but the scar has remained ever since, a token of my failure to protect myself against evil assholes. There’s so much magic can do, am I right?”

She’s defeated. But I’m here now. I’ll take care of her and protect her. I want to.

As I dream of our life together, her demeanor shifts. She pushes her chair away from the table, eager to put some distance between the two of us.

“You’ll probably want to go home now. You have a life to go back to. It’s horrible of me to deprive you of your freedom.”

Where the fuck did that come from? Had she wanted to slap me, she couldn’t have hurt me more.

“Wait, what are you on about?” I stand up too and approach her, but she avoids me and heads towards the door. “Bella!” The tone of my voice stops her.

She stands on the threshold, head down, biting at her nails. I edge towards her again, gently, like she’s a wild animal I’m trying to tame. She tenses at my hand on her shoulder but turns around when I press her to.

“Bella,” I whisper, a soothing drone this time. “Look at me, please.” I lift her chin and uncover her sunken visage. No beast there, just a frightened, subdued, beautiful woman. “What’s wrong, hun? Why the sudden shift?”

Tears fill up her eyes. “Because I’ve been a bitch. I can’t keep you here. It’s kidnapping. And I’m not a monster like him. I don’t do that kind of things.”

“Of course not! And I’m not accusing you of that. I’m not even thinking like that.” I keep my voice reassuring because it’s true. “I’m here because I want to be. Now, that is.” I smirk, but her despair overshadows my weird humor. “Hey. I want to stay here, even if just for a little longer.

“But don’t you have people who’ll worry about you not coming back?” Her distress stretches her features. She appears so much younger, and so lost.

“Well, sure, they’ll worry. But there’s not much I can do about it now, can I? It’s not like I could send my roommate a text or give her a call. There’s no cell reception here, remember?”

I smile as reassuringly as I can. The truth is, Nola must be pissing herself with worry as we speak. It’s been what, five days since I’ve left for that stupid job? She has probably called Interpol by now, and sent for MI6, at least. Fuck, she’s gonna kill me when I finally go back.

“There may be a way.” Bella stares at me, melancholy and defeat splashing across her sapphire eyes. “Follow me.”

CHAPTER 14



BELLA TAKES ME THROUGH THE GREAT HALL BACK TO THE CORRIDOR LEADING to the entrance. She stops across the parlor I slept in that first night—it seems like forever ago—and searches inside her pants pocket. She takes out a knob and introduces it inside the hole in the wall. She had the key to the hidden door all that time. Makes sense. It’s probably her lair we’re about to step into. I shudder with anticipation. She’s all mysteries and damn good fingers, this one.

The door opens onto a wooden staircase. The staff’s stairs. We climb the steps to the second floor and the third—right under the roof. A narrow hallway leads us past a few empty attic rooms full of dust and cobwebs, furniture all covered with sheets after sheets, wallpaper torn apart, and carpet eaten by moths. We reach the end of the hallway and a nondescript door. Bella cracks it open, then halts.

“I just want you to know, I cannot thank you enough for last night.” She stares up at me from her defeated posture, her eyes filled to the brim with tears.

She opens the door fully. Her room is desolate, devoid of anything personal, grim, and borderline macabre. A single bed with torn sheets that’s been slept in recently but never made. Clothes strewn across the wardrobe askew doors, littering the floor, and crowding the lonely armchair in the far corner. It screams of loneliness and depression. My heart tightens in my chest.

Bella ambles towards the dressing table, whose looking glass rests under a dusty cloth. She opens the middle drawer, takes out a small silver mirror and gazes at it with longing and sadness. She hesitates before swirling around

and handing it to me, reluctance fighting her willpower.

I examine the mirror. Its polished silver frame is carved with an intricate rose pattern, thorns prickling like real ones. The glassy surface is clean and shows no sign of wear. Something is off, though. It shows no reflection. I give Bella a quizzical stare.

“It’s no ordinary mirror. It’s not even a mirror, really.”

I wait for more details, but she just stares blandly at the piece of metal and glass in my hands, fingers fidgeting as she pulls at invisible skin bits around her nails.

“What is it then?”

“Oh, er... it’s a magical device. It’s what tells me when people trespass on my property.” She pauses, hesitating to continue. “I also use it to watch what’s out there in the world. Like a television. Or...” She bites her lower lip so hard it whitens. “Or like a smartphone, I guess.”

I start at those words. “You mean... I could talk to someone through this?”

“No, not talk. Not really. Maybe. I don’t know.” She gets all agitated, a mix of nerves and excitement. “But you could find people, like your roommate. To see if she’s doing okay. Or something.”

The perspective of seeing Nola fills me with unexpected joy. “Can I?” I’m beaming, but Bella winces and turns her back on me.

“Go ahead.”

I should care about her reaction, but I’ll address it later. I need to learn if Nola hasn’t lost her shit about my disappearance yet. “Er... Show me Nola, please?”

The glass shines at once, bright and blinding. Then it turns pitch dark.

“What the—I think it’s broken.”

Bella twirls and snatches the mirror away from me. “What do you mean? It’s... no... wait...” She allows me to watch over her shoulder as she searches the surface for a sign of malfunction. It doesn’t look broken. The glassy surface isn’t see-through as it was before the light. It shows the kind of obscurity one finds underground. “It’s not broken. She’s just in a very dark place. Maybe she’s sleeping?”

I think about this for a second. “But the sun is up. Heck, it’s past 8 o’clock. She should be on the bus or already at uni. Besides,” I scrunch my nose to pierce the shadows, “even if she was at home, it would never be that pitch black. Her shutters don’t block the light.”

“Ok, let me check if I can...” Bella whispers something to the mirror. Her breath fogs up the dark glass, and at once the image is brighter, like when one changes the gammas on a TV. Nice!

“Wait, I recognize this place.” I grab the mirror at once and focus on the details of the image. “Oh, fuck me senseless...”

“What? Where is it?”

I try fighting the swelling tears and the bile in my throat, gulping in short snags of air. “She’s at... she’s at...”

“Where? Rowan, where is she?”

“That warlock asshole, Gwideon Malevant. That’s the dungeon where...” I suck in a painful amount of air.

“Let me see.” She snatches the mirror back and scans the picture. “Oh fuck... You’re right.”

“What’s she doing there?” Tears flood my cheeks with the force of a destructive torrent. “Why’s she there?”

Bella takes me in her arms and squeezes as I sob uncontrollably on her shoulder. “I don’t know, love. But we need to get her out of there, and fast.”

I fix my eyes on hers, grateful and fearful at the same time. “But how?”

“I’m a terrible beast, remember?” She attempts a grin, but the graveness of her stare gives it a sinister twist.

“But there are armed guards by the dozen, if not more. Not to forget that evil freak. And I can’t fight for shit. I mean, I can kick and scratch all right, but they’ll laugh.” Sheer panic overtakes me at the thought of facing those monsters, and I cry even harder, convulsing and shaking so much that my muscles hurt.

Bella holds me again, even tighter. She takes my blubbing face in her hands and kisses me all over. Then she plunges her sapphire stare into mine. “We’ll find a way. I’m a witch, remember?”

“But your powers...”

“Are here, I know. But that’s a good thing.” She smiles, an earnest grin full of promises. She’s thought of something.

Bella goes back to the dressing table and opens another drawer. She carefully reveals a jewelry box, from which she extracts a smaller container, the type that encloses diamond rings. It’s not a diamond I gawk at, though. It’s a wonder of a design, a perfect rose carved in the most crimson ruby I’ve ever seen. The ring itself is fashioned after the body of a rose in pure white gold.

“Here, put it on.” She grabs my hand and slides the ring on my annular without a second thought.

Kinda fast, innit? I brush that stupid thought off and marvel at the jewel on my finger. “Why would you give this to me?” My cheeks are burning. I must be as red as the gem. All bloated, too.

“Wait a sec.” Bella takes my hand again and whispers yet another incantation on the ring before kissing it. “Here, I’ve asked it to protect you.”

How on Earth is a ring supposed to protect me? Unless it can make me invisible or give me superpowers. “How?”

“You’ll see. When you need it the most, it’ll work its magic.”

Great. I must look crestfallen—I totally feel crestfallen, for crying out loud—which makes Bella laugh. I give her my best surly glare, but her laughter is so full of confidence and strength, I can’t help but smirk a bit, too.

“Come on. Let’s get outta here. We’ve got a roommate to save.”

I wish I had even half of her energy right now. She’s so different from just a moment ago. So cocksure, emanating confidence and feistiness. This woman is full of mysteries and surprises. I follow her without a second thought. To my doom. Yep, probably. But she seems ready to die to save my best friend, so I guess all I can do is stick with her to the end. I look at the ring once more. There’s a promise there. I just hope she’ll keep it.

CHAPTER 15



AFTER I'VE PUT ON BETTER CLOTHES TO FIGHT THAN MY KNICKERS AND A Guns'n'Roses T-shirt, we head down the corridor but stop in front of the entrance's double oak doors.

Bella turns to me, eyes glistening. "You know what'll happen when I step outside, right?"

I half-smile, half-terrorized and half-trusting this woman entirely. "I know," I simply reply, then add, "But you'll remember who I am, right?"

She corks her head and grimaces. "I turn into a beast, not a monster! Of course, I'll remember the pixie who made me come last night, jeez!"

Her frown turns into a laugh, and we both snicker like eejits. We're about to die and she decides now's the time to make stupid jokes. Ah, Bella. I hope I'll get to make you come a thousand more times. My visage decomposes at the thought that I might not even have tonight, let alone another night with her.

She must have picked up on my anxiety because she caresses my cheek in the most tender gesture she's had for me so far. "Let's do this. Your friend needs us."

I marvel at her selflessness. Ever since she's figured out Nola was in danger; her attitude and entire demeanor have changed completely. It's like saving my roommate has given her purpose. AS if having these bestial abilities made sense now. I take an ounce of her confidence as I inhale loudly. "OK, let's do this." I open the doors and step outside.

Bella hesitates so I hold out my hand. Hers shakes as she reaches for the comfort of my palm, and for good reasons. As soon as her fingers pass the threshold of the house, they transform into a clawed and furry paw, very

reminiscent of her long, agile digits but bonier, all knuckles. I grab it all the same, trembling as we touch. A simple moment of clumsiness and she could tear my wrist off with claws like that.

Bella treads outside one limb after another, changing before my very eyes. Toned muscles make way for gnarly joints; smooth skin disappears under a furry cloak; gorgeous breasts become a powerful chest; and the lovely toes I nipped at a few hours ago have turned into dreadful talons. I stare at her wide-eyed with jaw dropped. Nothing remains of her beautiful visage but the eyes, and as I peer into the two sapphires, I recognize her humanity behind the facade. She's there alright, scared as fuck of my reaction.

I lift my hand gently and caress her maw with the same tenderness she's just shown me. It pays off. She relaxes and whimpers her appreciation. A rush of affection overwhelms me and in a bold move, I jab my arms around her and sink my face in her chest, just where her heart is. Beating, strong, fast. She releases the tension my sudden movement created in her muscles and eases into the embrace, and we stay like that a moment. When I let go of her, I drop a kiss on the top of her snout and smile at her.

She lifts me at once and I can't help but scream as she drops me on her back. "What the fuck? Put me down! What are you doing? Bella?"

But she's running already and doesn't stop for all my complaining. I hold on to her neck for dear life as trees rush past us--or are we wheezing past them? Gosh, the woman is fast! I bury my face in her nape for sheer dizziness. It wouldn't do to puke on the woman you had sex with last night now, would it? Though technically, she's not really that woman anymore right this instant.

I don't even have time to ponder on that philosophical dilemma that she slows down already. AS she comes to a halt, she gently puts me back on my feet, and holds me up as my knees give out under me. I realize we're at the fringe of the forest, on the border of the Malevant mansion's grounds. Across the impeccably manicured lawn stands the architectural beauty that contains the chamber of hell where Nola is held captive. Under the sunlight, it appears less grandiose and definitely not that terrifying. But the knot in my guts and the beast at my side tell me never to trust appearances.

I would expect armed guards sweeping the perimeter. I mean, what good is it to have an army at your call if they're not safeguarding your territory? But something tells me Gwideon Malevant doesn't really want us to stay at

bay. Nothing prevents us from getting where we need to go. Unless he's rigged the grounds with mines. It wouldn't even surprise me at this stage. Bella sniffs around, probably as dumbfounded as I am by the lack of defense. She decides that it's safe and ventures onto the grass, signifying with a grunt to follow her.

As luck would have it--it's a trap, come on; I know it, she knows it; none of us cares--we get to the staff entrance unbothered, and of course, it's open. I check with Bella.

"You do realize it's a trap, right?"

She growls.

"I'll take that as a yes. Are we sure we want to do this?"

Her deep-set azure eyes glare at me. Are we sure? It's my best friend we're talking about. I would die for her. Or at least get mildly injured. I never actually imagined we would end up in a crazy warlock billionaire's dungeon in the ten years we've spent braiding each other's hair. Well, hers, not mine. Mine have always been short.

Bella grunts again, breaking my nonsensical daydream. I inhale deeply. I need to pee. That's nerves talking, but still, it's annoying. I tuck my stomach in and force my bladder to behave, biting my lower lip and frowning, which gets me a little yapping from Bella.

"Huh? Oh, I'm just concentrating to get my nerves in line."

She scoffs.

"OK, well, if you think it's a good idea... Let's find Nola and pray the gods we can get her--and us--out in one piece!"

What a pep talk. Aragorn has nothing on me. Pfff. I turn on my heels and push the door wide open. Not a soul in sight. The kitchen is empty; no sign of the maître d' or any of the dozens of bouncers present the other night. Ugh. I shudder at the creepiness of the situation. And its danger. Fuck. Stop thinking now.

I amble through the corridors, retracing my steps. I am blessed with an uncommonly good sense of direction when I focus. Too bad I was way over my head then, I may never have found the dungeon, the orgiastic demons and the cursing asshole leading the ceremony. How my life would have been easier.

Then again, I wouldn't have met Bella. She follows me at every turn, keeping her distance as though she thinks want her away. I don't. I want her right next to me, but the hallways are too narrow for her own comfort, so I

guess space is good. Her talons scratch the wooden floor and bring me a strange comfort of my own. She's massive in her beast form. I guess that's where she gets her strength from too. Will she turn back into a human witch if we defeat Gwideon? Will she still want me when she's back to her normal self? Why wouldn't she? I'm fucking awesome! I am, aren't I? Those doubts are just the fear of dying taking the form of my long-time nemesis, because my brain can't fathom the danger we're in right now. Yeah, must be that.

We're in the rocky tunnel now. No torches this time. Great. I turn towards Bella and bump into her almost at once. I can't see shit in this darkness. Without so much as a grunt, she lifts me in her paws and moves forward. I bet she has night vision. Duh. She found me in the woods in the dead of night, didn't she? I release some tension as I nestle into her arms, but it ends too fast. We've arrived in the dungeon. A faint light glows from the altar in the center, and as my vision gets used to the shadows, I make out a human silhouette sitting on the stone table. As if on cue, the silhouette moves, releasing the jitter of chains.

"Nola?" I mutter, my voice barely perceptible in the vastness of the empty chamber.

"Ro... Rowan?" she replies, voice strained and shrill, also known as the anxiety cocktail. "Rowan, is that you?"

"It's me!" I reply, already running towards her.

In the dim light, her face streaked with make-up and grime glisten with fresh gleaming tears, and the shackles that hold her hands together shine like disturbing jewels. I follow the links to an anchor set in the altar. IN her ripped crop top and crumpled skirt, she looks the part of a London-based princess Leia, if Jabba the Hutt was a proper sarcophagus.

"What are you doing here? It's a trap! That man, Gwideon Malevant, he said you'd come. And he... and he..." Nola breaks down, filling her lungs to the brim with rapid gulps of stale air.

"It's OK, Nola. I know. I know."

"So why did you come?" she screams. I don't how long she's been a prisoner here, but it's clearly taken a toll on her sanity.

"I wouldn't leave you here now, would I?"

"But he'll kill us both!" Panic contorts her features as she says those words. My heart breaks to see her like this. And it's all my fault too.

I take her face in my hands and plant my stare into hers. "Now you listen to me, Nola Green. I'd rather die with you than live without you, especially

since it's my stupidity that put you in this danger. How on earth did you get here anyway?"

She coughs and swallows her tears for now. I know my girl, the panic will attack again soon, but for now, she gathers her thoughts. "Some armed men broke into the apartment two days ago. They asked me where you were, and when I told them I had no idea because you'd never come back from your waiting gig, they called someone who must have told them to take me instead, because next thing, they grabbed me and tied me up and dragged me to a car and brought me here..." She drags the end of her sentence in a wail. Her sobbing accentuates and tears as big as pearls submerge her cheeks.

"OK, OK. You're OK, sweetie. We're here now. We'll take you away from this hell hole."

"We?" Her wide eyes look like ping-pong balls in the gloom.

"Yeah, I brought a friend." I signal for Bella to approach. "Now, don't be scared, she's a sight to behold, but she's our friend, OK?"

I can already tell Nola will freak out, but we don't have time to ease her into meeting my beastly girl. "Bestie, meet my beast."

At the sight of Bella, Nola's mouth contorts into what would have been a screaming O. Except she passes out before any sound sails out.

"Great."

Bella doesn't mind and goes straight to work. She breaks the shackles apart at Nola's wrists and takes my friend's unconscious body in her arms. We don't waste time and head straight back for the tunnel, but Bella halts after a few strides and I bump into her again.

"What the—"

She growls, and I can see why. Light flickers in the tunnel. One after the other, the torches burst into flames in a cascade of whooshing sounds, accentuated by the rhythmic pounding of heavy combat boots clip-clopping down the hallway. A swarm of armed guards floods the chamber and surrounds us, aiming their weapons at our trio. A slow clap echoes through the dungeon as Gwideon Malevant appears behind the last guards.

"Well, well, well. Fancy meeting you here, ladies." He snaps his fingers and the torches within the room ignite at once, blinding Bella and me. "Let there be light, for I shall enjoy watching you die."

CHAPTER 16



HE SNEERS, ARROGANCE BUILT IN HIS BROAD SHOULDERS AND SINEWY stature, pride oozing through the pores of his perfectly sun-kissed skin. Why do I even bother about his tan, really? I'm about to die; so are my best friend and my lover, and all because of me. But all I can think of is how shiny his tan is in the shaky light flooding the chamber. All fake, like him. A fake human. A warlock conniving with demons. No wonder he's so rich.

His sultry voice booms in the tensed stillness and shakes me from my weird thoughts. "Three birds, one stone. I like those odds."

He's toying with us, enjoying his power, reeling in our fear and anger. He takes his sweet time glaring at us and licking his teeth, like he appraises his next meal.

Bella growls harder, protecting me from Gwideon. But she can't cover my ass even if she wanted to, and she's still holding poor, unconscious Nola. We're sitting ducks indeed, surrounded, guns pointing at us from every side.

I can't take it anymore and step forward, much to the dismay of Bella who grunts her disapproval. I signal for her to let me handle it my way. "What do you want, Mr Malevant? Why did you take Nola?"

He smirks and snorts. "Isn't it obvious, my dear? When my men failed to come back with your heart, I knew you'd found your way to our lovely Bella here. I did the next thing to lure you back. And it worked wonders, didn't it?"

Puzzled doesn't even begin to describe the state of my mind right now. "But how? And why? You don't make sense, dude." He squirms at my familiarity, but I just ramble on. "I mean, for one thing, why not let me just lose myself in the forest? I would never have come back, and nobody would have believed me if ever I had said anything about that night. Which I

wouldn't have, cause frankly, to each their own. And I'd rather forget the whole thing fast, anyway."

He cocks his head, studying me like I'm a talking dog. "Oh, you don't know." My frown makes him laugh like a madman. "Oh, goodness gracious, dear. You are something else! Back off, beast!"

He snarls at Bella as she moves to prevent him from getting closer to me. With a flick of his hand, he sends her and Nola flying against one of the columns. I ogle at my friends, dread paralyzing my whole body as I realize how strong and powerful Gwideon Malevant is. We're doomed.

The warlock advances on me with slow, deliberate steps. I can't take my eyes away from the lifeless bodies. Tears scramble my vision, but I can only flutter my eyelids as the rest of my body is stiffer than dead. He is on me now, sniffing, playing with my hair, roaming around me, appraising. I'm food for his sickness. He's more of a beast than Bella ever was, the real monster.

"The fat-bottomed girl with the purple hair," he muses, his voice a venomous rumble. He locks eyes with me. "I had a vision of you back when I cursed this one." He jerks his head in Bella's direction, but keeps his stare fixed. "You know how it works, don't you? Curses? They must have a remedy. I only got a glimpse of your hair when you intruded on my little affair the other night. Then I saw your ass scamper away. You're fast for a heavy weight. Agile, too. Too bad, isn't it?"

His fat phobic riddles get on my nerves just enough to rekindle the fire in me. I clench my fist and set my jaws, ready to punch the smirk off his face as soon as...

"Oh, look who's joining us again!"

Bella's beast of a body jerks back on all four. She paws at her forehead and dwindles, shaken and dizzy as she must be after such a blow. Nola sits against the pillar, still unconscious, or so I hope.

"Ah, Bella. My dearest Bella. What a mess." His sweet and sour tone is sickening.

Gwideon turns his back is on me. Time to act. His men won't shoot now that he's in the ring. I muster all my courage in my legs to jump on him. I take the leap—and choke. From the corner of my eye, I see the warlock's lifted hand. What the fuck? Is he a Jedi now? A Sith, sorry. I can't breathe. Fuck.

I hear the low, threatening rumble in Bella's throat through the deafening

pulsations of my own heartbeat in my ears. My brain swells in my skull. My throat clenches tighter. My eyes threaten to pop.

“Now, now, Bella. Don’t be a fool. There’s an easy way out, you know?”

She growls harder as he approaches her, still holding me in mid-air.

“Your little bouncing ball here? I’ll let her go. Her friend too. I’ll wipe off their memories. No harm done.” Jerk’s taking his sweet time to set the bait while I’m drowning in the tiny, suffocating gulps of air I can squeeze in. “I’ll counter the curse too, of course. All you need to do is marry me. You know we belong together. You’ve learned your lesson now, haven’t you?”

Air. Please. Let me. Breathe.

Bella snaps at him, only just missing the fingers Gwideon extended to caress her maw. Shock makes him release me and I fall to the floor, gasping for life itself to fly back into my lungs. Did he really expect her to let him touch her? The cock. What a fool. Bella, my gorgeous, vindictive wolf, towers over him, teeth bare and claws ready to strike.

“Still the stubborn one, I see.” Gwideon leaps to the side to avoid her attack and skips out towards the exit, one arm upright. A concert of safety catches getting unlocked echoes all around us. “If that’s how you want to play it, fine by me.” He lets his arm fall as he retreats safely into the tunnel.

CHAPTER 17



WE'RE DEAD.

Gunshots fly everywhere. Bella grabs me and leaps toward the column where Nola is as I close my eyes to protect myself from the bullets. If I can't see them, they don't exist. Right? I brace myself for death. We're dead, there's no avoiding it. There's a hundred of them shooting at the three of us. Even if they were stormtroopers, they'd still not miss us.

Where's the pain? A clatter of metal resonates through the chamber, then a rattle of reloads, a clamor of shots and another metallic jangle as the bullets meet the floor. No pain.

I open my eyes to witness the utter incomprehension on the guards' faces. They murmur amongst themselves and check their weapons. A few of them reload and shoot once more, but the bullets meet an invisible wall of resistance a few feet away from our huddled mass. My finger tingles slightly. The one bearing the ring Bella gave me. *When you need it the most, it'll work its magic.*

Wow.

Bella seizes the occasion to rampage through the unsettled guards. Arms, legs, and guts fly across the hall in the goriest ballet, to the music of shrieks, death rattles and complete mayhem. My begrudging cynicism finds poetry in the scene, but I know it'll haunt me for the rest of my life. Because I'm still alive. Fuck.

As the chaos quells, I search for Bella in a sea of bodies very reminiscent of my first show in this joint. Less sweat, more blood, though. What a spectacle. I wince.

“What the ever fuck?”

I spin around and fling myself on Nola, squeezing her hard in my arms. “Oh my gods, you’re still alive!”

“Am I?” She ogles at me, her inner turmoil clear as day in the storm of her eyes. She gapes at all the blood and gore surrounding us, and I just want to shut her sight and squeeze harder. “Tell me I’m dreaming, please.” Her voice quivers and breaks as tears flow down her cheeks.

“It’s over, Nola. It’s not pretty, but it’s over.”

She turns her wet, glistening stare on me. “A nightmare, then?”

I nod and embrace her again. She lets go of all the sobs she can, then gasps and pushes away from me, her wide, fearful eyes fixed on something behind my back.

I turn around and see Bella approaching. I spin back and grab Nola by the shoulders. “She’s with us, Nola. She protected us. Nola, look at me.” I shake her gently, forcing her to focus on me. “She’s our friend, okay? Breathe!”

Nola heaves several deep sighs until she regains some semblance of calm. “What the ever fuck? Like, what the fuck, Roro? What the fuck?”

“I know. It’s a massive mess. We need to get outta here. I’ll explain everything when we’re safe outside and far away from here.”

I grab her hand and pull her towards Bella. Her palm stiffens in mine and my grip loosens. I look over my shoulder. “Do you trust me, Nol?”

She nods reluctantly and follows.

I fix my focus on Bella, trying to reach her over the limbs and lifeless bodies, but a humming insinuates itself in my ears, a low rumble, like a hive of bumblebees coming to life. Pressure builds in my head; my feet become numb, and I buckle down on my knees. I strain to lift my head. Bella hovers over the ground ahead of me. She’s choking. I fight the tension to check on Nola. She’s holding her head in a fetal position on the ground. Fuck the fuck fuck fuck. What’s happening now?

The humming has turned into clear chanting, and I realize Gwideon is back and advancing on Bella, his right hand forming the chokehold trapping my friend from afar. Now that he has her in his power, he pats her head and flatters her maw like she’s a good dog. The blood boils in my veins, but I can’t move.

“Ah, Bella. Bella, Bella, Bella. Look at the mess you made. Bad girl.” The warlock slaps the gasping creature. “Maybe I should have killed you then. The curse was a nice touch, tough. It was fun, wasn’t it? It was for me.” He sneers, showing his teeth like he’s going to bite her. His eyes glow

amethyst, like that night when he was performing the ritual.

I free my head enough to check the altar standing a few feet away from me. Everything went so fast; I didn't think about it before. But there it is, shining in the torchlight, embedded in the stone sarcophagus: the knife Gwideon Malevant was going to use on that poor girl that night. Did he kill her? I chase the thought away; I need to focus on us, now.

The warlock rambles on, but I gather all my strength and attention to move towards the altar. I need that knife. I'm not dying without a fight. Fuck no! I crawl as fast as I can—inch after inch—always fighting this fucking pressure to check the asshole's not aware of me. He's too busy licking Bella's fur for now. Yuk. But good for me. His sick games are taking the pressure away and I creep faster. I grab the knife. Gwideon's back is on me. I'm gonna slash his fucking throat and get it all over with. He's so engrossed in his disgusting power parade, he doesn't even sense me.

I stab him right between the shoulder blades.

CHAPTER 18



TIME STOPS. MY BREATHING HITCHES. SILENCE PREVAILS.

Why is he not screaming in agony? He's not moving, but his stillness resembles the quiet before a storm, when the waves become suddenly motionless. That's when you know you're in deep shit.

A slumping sound lets me know Gwideon has released his grip on Bella. There's that at least. He turns around in slow, deliberate motion, growing anger radiating through his entire being.

"You little rat," he hisses through clenched teeth. "I will eat your heart raw!"

Gwideon lunges at me and grabs my hair. The searing pain yanks a scream out of my throat, and I see white for a second. His fist connects with my jaw, and I'm on the ground before I can even defend myself. He towers over me and grabs the knife in his back with both hands raised over his head. He grimaces with barely an inkling of pain crossing his features, as if the effort it takes to remove the bloody weapon was worse than the inflicted wound.

"You little bitch," he snarls, brandishing the vicious blade under my nose. His amethyst eyes shine with vengeance. "I was going to take my time with you, enjoy your big fat arse for a while. But you're getting on my nerves, so... bye-bye now."

He lifts the knife over his head, ready to plunge it into my heart, but I roll to the side in the nick of time. I scramble on my feet as the warlock hits the floor and curses.

"Come back here, you little slut!"

He runs after me and grabs my rolls. I yelp and turn around just in time to

see the blade slashing at me. I duck, but it's too late. The metal bites above my nose and down my cheek. Hot, viscous wetness trickles in my mouth, filling it with iron wine. I gurgle, gagging on my blood.

Gwideon comes back, a vicious grin uncovering all his teeth. They look jagged, spikey. His amethyst eyes glow around slitted pupils, and his entire face appears more angular, with sharp edges and bony cheeks. He's a fucking demon, and he's lunging at me, mouth wide open, trading the knife for his own set of prickly weapons. He aims to rip my throat off, I'm sure.

I close my eyes and raise my arms in front of my face in a weak attempt at defending myself. Strength and courage have fled for good. I know my fate has found me. There's nothing I can do against this monster. Tears trickle down my blood-free cheek and mingle with the liquid of life in my mouth. I think of Bella one last time, her golden locks, the sapphire gems she calls eyes, her soft, silky skin. I could have loved her. I did. I do.

The vilest sound hits my ears as a thick, sticky liquid splashes my face. Curt but meaty. Flesh ripping, sinews snapping, and bone crushing, all at once. I crack my eyelids open when I realize the pain I was bracing for is not coming. Just in time to watch the headless body of Gwideon Malevant tumble to the ground. In front of me stands Bella, her beastly body crumpling and heaving, tongue lolling out of her maw, panting. The claws of her right paw are drenched in black ooze, the same liquid now pooling at my feet. The warlock's blood. The monster is dead.

I slide to my knees to break Bella's fall. She slumps on me, and I embrace her. She's still a beast in appearance, but the frailty of her human body has transcended the strength of the creature. She wheezes, and I check to see if she's hurt anywhere. I find no blood of hers.

Nola approaches warily. "Is it—she okay?"

"I don't know," I reply, panic seeping through my hoarse voice. "I can't find any apparent wound, but he went harder with her than he did me, and my throat still hurts like shit." The last words are barely audible. My pipes burn like hell, and breathing doesn't come easy anymore.

Nola wraps her arms around herself and glances around, disgust and despair stretching her mouth and brow. "Can we get out of this hellhole, please?"

She helps me lift Bella, and we make our way back out of the tunnel and the mansion. The shining sun blinds us, but its warmth replenishes my soul. I'm alive. We're alive. The monster is dead, but the beast remains. She knew

it. She knew the curse would outlive the warlock who cast it. I search for her stare, but she avoids mine. She was defeated before, now she has completely given up.

“Bella?” I help her sit in the grass, hoping the sunrays would insufflate some hope into her, but she just gazes vacantly at the ground.

Nola checks the surroundings. “Ah. Wait for me. I’ll be back in a sec.” She marches away, confidence leading her steps again. She’ll be ok, I know it. Bella, on the other hand...

I lean my head against her neck. Her erratic wheezing seems appeased, but there’s a gurgle underneath that doesn’t bode well. She remains motionless, as if she’s not even aware of my presence.

A black Porsche grinds to a halt next to us and I start. What fresh hell has found us? But it’s just Nola.

“Hop in! Let’s find a hospital. You need stitches, love. That’s gonna leave a serious scar.”

I spot my reflection in the window and wince. Inky splashes and a dash of dried blood cover my mouth and chin. Fresh carmine liquid still trickles from the gash across my face. A giant bruise in the form of a triceratops—how oddly specific—colors the other cheek, too.

“Bella—”

I search for her, but she’s nowhere to be seen. I didn’t even hear her leave. I turn to Nola. “You didn’t see her go?” She shrugs.

I glance around again. “Bella!” I call for her, but the croaky sound of my voice gets lost in the fresh wind blowing through the leaves of the nearby forest.

A dizzy spell takes over me and I lean back against the car. Nola comes out and forces me in. I think I’ve lost too much blood. The car starts, engines rev, Nola drives us out of here.

Before darkness takes a hold of me, I glimpse sapphire gems twinkling in the sun beams caressing the underbrush. Bella. Why did you leave?

EPILOGUE



IT'S BEEN TWO WEEKS SINCE THE EVENTS NOLA AND I DUBBED "THE nightmare from Hell" happened. My face is healing nicely, but I'll be stuck with a grim souvenir.

The news has been awfully quiet. I would have thought that the death of a zillionaire asshole would make the front page, but it's gone weirdly unnoticed. There won't be any sequel though, as I recall glimpsing the head of said asshole impaled on one of the torches. The vision still gives me goosebumps, and not the good kind. Then again, he was a warlock. Who's to know what kind of magic he or any of his demoniac followers could do from beyond the grave? Nope. Not thinking about that. Thank you, but no thanks.

I'd rather think about Bella, though my memories are so tinted with all the dread and gore and pain, I sometimes fear it's all been a dream. A nightmare... No, my time with her was amazing. The magical house, the sex, her eyes... They must exist. But I've checked all the maps since I've come home. I cannot find a trace of her place. Makes sense, though. Nobody can find it. Nobody but me, apparently. I'm still searching.

"Are you sure you don't remember any road or highway sign?" I ask Nola from the living-room. "You must have seen something when we got out of there."

She appears from the kitchen, a half-eaten slice of buttered bread in hand. "I swear. I was too eager to leave that nightmare of a place. I only remember going over some hills, then passing Lincoln on our way to Nottingham and the hospital, but we'd been driving for a while already."

I search the map once again. My eyes keep looking up at the Lincolnshire Wolds and their remaining patches of dense forests. *Over some hills.* The rest

of the county is flat enough, but the Wolds are the hilliest hills around, and their woods are ideal to hide mansions and manors. Which one, though?

I rack my brain for a hint. I clearly remember Bella talking about a village outside her neck of the woods. She used a peculiar term to describe it. Mucky. No village is mucky anymore, except where there are farms, and even then. I zoom in on Google Maps. Lincoln, the Wolds, Louth. And South of Louth...

Muckton. The mucky village. Right next to a beautiful patch of preserved old forest.

I grab the keys to our newly acquired Porsche.



THE FOREST IS TRULY MAGICAL. So peaceful. So dense. I call for the manor in my head. It brought me forth once when I needed a shelter. Maybe it'll open the path now that I need to find her. My Bella.

A knot forms in the pit of my stomach. Sudden anxiety takes over me as I wonder if she's okay. Did she make it back? Was she wounded, after all? Is she still alive?

"Bella!" I hear myself screaming. A bird takes flight, cawing its annoyance at my disruption of the peace. The undergrowth to my right quiver and I startle. I suck in a deep breath, focusing my thoughts on the manor, its outline, the porch, the double doors leading to the checkered entrance, the inviting antechamber, the marble great hall, the delightful kitchen. And the room. My room. Our room. The bed where we made love. Her skin glowing in the dawning sun beams. Her eyes. Cerulean pools calling me. I'd drown in them without a second thought. I know I'd be safe.

I open my eyes and step forward. Something is pulling me, guiding me. My love for her, my need for her, my desire. Or maybe it's the house. Or maybe it's her.

Or maybe it's the fucking Persian cat jumping out of the bushes.

"Tomkitty! My favorite guide! Go on, show me the way."

I follow the feline through the thick branches and bushes, over stones and roots and small hillocks. I wonder if the curse has been lifted. She was still a beast even after Gwideon's head had flown over the altar. I like her beast. I love her in whatever form. Fuck. I love her so fucking much. My legs pick up

the pace. Sheer urgency drives my steps now. I should have come sooner. I should have never left.

The brushes give way to the meadow I was seeking, and ahead, Bella's manor.

Derelict.

The stonework is crumbling, the paint is peeling off the wooden porch, the windows on the first floor are broken, and the oak doors are ajar and dismantled. The house looks as though it's been abandoned for decades. The garden is overgrown with weeds, and the roses have died.

"Bella!" I scream again as I run ahead of the cat.

Mold runs down the walls from the ceiling inside the entrance corridor, and the wood panels are in shreds. The checkered tiles are all broken and askew. I glimpse inside the antechamber as I run for the great hall. The shelves have crumpled, the chesterfield sofa displays its bowels, the coffee table lies in bits on the floor.

The great hall is in utter disrepair, statues and colonnades scattered on the floor. The crystal chandelier lies shattered in the center of the room.

"Bella!" Panic has taken over me now.

I rush to the kitchen but find it in even worse condition than the rest. Burnt down, a gaping hole in the wall where the window used to be, cinders and ashes flying in the breeze from the still smoldering pantry.

Tears flood my cheeks as I run back to the entrance corridor. My chest burns, heaves, hurts. I choke, fear taking hold of my mind in a squeezing vise.

I claw at the hidden door, kick it, hit it with my fists.

"BELLA!"

I lean against the unbudging wall, my whole body heaving with painful sobs and panicked screams. My despair is even stronger than that first night when I was pounding at the door.

"Bella..."

A click stops my cries short. I step away from the panel as it opens with a sigh. The house may be dying, but it still has some fight in it. And it wants me to fight for it. I waste no time and climb up the staircase two by two, narrowly avoiding breaking my legs on crumpling stairs. I have no time for that. I need to find her, and I know now where she is.

I go straight to her room, jumping over holes in the floor and passing by open-sky ruins of former bedrooms. Her door is gaping. I push it open, only

to find the silver mirror on the saggy, moth-eaten bed. I snatch the contraption at once.

“Show me Bella! Where is she? Please, show her to me!”

The reflectionless glass shines bright. When the light subdues, I recognize the place it shows me. My heart races as my breath hitches. I should have known. I should have gone there first.

I return downstairs as fast as the terminal state of the manor will let me, into the great hall and up the marble staircase. The cat is waiting for me on the balcony.

“Couldn’t you pick me up earlier, silly kitty?”

He looks unfazed by my remark, as if time wasn’t of the essence right now.

“Dude! Take me to her, now!”

Tomkitty cocks his head and yawns. Stupid me; I know the way, don’t I?

I scamper down the aisle and rush to my former room. Bella lies on the bed, face buried in the pillows, just as the mirror showed.

“Bella?”

I can’t see if she’s still breathing. Her hair is matted, lackluster. The paleness of her skin emphasizes the bones sticking out, and the bruises. Fucking massive bruises. She’s been bleeding internally.

“Bella...” My voice quivers. I’m too late. Way too late. She’s been dead for days.

Her body is cold and stiff under my fingers as I gently turn her over. I dread to see her face in its deathly mask, but I must. I’m not letting her here. I need to take her away, give her a proper burial. Something. I need to do something. Other than weep uncontrollably and wet my beloved’s hair and temples.

The cat chooses this instant to jump on the bed and knock his head against my hand. My ringed hand. He hits my hand again, purring like the engine of the Porsche we fled in.

The ring.

I take it off and put it on Bella’s finger. It protected us at her request, so maybe now...

I lean forward to whisper to it, the way she did back then.

“Please, bring her back.”

I kiss the ring and her stone-cold finger, hoping my lack of witchiness won’t stand in the way of Bella’s magic. Holding her hand, I caress the hair

away from her face, uncovering the gaunt features and sunken eyelids. She still makes for a beautiful ghost, though. The tears flow like a torrent on my cheeks again.

I bury my face in the bed against her lifeless chest, her hand firmly clasped in mine, and I sob.

Then I feel it. The tingling sensation in my hand, followed by warmth. I lift my head to witness the miracle as life insufflates itself through Bella's body. Her skin plumps up, her cheeks redden, her breasts heave again. She takes a deep breath as she opens her eyes and fixes their cerulean beauty on me.

"You came back," she whispers, her voice hoarse, her tone grateful.

"Of course, I did. I should never have left."

"You had to. Your wound..."

I shush her. "I should have followed you. The house would have healed me, and you wouldn't be dead."

"Am I dead?"

"I don't know. Are you?"

Bella checks her hands and spots the ring. "My magic. You took it with you, so the house couldn't work anymore. And I couldn't live without you, anyway. So I let death ensnare me. I knew you were safe. I saw in the mirror. I just wanted to be with you, so I came here, and I drowned in your smell."

"But now you're alive again, aren't you? Or am I going to live the rest of my life with a ghost?"

Bella frowns. "What do you mean, the rest of your life?"

"Well, I'm never leaving you again. Look at how dramatic you become when I'm gone." I suppress a smile and choke on a laugh, but really, I'm so relieved she's alive, the sheer improbability makes me giddy.

Her eyes gleam and she smiles. Her smile turns into laughter and in an instant, she lets go of all the walls she's built up over the years to let me in on her glee.

The sun shines bright through the open window and the rose beams on her finger. Bella jumps on her feet, fresh energy flowing through her. She takes my hand and pulls me out of the room.

"Come on! We've got a home to build!"

We run down the aisle, and I glimpse the magic happening as room after room restore themselves to their former glory. We stop on the balcony and Bella twirls and swirls, hair dancing in the light of the great hall rebuilding

itself, chandelier ablaze on the ceiling and sunshine glowing through the crystals in gazillion rainbows painting the marble surfaces. We laugh like children as she draws me down the stairs and into the kitchen to find the table set with a feast fit for a queen's court. What was a smoking pile of rubbles only a minute ago is now steaming with the flavors of paradise.

Outside the fully repaired window, the garden blooms under my eyes. Colors explode everywhere in fireworks of petals and leaves. I run to the side door and open it wide to inhale the glorious fragrance of a thousand flowers sprouting into life. I step outside to bask in the radiance of our own little Eden.

Bella joins me but stops at the threshold. She leans on the doorjamb, her gaze fixed on me. Her smile is more timid, borderline envious. She's scared to go out. She's just survived death, but it seems she can't survive the beast anymore.

I hold out my hand. "I love you Bella, beast or no beast. You are magical and wonderful, and I love you."

Her features decompose as she takes in my devotion. Tears gleam on the edge of the sapphires imploring me.

I amble towards her, taking my sweet time devouring her with my ravenous stare, grinning like a kid at Christmas. I embrace her and kiss her lips. A deep, long, loving kiss. She loses herself in my arms and replies to my kiss with all the passion she can muster—and it's searing hot. She doesn't realize I'm leading her outside, or maybe she doesn't care anymore. She's given up fear and embraced hope. I'm all for it.

I open my eyes and dive into the ocean of hers. Gold frames her face and the scar across her eye appears more healed than ever. She's still Bella. She always was, and now she'll always be.

"How?" she whispers, marveling at her hands and arms and legs and belly.

I fix on her gorgeous boobs and snicker. "It's the curves."

"What?"

I shrug. "Don't ask, I have no idea. The other asshole said something about my ass breaking the curse. He was a psycho, so nothing he said made sense, anyway. But hey, it worked! My ass saved the day!"

We burst out laughing, the most glorious sound ever. Our mouths find each other, and our tongues meet, and glee makes room for desire. Bella's earlier bout of passion rekindles, and she doesn't waste time undressing me.

We melt into the grass, fingers gliding on each other's skin. Her mouth leaves mine to scour my body and I lose myself in bliss. The sun bears witness of our love as the forest sings the magic returned. I sing too, praises to her expert tongue and fingers.

My turn.

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ABOUT JUDE COCAIGNE

USA Today Bestselling Author Jude Cocaigne writes all things Fantasy, from family friendly and Young Adult epic adventures and cozy mysteries set in Ze World, to spicy New Adult Urban Fantasy and Paranormal romances.

Movie, series and anime addict, RPG gamer and LARPer when she finds the time, Jude draws her inspiration from these activities to write stories she hopes Terry Pratchett, Neil Gaiman and Douglas Adams would be proud of.

If you like geeky behind-kicking heroines, emotionally strong heroes and morally grey villains, you're welcome to join her cheery madness of a journey towards expanding her world where everyone fits and belongs.

PITCHFORK PREP ACADEMY



P. MATTERN

PITCHFORK PREP ACADEMY

Sometimes a witch needs something bigger than a *Wand*.

Antimony “Moni” Crockett is a direct descendant of the Crockett’s of Bavaria. She and other students at Pitchfork Prep come from families that have long practiced a peculiar and often dangerous form of magic that have their origins in the colors of the spectrum.

Red, yellow, orange, and violet magic are studied, of course, but Pitchfork Prep is known for offering advanced courses in Spell Casting using the mysterious Vantablack Magic, based on a color so much darker than black that it cannot be seen with the human eye.

Moni is hell bent on using her knowledge of Deep Magic to retrieve her twin brother, who was thought to have been abducted by a Rebel Coven shortly after their shared birthday.

He is able to communicate with her in dreams, and tells her to forget finding him, but she is determined to acquire the magic that will free him.

In the meantime, she pines for young love, and soon finds herself under the spell of Broody Watkins. His name is perfectly suited to his brooding good looks, silver blonde hair, and dark eyes, and his sister, Shady, is just as gorgeous with her dark curls and glacially blue eyes.

Moni finds herself attracted to both of them...

Romance was not originally in her plans, but Fate has surprises in store!

CHAPTER ONE-BASIC BITCH



BROODY WATKINS HAD TRADEMARK LONG, SILVER BLONDE HAIR, WHICH HE refused to cut, and he usually wore it flowing free or in one long braid down his back. Or occasionally two braids. He was so flawlessly gorgeous that his sister Shady—who was as dark in coloring as he himself was light—teased him that he looked like a girl.

“First of all, I would hardly expect such a sexist remark from YOU, little sister,” Broody demurred. “And I also doubt that any female could grow this much facial hair!” Broody was referring to the perpetually present and expertly groomed five o’clock shadow that he usually sported. “And anyway, you KNOW how I roll, so—” he added without bothering to finish the sentence.

It had always been true that he and his sister, Shady, even though they weren’t twins, had always been so close that they often finished each other’s sentences.

Broody had never been one to have a gender preference when it came to hookups, and it was hard for him to comprehend why anyone would.

Why limit oneself to just one sex, he reasoned, after all, “love was love” was it not?

They were sitting on the massive marble steps up to the Administration Center building of Pitchfork Prep Academy, checking out both the new arrivals and waving at the returning students. As sophomores, they were feeling slightly superior to newer students, having a year’s worth of intensive magical studies under their belt.

With the Watkins siblings, as always, was Luca, the best friend to both Broody and Shady, and Shady’s ex-boyfriend. He, too, was scoping out the

arrivals, and he gave an exclamation of surprise and sat up straighter, his interest piqued, when he glimpsed a low white limousine pull alongside the curb in front of them.

“Well look, I believe we have a celebrity arrival— Who in hell takes a limo to school on Registration Day?”

Before either of the Watkins siblings could muster up a reply, the long side door of the limo slid open and a female figure emerged seamlessly from within the dark interior. She was undeniably pretty, with a broad face and a full head of wavy, blonde hair. Oddly enough, she was wearing a white dress so tight that her curvaceous body shape was immediately evident.

“My GOD,” Luca breathed. “Her dress is so tight I can see the outline of her womb! And I think I can even make out her fallopian tubes!” he added.

“Guys, I think I’m in LOVE!” he added sardonically.

“She looks like a swan in the middle of a conspiracy of ravens!” Broody added, referring to one of the proper terms for a flock of ravens.

Shady peered at the newcomer, her brow slightly buckled. She too was amazed at the girl’s wardrobe choice. Nearly everyone who’d arrived that day, filling up the campus grounds, had worn the traditional black school attire and most of them also had on the short, black capelet worn during the day time on campus, causing the campus to become a sea of darkly garbed individuals, the only occasional bright spots of color provided by their caps and an occasional scarf.

Despite his sarcasm, Broody found himself intrigued by the blonde, and was aware of a reaction in his loins as he focused on the girl’s generous thighs. He found himself wondering about what was at the top of those well-muscled thighs, between them and beneath her too short skirt.

“She’s probably just a basic bitch trying to be something different,” he murmured aloud, trying to throw the others off that he was the least bit interested in her.

But inwardly he knew that he was VERY interested. At least his cock was, and he had always found that to be a promising sign.



PROFESSOR DORCAS WAS one of the most beloved Professors at Pitchfork Preparatory Academy, mostly because of his devotion to his many students.

He was determined that all of them each Semester would pass Advanced Practical Spells, and worked tirelessly tutoring any student having difficulty.

As a result, all of them did pass, even if some of them only passed by the skin of their teeth.

As popular as he was, he had never quite lived down, even after fifteen years of teaching at Pitchfork Prep, an infamous magical gaffe that had occurred on his watch.

The student had been Xavier Bigley, of the New England Bigley witch dynasty, and when an Ascendo Spell the Professor had somehow bungled pinned the heir to the Whisper Wand fortune to the cathedral ceiling for over three hours, it had scandalized his wealthy parents and nearly caused the administration to fire him.

Fortunately, at least in Shady Watkins' mind, feathers that had been ruffled had eventually smoothed over again and Professor Dorcas—thereafter often referred to as “Professor DORK” due to the Ascendo Spell incident—was allowed to continue teaching.

Shady thought it was a travesty that the kindly man had been stuck with that moniker, because she was of the opinion that he shouldn't be marked for eternity for a single lapse in judgment, especially since in the score of years afterward he hadn't ever made another gaffe like it. But she also realized that people tended to remember mistakes for a much longer time than they remembered accomplishments.

Still, she thought it was unfair, and she went out of her way to speak to Professor Dorcas nearly every day, feeling that he was vastly underrated.

Most of the students tested out of Primary Magic Classes. Yellow, Red and Blue Magic involved simple, basic and everyday Spells and Charms that most of them had learned from witch peers or adults as they were growing up, especially the warding and protection spells.

But most students hoped to qualify to be included in the Vantablack Spell Courses. The Professors who taught them were highly selective and to qualify students had to have certain natural gifts as well as nerves of steel...

...Because it was a much darker and complex area of Spell Casting, one that, depending on the level being practiced, required sacrifices to be performed successfully.

Moni was determined to acquire all the Casting skills she could. She had made it her sole mission in life to find her missing twin brother, Sam, taken when they were both just coming of age, and she instinctively knew that she

would have to arm herself to fight magic with magic in order to retrieve him.

All the dormitories at Pitchfork Prep Academy were coed, and though brothers and sisters rarely roomed together, it had always been their natural preference to room with each other.

That particular year, with all the turmoil in the outer world of humans, the enrollment at the once most popular finishing school for Witches had fallen, and the school had gotten less selective as far as admissions because they were anxious to make up for the loss of tuitions they had suffered in the years 2020 and 2021.

As a result, they had decided that instead of two students in the spacious dormitory rooms there would be three and that Broody and Shady would have to make room for an extra bed—not a huge problem because of the spaciousness of their room which was roughly circular since it was located at the tower end of the Mars Building and twenty-seven feet in circumference—and also make space for an extra desk and accompanying chair and wardrobe.

The siblings protested of course, and begged Luca to switch from the room he shared with Prince Malloy in the Neptune Dormitory next door and join them, but the administration refused to consider the switch.

It was the afternoon of the same day, and Broody was changing his shirt after briefly sniffing his pits to make sure he was still fresh before donning his newest blue silk tunic with gold trim and theatrically voluminous sleeves. As soon as he had stripped off the plaid shirt he'd been wearing, Shady happened to glance up from the volume of *Witch Lore and Lost Incantations of Circe* she'd been reading to notice her brother's naked back that was toward her.

Even from across the expanse of their room, she could see the odd pattern of bruises on either side of his back starting just below armpit level.

“Broody!” she exclaimed, slamming the cover to the book of incantations and jumping up. “Have you been fighting again?”

“No, dear sister, I have not!” he told her, turning with an amused smile. “Unless you happen to consider love a struggle— Why do you ask?”

With her pretty and usually silky smooth brow puckered in consternation, she walked across the stone flooring to get a closer look at the bruises on Broody's back. She lifted an index finger to poke at them. There were quite a few.

“Well, brother, you have the oddest purplish marks on your back. I've never seen anything like it! Do you even know *how* you got them? They look

fresh! And they are shaped oddly, like horseshoe shaped!”

“Oh, yes, now I remember,” Broody said cheerfully. “You know Farina Hopper, right? She invited me to her room last night—actually, she used magic to get me there—she sprinkled Detour Dust in front of our doorway so that every time I arrived I would find myself back in the corridor heading toward *her* room... She wasn’t expecting her roommates until today and she wanted to ride my—”

Noticing that Shady had covered her ears with both her hands and was glaring at him, he said, “Well, we hooked up and the marks are my fault. She was wearing heels and I told her to keep them on when we were fucking! I swear the entire time she was digging her heels in my back I never felt a thing!”

Shady lowered her hands from her shell-like ears and sighed.

“That’s because all the blood drains from your brain to your dick!” she said derisively, shaking her head.

“Honestly, Broody, I thought you had better taste! Starting a new year at school out by fucking the Prep School human trolley— Literally everyone has had a ride on her—hence her nickname Farina *bed* Hopper!”

“Oh the cruelty of schoolmates,” Broody replied, turning and shrugging on his new wardrobe choice. “Maybe she is just a generous girl providing a much needed public service for the student population. So that they feel less pent up and grouchy! I know a good hard fucking always cheers me up! Anyway, how do I look? The Orientation Dance starts in less than two hours. I want to check out the new students ripe for plucking—”

He heard a noise at the doorway to their room, which was open to allow the perfect fall air to circulate through and rid their room of the vestiges of the joint they’d shared earlier.

Standing at the entrance to their room was the girl he’d seen earlier—the girl with wild hair the same color of his own, only with startlingly dark eyes that he recognized were not black but more a rare shade of indigo violet.

As Shady turned to see what had captured her brother’s attention, she also was startled at the sight of the stranger.

“I’m your new roommate!” the girl said, dropping one end of what appeared to be a very heavy trunk with leather straps and pushing her hair back from the sides of her face.

“My name is Antimony Crockett. My friends call me “Moni.” Are you the Watkins?”

“Yes, we are,” Shady responded quickly, hissing at Broody to finish dressing himself.

“I’m the *clothed* one,” she continued, and this happens to be my brother Broody. He likes to go shirtless a lot, occasionally pantless— You’ll get used to it I’m sure! And, by the way— Bold fashion choice, most of the witches prefer black for daytime!”

“Thanks,” the new girl said shortly,

“Where is the other one, the guy you were hanging out with on the steps to Admin? I have kind of a thing for gingers— He doesn’t DYE his hair, does he? And I love men with red beards!”

Moni paused to measure what effect her little impromptu speech was having. The tall, silver haired, stunningly built goliath was frowning, and she thought that was a good indication that her ruse had worked. She didn’t want him to know that she was the least bit interested in him.

As far as the auburn haired youth—well, it was true she loved redheads. It was her experience that they seemed to give the best head.

“You must be talking about Luca,” Shady said, stepping over to the newcomer. She was about to reach for the girl’s trunk—which looked extremely old and heavy as a Victorian Era steamer trunk—in order to help Moni drag it across the room, when suddenly it elevated into the air along with the rest of the girl’s luggage, and after floating languidly across the expanse of the shared room, planted itself neatly against the opposite wall. The rest of the luggage followed suit and all of them heard the metallic clinking sounds as the wardrobe unlatched itself and opened to reveal an organized interior that included a row of dresser drawers and what looked to be an impossibly deep double-wide closet space.

“Oh, I wish I had a trunk like yours!” Shady commented appreciatively. “All the school provides us with are those clonky wardrobes, and for all their size they aren’t big enough to hold all of our outfits!”

“I feel your pain,” Moni said in a pleasant voice as she rifled through the closet side of her wardrobe, grabbing a strategically torn pair of jeans and a white peasant type shirt with dramatically full bell sleeves. “I need to change, do you mind?”

Shady nodded toward the door to the room and it closed immediately. She wasn’t sure what to do next—should she and Broody turn their backs?—but the newcomer, Moni, stripped away her dress underneath, which she was wearing no underwear, letting it fall to the floor and standing there

unselfconsciously naked for a few seconds before donning the pants and shirt she'd selected seconds before. There was no time to look away, and Shady thought that it was obvious that Moni had intended to give them both an eyeful. Her body was so fair it was almost glaringly white, as though she had some luminescence to her.

"Angel skin," Broody found himself thinking. Having seen her skin, and her unbelievable voluptuous curves and naturally cinched in waist, he found the same thoughts returning that had come to him earlier that day.

She was uniquely beautiful, in an unfashionable and original way that seemed to belong only to her. Her tits were rosebuds. Her pubic hair was so fair and blonde that it glistened like tinsel between her thighs.

"Pussy tinsel," Shady thought, wondering if she was picking up something different about their new witch roommate—

Could she be of Fey ancestry? Shady wondered silently. The coloring would certainly make sense. Shady's first kiss and fumbling sexual encounter had been with a half Fey girl named Adelina at a summer camp sponsored by Wood Sprites, so she was well acquainted with the unusually light coloring of the Fey folk.

The Watkins hadn't realized that they'd kept staring at Moni until she finished dressing and said in a pleasant and conversational tone,

"There! That's MUCH better! I grabbed all the literature the Staff at the Administration building shoved at me, but do you happen to know what's scheduled for tonight?

Some kind of Orientation Ball or something?"

CHAPTER TWO-THE HALF LIGHT BONFIRE DANCE



BROODY CLEARED HIS THROAT.

“Well of course, there is *always* a ball to welcome the new and returning students,” he affirmed. “And it is required that we put in an appearance, but —”

“But they never get a really good band, even though we have several bands on campus, and so everyone is sure to leave early and take off to the Western Woods,” Shady said, interrupting her brother. “That’s where the *real* party will be! There is always a bonfire and all of us working in unison ward it off with a Disorientation Spell so that they can’t get a fix on where the party is being held. And bust it up! Strength in numbers worked in Magic as well as in the Drab world!” she added. “And we really shouldn’t because of course it isn’t their fault, the so called normal humans, but that’s what we call them. *The Drabs*, or *Drabbies*, if you will!”

Moni chuckled at the expression and Broody added,

“Or the *Drabinskis* even,” he added helpfully. “Which isn’t very nice, but there are a lot of snobs here so you might as well get used to it!”

“I appreciate all the inside information I can get,” Moni told them, smiling, with a gleam in her eye. “And I think we are going to get along just fine. I am a neatnik, so if you are messy you can count on me picking up after you. Clutter pollutes my environment and breaks my concentration for Casting Spells and so forth— It’s kind of a quirk I have. I’m a bit obsessive compulsive and I know it! I hope you don’t mind! I guess we’ll be sharing a bathroom, so please flush after you do your business! And I should tell you that although I try to be as quiet as possible, I tend to pee a lot, especially if I’m nervous or I’m trying to lose weight and taking diuretics! As we all

know, not every problem can be cured with a charm or spell or potion!”

“Shady pees a lot too,” Broody said, laughing as he dodged a kick from Shady. “And I agree. I believe we will get along famously! I can’t wait until you meet Luca. He’s our best friend!”



SHADY AND BROODY hadn’t been lying about the formal Orientation event planned for the evening being pretty tame and boring. Even given the fact that the musical offerings included both a small orchestra—made up of instruments that played themselves—a level of magical prowess most of the student population hadn’t acquired—and a rock band located at opposite ends of the third floor Ballroom, there were too many Proctors side-eyeing the students.

After spending the minimal amount of time meeting Professors and dishing with other students, a small but steady flow of them began trailing away from the admin building and toward a distant hill.

It was about a half-mile trek over the meadows and by the time all four of them arrived it was already fairly populated by a crowd of mostly upperclassmen and a live campus band who called themselves *Burning in Effigy*.

Moni was happy to meet Luca, who looked very debonair in a black satin cloak with a red lining. He was wearing no shirt, and the open front of his cape clearly showcased his well-muscled and swoon-worthy chest.

Funnily enough, he wore a bow tie and collar, reminding Antimony of the Chippendale’s male strippers she’d heard of from the 1980’s, and very tight black leather pants and boots.

“So,” Luca commented, standing next to her after he uncorked a bottle of raspberry flavored beer for her and then for himself. “Why did you choose Pitchfork Prep? I mean it has a great reputation as a finishing school for Magicals, but it’s not even one of the top three here in the US!”

“Maybe I just liked the brochure they sent to my Scribemail,” Moni replied quickly, tossing her own depleted bottle of beer into a nearby trash bin as she took Luca’s bottle from his hand to tilt her head back and take two swigs before returning it.

As she did so, she could have sworn in her head she heard his voice say,

“Do you want to fuck me Moni?”

She felt her own eyebrows shoot up in surprise as she stammered,

“Luca! Hey! Did you just *mind* message me?”

Luca started to laugh.

“Guilty!” he told her, smiling widely and slipping one arm around her.

“But I swear it was only a test, to see if you could hear me. Not everyone *can* you know. I wasn’t really hitting on you or anything... At least, not yet. I don’t know if Shady or Broody told you, but I am quite the tease.”

Even in the flickering light of the bonfire, as Moni allowed her gaze to travel down Luca’s tone, lithe body. She could make out the unmistakable outline of a prominent erection straining. She moved closer to him and looked into his eyes.

“You may have been teasing but from this angle it seems that your *not-so-little-friend* is perfectly serious.”

Luca laughed again, this time with her, and she found herself loving the deeply seductive lilt of his laughter.

It was sexy... warm... inclusive...

“I really like you, you know,” Luca’s voice inside her head seemed to say.

“Nice trick,” she commented. “But to answer your question, my reasons for choosing Pitchfork Prep are deeply personal, and something I don’t want to discuss at the moment. But I will tell you this, one of my relatives is a Professor here!”

Luca moved even closer to her, curiosity evident in his expression.

“What? Nepotism much? Which of our esteemed Professors is it I wonder?” he continued. Wait, on second thought, don’t tell me! We’ll make a game out of it! How does that sound?”

Moni’s eyes narrowed as she tried to discern if Luca was joking again or being serious.

“Okay, I’ll *bite*,” she told him after a momentary pause. “And if you guess right, what do you want as a reward?” She could only hear Luca’s voice in her head, and in spite of the fruity beer she’d imbibed, his response echoed clearly in her mind.

“I want to make love to you, beautiful Moni,” Luca said.



JUST BEFORE THE band started up, as they were obviously trying out their guitar riffs and getting ready to perform for the gathering a pealing sound drifted from a distance toward them.

Moni automatically checked her Musephone for the time, then looked up to see the faces of Shady and the ever tall and brooding Broody, who had his silver hair skinned back in a man bun and secured with two lacquered oriental hair accessories that stuck out from either side at forty-five degree angles. If anything they made him appear impossibly taller.

“*That* was the sounding of the ghost bell from Carline Tower,” Shady informed her, reaching for the last of Luca’s beer and swilling it until it was gone before handing it back to him. Moni noted that Luca didn’t seem the least bit perturbed.

Shady wiped her mouth on the sleeve of her dark blue velvet tunic and continued, “It sounds only at the hour of the ghost that haunts that particular tower’s death, and no one has been up there in the half century since then. Her name was Halicora Halifax, and her great, great Grandfather was actually the founder of Pitchfork Prep. She was beautiful and in love with one of the locals here that used to help his father deliver firewood to the school.

They were star-crossed lovers, but even after she was forbidden to see the young man—I always forget his name—”

“Pasha,” Broody interjected helpfully.

“Yeah, thanks,” Shady said, looking slightly annoyed at the interruption. “Anyway,” she continued, “They were supposed to run away together, but Pasha failed to show up that night, and she used her gazing ball to locate him, thinking he had been hurt or something. It turns out that he was two-timing her with another witch on campus. So she turned him into a raven and threw herself off the ball tower after ringing the bell thirteen times.”

The last peal of the distant bell had finished sounding and to Moni’s ears it sounded more hollow and deeply mournful than all the previous soundings of the huge cast iron bell.

“So why has no one ever been up there again?” Moni asked, curious after being told the story.

“Because for some reason,” Shady told her, “Anyone that does ends up falling from the tower as well. It happened with a group of witches who went up there in the eighties, as a dare on Halloween. All three, two boys and a girl, were found bloody and broken in the courtyard the next morning, with no apparent explanation for their falls. Then on the eve of the Millenium,

1999, it happened again. A couple decided to investigate Carline Tower. By that time, the door up to the tower was heavily padlocked but apparently the guy was an expert in Dimittis Magic Spells and got the locks to fall away so that they could ascend the narrow, winding staircase to the tower. A witness was present in the courtyard at that time, a female Professor who had ventured outdoors searching for her missing cat, and she reported that she heard shouts and screams and then saw two bodies literally flung from the tower as though by some enormous power. She heard their skulls shatter as they hit the pavement, one right after the other.”

“A Ghost with issues,” Moni commented. “Never a good thing! Thanks for the story though, I’m glad I asked! The more I learn about Pitchfork Prep, the more I’m convinced I made the right choice.”

All of them could hear the band launching into a cover for the rock anthem *Hell With You*.

Both Luca and Shady grabbed her hands on either side, and soon they were all dancing to the heavy metal music emanating from the band.



MONI WAS unsurprised that two hours later the bonfire was still burning as high and bright as when she’d first arrived, and that there were a fair number of students who had shed all their clothing and were dancing around it.

It was a macabre and most beautiful scene. The naked bodies of the young witches were dappled by velvety black shadows and the orangey glow of the flickering flames. Behind them, the moon, which wasn’t quite full but nearing fullness, was hanging low in the night sky, circled by a halo of bright stars that shone with a vitality and ferocity that Moni hadn’t seen before.

At the summit of the bonfire spark ascended, red and orange and golden. It was a beautiful scene.

The band had taken a break before going into their last set, and the group had lost Shady, who was in a rapt conversation with the bass player, a conversation that was punctuated periodically with long languorous kisses.

Moni had, by that time, lost track of how many gourmet beers she had consumed. Dancing was thirsty work, and it had been so enjoyable dancing in a group with her new roommates and Luca that time had flown by.

Now she was sitting on a log between Luca and Broody, wishing that

someone would kiss her like Shady was being kissed by the bass player with the jet black hair to his waist.

As if he had read her mind, Moni felt the gentle touch of Luca's thumb and forefinger on her chin, as he tilted her mouth up to his.

That first kiss felt like a drink of Moonshine. She felt the heat of their tongues dancing course down the center of her body and straight to her pussy. At the same time, she felt a hand gently but firmly cup her pussy in the heat of their palm, gently massaging it as she continued to kiss Luca and breathed out an involuntary moan.

"Oh, Sweetheart, you are so drunk," Broody's amused and very kind sounding voice whispered in her ear,

"Tell us what you want, Moni. You know we both want you. We've wanted you from the first time we saw you... Tell us who you want to make love with. Ladies Choice."

Moni realized that Luca and Broody were both pressing their faces closely to hers. Broody began to kiss her neck, as she looked deeply into Luca's eyes and could see that he was aroused but patiently waiting for her answer.

"I want both of you," she heard herself say. "I'm a greedy little witch!"



MUCH LATER THAT same night on the heels of the most erotic experience Moni had ever been part of, she would have the same recurrent dream she often had, the one that featured her brother Sam's face inches from her own, although he seemed to be behind a round portal of glass, so thick that although he seemed to be mouthing words she could not hear him.

In her dream she would beat on the glass and plead with him.

"Sam! Sam! Where are you? I can't hear you!" But he never seemed to be able to understand what she wanted, though she could clearly see the desperation in his eyes as he tried to communicate.

CHAPTER THREE-TRIADS AND DRYADS



DUE TO HER INEBRIATED STATE, MONI WOULD NEVER REMEMBER HOW SHE had managed to make it back to the room she shared with Shady and Broody.

But she would never forget the sensations that she experienced that evening.

Never.

Moni loved being naked. Clothing always felt like an affront to her skin, so when she felt gentle hands undressing her, it didn't occur to her to question what might be happening. It felt like something that was supposed to happen.

She laughed aloud quietly when she felt the warmth of two bodies pressed closely against hers, one spooning her, and the other holding her so closely she could not discern where the other body began and her own body ended.

"Open your eyes, beautiful."

It was Broody's voice, and as soon as she did his angelic face filled her visual field.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she answered back, her eyelids feeling so heavy that she wanted to close her eyes again.

"Wait, lovely Moni, we have to know if you want us to make love to you," Broody said quietly. "It has to be what you want, darling. Luca wants to know too."

"Yes, Moni," Luca's voice came from directly behind her, somewhat muffled because he was nuzzling her neck.

A lightning bolt of desire surged through her core and her heartbeat

ramped up as she first nodded and then answered,

“Oh, yes. Yes, *please!*” The urgency in her voice was a decisively palpable thing that seemed to linger in the air between the trio.

Broody’s lips descended over her own, and she felt inquisitive fingers gently parting her labia to tease her clitoris. And then she was on her back, her hands held above her head, as both her nipples were first nibbled on. Tongues encircled her areolas in a symphony of pleasurable sensation, one circling clockwise and the other counter clockwise. And at the same time she was lost in a never ending kiss.

She felt her thighs parting gently and a welcome intrusion slide into her and began moving in and out in an ancient rhythm that caused her to raise her hips up to meet each thrust.

And suddenly, softer lips were searching hers, and looking up she saw Shady above her.

Shady pulled back long enough to say, “You are so beautiful Moni. Like a beautiful and delicate wood nymph. You deserve all the pleasure in the world!”

A myriad of new sensations followed. A nipple for Shady’s teeth, Broody kissing her neck as he moved his cock expertly between her thighs. The sensation of a gentle feeling of a single finger in her anus as Broody and Luca took turns penetrated her vagina. And afterward, when things slowed down, a myriad of hands smoothing over her skin and the radiating warmth of four people in the same bed loving each other.

Even Luca and Broody kissing tenderly above her head while someone—Shady?—lapped between her legs and teased her clit to a climax.

So much beautiful nudity, so many body parts that she reached to fondle like forbidden fruit, enjoying the tension of squeezing and sucking and tasting.

And finally, the covers pulled over her like a benediction as she basked in the afterglow.

“You are all beautiful. My beautiful friends...” she murmured as she drifted off.



THE PROFESSOR’S lecture seemed to be going on and on the next morning,

which happened to be the first day of class, and Moni, still slightly hung over from the Bonfire dance the previous night, was having a devil of a time keeping her eyes open.

In point of fact, she had nearly nodded off sitting straight up when the Professor called her name.

“Pardon?” she asked, instantly awake. The Half Light Healings class had not been her first pick, but both Welsh Faerie Magic and Creature Magic classes had been full up and so the current class she was in had been a default choice.

The elderly and bespectacled Professor looked at her skeptically over the rims of his square, silver wire spectacles.

“I was wondering if you could enlighten the class as to what magical qualities a Dryad possesses,” the Professor intoned.

Moni immediately colored, feeling embarrassed that she hadn’t been paying attention. She actually had found that she liked that particular professor, Professor Weasel, almost instantly. He seemed to have a keen sense of fashion, as his robe was a green color that seemed nearly phosphorescent, and the stars either printed or embroidered on it seemed to twinkle as he moved across the front of the classroom, pacing as he lectured.

“Female Dryads may possess several qualities, but one of the most pronounced is the ability to heal both plants and humans,” she recited from memory.

“Ah, very good,” Professor Weasel commented, beginning to pace again. “And what of male Dryads then?” he questioned. “What sort of magical proclivities do they possess?”

“There aren’t any *male* dryads, for Dryads are daughters of the River God,” Moni was quick to answer.

“Yes, that is correct!” the Professor said immediately after Moni responded.

At that point, blessedly as far as Moni was concerned, the bells signaling the end of the class period sounded, echoing throughout the arched stone halls with a vibration that Moni could feel from the soles of her feet upward.

She slid out of her desk, shoving her texts for the class inside her embossed leather backpack and was startled when she looked up and the Professor was standing over her.

“Witch Crockett, I had some questions I wanted to ask you,” he told her. “Do you happen to have a few minutes to spare?”

I would very much appreciate it!”



MONI HAD BEEN PLANNING to skip lunch in favor of a power nap after her first two morning classes, but as soon as she hit the door of the room she shared with Broody and Shady, she realized that was not going to happen.

All three of them, Shady, Broody, and Luca, were there, passing a blunt between them through the air without stirring from their seats. Broody and Shady were sitting on Shady’s bed, and Luca had pulled up one of the comfortable desk chairs to sit close by.

Moni looked up and noticed that someone, probably Shady, had opened up a fan portal to suck up the aromatic fumes of the marijuana cigarette so that it didn’t suffuse the room.

All three of them were staring at her.

“Ganja break!” Broody said cheerfully. “You want?”

Before Moni could shake her head, the joint, which had been heading peacefully through the air toward Luca, made an abrupt forty-five degree turn and was heading toward her as she stood just inside the door.

“Thanks,” she said, toking on it for a few seconds, inhaling the rich smoke, and then sending it back toward Luca, who looked slightly miffed at having missed a turn.

Shady looked at Moni.

“Elephants,” she said. At Moni’s perplexed expression. As she hopped up and retrieved another desk chair and patted the seat to invite Moni to join the trio, she added, “I’m sure you have some questions about last night, and we’re all here, so feel free to ask away. We promise to answer with absolute candor!”

Moni gulped. She *had* been wondering about the night before, aware that she’d been slizzered and not completely sure exactly how it had all played out.

In the light of day, it seemed like some sort of witchy horny coed wet dream, not unlike some of the ones she’d come up with herself when masturbating. It would be nice to know if what she recalled in flashes had taken place, but she found her usually outspoken self tongue tied with three pairs of inquisitive eyes on her.

“I guess I was wondering what happened last night,” she began. “I don’t have amnesia or anything but I was pretty buzzed and I’m pretty sure at some point we were all naked?”

“We sure were!” Broody enthused. Shady smacked his arm immediately.

Broody gave Shady a baleful look, saying, “Hey, Sis, that’s my *casting* arm, take it easy, would you?” And then in Moni’s direction as he rubbed at the injured arm, he commented, “I apologize, my little sister has some violent tendencies!”

Shady glared at him and then said to Moni, “*This* is why everyone assumes that I am the older sibling! And to answer your question, it is likely that everything you remember of last night happened, just as it was meant to. It wasn’t anything we planned... and you shouldn’t feel weird or awkward about it. Broody and I sort of knew something was in the air when you first showed up at the door to our room, Moni... Do you believe in destiny? Or fate?”

“To an extent,” Moni replied honestly. “Although, I like to think we make our own destiny, ultimately, I think some things, some synchronicities, are hard to explain.”

“Well, what happened between all of us last night, I think was meant to happen and I want you to consider it as more than a random orgiastic hook up times four—”

“We’re not a cult or anything,” Luca interjected, leaning forward and making sure that his eyes met Moni’s.

“Oh my *gawd*, Luca, I can’t believe you said that!” Broody said quickly. “Why did you use that word? Now she’ll be thinking she’s wandered into a nest of weirdos!”

“Luca you are *such* a moron!” Shady added, scowling at him.

“*Stop!*” Moni said. “I honestly am not thinking anything. I’m still kind of unpacking what happened last night, and I don’t feel weird around you, all of you, but I *do* sense some sort of group energy of something. Something indefinable. I mean I know you’re not *vampires* or anything, right?”

The other three looked stunned for a moment as they exchanged startled looks with each other, and then suddenly erupted into a cacophony of laughter.

After a moment Moni found herself laughing along with them.

Shady had laughed so hard she was wiping tears from her eyes.

“No we’re not vamps, although I think one of my Uncles is. He lives in

Dubai with his partner!”

CHAPTER FOUR-FLYING IN FORMATION



MOUNTING A PITCHFORK WAS NOT AS UNCOMFORTABLE AS IT SOUNDS, MONI was soon to discover.

She did, however, wonder whatever the male witches did with their balls so as not to cause harm to them. Since testicles were close together in a skin sack, she doubted they could fit the handle of the pitchfork between the two nards comfortably, one hanging on one side and the other dangling over the other side.

Being Moni, she was not afraid to ask Luca during Flying Maneuvers Class, and being Luca, he answered her question with aplomb.

“We wear a special cup jock,” he told her. “Kind of some under armor for the twins. Works very nicely, actually. Why are you so interested in my balls all of a sudden?”

“Just slightly intrigued,” Moni shot back.

She hadn’t slept very well the previous night. She had had the one recurrent dream that she was convinced was more than a dream. She’d been dreaming of Sam again.

Sam, born *Sebastian*, although no one had ever called him that, was her twin brother. He’d been abducted when they’d been younger, or at least that was the theory her parents had always had, offering bigger and bigger awards for his return until their own untimely deaths falling from a ski lift in Switzerland during an avalanche.

Within an eighteen-month time frame, her entire nuclear family was gone, leaving her the only surviving member.

That was, unless Sam was still alive and captive somewhere. He’d always felt like part of her, and the fact that they had been cosmically close caused

her to think that he might be trying to communicate with her through her dreams.

Usually, he told her that he was alive, and decently treated, but unable to escape. The dreams always ended with his pleading with her to find him. But he never gave her a chance to ask where in the world he was. As long as Sam was missing it felt, even in her happiest moments, as though a cloud hovered over her constantly, a reminder of her many losses.

She never talked about him with other people, but one of the reasons that she had come to Pitchfork Prep was because she knew that she had a relative, an Uncle to be precise, teaching there under an assumed name.

She felt the presence of a relative as soon as she set foot on campus, but her instincts led her no further, as she'd been hoping they might. It would be up to her to find her long lost Uncle.

She tried to refocus on what the instructor was saying, for Professor Bismark was demonstrating several features of their preferred riding mode, a trident type pitchfork that not only was a way to fly around, but also doubled as a magical staff, and under extreme circumstances, even a weapon.

She realized that she hadn't been paying attention when everyone around her rose up about fifteen feet into the air and she was left land bound, looking up at their dangling feet.

"Someone hasn't been paying attention, "Professor Bismark admonished her, looking downward with a disdainful look.

"You there, Antimony Crockett! Just recite *furca sursum!*"

Moni did so and soon found herself hovering just above the aeronautics field, once again flanked by Broody and Shady, both of whom were rapidly becoming... well, the word *friend* didn't seem to cover the relationship between them. Moni felt so comfortable with all of them, Luca included. And not just because they'd all been naked together.

She flushed inwardly, remembering. Being nude and the center of attention felt like it had healed something within her. Maybe one of the broken places in her heart? The combined energy of all their bodies around her, rubbing up against her and touching her, unfettered by clothing, had somehow pulled her out of what she now recognized as a low-grade depression.

How odd that clothing blocks so much energy between people, she thought.

She paid attention for the rest of the flight training, especially the

emergency maneuvers that involved backing the sharp end of the pitchfork into the trunk of a tree if having control problems. She also learned that, because their pitchforks were metallic they had high tech features and could be remotely controlled.

None of them believed it until Professor Bismark demonstrated it by taking a small, silver remote out of her robe pocket and sending them all first in one direction flying in formation, of course, and then the other.

As they remained several yards above ground, Moni willed herself not to look down. Flying hadn't ever been her thing because she suffered mildly from a sort of vertigo. She was okay as long as she didn't have to gaze down for any length of time. It was different riding on a broom or pitchfork than climbing a ladder, because when she was earthbound she never got dizzy. But up above Mother Earth, all bets were off.

"Hey, Moni," Luca hissed at her. "Don't be intimidated that our Forks can be remote controlled like drones. Look above your hands where they are gripping the handle, see anything?"

Moni squinted. She'd forgotten her glasses yet again, and anyway, she was just slightly nearsighted and didn't need them. Not to mention she had an aversion to being a *four eyes*.

"There are some screws or rivets or something," she hissed back.

"Yeah, well, the top one there blocks the remote signal if you press down on it twice! I studied this model in a Witchtech Owner's Manual. But don't —"

He was going to tell her not to touch it, but due to Moni's inquisitive and impulsive nature Luca was too late. The next thing he knew, she had abruptly dropped from her place right beside him in the air and was falling to earth!

Funnily, time seemed to go into a slow motion mode, and though Moni could see the meadowland rising up from below her, she felt no sense of panic. But she was having a problem figuring out which of her repertoire of memorized spells to use to stop from crashing to the ground.

She began by reciting the Yellow Magic Spell *Suspendi Motus* even realizing that she did not know how to focus the energy of the spell on herself rather than having it affect the other flyers or even the entire class, when she noticed that Luca had chosen to join her in her fall, his pitchfork in tandem to hers so that he could easily reach over and press another button on the handle that immediately stopped her plummet and caused her Pitchfork to rise up again and resume its proper place in the formation.

Luca was again beside her within two seconds, and she shot him a grateful smile as he seemed to laugh and waggle his finger at her.

The wind at that altitude was high enough to carry away any spoken words, but Moni read his lips as he mouthed,

“Such a naughty little witch!”



AFTER CLASS, Shady had an appointment tutoring a young witch who couldn't get her *Exponentia Caeruleum* Spell to work well enough to pass the upcoming finals in Novice Magic, but Broody, Luca and Antimony decided to spend the hour between classes relaxing in the Hellcat Café, one of three student coffee bar eateries, and the only one that served sushi.

As they manipulated chopsticks and dipped the tasty morsel in a variety of savory sauces, Moni decided to share her most recent discovery.

“I found my relative, the one I'd heard was working here at Pitchfork Prep Academy. He is one of the Professors, actually.”

“Let me guess which one,” Broody said, popping a Tako Nigiri and rolling his eyes briefly at the exquisite taste. “Might it be Professor DeSapientiae?” he guessed. “You look kind of like her, actually!”

Moni recoiled slightly, looking incredulous. “How can you even say that? You're joking, right? You know they say she wears that turban thing on her head to hide *horns*? Apparently, she is a freak, and her coloring is nothing like mine!”

“Well, she has great tits!” Broody said pleasantly. “Just like yours! And I, for one, can overlook a few extra bumps on the head for a perfect set of titties! I would totally *do* her!”

“Your sexual leanings tend to be bizarre, Broody, always have been. After you met and started dating that one underclassman with two vaginas, Shady and I didn't see you for weeks! You barely came up for air! I nearly lost my best friend!”

“What can I tell you, I'm a connoisseur of the Vag, among other things,” Broody said airily. “Anyway, so it wasn't Professor DeSapientiae?”

“No, it wasn't,” Moni snapped. “And as it turned out, he recognized *me* before I found *him*. Professor Weasel is my long lost Uncle. He was not close to my father because they have different fathers, and on becoming an adult,

he changed his surname to Weasel from Crockett. He seems pretty nice. He does have the Crockett chin dimple, I noticed. Very intelligent and he went out of his way to assure me that he had also been searching for *me*, off and on, after hearing about my parent's bizarre accident in the high country. He said knowing I am his niece would probably cause him to be harder on me in class, so not to expect any favors. As if I ever would anyway. And he also told me to feel free to seek him out if I had any problems or difficulties. Which I thought was nice, that he wanted to be there for me in some way. It's something I'm not used to and never expect. It feels kind of weird, in a good way, I mean."

"Well, I'm happy for you," Broody said.

To which Luca added, "It does seem fortuitous that you managed to connect with him but Moni, please, be careful .He is a relative—pun intended—stranger. Just because he's blood doesn't mean he has your best interests at heart. Broody and I wouldn't ever pry because we don't give a shit, but rumors around school hint that you are some kind of heiress, that your folks left you a lot of money... What I'm trying to say is, some people might want to get close to you because you're rich!"

CHAPTER FIVE-PLAYING DOCTOR/HOMECOMING



“I DID WHAT YOU ASKED,” THE HEAVILY PERSPIRING PROFESSOR WEASEL insisted as he looked warily from one half shadowed face to another. “I made contact. I let her know who I am. You never said there was anything else!”

The middle figure was taller than the rest, and as he stepped closer to the nervous Dr. Weasel, enough light shone on his face so that the Professor could see the sneer on the unwelcome visitor’s lips.

“I apologize for the misunderstanding, but our association will continue until we have achieved our objective,” he said in a quiet voice that was liberally edged with menace. “We need to make an acquisition, and for that to happen you need to have more than a cursory, casual relationship with Antimony Crockett. You must ingratiate yourself to her. Become her favorite Uncle. Win her confidence to the point where she relies on you and trusts you. She will be hungry for connection, having lost her brother, and with her family declining in number since the last century. You are a very well spoken and charming man. I am sure that this is a task you are equal to,” the figure finished.

Professor Weasel would have trouble sleeping that night, as it turned out. He had made the mistake of looking down at the feet of the robed figures that had come into his classroom, quietly closed the door, pulled the shade over the window, and cornered him for a private *pep talk*.

Although the exposed portions of their anatomy from the waist up seemed normal enough, even their exposed hands looked like the hands of any witch or warlock, their feet were something entirely different. They had feet that were those of a giant lizard, all of them. He could see the rough lizard skin and the claws protruding out from under the bottom of their robes.

That meant that they were *extra*. They were not only witches, but something more sinister. He had no desire to find out what they might do to him if he did not heed their instructions.



MONI COULD HEAR the raucous music emanating from the room she shared with Broody and Shady—who was now going by the moniker of *The Fabulous Shade*—filling the corridor as she walked toward it. Before she could open the door, she was met by a sweating and exhilarated looking Luca.

He pulled her inside and pushed her gently against the door for a full fifteen second kiss before explaining, “If you came for danger and excitement you’ve come to the right place!”

Luca was wearing a kilt, and peering around his shoulder, Moni could see that Broody was too.

Broody was jumping up and down on the bed to the beat of the music, his kilt flying up to his trim waist with each jump. And because he was wearing nothing underneath, as was proper with the tradition, all of his airborne genitalia was on full display every five seconds.

“Come join us and dance,” Luca urged.

For a fleeting moment Moni thought of all the Alchemy Homework she had yet to do, plus a short paper for Metaphysical Magic on conjuring diaphanous cloth from seaweed, but in the next instant, she allowed her armful of books to crash to the floor and ran to join Broody on the bed

Within seconds, she had them laughing, her standard issue Pitchfork Prep Academy skirt in the tartan plaid in various shades of violet, magenta, green, and gold associated with the academy flying up to her waist just as the kilts of her dancing partners were.

All of them were thinking how funny it would be if Shady walked in at that moment.

She didn’t though, and as they all finally collapsed on the bed they’d been using as a trampoline, Moni realized that all the tension in her body was gone.

She sat up and was about to get up when Broody gently grabbed her wrist.

“Please stay for a moment,” he said. “Let’s play doctor or something!”

Luca made a funny noise and rolled with laughter. Finally wiping his eyes he said, “Seriously? Is that a line you use? Does it still work even though no one here is five years old?”

“I just meant it might be nice to transition into some kind of body thing,” he said in an injured tone, pouting slightly. “Like role playing, which is something *grown ass adults do all the time*, am I right?”

Moni squinted and looked thoughtful for a moment.

“Okay I’m *in*,” she said at last. “As long as I can be the doctor!”

Luca and Broody shot each other astonished looks and Broody quickly said, “Okay, Dr. Antimony, where do you want us?”

Doctor Antimony had the two gorgeous young men lay next to each other side by side on the vast bed.

“Hmmm,” she said in a serious tone. “I think I’ll start with a thorough examination. What seems to be the trouble here?” she asked Luca.

“I have an insatiable ache, you know, *down there*. I wondered if you have anything that could help, Dr. Antimony?”

“That was my issue also,” Broody said, his cyan blue eyes looking up into Moni’s eyes innocently. “It’s a chronic problem... occurs more frequently than I would care to admit. Can you help us, Doctor?”

Moni gave a fake sigh, gazing into the deeply shadowed area between the legs of both Broody and Luca, barely concealed by their kilts. “I will do what I can to help you but you must close your eyes, both of you, and lie perfectly still during my examination. Do you think you can do that?”

“Oh yes, Doctor!” one echoed after the other.

“Alright then, try to relax, this shouldn’t take long!” Moni said cheerfully, admiring the musculature of Luca and Broody’s calves and thighs. Broody’s legs were covered with golden hair, which was glinting in the rays of late afternoon sunshine pouring through the floor to ceiling windows. Luca was a ginger, and had a handsome downy coating of red hair covering his legs.

Moni hesitated for a moment. Her inclination was to slide up the hem of Luca’s skirt first, but she wanted to tease him a little, so she started with Broody, who was to her left.

It was no surprise when she discovered that he already had an erection, a prominent one, springing from the abundant golden hair that surrounded his pubic area and also covered his lower abdomen.

She reached out and grasped his cock in her hand, causing him to emit a not-quite-stifled groan at her touch.

“Please, be quiet!” she told him, as she continued to explore the real estate beneath his kilt with her fingers. She lowered her hand and cupped his balls, first one and then the other, gently, and then licked the tips of two of her fingers and rubbed the moisture over the crown of his penis.

By the time she turned her attention to Luca, who was completely quiet, though his chest was visibly moving as his respiration increased, the atmosphere in the room had changed. The air surrounding the trio seemed to have taken on an electric sensuality. The air was more humid and warmer somehow, as if they were in some tropical climate instead of a castle-like gargantuan building made of stone.

It pleased Moni that when she finally flipped back Luca’s kilt to grasp him in her right hand, with her left hand still caressing the long shaft of Broody’s cock, he visibly trembled at her touch. Seeing Luca’s response caused her to feel a surge of feminine power and control that she had never experienced before.

She found that she liked it. It thrilled her. It also turned her on.

Both the young male witches beneath her still had their eyes closed, but their chests were rising and falling rapidly.

Moni watched their faces as she pulled, tugged and teased them with her hands, realizing that it was a first for her. She had never wrangled two cocks at the same time, but she was finding it surprisingly enjoyable.

Except for pubic hair coloring, there was little difference between them. Broody’s cock was perhaps a fraction of an inch longer when erect, but the turgid head of Luca’s trouser beast was larger in circumference.

Without warning, just as Moni was wondering what to do next, Luca’s eyes opened, though they remained seductively hooded by his eyelids,

“Gosh, Dr. Antimony, somehow I feel my condition had become worse under your expert *care* he told her. “How are *you* doing, Broody, my Bruh?”

“Oh, I wholeheartedly agree,” Broody said, his eyes flipping open. “And I think it might be the time to help the Physician heal herself... She seems a bit hot and bothered, don’t you agree?”

“For sure!” Luca agreed quickly. “I believe she needs an injection of some sort... Perhaps more than one, hmmmmmm?”

As if with one choreographed motion, they both arose and pulled her down to where they’d been lying side by side. Broody covered her mouth

with his and Moni felt her legs being opened, first just a bit and then parted widely as Luca went down on her.

She abandoned herself to their lovemaking, because there was no other choice, even though in the back of her mind she wondered if she were being spoiled for life.

She had always been a young woman of many appetites and it seemed impossible that she would ever do the traditional thing and resign herself to one lover.

There was no question in her mind that she loved them both. And she loved Shady too. There was an undeniable attraction there as well.

Afterward, as she lay between Luca and Broody, with their entwined arms cradling her, she reflected that she had never felt so loved. And nothing had ever felt so right.



ALL THREE OF THEM, Shady, Broody, and Antimony, nearly overslept the next day. It took a well-rehearsed Celerity Spell, which Shady cast into a breakfast bar and then split with the other two, to make sure they moved at the speed of light grooming themselves.

Even so, all of them showered at the same time to save even more time, their naked bodies enjoying a steamy shower together, were only a few nude flesh tinted blurs for less than ten seconds before all of them were dressed impeccably in their school attire and short capes with the embroidered emblem of Pitchfork Prep Academy emblazoned on the back.

They barely had time to grab coffees from the Student Center before sliding into their respective seats in their Conundrum Conjuring class.

Broody seemed to be daydreaming throughout most of the class, and it irritated Shady to no end that the teacher, Percival Prickens, called on both of the girls at least twice. It was especially galling that the Professor always seemed to favor Broody.

“What’s with all the favoritism?” Moni asked Broody just as the trio was leaving class. “Why does Professor Prickens kiss your ass all the time? Are you blackmailing him or something? I mean, everyone has noticed that he seems to have a crush on you!”

“Yes, he *does* favor me, doesn’t he?” Broody replied. “And I promise, I

have done nothing to encourage it, but I believe the old chap fantasizes about giving me face, if you get my drift. He is harmless, though. He would never make a move on me, it could mean losing his tenure!”

“But he’s disgusting!” Shady said in her inimitable blunt way. “I mean, he has hair growing out of his ears and birds could practically nest in his overgrown eyebrows. Why does he waste his time mooning over you? Is he delusional?”

Broody, for once, answered her seriously. “Because he is human, and most humans, especially the males of the species, don’t notice they have aged until it’s a done deal and they’ve lost whatever appeal they once had. Old Prickens, he means no harm, but youth has a beauty all its own, and it is a beauty that once lost, cannot be recaptured! That’s why we need to figure out some sort of spell or potion to prolong life. Very few witches last past a hundred and twenty-five nowadays and are usually suffering from dementia and getting their spells all wonky before they actually exit the earth realm. I don’t mind getting older, I really don’t. I think I might age rather well, but I feel sorry for him, for anyone really, that wants something that is out of his grasp.”

“Well, I *don’t* feel a bit sorry for someone who shows favoritism for *any* reason, much less some old perv that wants to get in my brother’s pants!” Shady practically spat. “I might just have to say something to him, like, ‘Look Professor, I am not the only one in this course that has noticed that you have the hots for my brother Broody, and you’d better knock it off or I am going to the administration.’”

Broody stopped walking and turned to Shady. “Please, don’t,” he told her. “Someday, that could be one of us, Shady. Especially with our libidos. I really think that inside ourselves we never feel any older than eighteen, not really. And I’ll tell you something else that I’ve never read any place but that I believe is equally true, having sex with someone is the fastest way to know who they are. Being naked rips away the veneer of who we present ourselves to be, allows us to relax and drift more deeply into our own psyches and communicate on a much more intense level, allowing us to express ourselves in visceral and raw ways that that are unmistakable.”

There was a silence after Broody spoke, and both of his young witch companions had their eyebrows raised in semi-astonishment.

All Shady could say is, “Well if that’s the way you feel about it, I won’t say anything to him Broody. I promise!”



MONI WAS NEARLY NODDING off in her next class, *Magical Hyperbole (and how to avoid it)*, when she noticed a messenger had interrupted the droning lecture of the Professor. As she watched, curious, the Professor engaged in a short exchange with the messenger and turned to look out over the classroom.

“Oh, you there! Miss Crockett! You’re wanted in the Proctor’s Office, immediately!”

As Moni gathered her books and secured them in her backpack, a few derisive tscking noises resounded throughout the classroom, led by Broody, who whispered in a tone of mock horror as she passed his desk,

“Moni, you in *trouble* girl! What did you *do*?” All of which failed to amuse Moni, and she purposely stepped hard on Broody’s foot as she walked past his desk on her way to the corridor.

“Do you have any idea what this is about?” she asked the messenger as they walked briskly toward the Proctor’s office. Usually, if someone was pulled out of class it had to do with plagiarism or cheating or notifying a student that they were failing some class or another. As far as she knew she had an A-plus average in every class she was enrolled in, and as far as the other two, well, it was much more likely someone else would be trying to copy *her* work than the other way around.

The messenger shook her head. “They never tell us anything, but I *will* tell you that Proctor Reynolds seemed very agitated, so I don’t know.

At Pitchfork Prep, Proctors were not only present during exams but also responsible for following up on any student conduct concerns. Reflecting on that, Moni started to wonder if someone had officially complained about something that had happened when she was in the company of Shady, Luca, or Broody.

That made her start to worry, and as she and the messenger arrived at Proctor Reynolds office, with the imposing sign posted above the doorway, she braced herself. In spite of the bracing, she was still gobsmacked when the door was opened from the other side and she stepped into the impressively large office space. She reeled as soon as she took in what was inside.

It was Sam.

He was older, to be certain, but there was no mistaking the twinkle in his sable brown eyes and the face that, except for being large and having a more chiseled jawline, was a mirror image of her own.

She flew into his arms. He was dressed nicely, in a tan cashmere coat and scarf, and he smelled like a pine forest on a sunny winter morning.

Moni at last stood back. He was definitely more mature, but had the same unruly mop of silver blonde hair as he had always had and the same adorably authentic crooked smile.

Moni was crying. Tears of joy wouldn't stop falling and she kept flicking them away from her eyes so she could take in his appearance.

“Oh my *God*, where have you been? You grew up and filled out, and I guess you are a real *mensch* now!” she said, complaining cheerfully. “*Talk fast*, before I fucking faint!”

Realizing that she was in Proctor Reynold's office, she shot an apologetic look toward the school official saying, “Oh wow, I'm sorry. I am just overwhelmed. I'm really sorry to curse in your office!”

“Completely understandable,” the Proctor said in his usual prim sounding tone. “Now, I think we *both* need to listen to what your prodigal brother has to say, so why don't we have a seat. I always hesitate to call students out of class but when your brother showed up at Pitchfork Prep Academy asking for you, and also asking if he could be considered for emergency admittance to the Academy, well... I don't believe I have ever heard of a similar case in the history of the school, and we have had some strange situations crop up, I assure you! First of all, I wanted to ascertain that he *is* your twin brother, and not someone claiming to be! I believe your reaction to seeing him has told me everything I need to know!”

“Yes, yes, this is my twin brother, Sam,” Moni said as she and Sam took seats together while still holding onto each other's hands. “I haven't seen him since our eighth birthdays... We, my parents and I, always believed that he was abducted. We even waited for a ransom note, but never received one!” She turned to Sam, who was looking as happy as she felt.

“I guess it's *your* turn, Sam. Where have you been?”

Sam leaned forward. “I wish I could remember,” he replied, with a tinge of sadness in his tone. “I know that it sounds unbelievable, but I don't remember anything past our eighth birthday, when we were playing hide and seek!”

Proctor Reynolds frowned deeply as he looked from Sam to Moni, and then back to Sam.

“I'm sure you realize that it would take some very dark and malevolent magic to erase over eight years of memory,” he said in a serious tone. “I can

only assume that, as your sister just said, your family postulated, you must have been taken because of your gifts in Magicae. Gifts that you share with your sister, Antimony, I'm sure. It is quite common for twins to have the same gifts."

Moni turned to Sam again. "Sam, what's the very last thing you remember?" she asked him. "Very last memory?"

Sam's handsome brow buckled for a moment. "I was hiding in one of the closets in our room," he told her. "I had discovered that there was a small square door in the back corner of it that opened into an attic space. The door was so small that only a kid could get through it, and I was convinced that it was the perfect hiding space! I crept in and closed the little door behind me. It was pitch black in that attic space, and dusty. After a few minutes I started to get a feeling of dread, not just the willies but a feeling that something—or someone—was behind me. I was about to abandon my perfect hiding space and crawl back into the closet when I heard a chuckle in my ear. It wasn't a nice sound, it caused me to get prickles on the back of my neck and I panicked and threw myself forward toward the door to the closet space. I never made it, and the same voice saying, 'Oh no you don't!' is the last thing I remember. And then I show up here, in clothes I don't recognize and a body I am just getting used to and, well, it's been a *trip*, to say the least!"

After conversing for a few more minutes, Proctor Reynolds had Sebastian Crockett fill out a series of forms and then handed him a key.

"There is a small room that students don't seem to care for in the same hall as your sister's room. You are welcome to stay there until we get all of this sorted out. In the meantime, I would suggest you keep your conversations with other students at Pitchfork Prep casual. Please, tell no one what we have discussed or the unusual circumstances surrounding your arrival. What matters is that you are Antimony's brother, you are here now, and I am sure, since you are her twin, that you will make considerable contributions to the Academy. Can we all agree on that?"

CHAPTER SIX-SUSPICIONS



MONI SPENT MANY DAYS AFTER THE RETURN OF SAM PINCHING HERSELF AND feeling as though she were walking on air. She'd introduced Sam to Luca, Shady, and Broody, and as far as she was concerned he fit right into the group.

Moni had never felt the slightest need to apologize for her lifestyle or non-discriminatory sexual proclivities, but she did feel an obligation to let him know that she was not only friends with Broody and Luca but also occasionally lovers, and that she occasionally hooked up with Shady.

Sam seemed to be as open-minded as she was, and told her that while he was glad that she felt able to confide in him, her confession wasn't necessary and that her private life was her own business.

"Now that I have you back, Sis, I would never do anything to make you feel uncomfortable or question any lifestyle choice you made for yourself... And I have to tell you that while I am more attracted to Shady than Luca or Broody, I have to admire them, even as a guy I think they are *both* hot as *balls!*"

Moni had to laugh. It was the first time Sam had used off-color language, which made sense because, as far as she knew, he'd been kept apart from society for several years. In some ways, his speech patterns were naive and more "coming-of-age" than one would encounter in a male witch that had been raised in the same society and time period that *she* had.

They got along swimmingly, and that was why she found it so disturbing when Broody and Luca, with whom she'd been spending less and less time, asked if they could speak to her alone, just the three of them.

"Look, I know I haven't had as much time to hang out with either of you,

and Shady, but I'm trying to help Sam acclimate to Pitchfork Prep Academy. Just yesterday afternoon, I had to tutor him in riding on his Pitchfork! Boy was all kinds of clumsy at first. It even took off without him, if you can believe it!"

Broody looked at Luca, and both of them turned back to her. Broody gave her an oblique look.

"That's, well, just fascinating, but we *seriously* need to consult with you, in private, without your dear brother, Sam, present... Can you meet us in the Library, third sub-cellar Archives, say, immediately after dinner?"

Still perplexed, Moni nodded her assent. She was still thinking that the fact that she'd been spending so much time with her long lost twin was bothering them, and they missed her and were maybe jealous that Sam was occupying nearly all her waking hours since his arrival. Well, that was understandable, but she thought they were being immature. At least Shady understood that, after missing many years together, years that they would never be able to get back, she and her twin, Sam, had a lot of catching up to do.

Moni sighed deeply. *Men!* They were so selfish, and whiny when they didn't get enough attention!

Not many students visited the Magical Archives in the sub-cellars of Pitchfork Prep Academy. Most of them had no use for the ancient texts kept there, separated from the rest of the library by steep stone steps and tunnels. Most of the student body was not interested in the history of the school, which was well documented there, or the curious texts dating back to the time of the Crusaders.

Broody had often said that it was the only part of the library worth preserving, and the founders must have agreed, because in the event of a fire, or even a holocaust, it was likely that only the texts in the sub-cellars would survive.

It was always cold down there, even in the warmer months, and as the autumn kicked in the drop in temperature as she descended the winding circular stairway—which was the only way to reach the sub levels—she found herself shivering.

She was also thinking that if Luca and Broody had asked her to meet them there as a joke and didn't show up, she would use the itching charm she had just learned to vex the entire contents of their underwear drawer.

But there they were, on time, sitting in a pool of light that Luca had

provided with a *Lumina* spell since the lighting in the sub-cellar was barely adequate. They were sitting at the end of a long library table and looked up as soon as she came into view.

Broody stood up and pulled out a chair catty corner to where he was seated.

“So glad you joined us, Moni. Please have a seat. I know you are wondering why all the subterfuge, but please hear us out and you will understand why we decided that it was best not to meet in public!”

Moni unwound the scarf she was wearing around her neck so that it hung loosely over her small shoulders and said, “Wow! I haven’t been down here since I was researching Mission Moth Messengers at the beginning of school for the Enchanted Entomology course. So, what’s up? And I would have much rather met in the Charm Café. We could be sipping lattes right now!”

Luca sighed, exchanged a significant look with Broody and said, “Moni, Broody and I think that guy who showed up out of the blue claiming to be your brother is a fake—an imposter—someone just *posing* as your long lost brother Sam! I can tell by the look on your face you think we are insane, but *trust* me. We knew your first reaction would be to get mad and accuse us of being jealous because you are spending so much time with Sam—”

“Which I already *am* pissed off, and yes, I think you both are jealous of our relationship and I also think you’ve gone mental,” she replied in a snippy tone. Where in the *world* did you get the idea he is not my brother, my *twin*, for God’s sake. Don’t you think I would know my own *twin*? I mean, if you put lipstick and a wig on him, he could be my double!”

“Not bodywise—” Broody started to object.

But Luca nudged Broody into silence as he replied, “Moni, there is just something *off* about him. Both Broody and I sensed it from the beginning. And yeah, he’s a nice enough guy but he acts differently when he’s not around you. Broody and I were playing a game of pickup basketball the other day with some of the other witches and he joined in... Well, a couple times during the game he exhibited superhuman skills, well beyond the capacity of mortals. And you know the gym areas are warded from any type of magic to keep things fair when we play games. At one point he made a vertical leap into the air to make a basket that no ordinary witch could achieve, Moni! I mean it was *beyond* Olympic quality. Other times, he was moving too fast for the eye to follow! Whatever he is, he is *not* your twin! I’ve *never* seen you move like that!”

“And the way he talks about you is creepy,” Broody chimed in. “I mean, *really* creepy. We were all watching you across campus the other day, hanging around in the Commons after class, and he was watching you as you walked and said something to Shady, like, ‘Moni is so hot, who wouldn’t want to tap that ass!’”

Moni blanched at the revelation but came to Sam’s defense immediately.

“Maybe that just came out wrong! We have no idea where he has been. He can’t remember and even Proctor Reynolds couldn’t find out anything when he was doing Crystal Ball scrying. He’s just confused or something. Maybe Shady misheard what he said!”

“Would you listen to yourself?” Luca interjected, his face flushing as he half rose up out of his seat. “Are you his attorney? Are you not hearing any of this? Okay, I wasn’t going to tell you, but— He took me aside yesterday and asked me how you were in *bed*. What the hell kind of question is that for a brother to ask about his own sister?”

Luca hadn’t expected the slap, but even though it was hard enough to cause his head to snap back, he reached for Moni’s shoulders and shook her as if trying to wake her up.

“That’s what he said! I swear to God! How does that sound anywhere close to *normal* to you?”

But she was gone in the next instant, and both Broody and Luca could hear her footfalls growing fainter and fainter as she clambered up the winding stone steps to the main level of the library.

Moni was still furious as she exited through the centermost of the main library doors and ran out into the campus yard. She could feel her face burning and she was irate, but at the same time she could feel tears streaking their way down her cheeks, making cool trails as she faced into the chilly evening breeze.

She hated them for trying to fuck up her relationship with Sam.

Most of all she hated herself for crying over it.

She felt that Luca and Broody had turned on her, and for no other reason than petty jealousy. She hadn’t done a thing to deserve that, and neither had her twin, Sam.

She decided to ask Sam if she could move into his small, plain single room. She would drag some of her clothing and her mattress down there before Shady or Broody got back.

She was determined to avoid them—not Shady, but Luca and Broody—at

least until they apologized for defaming her brother.

CHAPTER SEVEN-REVELATIONS



“THEY REALLY MISS YOU, YOU KNOW,” SHADY WAS SAYING, AS SHE DREW IN a lungful of the fuchsia color smoke from the imported French cigarette she was smoking and puffed it out in three neat and colorful smoke rings. “They hardly know what to do with themselves since you moved out of the room. They’re like little lost puppies!”

“Good!” Moni found herself saying as she swung her legs. She was sitting on one side of the steps to their dorm, and Shady was sitting back to back with her so as not to blow smoke in Moni’s face. “They need to get a grip. Maybe they don’t understand the bond that exists between twins, but at this point I think it’s deplorable that they made up lies—”

“Luca and Broody wouldn’t lie, Moni!” Shady said, cutting her off. “Believe me when I tell you that even though they like to goof around and play pranks, I have never known either of them to tell a lie... Anyway, aren’t you getting horny? Are you dating anyone else now—wait—of course you aren’t, tending to your brother takes up most of your time still, right?”

Moni sighed. “Yeah, he seems really attached to me but he *is* making other friends. Though he *is* a bit neurotic, like he has to know where I am and what I am doing every minute. He is constantly texting me! It’s like babysitting. I was trying to get him interested in Brandy Tanderell, and I think they actually made a date! Maybe if he makes more friends he won’t be such a stickleburr!”

It seemed to Shady that Sam was behaving more like a stalker than someone with insecurity issues, but she wisely kept her peace, because she was determined not to offend Moni. Moni was the closest thing to a sister she’d ever had, and the fact that she was intensely attracted to her was just a

bonus.

“You know what?” she said as if she’d just had a brilliant idea. “You should invite me for a sleepover in your brother’s room tonight. He’ll be out on a date... And we girls can have cocktails and some girl fun! I bet you are in need of a massage, Moni. You’ve had such a tense week. And I don’t know if you remember, but I have *magic hands!*”

Moni turned to smile at Shady.

“That sounds perfect. How about nine pm? I’ll bring in some fruity beers and we can relax!”



“So HOW IS your Vantablack Level I Course coming?” Shady asked Moni sometime later when they were both comfortably ensconced against a huge bank of damask pillows atop Moni’s comfortable mattress.

“Too slowly,” Moni said, flashing a grin. “And I have very mixed feelings... I had no idea how dark Vantablack is... I’m not a prude but I am surprised they allow Sophomores into such an advanced class! How is your Level II Vantablack Course going, by the way, Miss Advanced Magical Studies candidate?”

“I know what you mean about it being darker but that’s what I like about it,” Shady replied, swilling down her beer and then emitting a small ladylike burp. “It’s exclusive, and different. And it often requires the practitioner to shed a few drops of blood... But, Moni, that’s why it is so much more powerful than other forms of Magic... That’s what makes it unique!”

“I know,” Moni said dreamily, starting to feel a buzz from her second beer. “And I wasn’t going to ask, but... Do you think you could teach me a few tricks from the advanced class? I don’t mean to take advantage of our friendship or make you feel uncomfortable... Please, feel free to say no!”

Shady turned to Moni, her perfect brow slightly buckled.

“If it were Broody my brother or even Luca asking I would have to say *no*, she told her. “But I think you have a penchant for it, even a *gift* for it... So I will say *yes*, on one condition... I will only teach you Vantablack Magical Charms and Spells as you *need* them. I mean, *really* need them! It is a heavy magic, and can backfire on you if you try to become proficient at it too quickly! Have you ever heard the story they tell about George

Tinklemiss?”

Moni shook her head as she uncapped another bottle of fruity beer.

“Well, school legend has it, that he was at the top of the Vantablack advanced studies. He was a whiz at memorizing even the most complicated of spells and casting. Anyway,” she continued. “He got ahead of himself—some say he had memorized even the most arcane Egyptian papyrus scrolls from the House Of Books—well, that’s what the Egyptians called libraries and they just had scrolls up to the 17th century. Old George was fascinated by the discipline, and I also think drawn to the mystique and danger of Vantablack Magic, just as I am and you are, but he got ahead of himself when he started Casting to summon dark entities and trying to control them. They say he called one too many of them, lost control, and inadvertently unleashed an evil into the witching world that still exists in the Rebel and Underground Covens.” She reached for Moni’s hand to grasp it.

“I *will* teach you some useful enchantments and spells, because I believe your brother’s abduction sounds like so many others that happen to our auspicious and highly gifted magical families, but you must be careful... If that was the case, they have undoubtedly figured out the fact that any casting by a pair of twins becomes more than twice as powerful... Moni, what if they let Sam return just to lure you back to wherever they were keeping him, so that they could have the *pair* of you?”

Moni returned Shady’s worried look and asked, “Whatever became of George Tinklemiss, Shady?”

“Oh, they found him face up and stone dead in the Refractory Practice Tower, an area they had set up in one of the towers away from the rest of the school for students to safely practice less manageable magic. Since his death, because they removed most of the more dangerous forms of magic from the curriculum, it is rarely used, and only with permission, however...” Shady slipped her hand into her cleavage and pulled out a copper colored key on a long silver chain.

“I happen to have a key to it! Why don’t we practice every evening right after supper! But in the meantime, let me share a secret that will vaporize any entity in its tracks. It takes three drops of your blood and you must cut yourself and be bleeding when you recite the Spell! Now pay attention, it could save your life someday!

Moni was great at memorizing spells, and good at Latin, so she quickly committed what Shady told her she had dubbed the *Lifesaver Spell* to

memory.

Facti sunt sicut pulvis malus unis

Pulvis moes in radium solis

Denigrati

Shady explained that, like many of the Spells and Incantations in Vantablack Magic, it was the shedding of her blood that gave it such tremendous power.

“Do you know what you are asking the Magiverse to do?” she asked Moni. “I know you won an award in the Witches Latin Tournament last year, it was mentioned in your write up in the Pitchfork Press as a newcomer to the Academy!”

“Basically, it says to smash my enemy to smithereens,” Moni said, nodding. “And don’t worry about the blood part. It’s not something I am used to doing but I have found that in a situation that calls for extreme measures, I do what I have to do!”



AFTERWARD, after the impromptu tutoring session, Moni threw her arms around Shady in sheer gratitude, and soon the two young witches were kissing.

No words were spoken as they removed each other’s clothing because no words were necessary. Their very closeness and deep affection for each other granted permission for the mutual tactile exploration of each other’s bodies.

Moni moaned and grasped handfuls of Shady’s hair as she trailed her tongue down the center of Moni’s body and began lapping gently between her thighs.

Not wanting to be selfish, Moni gently moved into a sixty-nine position, so that she could give Shady similar pleasure. They rocked together for an interminable amount of time, and finally spent, fell asleep in each other’s arms.

Behind the slightly open door of a closet situated opposite the mattress they were lying on, a shadowed figure licked his lips as he finally stopped filming the video of Moni and Shady, using the cell that Moni had gifted him with, and then stealthily let himself out of the room.

He had someone to meet and someplace to be. He hadn’t canceled his

date, just postponed it in anticipation of catching his *twin* and her best friend making love.

Sam had a wide and satisfied smile on his face as he made his way across campus to the Charms Café.



MONI WAS CONFUSED when she was awakened by a loud knocking at the door of the room she was sharing with her twin, Sam. She scrambled to get her bearings and realized that it was a Sunday, and absolutely no one should be disturbing them unless the building was on fire.

Across the room, she could see that Sam had slept in his clothing, while she was buck naked under the eiderdown quilt that Shady had made sure to place tenderly over her when she'd left the previous evening.

Moni nodded toward the door, where the loudly annoying knocking had continued unabated and Sam swung his long legs over the side of his bed and went to answer it.

As soon as he opened the door, Moni could see two of the Elite Security Guard for Pitchfork Prep Academy standing there, with their purple caps with a shield perched on the front that bore the image of the Academy and long matching robes.

“Sebastian Crockett?” one of them asked.

“Yes, I’m Sebastian Crockett,” Moni heard Sam reply.

“Sebastian, you are wanted for questioning in Security,” the same Guardsman intoned.

Moni, who had been fishing under the covers for her jeans and t-shirt and managed to slip them on, rose up off her comfortable nest in a state close to fury.

“What is this all about?” she said, pushing past Sam to glare irately at the two men. “Sam has been in this room with me since last night!”

“Sorry, but our instructions are clear, and his only choice is to come quietly or we will truss him to our Pitchforks and carry him down to be interviewed like a hog on a spit!” the taller Guard told her. “His choice of course!”

“Moni, I’ll go with them,” Sam said quietly, shooting her a desperate look.

Shoving on boots and grabbing a jacket for herself—and Sam, who had forgotten his—she followed the other three. Sam was walking between the Guards and she was still fuming as they arrived at Campus Security.

To her surprise, Shady was already there.

As Moni watched Sam disappear into an office, Shady took her hand and led her over to the bank of chairs in the waiting area.

“Now, don’t freak out,” she whispered in Moni’s ear. “But there was a murder on campus last night. Brandy Tanderell. Several people saw Sam with her at the Charms Café. Apparently, they hung out there for an hour or so and then left—together! *That* is why they want to question him!”

Moni turned and gave her a stunned look.

“Well, they are barking up the wrong tree. I got up to pee last night and I’m not sure what time it was but the moon was out and Sam was in bed snoring... And there is *no way* he would hurt anyone!”

“Well, he isn’t charged with anything *yet*,” Shady said ominously. “But if you have a family attorney, I would certainly let them know what’s going on... This is serious, Moni! They found her nude, and ravaged somehow. I haven’t heard any details and my buddy, Dan, who is apprenticing in the Magical Magic wing, said that in spite of the cold the stretcher they brought her in on was soaked with her blood. Did you get to talk to Sam about his date with her?”

“No, we were both asleep and got rudely awakened,” Moni huffed, slouching down in her seat. “But I get a really bad feeling about this!”

At that moment Broody and Luca, both flushed and breathless, arrived at Campus Security.

Moni was so glad to see them that when she stood up and they both put their arms around her, she forgot that she was mad at them and let them hold her.

CHAPTER EIGHT-ORDEAL



“WELL AT LEAST THEY DIDN’T ARREST YOU,” MONI SAID WEARILY, HANGING her jacket up after they got back to Sam’s room. “We have to be grateful for that. And I talked to our family lawyer. You will need to meet with him. He is coming to campus tomorrow to meet with you at nine am sharp, and of course, I want to be there.”

Sam muttered a response and Moni thought that his voice sounded muffled as though he’d been crying. She felt terrible for him.

He was facing into his closet, changing his clothes, and he had just slid the flannel shirt he’d been wearing off, letting it drop to the floor and was reaching for a clean shirt. Under his flannel shirt, he’d been wearing he had on a ‘wife beater’ t-shirt, and she began to notice something strange as she came up behind him.

All along the centerline of his back she could see a row of what appeared to be spines, poking up from under the thin material of the tee.

She blinked, unable to make any sense of what she was seeing.

“Sam?” she asked tentatively, her midsection growing tight as an unfamiliar sense of dread seemed to expand outward from her gut, and again,

“Sam?”

But he didn’t immediately turn around to face her, and the voice that came drifting back toward her sounded like a garbled version of her brother’s voice.

“I’m sorry about that,” the voice announced. “I fear the proverbial *jig is up*, as the saying goes... And that stupid girl, Brandy Tanderall, I killed her because she wouldn’t let me have my way with her... But that’s neither here nor there, because now that I’ve outed myself I’m afraid we have to leave

ahead of schedule. The downside is that your friends will wonder whatever happened to you. The upside is, you will actually get to see your *real* brother again!”

The thing that had pretended to be Sam turned so that Moni could at last look up into its face. The *Sam* part of its features appeared to be melting away, revealing reptilian skin and yellowish parietal eyes.

Moni felt as though she were two people, one that was shocked shitless and immobilized, but one who was thinking fast. She decided that the best thing to do was to play along, even if going with the creature meant that she would be placing herself beyond the reach of all help.

Shady had shown her a few new magic tricks but would they be enough to save both herself and, hopefully, her twin Sam? She had no answers but said, “Take me to my brother. You owe me that much, whoever, *whatever*, you are!”

“I thought you’d see it my way,” the thing said, hissing slightly after each word it delivered. I believe I can open a portal right here, using the mirror in your wardrobe! Next stop... *Ingolstadt Bavaria!*”



THE SWIFT JOURNEY through the portal took Moni’s breath away, but to be fair, it was the first time she had traveled in a portal. Just as she thought she would black out from lack of air, she found herself in a corridor not dissimilar to the corridors at Pitchfork Prep, with high arched ceilings and lit dimly with arched windows letting in the pale grayish light of an overcast day. There were also torches lit along the walls, electric ones.

“I thought I’d stop just outside his chambers so that you could gather yourself,” the creature remarked. By that time, it bore no resemblance to her brother other than a few fronds of blond hair that were stubbornly still attached to its lizard-like head. It was also at least eight feet tall. And as she followed it, she noticed it had a tail that whipped along behind it.

The creature knocked once and then stuck its head inside.

“I have a surprise for you,” it announced, hissing over its words and sounding happy. “You’d never guess it!”

Moni heard the sound of someone jumping up from behind a desk and striding over to the door that was only cracked open a few inches. As soon as

the door swung all the way open, she knew that she was, at long last, looking into the eyes of her own twin, Sam.

Nothing had ever felt as good as his embrace. It was like the first time she thought she had been reunited with him, only better because it was the real thing.

“They said they were going to bring you here, but I didn’t believe it,” Sam said smiling the crooked and adorable smile that Moni remembered from their childhood. Stand back and let me look at you! Why are you so short? Are you sure you’re my *twin*?”

“Why are you so *tall*, Dude?” Moni countered. Then, remembering where she was, she nodded over at the creature that was still standing by the door.

“Oh, that’s Boris,” Sam told her. “He’s been around for a while. He works for the Rebels and, for what it’s worth, he never wanted the assignment they just gave him. He used to be human but he disobeyed an order and they turned him into a lizard. He still likes girls though...”

Turning to Boris, Sam asked, “You weren’t inappropriate with my sister, were you?”

As Boris shook his head, Moni piped up, “Well, he had a date last night and I don’t think it went well because he murdered her!”

Sam looked aghast. “Bad, Boris!” he said to the creature, as the creature managed to look contrite and hung its head.

“Sam, you have a lot of explaining to do,” Moni told Sam in a serious tone, “We thought you were *dead*. We *mourned* you! Especially me, although I always felt you might be somewhere far away. And you are! Why didn’t you try to escape?”

“I actually tried—what was the count, Boris? One hundred and eleven times,” Sam replied. “Fortunately, my captors are patient. And because I had abilities they could capitalize on, I’ve pretty much been given the royal treatment. I’ve been treated like a Prince here. The only thing missing has been *you*, Antimony!”

Moni let his declaration sink in for a few moments. In all her wildest imaginings, she never thought Sam would have been treated well by his captors, but what he was saying made sense. Why would they harm him and damage the very potent magical energy they wanted to harvest from him?

As if to answer her next question before she asked it, Sam continued, “And now that we are together, everything I have been able to do on my own, all the Spells and Conjures, will have exponentially more power when

combined with *your* energy, because we are twins!”

Seeing her look of puzzlement, he continued, “We have a special Energy of Intention, Moni. Whatever we agree on *has* to happen, and nothing can prevent it! It’s like we are living batteries, chock full of magical energy. Having you close to me can double it. Here, Moni, give me your hand and I’ll show you!”

Feeling slight trepidation, Moni took Sam’s hand. It felt smooth and cool in hers, and she remembered that he’d always had cooler hands. Of the two of them, she was the hothead, the one with sweaty palms.

“Cold hands and a warm heart,” he’d always joked, teasing her that maybe it meant *she* had a *cold* heart. But that was then, this was now.

As soon as their hands joined, she felt the current that they were spontaneously creating. While she watched, Sam pointed over to an ornately carved desk that Moni surmised must belong to him.

“Think about elevating the desk now,” he told her in a hushed voice.

As she concentrated, she saw that the desk rose immediately from its position on the flagstone flooring, rising upward rapidly until Sam called out

“*Whoa*, that’s enough!” at which point it floated down as easily as it had risen.

Moni was impressed. Even though she was one of the best at telekinesis in her classes, transporting material objects had never gone that smoothly and effortlessly, especially objects as heavy as that desk had been.

“The Rebel Elders will be so very pleased,” Sam said, sighing happily.

Moni was still grappling with her thoughts and emotions. It had never occurred to her that Sam might not want to return with her to school. She rather suspected that he had Stockholm Syndrome. That he had been entrenched in Bavaria with his captors for so very long that he now felt completely at home.

Sam was pointing at a huge portrait hanging on the opposite wall over a massive fireplace, featuring a dark robed, distinguished looking male figure in formal robes with silver hair and a goatee.

“*That* is one of our relatives, Moni. Our Great Uncle Sebastian Crocket. I believe that’s why I was named Sebastian .It’s a family name. I think he favors us a bit! It’s no wonder I feel at home here .It is a place where we are surrounded by the vibes of our relatives, egging us on to be the best Magicals that we are able to be!” Sam smiled at her, a beatific smile and then turned to stare dreamily at the portrait of their great, great, great relative that provided

a dignified and imposing presence to the room.

But all Moni could think was, “FUCK!”



MONI DECIDED that she wasn't giving up on her mission, and she wasn't giving in to whatever delusional spell that her twin seemed to be under. She decided that he was as good as brainwashed, probably needed to get back to America, to Pitchfork Prep Academy, and after he spent a drunken boys night out with Broody and Luca and got laid by some trampy little witch who knew her way around a male body, he might be right as rain. Or at least decide he would rather not be confined and used as an energy battery for the Rebels any more.

“Can we talk privately?” she asked him.

“Moni, anything you have to say, I'm sure you can say, it isn't like we're being censored,” Sam told her. “Anyway, didn't you notice that the walls have ears?”

“What are you—” Moni started to ask, scanning the pale granite slab walls surrounding them, plain with the exception of a formal portrait hung strategically along its expanse. But as she looked upward, she noticed a whirling liquid looking thing on the ceiling and recognized that the Rebel Clave was using hydromancy to listen in on their conversations.

“We can, however, talk outside, if you would like,” Sam told her, noticing her look of alarm. He slipped his hand into hers and walked with her to one of the blind corners of the space that turned out to be an opening onto a small outside terrace.

“Isn't it a beautiful town?” Sam asked, throwing one arm out in an expansive gesture.

Moni stared down at the many buildings, large and small, the green rolling hills and distant mountains and waterfalls, and had to admit that the town was quite scenic.

“It is lovely,” she told him, meaning it. “But I don't want to live here forever, Sam, and neither would you if you could spend just a little while back in America with me... All of my friends are ready to welcome you with open arms. Broody and Shady are brother and sister, and Luca, well, Luca is—is—”

“Your boyfriend?” Sam teased. “Did you know you are blushing right now? Dead giveaway! I assume you two are serious?”

“All of us are serious, about each other!” she told him. “It’s like having the best and most loving family in the universe... Look, I *know* you believe you are happy here, but you *have* to see Pitchfork Prep Academy. I know if you see it, you wouldn’t want to come back!” she finished in a plaintive voice.

Sam looked around and leaned more closely toward her.

“I don’t think the Elders would like it, Moni. They have waited a very long time to reunite us. I think, because we are twins and also Magicals, that we are the new definition of a *power couple!*”

“Wow you really keep up on language!” she told him. “Streaming media much?”

But listen,” she said seriously. “I have some new skills that my best friend, Shady Watkins, taught me, some really deep magic that I *know* can get us out of here and back to Pitchfork Prep Academy... I am literally *begging* you to help me by lending your energy to help make an escape for us. And I also *swear* that if you don’t like it, you can return as soon as you want... Though, I would hate to lose you for a *second* time, it *has* to be your choice, Sam!”

Sam looked into her eyes for a very long time. After what seemed to be an eternity, he leaned down and kissed her on the forehead, the same way he had always done when they were kids, because he had always been taller than she was.

“Only for you, Moni,” he sighed.



NEITHER ONE OF the twins were much for hanging around after the decision was made. By the time they reentered the study or whatever the huge room had been—later, Sam told her it was his own private library—they had a solid plan and the determination to stick to it.

Step one was to create a portal, a manageable one that would get them straight back to campus and leave no trace.

Moni had told him that she was able to create a portal and wasted no time in using her magical skills to do so. As both of them stood back, she created a

belly button sized dimple in the air before them that, as it whirled in a counter clockwise direction, became larger and larger until it was about the size of a... pet door!

Moni knew she couldn't say anything, but she was getting red in the face, because the portal refused to get larger even though she knew was repeating the spell correctly.

Sam chuckled, and then mouthed *sorry* before stepping up and whispering in her ear, "There must be wardings in here. I can do a quick counter-casting!" And then he proceeded to manipulate the air around the undersized portal opening until it suddenly expanded to regulation size.

There was no time to even congratulate him. He stepped aside to let her go first and then plunged in himself.

Time was odd within portals. It seemed to both of them as they navigated down the tunnel-like structure—which had the same feel under their feet as very firm jello—that time was passing quickly and slowly all at once. One minute it felt as if a thousand years had passed, and the next like only a few seconds had gone by.

It spit them out in the back gardens of Pitchfork Prep Academy, where it was deserted, most of the gardens having withered during the previous frosty nights, and no one but a curious squirrel seemed to take any notice of their being there at all.

Moni grabbed Sam's hand, just as the portal winked closed behind them. Sam looked up at the huge building, and then back at Moni.

"I like it already," he told her nodding, "It has great ambiance!"

They hurried to Mars Hall and took the back stairs up to the dorm room that Moni had shared with Broody and Shady. As soon as Broody opened the door, he looked to see if anyone else was in the corridor and hauled both of them inside.

"*Oh my gawd*, we've been frantic!" he said. "Did you know that it's all over campus your brother is a murder suspect? We've been looking for you for hours, Moni!"

"I know, I know," Moni said, hugging each of them in turn. "Lots to catch up on and we *will* be going to meet with Security to get things straightened out because, well, because... You were right, all of you, about my brother. This *is* my *actual* brother, Sam. *Very long* story, but the imposter you met earlier was just what you suspected he was—an imposter, a poser sent to lure me into joining the Rebel Clave in Bavaria. Anyway, everyone

please meet the *real Sam!*”

“Pleased to meet you, Sam!” Broody said, giving Sam a one armed hug and adding, “I want you to know I took one for the team. Moni was so pissed off when I told her I thought the other Sam was a fake that she *hit* me!”

Moni had the good grace to look guilty. “Hey, I apologize to you all. I guess I was just blinded by the joy of thinking I had been reunited with my brother at last! I hope,” she added, looking pointedly at Luca. “I hope you won’t hold it against me!”

Luca just winked, and Moni knew what he was thinking.

“Anyway, we need to tell Security what happened, and make sure the wardings are in place here, because there is a good chance they might come after us!”

“Yeah, do that,” Shady told her looking worried. “Moni, I know enough Vantablack Spells to keep you both safe and virtually invisible to the Rebels, but the ones I have learned so far only last up to a year, and I am not sure they will ever give up on their plan to have both of you working for them... And Sam, Sebastian, are you here to stay?” she asked, turning to Sam and looking up at him hopefully.

As Moni watched the two of them connect for the first time, she realized that somehow Shady and Sam had some kind of instantaneous and mutual attraction going.

“If I wasn’t sure before, I am now,” Sam said, still gazing down into Shady’s dark eyes. “I’m pleased to meet all of you, but especially *you*, Shady... I hope you don’t mind showing me around after we check in with the Officials!”

“Not at all,” Shady assured him, “I’d do *anything* for Moni’s twin brother!”



THE REST OF THE AFTERNOON, which Moni referred to in her own mind as the *debriefing*, seemed to take forever, and by the time everything was sorted out, and Security was satisfied that a creature posing as Sam had invaded campus and was now gone, both she and Sam were exhausted.

As soon as they got back to the room, Shady announced, “Sam and I are going to the Charm Café to unwind. Anyone else want to come with?”

Luca and Broody turned to Moni, then, as if on cue, both ran over and jumped onto the biggest bed in the room, relaxing back against the pillows and patting the space they'd purposely left open between them.

"I think Moni wants to take a nap with us," Luca said, smiling as Broody added,

"Doesn't that sound nice, Moni?"

"Nothing ever sounded *better!*" Moni agreed, clambering up between them and heaving a long and blissful sigh.

Thank you for reading.

ABOUT P. MATTERN

P.Mattern is a USA TODAY BESTSELLING, Amazon Bestselling and Award Winning author, also known as "MAMA FANG". She is the author of over 81 published books and novellas and included in many bestselling anthology collections. Born with a stylus in her tiny hand, she wrote stories to entertain classmates in elementary school and won awards for fiction and poetry in college. After being laid off from her professional job in Mental Health, she began writing down all the stories she had carried in her head. She was inspired by Anne Rice and her differently-abled son to write Book One of Full Moon Series 'World of Azglen', about a widow and her adult handicapped son who becomes brainy and strong after being bitten by a vampire. Soon her children, J.C. Estall and Marcus Mattern, joined her in writing Full Moon Series. She is the author of the Amazon Bestselling Vampire Princess Trilogy, The Winter House, The Creatures Who Love Me, Queen of the Fireflies, Andy of the Damned, Strident House, Shock of Night, Vampire Orphanage, Forest of Bleeding Trees, and others.

P.Mattern currently lives in the Midwest and is currently involved with one of her characters. She is a RONE nominated and Winner Tell-Tale Publishing Vincent Price Award in 2015 for 'Terrible Choices'.

Find more of P.Mattern aka Mama Fang on Facebook
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RED MOON RISING



ERZABET BISHOP & GINA KINCADE

RED MOON RISING
SILVER CIRCLE WITCHES
BOOK ONE

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THANK YOU FOR RESPECTING THE HARD WORK OF THIS AUTHOR.

RED MOON RISING

A witch trying to forget.

Kate Caeli was very happy with her life, thank you very much. She'd successfully opened Enchanted Yarns and spent most of her time drowning out the memories of her first love with romance novels, stabby knitting needles, and her very successful naughty crochet class. But when one of her shop girls goes missing, it might be up to her to put things right. Even if it means endangering her own life and getting scorched by an old flame.

An ocelot drawn to remember.

When Detective Devi Graves is pulled back to her old stomping grounds, her beast knows something is wrong. But when she catches the scent of her mate at a crime scene, she almost goes off the deep end. Witches are turning up missing and dead, and if she doesn't solve this case quick, the past she longs for will be lost forever. If she isn't careful, it could be more than just her life on the line. Some secrets from the past should be left buried.

*For my hubby and fur babies. I love you more than words can say.
To Gina... you kick my backside and keep me reaching for the stars.
For Roseanne. I miss you. Covid took you too soon.*

CHAPTER 1



BARE BRANCHES OF THE TREE LINE DOTTED THE TWILIGHT SKY. A BRISK autumn breeze blew past and Kendall shivered. She huddled next to her car for warmth, but it wasn't helping. The acrid smell of burning leaves tickled her nose. Mischief ran freely in the air tonight. She could sense it. Not much longer until Samhain. Just another month or so. Time enough before the Witch's Ball for her to make a bit of cash to get her costume in order.

The swamp lay silent, save for the chirp of an occasional cricket and animals running in the brush. She had to get to the Enchanted Yarns shop and soon, even though she really wasn't in the mood tonight. Endless hours winding skeins of yarn and teaching women to wield crochet hooks and knitting needles tended to fray her nerves.

Especially the gaggle of project women that always seemed to show up on Wednesday mornings. They brought their misshapen toilet paper cozies and whatever weird thing Kate had set up for the month; but for the last three weeks, she swore not one hook actually hooked. Clueless, the lot of them. She'd never seen a bunch of women take hours to accomplish absolutely nothing. Well, except make her miserable and drink the shop out of iced tea.

She'd also promised Kate she would show her how to start up her Tiktok account. The witch had many talents, but wielding a phone wasn't one of them.

"Unbelievable," she muttered to herself. Her nerves were still smarting after one of them had complained to Kate, her boss, that she had given them attitude. Kate had rolled her eyes and dealt with the woman, but she was pretty certain the discussion wasn't over. Talk about the last freaking thing she needed.

What was it with busy body women anyway?

Damned Karens were taking over the world and she was sick of it.

Her mother and Kate were in the same coven. She was more than capable at setting up her own curses, thank you very much. She didn't need help. The bitch had better watch her step the next time she came into the shop. Spit might not be the only thing she needed to worry about being in her tea.

Kendall let out a throaty laugh that echoed in the silent dirt clearing. She'd been here often enough for raves, but tonight, it felt especially creepy. If it got out she was foraying into the swamp, it would put her on the naughty list for sure. But the exhilaration of dancing with the forbidden was a siren song.

A twig snapped in the distance and her head popped up, eyes searching the darkness.

"Okay. This isn't a serial killer special here. WTF? Dude, I have to go." She stomped her foot and checked her phone for the time. She wanted to get this meeting over with. Her girlfriend, Cybelle, was pissed at her for going, especially knowing she had work first. They planned on looking through the costume shop site once she got paid. After weeks of nothing, a bite on her ad came through. She texted the client she would meet him after her shift at Cast Two Stitches.

Things were lean and she needed the cash. Spell work for hire. Pretty straight forward.

A love spell.

A banishing or two.

No biggie.

What she didn't like was meeting random weirdoes in the swamp after dark. She'd promised Cybelle this would be the last time. Maybe there was someplace safer. She'd have to think on it. There was that park near Lucia's Botanical Brewery. Nobody would mess with her there.

Yeah.

Maybe.

But right now, she was stuck here. The guy had better fucking hurry or she was going to be three shades of late to work.

Kate would kill her if she knew. So would her mom, for that matter. The coven kept harping about not going out alone. Someone was picking off witches and it wasn't safe.

Get real.

If something happened, she could scream, and somebody would come running.

Well, probably.

There was always someone out here getting up to no good. Besides, whoever it was had better keep his hands to himself. She just wasn't in the mood.

The news reported another murder a few days ago. Kendall wasn't worried. She felt around in her pocket, palming the spelled pepper spray she kept on her for just these occasions.

It paid to have insurance.

Shit. She ought to just sell that.

Maybe she could nab the asshole and get the reward the cops had offered. That would shut her mother and the rest of the coven up. She totally knew how to handle herself, thank you very much.

Her stomach growled and she flipped her long black hair out of her eyes impatiently. This guy had kept her here twenty minutes already. She should have stopped by the drive-in on her way, but she wanted to grab some Chinese take-out after work with Cybelle. Or hell, even some pancakes would be good.

The wind cut through her thin outfit, and she let out a curse. She had to dress the part, but jeez. The temperature was dropping and she really wanted to get back in her car and leave.

"Damn, I should have brought a coat." Kendall ground out. Her long black dress and clunky shoes did little to stave off the chill. She rubbed her hands along her arms to try and gather some warmth.

"Okay. Anytime now." Kendall scanned the growing darkness.

So beautiful.

So quiet.

She missed coming here. Used to be, she'd come every weekend with her posse. But since graduation everyone had spun off into the four winds.

Everyone but her.

Kendall sighed. She would get the money she needed to move to New York with Cybelle. It was all they talked about. Freedom. A life without people telling them what to do.

Goddess, she couldn't wait to tell the coven to suck her big toe and like it. But until then, she had to go along to get along. And that meant not getting caught sneaking out here.

The timing was pretty much right on with her needing costume money. At least, it would have been if the guy had been on time and she wasn't starving. The newly full moon hung bright in the sky and she sensed the pull deep in her bones. Tomorrow night was the coven get together.

So, she should be safe. From what she remembered; the maniac liked to play slasher under the second night of the full moon.

So, yeah.

She'd be fine.

A crackle in the brush to her left startled her, and a warm flush crept over her cheeks. Uh. Probably some rando raccoon digging around for candy wrappers. No more caffeine for her tonight.

Rubbing her arms, Kendall rolled her eyes and checked her phone.

The blare of a Tiktok video jolted her, but she quickly switched over to her account and checked for new followers.

She had three.

Score.

More followers meant more sales and, praise the goddess, she was tired of working retail. More customers buying spells would bring her the freedom she needed to have her own life.

And she was going to do it, too.

Something shifted in the air, and the scent of sulfur made her wrinkle her nose. "Ewww."

In the darkness to her left a light flickered. Kendall turned her gaze and found the dark form of a large canine bounding out of the tree line.

Night time at the swamp was freaky.

No doubt about it.

She started and backed up a step, and the creature faltered, its eyes narrowing in on her.

Okayyyy.

Maybe it was somebody's dog that snapped his chain. If that was the case, maybe she could get a reward.

The idea appealed.

But damn...it was a really big dog and it didn't look friendly. Not in the least.

What the hell was it?

A Great Dane?

No.

Squinting, she tried to figure it out, but the shadows were too deep. She took a step forward, her nerves jumping around in her stomach.

Something didn't feel right.

A low growl came out of the darkness.

"Jeez boy. Are you okay?" Kendall took a step back as the dog started toward her.

This wasn't good.

She stumbled backward, nearly tripping on the uneven terrain between her and her car. Then, the beast leapt at her. Holding her keys between her fingers, she clawed at the creature, nailing it in the forearm.

It didn't stop it, even for a moment.

"Holy shit, dog. Get *off*." She shoved at him, but he was too strong.

This was anything but a dog.

Her footing unbalanced, she struggled to distance herself.

"Oh, my gawd!" Hot breath tinged with spittle hit her neck and a strangled yelp rang from her lips.

Why weren't her legs working?

She needed to run.

Shit!

"Stop! *Stoooooopp!* *Noooooo!*" The wolfen face was twisted, the eyes manic as the jaws opened and snapped against her cheek. This wasn't a werewolf. They were sentient. She'd hung out with some in this very spot. This...this thing was in a blood rage.

Kendall stumbled, and the creature knocked her against the car. The fetid breath blew warm into her face. Kendall reached for her spell bag, but she was too slow. Grabbing a hold of the strap, the beast tore it from her. A bottle of potion burst, letting loose a spell of confusion.

Shit!

The creature slipped and fell to the side, shaking its head, allowing her a brief window of escape. Kendall darted off beneath the canopy of moss and half dead trees, running like the hounds of Hell were after her.

Branches and twigs snapped as she burst through the brush. She strained to see in the inky darkness. Clouds covered the moon, snuffing out what little light she had.

There.

Something in the distance.

A soft light glowed through the trees and she gave a sob of relief. She ran

toward it.

Someone was there.

Maybe they could help.

Her feet pounded against the ground, her breath hard and fast in her ears. Behind her she heard the beast making progress.

The source of the illumination came from a small clearing.

Shit.

The rave site.

No wonder it looked familiar. Maybe someone was there. A witch who could help her.

Kendall burst through the trees, and skidded to a stop. This wasn't a rave. Not by a long shot.

A form stood in the center of a crudely drawn pentagram gouged into the earth. Behind her, two golden moon shaped scythes stood at attention on either side of what appeared to be an altar.

There, a woman stood, her back to Kendall. The suit she wore was expensive and her shoes had higher heels than anything she'd ever seen, let alone considered walking in.

"Hello?" Her voice cracked and she cringed. "Can you help me? There's this crazy dog..."

A feminine face turned to face her, only the docile smile she was expecting was replaced by something other.

Something cold and reptilian.

What had she just walked into?

"You're late."

"Do I know you?"

Kendall's brain sputtered and she tried to think. The spell must have gotten on her, because whatever she said wasn't making sense.

"You're selling, my dear. And I'm buying."

"No..." she stuttered. "I mean, I was supposed to meet this guy out here for a spell."

"And so, you have."

"You?" Kendall rasped. "I don't understand." The sulfur smell was nearly overpowering now and she almost gagged.

A flash of silver emerged from the woman's suit.

"Some things are not meant for you."

Kendall swung around to run. The beast countered her movements,

blocking her way. Its yellow eyes glowed in the darkness. She never felt the blade enter. Only the sensation of falling as the ground rose up to meet her, and the slow exsanguination of her blood as it left her body and filled the pentagram.

CHAPTER 2



“No, JESSICA. YOU HOOK IT LIKE THIS.” GRIPPING THE SCARLET SPORT weight yarn in her hand, Kate maneuvered the hook until the stitch came out just right. “Class, I want you to all take out your phones and look up how to do a single crochet stitch. It’s on my channel. But if you need a refresher, here goes.”

An abandoned crochet hook took off from the long brown folding table and found an extra skein of yarn.

“Up we go!”

The hook twirled in midair, showing the stitch in question multiple times until it had made its round to all the ladies.

Goddess, was this what her magic was reduced to these days? Kate sighed and pasted a smile on her face.

“How do we do that?” One of the older ladies grumbled.

“You Tube, Marge.”

“I’d rather be able to wiggle my nose and pull that off.”

“Sorry, hon. Nose wiggling will only get you so far. Trust me.” Kate winked and let the ladies get back to their projects.

Nine distinct grumbles ensued, but the women laughed and pulled out their androids and iPhones, linking to the Internet.

She didn’t mind pulling the witch card sometimes. It felt good to at least put her powers to some kind of use. These days, she didn’t much make it to the town coven meetings. Instead, she relied on a once-a-month brew with her inner circle and tonight was the night.

“Excellent. This is one of the best ways to watch and learn. Repeat after me. Videos are my friend.”

A chorus of feminine voices echoed her own and everyone began to laugh.

“Kate, you kill me.” Jessica grinned, holding up the bikini top she had been working on for the last two weeks. “Did you post it on Tiktok, too?”

“Last night. I was on there for hours.”

And she had been. If Kendall had shown up to help her set everything up, it would have gone off without a hitch. As it was, she’d spent a ton of time trying to master what the girl had told her.

Lighting.

Music.

Pictures that pop.

Hashtags.

It was a whole new world—and a world that was all Kendall’s idea.

“I use it for my side business, Kate. More followers equal more sales and we all need more sales.”

The girl wasn’t wrong.

But the fact that she hadn’t shown up wasn’t like her. And she hadn’t come in for her shift today, either.

No calls.

No texts.

Nothing.

She’d been a little fidgety lately, but hadn’t seemed the type to just bail on her. Sliding her phone out of her back pocket, Kate frowned. Still no return calls or texts.

Closing her eyes, she reached for the girl’s name badge, left on the back counter, and let her senses reach out.

Where are you?

Nothing but darkness greeted Kate and she frowned. Making her way toward the chair behind her computer, she sat down and eased the door shut between the class and her private space. They could still come around the front counter, but all she needed was a moment or two to set her spell in motion.

Her element was air and she would use it to find her missing friend. A spark of an idea formed. It had worked before when she needed to find her coven sisters.

She called the quarters to her, and reveled in her element of air. Wisps of magic floated around her and Kate hummed the simple spell under her breath.

“A simple kiss to find a friend, to thwart all mischief to an end.”

The kiss blown, she smiled as it rattled the door on its way out into the night.

“Goddess help her if she’s just playing hooky.”

A loud burst of laughter from the group brought her focus back.

Kate eased the door open and checked her watch. Only ten minutes left in class.

Jessica was grimacing and working on a troublesome stitch.

“You got it?”

“I think so.”

“Well, if you get lost, just bring up one of the videos. Just be careful not to fall in.”

Jessica laughed. “I know. I went to look up a gardening hack and four hours later, Hyacinth asked me what was for dinner. Whoops.”

“You’re telling me. It’s worse than YouTube.”

Grimacing, Jessica nodded. “So true.”

Kate turned toward the group.

“Okay, gang. The project list for this month includes a wrist cuff pattern or a simple headband for you ladies who don’t want to frighten the fish, so to speak.” Kate smiled as the group began to titter with laughter. “The project models are up on the board for you to see. Personally, I think the black and pink ones are wicked cool.”

“Kate?” A young redhead in the back of the room stood up.

“Yes, Arlene.”

“Can you help me with last month’s project? I can’t seem to get this right at all.” Arlene held up a gray vibrator cozy that was supposed to be rectangular but had somehow gone horribly wrong.

“Oh wow, honey. What have you done?” Joan, a woman in her mid-forties asked, holding up her own completed project.

“Remember that little scarf you made last Christmas, Joan? Don’t judge.” Kate raised her eyebrows and smiled. “Can you see if you can help Arlene figure out where her stitches went wonky while I get everyone checked out?”

“Sure.” Joan slid her chair down and the two began comparing notes.

“Thanks.” Kate glanced around the room. Ladies were poking through some of the new wools and synthetics she had brought back with her from market. Others were at the back of the room in the kitchen sampling the iced tea and cookies she had prepared while they decided what naughtiness they

were going to work on.

“Okay class, decide which project you want to start and I’ll be around to talk with you about yarn selection. For anyone interested in next month’s pattern, we’re going to work on a matching lacy nightie and a sleeping mask.”

Kate made her way to the back of the class and watched the ladies race to the project board and signup sheet. Naughty Crochet had to be her most popular class night ever. She had sunk her life savings into this shop and was determined to offer something a bit different than the average doilies and baby sweaters most of the local yarn stores offered.

“Ladies, don’t forget to take your measurements for next month. You’re going to need them for the sizing.”

Kate didn’t even bother to listen to the griping her announcement prompted. She understood. Not a slim woman, she flinched whenever she had to get on a scale, measure body parts, or go shopping. Her best moments were in her head and through her crochet hook.

Not to even mention her stash of smut novels. It was her secret joy and every night after work, she retreated into the bedroom with a glass of wine, her latest erotic pick, and her sketchpad. It was how most of her projects had been born.

Her thoughts drifted and she couldn’t wait to close shop and get over to Lucia’s. But she couldn’t stop thinking about Kendall.

Twenty minutes at the register and the shop was empty. With a smile, she snagged her purse off the back counter and reached for her keys. She could already taste one of Lucia’s brews now.

She let her senses reach out for a trace of the tracking spell, but it was still searching.

Odd.

A flick of her wrist and the door was locked and armed behind her and she headed off into the night, unaware that a pair of eyes watched her from the darkness.

CHAPTER 3



IT WAS TOO QUIET.

That was the first thing Detective Devi Graves noticed as she stepped out of the parked car and into the alley. Normally, a crime scene would be bustling with cops and forensic techs. She looked up at the sky and grimaced. She'd gotten the orders from her captain to head back to her hometown in Bixby, Texas. If it hadn't been for Avery, she would have just kept going.

Too much witch and shifter politics. She preferred to live on her own merits and not bound to some old-fashioned idea of what was normal in the witching world.

What about her world?

Better yet, what about Kate's?

She didn't want to tie the other woman down by dragging her around the country investigating the weird shit that always seemed to fall in her lap. Always on loan to some police department or another, she hadn't called one place home since she'd left.

Seven years.

It felt longer.

They'd been good, but the tiniest part of her wondered when things were going to settle down. She usually shoved that thought down into the dark places she didn't think about, but lately, it had been rearing its head more and more often.

So had thoughts of Kate.

She missed her.

Her smell.

Her taste.

Her laugh.

Her.

She also didn't want to be forced into a relationship because Kate was a witch and she was supposed to follow suit and be her familiar.

It wasn't in her plan.

But here she was, driving right back into the hornet's nest.

Familiar landmarks dotted the highway, and her gut tightened with every mile. She would have driven right past the old diner but a text shot through from her old boss and mentor, stopping her in her tracks.

Shit.

She pulled into the dark parking lot and tried to push down the nausea. Popping a couple of papaya tablets, she parked the rental away from the road.

The sky was clear with no clouds. She hated full moons. In her line of work, that meant the whole world usually went ape shit, taking her along for the ride. It was true now more than ever.

Devi took in the dark alley and her nostrils flared. Disgusted, she took a step backward.

It smelled of blood and death. Her inner beast coiled, ready to break free, and she had to dig her nails into her arm to still the urge. Now was not the time. She pressed her hand against the blade hidden in her pocket and sucked in a breath.

Corny and stereotypical, but it was the faith and the meaning behind it that tied her to the spelled knife. That was enough. Kate had matching daggers made for them. With every touch, she felt her power curl around her like a caress and it eased her loneliness.

"What the hell?" Her gaze darted up from the black pool of blood shimmering in the light of the moon and the impersonal glare of the streetlights. Gore streaked across the concrete toward the hazy red glow emanating from the back exit of the diner. It was propped open. Hmmm. In this side of town, you kept your doors locked and your ass to the wall if you had to be out after dark.

"That's what I was hoping you could tell me." Detective Sergeant Avery stepped out of the shadows, a grim expression on his too pale face. His white and gray hair lay messily on his head, like he'd been running his hand through it. He only did that when his back was against the wall.

Police tape fluttered in the early morning breeze, the unis keeping the few stragglers at bay. "Thanks for coming."

Thinning salt and pepper hair and a weary expression tugged at her heart. It had been too long. He was the reason she'd gotten this job. Like a father, he'd been there for her when her world had fallen apart and had nudged her in the right direction to help her get her shit together.

She just wasn't sure why exactly he'd felt the need to call her back.

Devi peered into the shadows, but things blacker than night would be staring back at this hour of the morning so she refocused her attention to the task at hand.

Lucky me.

Something skittered down her spine and she felt a niggles of fear and awareness.

"Who was it?" She knew most of the officers and detectives that worked the streets of Bixby, but three years was a long time.

Avery looked down at the concrete smear and swallowed. "James," his voice broke. "It was James."

Goddess.

He'd been her first partner when she'd barely cut her teeth at the department.

"Shit." She glared up at her. "What was he doing out here without backup?"

"He had backup. He just didn't use it." A blonde woman in nose bleed heels made her way into the alley, her eyes red and her face blotchy. The rest of her was as polished as it got. Hair pulled into a tight ponytail, not a strand out of place. Her suit jacket crisp over a white button-down shirt and dress jeans, she looked like she'd just come from a night out instead of wading through a crime scene.

"Graves, this is Cappelli. She and James were partners."

She couldn't help but size her up and the other woman knew it, judging by the way her eyes narrowed.

Devi gave her a courtesy nod. "Where?"

"Follow me."

Devi trailed behind Cappelli as she made her way down the back alley, avoiding the congealing pools of blood, her heels clacking against the wooden floor as she entered the building. The place was much like she remembered it. Permanently stuck in the fifties, the décor was faded, the band posters dated, and the worn booths cracked and peeling.

Absently, she wondered when it had closed. The scent of old grease and

salt warred with the sickly-sweet aroma of blood and other things. Devi tried to breathe through her mouth before she gagged.

CSI techs began to roll in. The scene was getting busier than she liked. Avery stood in the doorway, a haggard expression on his face. “I wouldn’t have bothered you, but this one needed your particular...expertise. You knew him.”

Cappelli gave her a cold stare and continued into the recesses of the diner.

The acrid scent of familiar demon magic met Devi’s nose and her animal hissed, ears flattening.

I know.

Demon magic had its consequences. James must have found that out the hard way. But she wasn’t going to say it. Not yet. She’d helped him to contain it once, but judging from the carnage, he hadn’t listened.

Avery nodded and stared past her into the room. The diner looked like any other, save for the trail of blood that came through the doorway. Tired linoleum and worn fixtures made up the scene. She had spent hours in places just like this wherever she landed. The prices were cheap and the grease flowed easy.

She narrowed her eyes and moved past Avery and Cappelli into the main part of the room, mindful of her steps. Her boots barely made a sound. The trail of blood stopped in front of a worn wooden booth with cracked red vinyl seats. There, on the table was a small wooden box, a sinister glow coming from the small space where the lid had been haphazardly replaced and not sealed.

“What the hell?” Devi’s heart thudded in her chest.

Fuck.

She knew that box.

It had been the center of most of her nightmares since her parents had been killed when she was a girl.

Her familial history had been dotted with ocelots tied to demons or witches that harnessed demon power. Most of them hadn’t lived long, but once you have a demon on your tail, you were screwed. And that fucking box was supposed to be buried in consecrated ground.

Again.

Cappelli cleared her throat. “He said he was taking this box to someone. Someone who would know what to do with it. He’d found it under his house last month.”

“Last month?”

Cappelli nodded.

That was a load of horseshit. She'd helped him bury it before she left town. Under his house, in sanctified earth.

Why the fuck did he mess with it?

The damn thing had almost killed him before.

Now it looked like it had succeeded.

“Have things been...” Devi paused, thinking. “More active in town than normal?”

“What are you driving at, detective?” Cappelli asked.

“I'm saying this thing reeks of demon magic and I don't even have to touch it.”

Cappelli's brow furrowed. “What?”

Devi sighed. Goddess, but she hated explaining herself. And she really, really didn't want to.

It was James' secret.

Not hers.

“Graves has some unique talents that have come in handy over the years.” Avery said. “I knew something was off, but...”

She didn't want to touch the damned thing, but until she did, they were going to be in the dark. She'd kill him, but he was already dead.

Damn it.

Sadness for her friend and the detective he'd been swirled in her gut. He'd found the box at an antique market. It had looked like a good find, but when he'd gotten the chance to open it, the reality was a whole other thing.

The residue was there, but she wasn't sure if the demon was still lurking inside or if it had flown to the four winds.

“Stand back.”

Goddess, but she didn't want to do this.

Devi took a step forward and let her finger trail along the top of the lid. Visions crowded in the way they always did and she almost cried out.

Clutching the table, she broke her connection to the box and staggered toward a booth and threw herself down.

Visions of her helping James bury the box beneath his house circled in her mind.

The holy water.

The demon vowing vengeance.

He had kept it the crawl space with the promise that he'd never open it again after she helped him seal it.

He hadn't listened.

Nightmares plagued him. He couldn't sleep. And then one night he found himself standing just outside the crawl space, dirt all over his pajamas.

The demon had worn him down until he went a step further and dug the box up. It belonged to the demon that had taken his life and ripped it all to hell. No one, not even Avery or Cappelli had known about it. At least, nothing he hadn't wanted them to know.

But when the demon's face was revealed, she almost threw up. Some mistakes never left you and this was one.

Instead of having him bury the thing, she should have burned the box and sent the bitch back to Hell where she belonged.

Devi's nails curled into her palms and she struggled to keep her ocelot reined in. Her beast wanted to run, to escape the sulfurous death that coated the place like a bad paint explosion.

James had been lying. Not just to his partner, but Avery as well.

Not something she wanted to reveal.

Yet.

The box, its lid still askew, oozed an energy that made her want to alternatively sink inside of it and burn it to a cinder. There was a power that played on people's worst and best intentions, and she knew it firsthand.

The only question was, why bring it here?

If it had been nestled under his house, what made him think he could contain the force inside of it?

Had he been dealing with a local witch?

Goddess, she hoped not.

"Who was he supposed to meet? He brought it here for a purpose."

"I don't know."

"Was he acting strange? Secretive?" Devi prodded.

Cappelli looked her square in the eye. "I know James must have had his reasons for coming here but he didn't tell me about it. As to being secretive? Well, let's just say we both led different lives and leave it at that."

Oh. Snap.

"Well, that's less than helpful."

"What do you want? A fucking roadmap? Someone killed my partner. Probably a witch. You're from around here, so you know better than anyone

just how low they'll go to get the upper hand."

Her animal growled low, but she coughed and shook it off. Throat punching the bitch wasn't going to help the situation, and right now she answered to James before anybody else.

Frowning, she looked closer at the box.

Why had James moved it?

It just didn't make sense. To Cappelli's point, the witches in Bixby had always been a little power hungry. That was one of the things that drove her to leave.

The other had been buried in that fucking box.

"Ya'll might want to move back a few steps."

Devi reached for a shaker of table salt. Uncapping it, she made a circle around the box, then snagged a fork and edged the lid the rest of the way off.

The box was pulsing with rancid power. Ice sluiced down the back of her spine as she felt the residual energy emanating from the glow. Demon still there or not, it was creepy as fuck.

She'd hated the thing from the first moment James showed it to her. He'd been so excited, but when he uncovered it in the trunk of his car, she'd taken one look at it and backed away.

"What the hell did you buy that for?" she'd said.

God, the sweet idiot had the indecency to look hurt.

"I needed something for my remotes."

"You're a cop. How could you not sense that thing is evil?"

His eyes, now snapping with anger, met hers. "Well, I guess we can't all be as in tune with the freaky shit as you are."

Then, he slammed the trunk shut and didn't say another thing about it. But two weeks later, he'd shown up at her apartment and begged her to help him get rid of it.

And here they were.

Dark laughter echoed through the room and Devi suddenly wished she'd made the circle just a little bit bigger.

Oh fuck.

Oh fuck. Oh fuck.

People who played with demons thought it was a fun thing until a real one showed up. She knew that first hand. Everyone in the room was at risk.

She shoved Avery and Cappelli toward the door.

"Get everyone out. Now."

Cappelli's eyes met hers and awareness made her eyes snap hard. "Fix it," she hissed. "James was my partner. It can't go down this way."

"He was mine too. Once."

Without another word, she pushed her way out the back door, ordering the technicians outside until further notice.

Devi closed her eyes, her stomach knotting up in a combination of nerves and her impending change. She would have to fuck with her on a full moon. All she could do is try and keep her wits about her. As if she could do anything else.

She was going to have to talk to Avery about his unfortunate timing. It was hard to do human shit when you had an over eager ocelot trying to claw her way out of her skin when they had a standing appointment.

Full moons sucked.

Red eyes glowed out of the shadows of the box and a dark chuckle laced with hellfire curdled the air. A familiar form took shape, her smooth features framing eyes that burned bright in the murky darkness of the diner.

"You."

"Hello, pet. No, wait..." The demon held up one elegantly manicured finger and swirled it through a puddle of blood that had congealed on the table. Bringing to her lips, she licked it off, savoring the flavor. "That would be, detective now, wouldn't it? What do they call a familiar afraid of getting a little too close to the fire?" She elegantly wiped at her mouth with a paper napkin. "Ummm. Nothing like a little terror to make it zing. Don't you agree?"

Devi growled, her cat waiting for the change to push her way through. The bitch had fucked with her once. She wouldn't let her do it again.

"What are you doing here?"

"Oh...catching up on some unfinished business. How about you?"

"Right. Now, how's about you get back in the box so we can call it a day?"

"Oh...I'm not quite done yet."

"I think you are." The blade in her pocket burned bright and she longed to just bury it in her and light the whole thing on fire.

"How is the moon tonight, Devi? Do you find it scintillating?" The demon's eyes burned bright as she sashayed toward her, swinging her hips with every step. The maroon suit would have looked ridiculous on just about anyone else, but with her chestnut hair and curvaceous build, Gambian was

able to pull it off and look damn sexy in the process.

It was also a ruse.

“Your old partner... James, was it?” The demon paused, deliberately avoiding another puddle of blood that streaked down the floor. “He dug the box up for you. How quaint.” She glanced over at Devi, her blood red lips curving up into an evil smile.

“For me? Now why would he do that?”

Unless she’d been spinning lies.

Gambian chuckled, her laughter making the hair on Devi’s arms stand at attention. “He knew we had unfinished business, you and I. Well...we are practically related. Our families have been working together for centuries. It’s only right I made you see just how wrong you were by running off to play detective.”

“Fuck you.”

“Ah. Now that’s the spitfire I remember so well. And I thought that insipid Kate ruined you forever.”

“Don’t talk about Kate,” Devi ground out, her jaw locking in frustration.

“Whyever not? You’re not still together, are you? I thought you had higher aspirations than being someone’s pet kitty?”

She sauntered closer, kicking something that squelched out of her way.

Devi wasn’t going to answer.

“Oh, come on now. Don’t be a spoil sport. You know I’ll have to make sure you come to the right decision, don’t you?”

“Leave me alone.”

“Oh, my dear. Didn’t you know? Your parents made sure our bond could never be broken.”

She held up a tiny vial of what looked like blood.

“What the fuck is that?”

“Our future.”

“Bullshit,” Devi spat the word. There was no future with a demon. Her parents had shown her that.

The hard way.

“Don’t take my word for it.” Gambian waved the vial at her, then snatched it back. “I know you can touch and tell. But break it and well...I’ll just have to fill it again, won’t I?”

“You wish.”

“Oh, I do.” Gambian placed the vial on the table between them and stood

back, waiting.

Touching anything from the demon wasn't in her wheelhouse. But if it was her blood, surely, she'd know just by being close to it.

Closing her eyes, she let her hand hover over the table, getting as close as she could without actually touching the vial.

Faint images filtered through her senses, but the one that lingered the most was her mother drawing the blood, and the pain in her arm from the incision. She still had a half moon scar there. A mark.

"Oh yes. You see it now, don't you?"

Bile rose up Devi's throat and she pushed away from the table, the images evaporating like they'd never been.

"Was it true?" She hadn't meant to ask, but it tumbled out before she could stop herself. Asking a demon any question was a bad idea.

But she already knew.

It was her blood.

"I don't hold with a contract I didn't make."

"Well now...that isn't entirely true, is it? I have your blood right here to make sure you keep up with your end of the bargain."

"No."

"No?" Gambian laughed, her eyes twinkling with delight. "Now, that's just what your friend here told me when he dug me out of the hole you put me in. Seven years is a long time, kitty cat."

"I haven't changed my mind. Not then. Not now."

"Well, then. We'll just have to see how long you intend to be stubborn. Witches love parties. And I have several planned for the next few hours. I do hope you can attend."

Gambian wrapped herself around Devi, pressing herself against her. Her teeth grazed against her throat, fangs dragging across her flesh carving little rivulets of blood in their wake. Her hands caressed her, cupping her through her clothes.

"You know you want this. I know you better than anyone else ever will."

Devi swayed, the soft curves of her breasts molding themselves to her curves as Gambian pushed her against the wall. The sour smell of rot left from her earlier carnage brought her back to herself.

"No!" She shoved her away, gasping for air, willing her body back under control.

She loved Kate.

Even if she had to leave her behind to protect her.

"That was not wise, Devi." Storms brewed behind the demon's eyes. Power skittered in the shadows and her dark hair moved with unseen wind. "You have something of mine and I will take it."

"What are you talking about?" Devi searched her memory for acceptable spells that would banish her back into the box, but her mind would not focus. The siren's call of the moon rippled through her body and she began to lose control as her muscles contracted and began to reform.

Shit.

Not now.

Her cat screamed, coaxed to the surface by Gambian.

No.

She wants to control you.

Stay.

Please.

Devi bent over, gasping as she fought the change with everything she had.

"Did you think I would let you leave me in that box? James is dead because you wouldn't take your place."

"No."

"How many more have to die before you accept your fate? You belong to me, pet. And I won't take no for an answer." She scooped up the blood-filled vial and it vanished into her suit pocket.

There had to be a way to toss the bitch back to the bowels of Hell. She just had to find it.

Clutching the table, Devi grabbed the salt and pried open the spout with shaking hands.

"No means no. I'll put you back in that box a hundred times for what you did to me and my parents. Not to mention James." She flung the salt in an arc, and the demon howled.

Gambian screamed. "You dare!"

"I dare anything to keep my people safe."

"The night isn't over. We'll be seeing each other again soon."

"I'm counting on it." With that, she dug a surprise of her own from her pocket, but before she could douse the demon with holy water, the bitch had vanished into the night.

CHAPTER 4



DEVI KNEW THEY WERE CLOSE TO THE CRIME SCENE BY THE PEOPLE gathering in the street. Nothing ever happened on the privileged side of town. Tragedy was for someone else. Someone less fortunate. She could read the confusion in the wide stares of the neighbors as she and her very temporary partner got out of the car and made their way up the driveway to the uniform on scene.

Gambian had promised she would be busy, and so far, she was racking up the bodies.

One crime scene down, and already a second one. She gazed up at the moon, wincing. When this was over, she owed her cat a run in the woods. No creeps. No demons. Just her and a damn good run. But for now, she was still on loan and desperate to find Gambian before she destroyed every witch in Bixby until she got to Kate. And that wasn't going to happen.

“Officer.” Cappelli reached him first and flashed her badge. Devi followed close behind, grinding her teeth. The woman had the personality of a wet dishrag and she was grinding it in that it was her town, her case.

Fine.

Let her try and put a roundish demon in a square box—again—and see how that went.

Speaking of the box...the damn thing was in the trunk of Cappelli's car, reeking of sulfur and shooting off enough energy to give her a headache.

With her luck, she'd be here weeks, when all she wanted to do was get home and decompress. Avery told her one night. She didn't believe him.

She left town to protect Kate and leave Gambian behind and being here was messing with her mind. Damn James for digging her up. Things would

have been fine if he'd just left well enough alone. Crating that bitch had almost killed her the first time. But it would be worth it again if she could get to her before she got to Kate.

Her thoughts drifted back to the hotel room and images of flopping on the bed and getting some actual sleep taunted her.

Hah.

As if she could sleep.

Not a chance.

She took in the brick facades and coiffed lawns. You'd never know that a mile or so away there was a murder scene. Another witch found with her throat slit in an alley behind a popular coffee chain. Or even that there was one inside the holy sanctum of the pristine suburban sprawl. Well, unless you ignored the flashing lights of the squad cars and uniformed officers.

Things like this just didn't happen in Bixby, Texas. Especially in neighborhoods like this one. It was time she took the lead, whether little miss tight britches liked it or not. She sped up so she was ahead of Cappelli by the time they got to the edge of the property in question.

"Your business?" The officer's gaunt face was ghost like in the faint light of the flashlight as he flashed the beam in her direction.

Devi flipped open her badge.

"Inside." His voice was firm, but she detected a quaver at the end.

"Bad one?"

"Yes, ma'am." He looked back toward the residence and shivered.

Without a word, Devi lifted the tape and leveraged herself beneath it. Cappelli joined her letting the stark yellow crime scene tape fall back in place. Her gaze locked on the entrance to the house. Sheer curtains covered the windows. She made out shapes of bodies moving inside.

"At it again so soon?" A gruff voice ground out.

"Apparently." Devi hesitated, but he knew she would. Touching people told her too much. That's what made her good at her job. She reached out and took it, the images of what he had just seen rippling through her mind. It was also what made her a great familiar. Magic bonded to her like cheddar powder on popcorn. And old witch that he was, he knew talent when he saw it.

Damn it.

She staggered a little, holding the nausea down. It was getting to her. First the diner, then the alley murder, and now this. That, and the enormity of what

they were facing. A demon with a penchant for witches didn't bode well. And the fact that it brought her back to Bixby when she'd done everything in her power to put distance between them, just pissed her off and simultaneously scared the shit out of her.

She fingered her phone and thought about calling her, but squashed the idea like a bug.

Seven years was a long time.

"Sir." Cappelli nodded, missing nothing of the exchange between her supervisor and Devi.

"You, okay?" His steely eyes regarded her; his expression no more moveable than stone. He stepped out of the doorway, light pooling out in the emerging darkness. The scent of blood and spoiled things drifted out behind him.

"So far."

"We left the rental at the diner." And Devi could hear every ounce of resentment curling through her words. The sulfur reek was going to take months to air out.

The evil part of her couldn't help but smile. She could have taken the rental, but what the hell, right? Cappelli wanted to take the reins, she could just take a giant bite out of a shit sandwich and like it.

He nodded once at Cappelli but said nothing.

Devi gave a quick nod. "Where?"

His face twisted. "Come on." He motioned her and Cappelli inside and shut the door behind him as soon as they were through. "The wife is in the back bedroom. The son went missing tonight, and we've heard this may be related to the scene you just left."

"How so?" Cappelli spoke up, the first words she'd uttered since they entered the house.

"The team has been working on identifying the bodies from the alley."

They passed through a living room filled with well-worn furniture. A brown leather couch that had seen better days, a weary looking easy chair and scuffed wooden end tables covered in books filled the space. It was comfortable and homey, with landscape paintings of local art. Devi stopped when she passed a hall table laden with family photos.

There.

She picked up one of a young man she'd seen just an hour ago, his body strewn about like trash next to the dumpster. He was found next to a young

woman dressed like she was going to an all-out Goth witch function.

There hadn't been a familiar present. They were too young. But in some ways that was even worse.

Gambian was racking up the points tonight.

Tears prickled in her eyes. If the son was involved, what did that mean for the rest of the family? She continued down the hall. Cappelli had stopped to discuss something with Avery and another officer. That was fine. She preferred doing what she did alone. And she didn't need the other woman's hostility mixing with the energy of the scene.

The second door down was the boy's bedroom. White walls covered in posters of D&D and Game of Thrones. But there, on his desk, was the clue she'd been expecting to find. A thick, leather-bound tome like one she herself had at home.

Demon Craft: The Summoning.

She ran her fingers over the open pages but the impressions from the pages were faint and didn't tell her much. Leaning forward, she noted the portion he'd been reading.

Blood sacrifice.

How apt.

Darkness called to darkness. And before you knew it, you were lunch.

Bye, bye Felicia.

A clawing in her gut had her moving again. This was one part of the puzzle. The others were here in the house. She gave the room another cursory glance and shut the door behind her. She needed to see the body. Passing through the living room again, she stopped at the crime scene tape. The smell was thick and viscous, and made her already temperamental gut-churn.

Do your job.

Find the answer.

This is what you're here for, no matter the cost to you.

Blood spatter darkened patches of the beige carpet and walls of the dining room, a circular pattern that ended at the closed door in front of her. She made her way around the blood noting the ordinary looking wooden table and bare walls. It was obvious no one ate here.

Devi opened the door and stepped into a dark library. Walls of blood-spattered bookshelves and antiquities that didn't fit into the bland suburban scene staggered her senses.

"My God." It was worse in person. The reek of old blood, dark magic,

and vomit assaulted her senses, blending with the stench of death.

The body lay twisted on the floor covered by tan pants and white shirt violated by the blood of unexplainable wounds and puffy welts on the skin.

Bee stings?

Devi bent over the body, trying to keep her boots from stepping in the congealing blood. A dark, elongated wooden object lay askew next to the corpse. She shifted her weight to see it better.

Avery appeared at the door, his gaze settling on something across the room. "I don't like it. Wife said he just got back from some weird ass vacation in the middle of the swamp. Then, he locked himself in here."

A buzzing noise wafted through the room. Her fingertips tingled. There. She opened her eyes and her gaze fell on the dark wooden object. She flipped it over with the toe of her boot.

A wooden mask.

She'd seen others like it in the Voodoo shops she'd visited in the past. They made her skin crawl every time. The hollow eye sockets pulsed with shadows and sinister secrets. Her gaze darted around the library, landing on an open box on a nearby table.

She started to touch it, but her animal hissed, forcing her to back up.

"Our boy here must have been dabbling with the occult." Avery picked up a feathered object with tiny shells dangling from it. He shook the piece, and she could see the gears working in his head, but even he didn't know what he was messing with.

That was why they'd brought her in.

Goddess, what had been happening here?

She'd only been gone seven years.

"Avery, don't touch anything." She glanced around the walls. Most were covered with books, but where there was bare wall space, she found artwork depicting the rise of demons from the depths of Hell and strange landscapes that reminded her of Dante's Inferno. Her gaze rolled over the books on the shelf. Lovecraft, an illustrated Necronomicon, books on the occult both obscure and mainstream.

This is where the money was.

Right here in this room.

She needed to talk to the wife.

"I should get the team in here and get it cleared out. Do you need to look at anything else?" He flipped open his phone, pecked out something, and then

slid it back into his pocket.

“No. I don’t think so.” Devi replied, distracted. “The wife? What’s her name?”

“Skyler. Skyler Chambers.”

Chambers.

As in The King in Yellow.

Was it a coincidence?

No.

She didn’t believe that for one minute.

She left Avery to work with the crime scene crew. She could have touched the body but she didn’t have to. He was a willing sacrifice to summon beings that should have remained in another dimension. She reached the last bedroom at the end of the hall. The officer guarding the door opened it, allowing her to pass.

The room was empty save for a queen size bed and dresser; a glass paned door to the outside hung open, letting in the fetid night air. Devi burst into a run, covering the small bedroom in a few steps, her boots hitting the concrete pad outside with a thump. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dark.

The house rested on the edge of the swamp and Skyler Chambers was halfway toward the water’s edge. The woman’s nightgown glowed white in the gloom, her long blonde hair tumbling to her waist.

“Mrs. Chambers! Wait!” Devi darted forward as the woman proceeded toward the water. “Stop! Please.”

The woman turned and regarded Devi with an unreadable expression. “It’s time. The dead lie dreaming and they must awake.”

“No.” Devi panted. “No. Your husband...your son.”

“They are with Her now. It’s time for a new world.” Her gaze met Devi’s with a pitying expression. “You will learn to see. I see Her mark on you already.” Her hand reached out to touch Devi.

Images both horrifying and glorious tumbled into Devi’s mind all at once. Goddesses and dead things and a language so old she could only guess at its meaning.

The death of her husband.

Her boy going leaving for the party with his girlfriend, knowing what his fate would be.

It was all orchestrated.

All planned.

Skyler released Devi and offered her a joyous smile, her fingers sliding down the material of Devi's jacket. "You'll see. Look to the stars. Your blade is ripe for the purpose. Feed it. She is coming, cat. I hope you're ready."

The other woman stepped into the water and slowly sank beneath the waves, her nightgown filling with air as it submerged around her. In moments she was gone save for a smattering of air bubbles. The world was full of silence and the chirping of cicadas.

One step was all it took for her to follow, and that was what she did. Her ocelot scratched and bit as she found herself half submerged in the fetid water.

In the distance she heard Cappelli calling her name. Devi looked on, powerless to move. As the ripples in the water ceased, a reflection of the night sky and the over-ripe moon came into view. She slipped the blade out of its holster and readied herself as something shifted in the wind and she caught the scent of something that terrified her.

CHAPTER 5



SHE SHOULD HAVE DRIVEN RIGHT TO LUCIA'S, BUT THE WHISPERS IN THE AIR tonight felt restless. Kate reached out to her kiss spell, but nothing outright came back. But what she did smell was the poignant scent of sulfur and a tinge of dark magic in the air.

"That's odd."

Kendall's apartment wasn't too far. She roomed with her girlfriend and odds were, she was just being a snowflake.

Pulling into the driveway, she noticed Kendall's car wasn't there.

Minutes later, she was knocking at the door.

"Kendall. Are you in there? It's Kate."

The door swung open and a teary eyed Cybelle peered out at her, the scent of patchouli and smoke drifting out to greet her.

"Kate?"

She nodded. It had been a while since she'd been introduced to the younger woman.

"Hey. I know it's late. I was just wondering if Kendall was here."

"No. I was just going to text you to see if you'd seen her." Cybelle wiped at her eyes. "She hasn't been home since last night when she left to go to work at the shop."

"What?"

But Kendall hadn't shown up.

"Where else did she say she was going?"

Cybelle's lips twisted. "That damned swamp. She's been selling spells on the side to try to get us more money. Some guy was supposed to buy one off her."

Unease slid down her spine.

“And she was going to do this before work?”

“Yeah.” Cybelle reached for a cigarette in the pocket of her robe and flicked open a lighter. As she shifted her arm, Kate got a glimpse of a bandage.

“Did you cut yourself?”

Cybelle flinched.

“No.” Her eyes darted away and she arranged the robe so it covered the injury. “I just cut it at work. No big deal.”

“Okay. Is there any place else she would have gone? You guys...are all right?”

The salty scent of fire and clove cigarettes tickled Kate’s nose.

Cybelle shook her head, wrapping her arms around herself. “We’re fine. But I’m totally pissed that she went out there.”

Kate hadn’t been to the swamp in years. Not since...Devi. Goddess, just thinking about her gouged out a new hole in her heart. She missed her so much.

But she wasn’t going to think about her. Not now. The connection in their blood was bad enough, she didn’t need to actively pull it up to torture herself.

Kendall was her worry now. Devi was a ghost from the past that just needed to stay there. If someone doesn’t want to stay, you can’t make them. Goddess, but she hoped Cybelle wasn’t about to experience that loss.

“I’ll see what I can find out.”

Cybelle took a puff of her cigarette and held it between shaking fingers.

“Thanks. I’d appreciate it.”

Without a word, Kate headed for her car. With any luck, her sister witches would have some ideas. Her thoughts kept coming back to the bandage on Cybelle’s arm and filed it under the thousand and one questions buzzing in her brain.

CHAPTER 6



“WE THOUGHT YOU’D NEVER GET HERE.” JOCELYN GLANCED UP FROM HER froth-covered beverage.

Goddess, but she loved her monthly bitch sessions with the girls. Lucia had taken the old Block and Tackle bar and turned it into Lucia’s Botanicals and Brews, a place where they could all let their hair down. It wasn’t just beer, although she had some unique draughts on tap, it was the botanical potions and brews that drew people in.

In other words, it was a bar for witches.

And it was freaking fantastic.

Orlo was a kitchen witch and his food rivaled anything she could get anywhere else in town, no matter if it was a steak, a fig vinaigrette salad, or a basket of onion rings. The man had talent. If she actually leaned that way, she would be tempted to marry him just to have him cook for her the rest of her life.

But sadly, he and his husband were happily married and adopting a baby girl. A tiny little part of her was jealous, but they’d all made their choices. Even if hers left her a little lonely at the end of the day.

Love was for other people. Hers had left town with little explanation, but deep down she thought she knew. Being trapped into a relationship wasn’t cool, and Kate had tried to do just that.

Warning her that it was close to a full moon, she’d seduced her right into bed, and when Devi accidentally marked her, it had been a bittersweet gift. It tied them together forever, but it also scared her off.

Goddess, she’d been an idiot.

Seven years later, she couldn’t get the cat out of her mind and no other

familiar would do.

Loneliness was a bitch. But she didn't blame Devi. All she'd ever wanted was to be a cop and to help people. Staying in Bixby and just being a familiar wasn't something in her blood. Especially with her family's bullshit kicking up dust. She had a lot to prove. Demon magic left a stain, even when she wasn't the one using it.

People had choices. And she wasn't going to stand in her way if leaving was what she wanted.

Her thoughts drifted back to the present as a steaming basket of onion rings drifted under her nose.

"Earth to Kate..."

The small table was laden with potato skins, cheese sticks, and now a heaping basket of onion rings with a vat of ranch that earned a happy grumble from her tummy and reminded her that she hadn't eaten much since breakfast.

But that was fine with her. All the better to enjoy the food, drinks, and atmosphere.

The lighting was dim, just like she liked it, but the plants Grace helped Lucia cultivate to share the space were especially suited to thrive and give the place an even more unique edge.

"I know. Sorry. It's been a hell of a day," Kate responded, taking her seat on the high bar stool.

"Tell me about it." Grace winced. "The garden shop was overrun with Karens and Chads and I ran out of succulent dirt."

"The world is indeed ending." Lucia made her way over, a large beer mug overflowing with goodness on her tray. "Here you go, Kate. You look like you could use this."

"Yes. Thank you." She grabbed at the mug with greedy fingers and sucked down a large gulp, the heady, malted brew like heaven on her tongue.

She loved the ladies at the store, but just soaking in the silence was a welcome change. If only her thoughts would follow. She was worried about Kendall and her visit with Cybelle had done nothing to assuage her fears. Frankly, they'd only added to them.

"I'm glad you could all make it. Especially tonight." Lucia set down the tray and climbed onto the last bar stool. Her dark eyes flashed with something like concern and Kate put her drink down with a *thunk*.

"What's happened?"

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. The Council sent out a notice for all members to use caution in their travels.”

“What does that mean?”

“There’s been a rash of missing witches in town tonight and I wanted to see if you’d noticed anything odd.”

Kate nibbled on her lip, unsure of how to respond. Eying the others, she took a deep breath and decided it was better to just get it over with.

“Well...Kendall didn’t show up last night. Or today.”

“Is she prone to that kind of behavior?”

“No.” Kate shook her head. “She’s been reliable, actually. Helpful to the max.”

Lucia nodded, her gaze flickering to the other two.

“Anything strange going on with you?”

“Nope. Unless you count Melissa Rodriguez not showing up to get her bakery order. The woman is like clockwork. But tonight, not a thing.”

“Hmmm. Grace?”

“No. Just the usual, I’m afraid.”

Lucia nodded. “Okay. Word from the other covens in town is something is going on. At least two of their younger members have gone missing in the last few hours. If Kendall is part of this, then we have at least three.”

“I don’t really know about Melissa. She’s never mentioned a thing.”

“Keep your ears open. If I were you, I would call it an early night.”

“Well, that’s kind of hard to do.”

“I know. But listen...I overheard one of the patrons talking about a couple of dead teenagers behind the coffee place earlier tonight. They’re still working the case, but they might be part of the witching community.”

“Oh no.” Grace pressed her lips together. “That’s right down the road from the shop.”

“No kidding.” Jocelyn frowned. Her pottery studio was only a few blocks away as well.

“Just, everyone keep an ear to the ground, okay?” Lucia sighed and met Kate’s eyes. “What?”

“So, Kendall went to the swamp to meet someone who wanted a spell.”

“Oh, Goddess.” Lucia closed her eyes. “That place is off limits for a reason. Has been for years.”

Jocelyn snorted. “You all know the kids will always go hiding where they think we can’t see. Hell, we did it.”

“We did. But it wasn’t teeming with off energy back then, either.”

“True.”

“I sent a searcher spell but it hasn’t come back yet,” Kate said, pulling her hair behind her ear.

“Girl, be careful. I don’t like the things I’m hearing.” Grace’s lips thinned into a line.

“I don’t want any of you taking chances. At least not until we get more info from the powers that be.”

Kate didn’t either, but as they dissolved for the night, she knew exactly where she was headed, like it or not.

Her spelled blade burned a hole in her pocket, and she grit her teeth. Something wasn’t right and she was going to find out what it was.

CHAPTER 7



“ARE YOU GOING TO CHANGE BACK, OR AM I GOING TO HAVE TO LIVE WITH the smell of wet cat in my car?”

Cappelli glared down at her, and Devi proceeded to rub her face in the towel Avery brought from the house. They were still by the water, and the scent of magic drifting through the air was really making her nuts. She really needed a shower, but that was going to have to wait.

“She hasn’t shifted like this before,” Avery commented. “Not at a crime scene.”

Devi glared up at him, annoyed that whatever happened in the water had forced a change. In front of her old boss and temporary partner, no less.

“Well, she better get her butt back in human form because we still have another one to go and I don’t intend to babysit an oversize housecat all night.”

Hello... she wanted to say. But all she could do was hiss and pin back her ears. The thought of scratching her just to watch her bleed held some merit, but well... she didn’t want to take the chance if the woman was actually human.

Infesting someone with shifter traits wasn’t a good plan, even if she felt like dumping her ass head first into the swamp to see how she liked it.

“The swamp. You head out. I’ll finish up here. Devi, let me know if you piece any of this together. The crew has already started working the scene, so you might want to get a move on.” Avery was already moving toward a group of technicians.

Cappelli nodded. “Will do. From the preliminaries, it sounded like a rave gone wrong. But now, I’m not so sure.”

“Keep me in the loop, will you?” He barely looked in her direction.

“No problem, sir.”

A pair of eyes trained on Devi, and she fought the urge to squirm.

Her animal wanted to hunt, but she forced herself to focus.

The shift was painful, her muscles already tired from her previous change. Her clothes lay in a sodden heap at the edge of the water, and all she had was the towel she was swathed in.

“Well, this is awkward.”

“No kidding.” Devi peeled a blob of wet, silvery white tresses off her face and wrapped the towel around her.

Nothing like being naked in front of your co-workers. It ranked high up on the fuck-this-shit list.

She had to move, but every part of her body protested.

Getting to her feet was a monumental task, but she did it. “I need you to take me to the nearest gas station. I need to change.”

A half hour later, they were back on the road, her damp mop of silver hair still smelling of swamp water and death.

Devi pressed her face against the passenger’s door and sighed.

She didn’t want to do this one. Something about it rang a little too close to home. And after the last stop in the suburbs, she was ready to hit the bar and down a few. Or curl up on her bed in the hotel room and shut out the world for a while.

Why had she scented Kate over the water? She hoped Gambian hadn’t tracked her down already.

Kate had to be safe or she would lose her ever loving mind.

She picked up her phone, debating whether she should be the one to break the silence, and put it down again.

Damn it.

She snatched up the phone and before she could talk herself out of it, sent Kate a text.

Something’s going down in the swamp. Felt your magic. Please be safe.

Goddess, her head was going to explode.

What the fuck had the woman been thinking?

Drowning herself in the swamp right in front of her?

The whole thing was fucked up and it was starting to mess with her head.

There was a reason she was good at this job, but damn, she had enough scars, damn it. She didn’t need more.

Avery and Cappelli had caught up to her when she was hip deep in the water herself. The siren song of the deep had been calling and she didn't want to think about what might have happened if they hadn't gotten there when they did.

She'd grabbed her bag and changed while Cappelli filled up the car.

Cappelli opened the driver's side door and got behind the wheel without looking at her.

"What is wrong with you?"

"Excuse me?" Devi stuttered, blinking at the vehemence in her voice.

"You're my partner, for tonight at least. Like it or not, I need to know if you're going to get suicidal, or whatever the hell that was, with every tough case we work."

"No."

"Well, what was that?"

"I honestly don't know."

And she didn't. One minute she had been on the shore, and the next she was wading deep into the water.

"So, you always keep a change of clothes in your bag?"

"It's kind of the nature of the beast."

Cappelli winced.

"I know. Bad joke. But it kind of applies, don't you think?"

"I guess."

It was going to be a long night.

"Need some coffee?" Cappelli started the car, waiting for her answer.

"No. Let's just get this over with."

"Suit yourself."

Devi scooped her silvery white hair up into a messy up do and uncapped her rarely used lipstick. She stared at the crimson shade, her mind traveling back to when Kate first gave her the silver tube.

Kate.

Goddess she missed her.

It had been three years, but the sting of it still felt like yesterday.

Yeah. And whose fault was that?

Every time she picked the lipstick up, the zip of Kate's magic flowed over her like kisses on her skin and she was lost.

Bitterness twisted in her gut.

She had been damned if she did, and damned if she didn't.

Being a cop meant being her own person, not an extension of someone else. But no one understood and she had no choice but to walk away.

So why did she still miss her so fucking much?

Her ocelot scowled at her from within. Of course, she knew.

The lipstick grew warm in her hand, and the memories of that last night played over in her mind as if it were yesterday.

“You look sexy in that shade of red.” Kate entered the room with a small object in her hand. The florescent glow of the bathroom lights brought out the silvery blue in her eyes and the chestnut waves of her hair.

All ready for their night, Kate was a knockout in her blue slip of a dress.

“Thanks.” Devi zipped up the side panel on the dress and adjusted her cleavage. Her breasts filled out the top portion of the crimson velvet bodice to a tee. Her long, silvery white hair was styled in old fashioned, large curls and parted down the middle, letting her shiny locks flow in waves down her back. One glance at her girl and her pulse pounded in her throat. *“Are you sure we have to go?”*

Her animal agreed. She could still taste her, and the scent of her was everywhere.

They needed to talk about what happened earlier, but Devi was struggling to find the words.

Kate laughed, her lips curling up into a guarded smile. “You just want me all to yourself.”

She wasn’t wrong.

If they went out tonight, she would be sharing her and that was something she didn’t want to do. Her body was still flush with heat from their earlier lovemaking and the unforgettable moment when she’d slid her teeth into Kate’s neck, just under her hair.

The warm bloom of the mate bond had flooded through her, and when she’d pulled away, she found Kate’s eyes closed.

A single tear slipped down her cheek.

“I won’t hold you to it, you know,” she whispered. *“I know you don’t want this.”*

The denial had been on Devi’s lips, but she tasted the lie for what it was before it escaped.

Kate deserved more than that. She deserved someone who wasn’t tied to demon magic, as much as she fought it.

Instead, she rose from the bed and shut herself in the bathroom and let

the shower drown out her tears.

It wasn't fair.

Why did everything have to have rules and consequences?

Why couldn't she just love who she loved and have a life without all the bullshit?

If they came out publicly as a couple, she would be bound to Kate as a familiar and as much as signing her a death sentence if Gambian found a way to escape the box she'd sealed her in.

She had just started her job on the force and found her path to freedom.

Devi's eyes met Kate's in the mirror. She'd hit home and Kate immediately frowned.

Cops and witches didn't get along, let alone them knowing she was a familiar. It was well known Devi's family were hereditary familiars to some of the highest witching and demon families and it had taken her a long time to help them see her as a cop, not a supernatural freak they had to worry about.

What was she going to do?

Take her mate to every crime scene?

Call her when things got tough so she could funnel her power?

Keep her with her twenty-four hours a day to make sure some random demon didn't hand her over to Gambian just out of spite?

Fuck no.

She was no one's battery. And that was the argument that started and ended it all. And she couldn't stand by and watch while Kate's life was destroyed by something that wasn't in her control.

"I'm sorry Devi. I know your mom is still really pissed at you for quitting the coven. And I hardly ever see you anymore between you moving to the city and the yarn shop." Kate wrapped her arms around Devi and kissed her on the cheek. "I thought going tonight would be good for us. You used to love thumbing your nose at what everyone else is expecting."

They expected her to stay away.

They would be right.

"Sure. But tonight, I just wanted it to be us. Here. Together," Devi protested. If Kate wanted to go, then she would, but the last thing she wanted to do was be out in public and deal with other people's expectations, witch or otherwise.

"Just dinner with the coven, okay? Your mother is expecting us. Mine too.

After that, we can go dancing.” Kate’s lips quirked into a flirty smile that faded when she took in Devi’s expression. “We don’t have to, I mean. If you really don’t want to.”

And she didn’t.

Despite the risks they were taking just by being together, she didn’t want to hurt her. Every time they touched, there was a very real possibility the goddess would bind them.

Witch and familiar.

Mates.

Which she had gone and done tonight.

Fuck.

Goddess, she was so stupid.

In her heart, she knew there would never be another for her. But in her head, she balked at the shackles they kept trying to put on her. Demon or otherwise.

Being a detective was a hard job and one that didn’t follow a nine to five schedule.

How was she supposed to be a good mate in that reality?

“The coven knows full well why I left.” A slow burn of anger began to simmer in her gut. Her mother found ways to ruin everything even after she was dead. First her coven family, and now her time with her girlfriend. She jerked the back off the earring and fastened it, repeating the action with the other ear. Two diamonds sparkled back at her in the glass.

Her mother had never approved of her wanting to become a detective, or anything other than a bond between a witch and a familiar. She might as well have told to stay barefoot and pregnant. That was how she felt. Even if that person was Kate.

Why couldn’t she just be left alone to live her life?

But the one thing Devi never wanted to do was hurt Kate, and if she was honest, and told her how she felt, that’s exactly what would happen.

“Are we going to talk about it?” Kate put her hand on her arm.

“No.” Devi sighed. There were no words that wouldn’t make things worse. “I want to enjoy the night.”

“So, let’s get out of here.” Kate looped her arms around her and held out a small silver tube. “This is for you.”

As her fingers reached around the lipstick, a zing of something she recognized as Kate’s magic kissed her skin.

Too bad it was as bittersweet as the look she gave her as they walked out the door.

That was the last night they spent together.

She hadn't called. Neither had Devi.

It was just too fucking raw.

Seven years had gone by and she wasn't any closer to getting over it.

The car stopped and it jolted Devi out of her memories and back into reality.

"Jesus." The normal Texas landscape of pine trees and occasional oaks had shifted into shadowy swamplands. Her skin prickled with unease, her inner cat's ears turning down in disapproval.

The night seemed deeper here. But not like it used to.

It almost seemed...alive.

Devi didn't like it one bit.

"I know this place." It popped out of her lips before she could take it back and wanted to curse herself for it.

"Oh?"

"I used to live around here." That was all she was going to say. Cappelli kept to herself and she would take her cues and do the same.

All the witching families in Bixby had forbidden anyone from going beyond the barrier of the swamps.

That didn't mean everyone listened. It was the top choice for teenagers longing to have a bit of freedom away from prying eyes. Pop up raves had been common. One site in particular snagged her memory.

A stolen kiss.

Bonfires snapping and crackling against the darkness.

A mutual discovery of bodies and groping hands.

It had been a time of awakening. But it was over now.

"What exactly was the complaint?"

"Neighbors at the edge of the swamp complained of a loud party. Then, they heard screams." Cappelli pulled the car over to the side of the road.

Bullshit.

"Nobody lives near enough to hear that."

Except maybe the recently dead Skyler Chambers. She'd have to check her phone records.

Cappelli shrugged. "What I don't understand is why they asked for us when we've already had three scenes tonight and the team is already on site."

“Did he say anything else?”

“No. Just that he needed a report asap.”

“Shit. Where are Murray and Daniels?”

“They’re working the homicide at the Pickled Bear.”

It figured. People had damn near lost their minds being in lockdown for almost a year. It seemed like it was only getting worse.

Goddess, she was tired.

“Great.”

Cappelli’s lips curved into a smile. “Come on. Let’s get this over with.” Opening the driver’s side door, she stepped out into the darkness.

Devi followed suit. She got out of the car and from the moment her feet touched the earth, she felt the vibration in her bones.

“Shit.”

“What?”

“You don’t feel that?”

For a moment, she wished Kate were here, then gave herself a mental slap. This was why she had to leave. The witch, familiar bond was too strong and they’d gotten too close to the fire.

Had she imagined her scent when she was at the Chamber’s house? It seemed like it was impossible, but she knew her magic anywhere. So where was it coming from and why would she be out here of all places?

“Feel what?”

Devi sighed. She really hated breaking in a new partner.

“How are you on a taskforce that deals with paranormal shit if you can’t feel it?”

“At least I don’t cut and run when things get tough.”

“Go on.” Devi crossed her arms, her lips twisted into a smirk. “Tell me how I have to *run* back here to help you do your job.”

“You’re a bitch.”

“Right back atcha.” Devi gave her a cold smile and turned her focus to the darkness beyond. Cappelli was noise. What was out there...it was a threat and she took it seriously.

“There’s something here. And it feels...wrong.” There wasn’t any other way to say it.

Just then a ghost of music drifted toward them and she cocked her head.

“Before you ask, yes, I heard that.”

Why hadn’t the team turned off the music?

“Let’s go.”

“After you.”

“Hang on.” Devi went to the trunk of the car and dragged her duffle bag over. Yanking out a Taser, she tucked it into the waistband of her jeans. Her knife was heavy in her pocket, pulsing with each burst of energy.

There was no doubt about it. The very land was alive.

She gave the tree line a visual sweep, the sense of not being alone washed over her.

“You want a flashlight?”

“No. I can see just fine, thanks.”

Devi sighed. Let the games begin.

“Are you going to tell me what you are?”

A snort was her answer.

“You’re a detective. Figure it out.” With that, her mysterious new partner stalked off into the night and Devi was left to follow in her footsteps.

God.

The night couldn’t be over fast enough.

CHAPTER 8



KATE PULLED UP TO THE OLD RAVE SITE AND SURE ENOUGH, KENDALL'S CAR was there. But so were at least a dozen others and what appeared to be a sheriff's car and a crime scene tech van. Rolling the window down, she was hit with the fetid slap of cool, moisture-laden air, the spell she sent out still mysteriously silent.

Something was way wrong.

The flesh on her arms tightened, and gooseflesh settled in.

If there were police here, why couldn't she hear sirens and all the crap that comes with a crime scene?

She watched TV.

No... this was... off.

Where were the cops?

What had they come here to find?

Her phone buzzed and she gave it a cursory glance. Then, she looked at it again.

Devi?

Something's going down in the swamp. Felt your magic. Please be safe.

What the hell?

She sat back in her seat, irritation warring with worry. This...this was what she said after seven fucking years?

Then her stomach dropped.

Was she in trouble?

Her heart raced and she struggled to get her emotions under control.

Devi was back?

And at the swamp, no less?

She hadn't sensed her yet, but she hadn't been trying either.

Parking the car, she got out, her feet loud on the pebbled ground. She remembered when they'd snuck out here as teenagers to put the rocks down so their cars didn't keep getting stuck in the mud. She and Devi had laughed and gotten tangled up in each other more than once that night.

Just the thought of her made her pulse quicken, but then she forced herself to shake it off. They'd each made their choice and they were going to have to live with it. If she was here, it had to do with work and that made her nervous.

The tree line was dark with unknown menace and it made her skin crawl. Dark magic fairly drenched the place and it made her want to take a shower. What the hell was going on around here?

"Kendall? Devi?" Kate called out, her voice jarring her amid the silence.

The only sounds were the chirping cicada's and the wind whispering through the trees.

Her fingertips tingled as she made her way toward the rave site just a little way beyond the parking area. They'd cleared the land just enough to have bonfires and have some fun, but not enough to take away from the nature beauty of the swamp.

Eyes adjusting to the dark, she carefully made her way between the brush, taking care not to make any noise.

What she saw made her freeze in her tracks.

CHAPTER 9



WHAT MUST HAVE BEEN MINUTES FELT LIKE HOURS AS DEVI STUMBLED around in the brush. They still hadn't apprehended anything but a shrub and a moss-covered log that Devi could have sworn was staring at her. Vines slid across the ground, and plants brushed against her, like they were taking a taste.

Goddess, but she hated this part of the swamp.

She came here as a teen, just to prove she could. But damn, she never remembered it being this creepy before. And why hadn't they driven around to find the parking area they'd built as kids for the raves?

"Better to go in the back way," was all Cappelli had said. "The team will probably do the same."

Except she hadn't seen a sign of them.

Not one.

Well, shit.

Let's fucking do things the hard way.

Moving plants and trees with eyes?

No.

Even with all the booze she'd downed, she'd have remembered that shit.

She was jumpy, and the worst part was Cappelli knew it.

"You okay back there?"

"Fine," she bit out as another branch tickled her face.

She would be better off if she could just shift and let her ocelot take the reins. Her animal would have found whatever was messed up and they'd be out of here eating breakfast in an hour.

Her cat stretched beneath her skin, eager to do just that. But this was a

situation that called for her to stay in human form. Besides, she didn't know her new partner well enough to trust her. She knew she was a shifter. Let her wonder about the rest.

If she wanted to be cagey, Devi could play along.

The sound of a twig breaking nearby made her freeze. A low growl bubbled up her throat and she scanned the shadows.

Her partner was nowhere in sight.

Fuck.

"Cappelli," she hissed.

But the night had taken her as if she had never been there.

Double fuck.

She eyed the trees and put her hands on her hips.

"Really?"

She half expected the old cypress to shoot her the bird. Huffing, she rolled her eyes and peered once again into the shadows.

She grit her teeth and moved forward. Her partner hadn't vanished; she had probably just gone ahead to scope things out.

It was the music that lured her deeper into the congested mire of moss-covered cypress trees. The heart of the swamp loomed dark, the cicadas chirping blending with the strange echo of something melodic and infectious. Dank wet air pawed against her face and she swiped at the perspiration trickling down her forehead.

A shadow moved into her line of sight and she couldn't help but breathe an irritated sigh of relief.

Her temporary partner traipsed through the brush ahead her in the inky black. The pale light of the moon was the only light saving her from stepping into a bog or worse, a gator trap. Cappelli had taken a chance leading the way, but if she wanted to stumble around in unfamiliar territory, it wasn't up to Devi to tell her what to do.

The blade she carried whispered to her beneath the confines of her jeans pocket. It had awakened the moment they'd stepped foot on this cursed earth and she knew better than to take anything around her for granted.

The decorative knife was similar to ones you'd find at expensive jewelry shops in the hoity-toity shopping districts of town, except for the strange green fire twisted through the metal of the blade. Sometimes, when she looked at it, she could swear there were faces there.

Usually after a couple of beers.

Her position within the department was a tenuous one. People distrusted things they didn't understand and she was exactly that. It wouldn't help that she'd been dragged back to her hometown to solve whatever it was that was happening here.

She would do her job and go home to her empty apartment just like she always did. And she didn't have a death wish. Playing with fire was fun but when you landed in the flames, too...well now. That left singe marks. She had a job to do. Weird shit was happening and they paid her to figure it out with as little body count as possible.

She thought about the 911 call that Cappelli played on the way to the scene.

“Oh my God. Come now! They're killing her!” The caller dropped the phone with a clatter. After a moment and the sounds of labored breathing the voice resumed. “It came out of the swamp Holy crap! Kill it. You have to...” A terrible scream almost made Devi jump and the line went dead.

Cappelli had met her eyes, steering the car toward the reported area of the incident. She'd responded to the homicide team there would be a slight delay in their arrival. If it was anything like she thought, it was a party gone bad and someone was playing a prank on a snitch once they found her on the phone. Now here they were in the middle of the swamp hunting down clues like some kind of episode of True Detective.

Where was the rest of the team?

She didn't like this.

Not one bit.

“You see anything?” She whispered.

“Not yet.”

Something glimmered in the shadows ahead. She knew better than to trust anything out here. Swamp gas did funny things. The music grew louder. Instead of an electronica beat, this music brimmed with percussion and the blood rush of orchestrated screams. The sound sent shivers down Devi's spine.

“Do you see the lights?”

Cappelli moved next to Devi, her narrow face white in the faint glow of the moon. Her lips pressed together and she nodded. “This reminds me of a bust I did a few years back. Looked like an episode of that swamp justice show. There was some pretty nasty voodoo activity on site.”

“Voodoo? Like what?” Devi sucked in a deep breath. She'd seen a few

things at the local tourist traps since she took the job at the department, but nothing that rivaled what life would have been like if she'd stayed. There was a reason she left home. Other people's darkness was always preferable to one's own.

Cappelli urged her forward, a faraway look on her expressive face. "Yeah. Dead chickens scattered everywhere. An eviscerated goat...and the snakes. God, I hate those damned snakes."

Devi nodded. It sounded familiar to the occult scenes she'd worked in the city. As much as it turned the stomach of the cop she'd been before, it electrified her animal.

"We have to finish this or Avery will have our asses. I don't know why he insisted you consult, but whatever."

Devi didn't say a thing. All they had to do was get through this shift and she could go home. That was the deal and she was sticking with it.

"Capote and Ford are in Slidell checking out info on that stranded camper they found last week." Cappelli peered into the shadowy forest of hanging moss and cypress trees.

"Right." Her foot slipped in a pile of slimy putrescence and she shuddered. One time in the swamp was all it took to learn to wear boots.

"Where'd they find the camper?" She shook her foot and didn't bother looking down. The jeans more than likely ruined, too.

"A mile or so away."

The music stopped and their steps sounded loud in the sudden silence.

"Come on." Cappelli picked up the pace, tugging on the sleeve of her suit jacket.

Devi jerked back without even thinking.

"Sorry." She slid her gaze away, bolting ahead of Devi into the murky night.

Her breath came in soft pants, she hurried after Cappelli, brush and scrub pawing at her clothes and face. The light grew brighter but it barely registered as she struggled to keep up, slamming into Cappelli's back when she froze.

Images from Cappelli's past assailed her. A crime scene hovered and centered in her vision and she cursed herself for not paying closer attention.

A dead girl in a white dress laid out on the ground, her eyes open and glassy. The altar flickered with candlelight, the pavement surrounding it covered with colorful chalk marks and symbols. Entrails in wooden bowls covered in flies buzzed and the warehouse smelling of blood and feces.

She also felt the other woman's pain.

But the memories weren't over.

Her partner darted out in front of her trying to deflect the bokur coming at her from the far reaches of the shadowy room with a machete. Ridgeway, all too human and still recovering from medical leave, wasn't fast enough. The sickening sound of the blade imbedding in his flesh caused her fragile stomach to heave once more.

"Ridgeway!" She croaked out, staggering forward. She drew for her gun in time to aim and fire, hoping to God she connected with something that counted. That something was the bokur's head. It exploded, the sound echoing through the cavernous structure.

Shit.

A hiss greeted her and red eyes flashed in the darkness.

"Get out of my head," Cappelli bit out, stepping away.

Devi dug her nails into her palms to bring her focus back into the physical world.

A flash of fang revealed, and she understood. Her new partner was a vampire, and she'd been through the shit. Part of her wondered where Ridgeway was now, but hell if she was going to ask.

Devi swallowed, nervous perspiration erupting all over her body. She had gotten used to thinking of her as human. Having a reaction to her wasn't planned and she had to shake herself.

"Shit. I'm sorry."

Devi was drawn back into Cappelli's consciousness and memories as her own nausea took over and Cappelli's attempt to keep the contents of her stomach from defiling the crime scene was lost. The sour tang of bile overwhelmed her as she stumbled away and retched into the dirt.

"Ugh." Her face was hot and she wiped at her mouth with the back of her hand. "Nasty."

Devi let out a strangled breath and blinked to clear the visual from her mind.

"Hey," Cappelli grunted, turning her body to help steady her.

Oh God.

Devi held up her hand.

"Please don't touch me again. I don't want to see anything else. I'm okay."

"So that's why he wanted you."

“Among other things,” Devi grunted and tried to right herself, but instead got an eyeful of the rave site.

She tried to keep the tremor out of her voice as her eyes adjusted to the light. The scene in front of them was carnage. A campfire burned and within it she could see the charred remains of something that appeared more or less human.

More images of her past experience with the occult came unbidden and she had to blink them away. There were reasons she’d been asked to come here. She may hate it, but she was good at her job.

“It’s a body.”

“And not just one.”

Bodies of bound teenagers lay around the fire, their throats slit. The pooling blood appeared black in the dim light. One kid, a boy, was sporting a hat that looked like a house from Hogwarts. Her fingers itched to touch him, but she feared the visions it would bring. Perhaps she wouldn’t need to.

This was familiar. Like a scene from one of her case studies. A few more seconds of observation and the facts fell into play.

Isolation.

Swamp.

Elements of magic.

It was all there. Hell, she could even read the plot right now, it was so textbook.

Corpses of slain uniformed officers, what appeared to be a detective and a couple of crime scene techs, lay among the witches.

Some were mauled, but others had their throats slit.

She said the word before the thought even processed. “Power.”

“What?”

“The hat the kid is wearing. It’s a magical wanna be.” Devi took in the rest of the scene, nausea pooling in her gut. “You know? Like charging a battery?”

“Not something we’ve seen much of around here, detective.”

“But I bet you have in your own circles.” She let her gaze linger over Cappelli’s and the woman’s icy façade melted just a little.

“It’s happened before. Vampires drinking those with power to take their essence.”

“Witches do it, too.”

But among the ravers lay the missing members of the homicide team,

their throats torn open, eyes staring blankly into the night.

“Cappelli. Oh, no.”

“I see them.”

“This is seriously fucked.”

A shadowy figure burst out of the woods, darting toward them at breakneck speed. He was covered in gore, his eyes wide with terror.

“Get out of here! It’s coming.”

“Andrews?” Cappelli backed up a step, her mouth open in shock. “What happened to the team?”

“Go!” Andrews roared. His right arm was drenched in blood, a bite wound laying open his flesh.

Devi moved on impulse, the blade she carried under the suit jacket freed by virtue of muscle memory and a will to survive. Something was chasing him and she didn’t want that something to clamp down on her.

Cappelli stepped into the panicked officer’s path. “Jesus, Andrews. Stop.” She reached out to detain him but he maneuvered out of her grip.

“No,” he moaned. “Not going to become that.”

He gave Cappelli a mournful look.

“Leave this place before you die.” Then he dove head first into the bonfire.

“Stop! What the fuck are you doing, man?” Cappelli tried to pull him from the fire, but it was more than a little too late. The inferno grew, engulfing him in flames.

“Leave him.” Devi broke her own rule and touched the vampire, this time putting up her shields.

“He was one of the best in the department. None of this shit makes any sense.” She thrust her fingers through her hair in frustration.

“We have to know what to look for. And if whatever was chasing him is still out there, we better be ready.”

Without a word, Devi sheathed her weapon and pressed down the radio call button. “This is Graves and Benoit requesting a bus and backup. Multiple victims on site. Officers down. I repeat, officers down.”

Nothing else in the macabre scene moved. Whoever else performed the rite was long gone. It was a wasteland of death and destruction. She walked along the edge of the campfire and noted the strange markings on the stones.

Runes.

Sigils.

All meant for drawing power.

A bloody pentagram drawn in the dirt enclosed the space, and the fire burned in the middle like a beacon in the night. The smell of sulfur was unmistakable, but faded.

On the ground lay a discarded copy of the Necronomicon. It was the kind of cheap paperback you'd find at any chain bookstore. Well-thumbed and covered in bloody fingerprints, it was a spell of intent. There, hidden in the sand, were the complex drawings she was looking for. In the shadows of the trees, she found the twin scythe moons and a throne-like chair between them.

She thought back to the 911 call and shuddered.

Movement caught her eye and she gripped her blade and almost dropped it.

Kate appeared out of the darkness, her scent wrapping around her like smoke.

CHAPTER 10



KATE BLINKED IN THE DARKNESS, ALMOST UNABLE TO BELIEVE WHAT SHE WAS seeing.

Devi.

She was here.

She'd felt her essence, but wasn't sure if it was real, or just a ruse.

Without even thinking, she stepped from the shadows.

"Hello?"

"Witch." A vampire approached, not even bothering to hide her fangs.

"Devi?" Kate licked her lips, then stifled a gasp as her gaze slid past her mate to the scene beyond.

"Kate. What are you doing here?" Devi stared at her; eyes wide. Her animal was close to the surface and Kate could sense her fear. She could also feel the link between their matching daggers.

"Kendall, a girl from the shop, went missing. I traced my spell here but..."

"You need to leave. Now," the vampire hissed. "This is an active crime scene."

"What?"

"Jesus, Cappelli." Devi shot the other woman a vicious glare.

"She's a witch." Cappelli growled, taking a threatening step forward.

"Maybe she's controlling whatever attacked Andrews."

Devi rounded on the vampire; her fangs elongated.

"*She's my mate.*"

Kate swallowed, her knees growing weak. Were her ears playing tricks on her? Had the words she'd been waiting to hear for seven years just erupted

out of Devi's mouth or had she just lost her mind?

"Prove it."

"Excuse me. I'm still here."

"I don't have to prove anything to you, vamp girl. She's not the threat here."

"Like I said. Prove it. For all I know, she's that fucking demon that killed James all tucked up in a pretty package just to lure you in."

Devi stared at the vampire as if she'd been slapped.

"Demon? What is she talking about?"

"Nothing. Look. It's about my old partner."

"What?" Kate blinked, not entirely sure what was going on.

"I'm waiting." The vampire edged her suit jacket back to reveal a gun at her hip. She fingered the safety and looked pointedly at Kate.

"Fine." Devi spun back around and before she realized what was happening, captured Kate's lips in a kiss.

Kate meant to shove her away. This wasn't something she wanted to share in front of anyone, especially, after seven years of silence and guilt, worrying that she tried to trap the one thing that was good in her life.

But the warm and spicy scent of her lover filled her with happiness and a groan slipped from her lips, despite trying not to react.

Devi was the first to draw back.

"Hi."

"Hi, yourself." Even to her own ears, her voice sounded breathless. But then she let herself see. "The ground is..." she couldn't even form the words.

Nodding, Devi sighed. "It looks like someone lured them here and took their power."

"Not to mention murdered them all," the vampire interjected, her gaze still radiating hostility.

"I should go look for Kendall."

"No." Devi swallowed and blocked her way. "If she's there, she's gone."

Tears prickled the corners of her eyes and she angrily brushed them away. "Who would do this?"

"You're the witch. You tell us."

"I don't know. But I'm going to find out."

CHAPTER 11



DEVI SWALLOWED, STILL STARING AT KATE.

She was here.

The blade in her pocket pulsed, recognizing its twin close by.

“There are police already here. And dead. What happened?” Kate peered at the bonfire, wrinkling her nose in distaste as the wind shifted direction and she caught the smell of burning flesh.

“Have you heard anything from the witches?” Devi asked. Goddess, but she had to try and focus on the case.

Nodding, Kate rubbed her hands on her jeans. Her eyes looked tired, Devi realized.

“I just left the store. You know, the one we talked about opening? Well, I met with some of the girls at Lucia’s and there was talk about something going down.”

“Lucia’s?”

“Used to be the old bar on Main. I’ll have to show you. If you’re in town long enough...” her voice trailed off.

“So, even though they told you something was going down, you decided to come and check things out on your own?” Cappelli’s eyebrows lifted.

“Kendall, one of my employees, didn’t show for work. I sent out a finder spell, and it led me here.”

“I felt you. At the last crime scene. The scent carried over the water.” Devi was almost embarrassed to admit it.

“I got your text.”

“You texted her? Are you nuts?” Cappelli growled. “What if she was a part of it?”

“Ladies. We have company.”

A swirl of wind skittered around Kate, her chestnut hair swirling around her face as her element gathered strength. Her gaze shot to the darkness of the woods and Devi heard the crashing of brush and branches as a wolfen beast crashed into the open, heading straight for them.

“Kate!”

But her girl was already in action. Arms thrown wide, she whipped the tempests from teacups to tornados, hurling them at the creature.

Cappelli dove at it, struggling to subdue it, even with her superhuman strength. The creature shook her off, and Devi heard the unmistakable crack of her head hitting one of the large rocks near the fire pit.

Fuck.

“Why don’t you tangle with someone your own size, asshole?” Her blade was in her hand before she even realized it and she took her place at Kate’s side. Her gusts were getting fewer, and the creature was getting too close for comfort.

“Take what you need.”

Kate’s eyes met hers and she thought she saw a shimmer of something that looked like tears.

“I’m not going to use you. You have to do this because you want to.”

It wasn’t even a question.

But Devi didn’t have time to answer. The beast was on her, grabbing her by the hair and throwing her toward the nearest tree.

Fuck.

She slammed into the bark and blinked, her face numb from pain, and her arm twisted at an off angle.

Double fuck.

Moving it gingerly, she scraped her body off the ground and stalked back toward the fray. Cappelli had risen and was holding the creature back, but one good jab and she lost her footing, and the beast lunged for Kate.

Devi lost her mind.

Nothing else mattered.

Not her job.

Not the demon.

It was only ever about Kate.

The shift happened without her thinking about it. Muscles reformed and bones crunched, but this time, she allowed Kate’s power inside of her. They

were one, and as one they were stronger.

And a fuck ton larger.

The snarl ripped from her chest, and she charged the beast. Claws out, she swiped at it, sending it sailing. Kate lay too still, her perfect skin marred by bloody furrows from the creature's claws.

Enraged, Devi stalked forward and they met, claw for claw, fang for fang. Pain didn't exist.

She was fighting for Kate's life. There was a connection, but it was growing fainter.

She had to end this.

Now.

"Get it to come to you," Cappelli snarled, heaving herself out of the dirt. Her suit hung in tatters, and she shrugged off the jacket in disgust.

Devi yowled as the beast crashed into her, but she held on, twisting her legs up around its neck. It struggled, but she dug deep.

"Hold it!" Cappelli stalked forward, her perfect blonde hair askew, eyes black with fury.

Jaws snapping, it tried to latch on, but Cappelli was faster, snapping its neck with a swift twist of her hands.

Releasing the creature, Devi couldn't tell whose blood she was covered in. But they'd won.

The beast was dead.

"Devi." She heard Kate whisper her name, but it sounded far away.

"She's lost a lot of blood."

Cappelli.

God.

She was such a b...

CHAPTER 12



KATE SAT IN THE UNGODLY HOSPITAL CHAIR AND WATCHED THE MACHINES dance to Devi's heartbeat. She was bandaged and casted to the nth degree and Kate didn't know whether to scream or just crawl in bed beside her.

It wasn't fair.

She'd gotten the chance to see her, only to almost lose her again.

Who was she kidding? The second she woke up, she'd be gone now that the beast was dead.

But it hadn't just been a beast.

She'd crawled over to cradle Devi's head in her lap as the vampire called in for medical support and watched as the grotesque animal shifted form.

Her gasp brought the vampire's attention back in her direction and her lips formed a grim line.

It had been Cybelle.

But that hadn't answered every question in her mind. The girl wasn't the type to think of all of this on her own.

And why would she kill her girlfriend?

Just because she sold some spells?

No.

It didn't make sense.

She tried to tell the vampire, but she was on the phone again talking with her supervisor. Not long after, the ambulance came and with it, a flurry of activity.

They tried to pry Devi from her arms but she wouldn't let them. And now here she was, waiting for her to wake up so she would at least know she was safe.

A blip from one of the machines brought her out of her head and she found herself looking into Devi's eyes.

"Hey."

"Hey yourself."

Devi gave her a half-hearted smile, then winced. "Where's Cappelli?"

"With the crime scene techs. They have a lot of work to do out there. That girl who killed those people, I knew her."

"I'm sorry."

"It doesn't make sense."

"I need to talk to Avery and Cappelli."

"They said to tell you they'd be in touch. And not to go anywhere."

"No doubt." She tried to sit up, but made another face. "Are you okay?"

"I've been better."

Her face still stung from the beast's claws, and she was sore from where she'd hit the ground, but otherwise fine.

The wind whispered inside of her and she reached for Devi, the need to touch her nearly overwhelming.

"I couldn't stand by and let it hurt you." Devi closed her eyes. "It didn't matter what happened to me."

Anger, sharp and hot, sizzled through her and with it, a tiny tempest of air swirled through the room, ruffling the clipboard on the end of the bed.

"Don't you dare say that." Tears prickled in Kate's eyes. "It does matter." She moved from the chair and perched on the edge of the bed.

"I left you."

There it was.

"And I tricked you into marking me, so we're even."

Devi's eyes snapped open. "What are you talking about?"

Shame crept hot up the back of her neck. "That night, I knew you were close to the moon, but I just wanted to be with you. It didn't matter about anything else. But when you marked me, I knew you didn't really mean it. That you wanted to leave. And I wasn't going to stop you."

"Kate."

"I'm sorry. I know we're technically mates, but I'm not going to hold you back. I never wanted that."

"I left to protect you."

"What?"

Devi fidgeted, tearing at one of the bandages on her face. "There. God. I

couldn't see a damned thing.”

“You're terrible.”

“I know.”

“So...elaborate, please?”

“You know my family history.”

“Okay. Sure. Your mom was into demons.”

“And she was killed by one. But not before she apparently bargained with one to save my life in exchange for a blood bond.”

Ice shivered beneath Kate's skin.

“A blood bond?”

“It's a long story. James and I buried that damned box. I left to protect you, but now she's back and I'm going to lose you anyway.”

“Wait. James? Who says I'm going anywhere?” Kate demanded. She took Devi's hand in hers.

“I can't lose you.”

“Then don't, you idiot.”

“We have a lot to figure out. And I'm not going to let her win.”

“One step at a time. Okay? Besides, you still have to meet the others.”

“Others?”

“The Circle. But we'll talk about that later.”

She leaned over the bed and placed a tender kiss on Devi's lips. Energy crackled around them and a moan slid from between Kate's lips.

“I'm a mess,” Devi protested.

“So am I.”

She placed a kiss on her collarbone and slid the hospital gown out of the way. Kate gazed at her lover's voluptuous body and felt a warmth trickle in her secret places. Leaning forward, she placed a kiss on the raised scar that ran along her lover's abdomen.

“See. We're magic together.”

“You're killing me.”

“Am I?” Wisps of magic trailed along Devi's skin as Kate explored her beautiful imperfections.

“You are as lovely now as you were then.”

Kate stood up and padded over to the door, locking it against wandering nurses. Visiting hours were almost over, so they didn't have long before someone would come along and try to kick her out.

Making short work of her clothes, she gently climbed onto the bed,

mindful of Devi's injuries.

"Now." Kate pressed her lips to Devi's. Kissing her softly, she edged her thighs apart and sank between them.

Their nipples touched and sparks flew as hunger grew between them.

"I need you," Devi rasped.

Kate found her lips and traced the lines of her body, stroking and healing with each caress.

Breath coming heavier, Devi sighed against her and Kate delved lower.

Lips tingling, she explored her lover's flesh. Hungry for her touch, she let her fingers wander the soft, fleshy plane of her stomach and the fine line of the scar that still remained. It was part of her. That was all. She stroked it, another branch of the road map of her life.

"I love your breasts." Kate nipped the taut pink peaks and the sensation reverberated through her body.

Devi moaned and she moved between her thighs. Thrusting her fingers into the scalding heat of her molten core, Kate stroked the spark and coaxed her into an inferno.

"Oh God. Fuck me," Devi begged, her legs splayed wide. She thrust against Kate's hand, finally surrendering to her need.

Kate slid three fingers inside of Devi's channel, stretching her wide. Juices flowing, her lover arched her back as Kate began to pummel her, tweaking her erect clit as she moved. Pinching and fondling her breasts, Kate worked down Devi's body, finally spreading her wide open. Withdrawing her hand, she blew on her moist folds causing Devi to thrash and moan.

"Goddess, bless. Don't you dare stop now." She panted.

"Do you think I would dare?" Kate whispered into the flesh of her stomach. Licking and nibbling her way past the scar, she worked her way back to Devi's mound. Placing a kiss upon the neatly trimmed triangle, she gently parted Devi's folds and began to explore her with her tongue. Licking and sucking, she pulled Devi to the edge of the bed. Sinking her tongue deep inside of her, she fucked her. Swirling wide, Kate edged her clit further toward orgasm by bumping it with her nose.

"Oh God!" Devi shrieked. Her fingers pulled at Kate's dark curls, pushing her face against her throbbing clit.

Smiling, Kate pulled back and thrust three fingers deep inside of her. Her core spasmed around her fingers, and Devi shrieked, a keening cry echoing through the hospital room.

A knocking sound at the door brought Kate out of her happy delirium.

“Hello! This door isn’t supposed to be locked.”

Three more bangs and Kate started to giggle, staggering off the bed. Between them, Devi’s wounds had almost healed and so had Kate’s.

Magic.

Goddess, she loved it. Even if it did make her want to eat an entire blackberry pie.

She would look into that. After she got them home.

“You’re awful. Gonna get me kicked out of the hospital.”

“I don’t think you need it now.” Kate reached for her clothes, but wasn’t fast enough.

The doorknob rattled and an angry nurse burst inside.

“What the...”

Kate couldn’t hold it inside anymore. She snort laughed and let the sheet fall as the nurse shrieked and called for backup.

“Well, I guess you’re staying at my place.”

“Do I get the spare room?”

“Not on your life.” Kate leaned in and kissed her. “But I think we’re going to have to find you some pants.”

Thank you for reading!

For more from The Silver Circle Witches, read [Blue Moon Rising](#), Book Two now!

Turn the page for a preview from Blue Moon Rising...

PREVIEW



LUCIA BELLFLOWER LET THE DOOR TO THE KITCHEN SWING SHUT BEHIND HER, the noise of the bar fading into the chirping of crickets and other denizens of the night. Rain had started misting down, bringing her customers inside from the lakeside deck, and she figured she might as well get some of the trash out while there was a lull and it wasn't raining too hard.

She rolled the garbage can toward the dumpster, neatly hidden behind a wooden fence well covered with morning glory.

Her boots crunched along the walkway, the thump and bump of the trash bin wheels along the uneven path echoing in the near silence. It was a nice breather from the din inside, and she let the damp night sink into her soul.

Water was her element, and she didn't mind the rain. If anything, being out in it was refreshing, especially since she'd gotten off the call with the local coven.

"Idiots." She shook her head, using her irritation to fuel her movements. The scent of greasy, congealed food and heavy odor of trash hung in the air as she tossed the bags into the dumpster and slammed the lid shut.

Something was wrong in Bixby, but not one of the elders seemed to be lifting a fingernail to find out what it was and that just pissed her the hell off.

Witches had gone missing and there had been no explanation. It had been embarrassing to say the least when the Silver Circle girls had come in for their monthly bitch session and she couldn't tell them more than that.

Be careful.

Stay away from the swamp.

Watch your back.

She snorted, jerking the can back toward the path. Every witch in town

knew the drill. The swamp was off limits. Hell, she could see it across the lake every day of her life.

Against her better judgment, she turned to look at the sinister form of trees. The last time she'd gone there, she'd been a teenager looking for a good time at one of the bonfires the local human kids liked to indulge in. Booze, drugs, magical shenanigans, and a whole lot of groping ran rampant.

It was also the night her mother vanished amid another cluster of disappearances. The coven hadn't had any answers for her then, either.

She shook her head, shame heating her cheeks.

Her mother would have never gone into the swamp if she hadn't been there. If she hadn't been so stubborn, thinking she knew better.

Rolling the wheely can as it wobbled into an uneven spot on the path hidden by a puddle, she cursed, righting it.

Thinking about her mother wasn't a productive way to spend the few quiet moments she would have but she couldn't help the creeping sense of déjà vu when she clicked off the news.

Murders.

Disappearances.

That damned swamp.

Fifteen years and still not one clue as to where she'd gone.

But when she turned her gaze back toward the dark, she could swear she could hear something calling to her from beneath the waves.

A gurgle.

A plea.

Her task abandoned, she took a step toward the water and cocked her head, listening.

The energy was off. It had been for days, now. Last night had been the worst of it so far, but she refused to believe that was the start and end of it. Dark magic roamed the streets and witches were dying.

The questions was, what could she do about it?

Nothing seemed off in her clientele. Not even the shifters and their usual boisterous nature. Even Nina, one of the nurses in the neighboring town had popped in for a pint of O Negative with one of her fangy buddies and all seemed right with the world.

So, what the fuck was going on?

One thing she did know... someone knew something and she was damned well going to find out what it was.

A loud slam of a door snapped her out of her reverie. It didn't serve her well to stay out here alone. Tossing the garbage into the dumpster, she headed back into the noisy din of the bar, the long shadows of the trees looking on.

Read [Blue Moon Rising](#) now at your favorite online retailer.

Don't forget to keep turning the pages to follow Erzabet and Gina as they team up to bring you many more delicious paranormal romance books in 2023 and check out their incredible back list!

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ABOUT GINA KINCADE

USA Today Bestselling Author Gina Kincade spends her days tapping away at a keyboard, through blood, sweat, and often many tears, crafting steamy paranormal romances filled with shifters and vampires, along with witchy urban fantasy tales in magical worlds she hopes her readers yearn to crawl into.

A busy mom of three, she loves healthy home cooking, gardening, warm beaches, fast cars, and horseback riding.

Ms. Kincade's life is full, time is never on her side, and she wouldn't change a moment of it!

Find more from Gina at: <https://www.ginakincade.com/>

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ABOUT ERZABET BISHOP

Erzabet Bishop is a USA Today bestselling and award-winning author of over forty paranormal and contemporary romance books. She lives in Houston, Texas, and when she isn't writing about sexy shifters or voluptuous heroines, she enjoys playing in local bookstores and watching movies with her husband and furry kids.

GODDESS OF MISCHIEF



A SAPPHIC URBAN FANTASY ROMANCE

CAILEE FRANCIS

Goddess of Mischief: A Sapphic Urban Fantasy Romance © 2023 Cailee Francis
Proofread by: Pair of Nines

GODDESS OF MISCHIEF

Pursued by angels for a crime she didn't commit.

Goddess turned muse Melinda Grace is on the run. She realises after the death of her client — renowned sculptor, Misha Drake — that she's the only likely suspect. Drake wasn't just murdered — his soul was ripped apart, and only an enormously powerful being could've killed him. Facing the prospect of hiding out indefinitely or handing herself over, Melinda also feels driven to solve the crime.

Seraphim Aurelia is under orders to work with the Archangel Raphael in bringing Drake's killer to justice. Part of her mandate is to pursue the absent goddess Melinda, who is now the prime suspect in the case. This brings her to the city of New York — a hub for the supernatural community — and on course to cross paths with the runaway goddess.

She isn't sure what she'll find, but she couldn't have expected to fall in love.

Goddess of Mischief is a F/F urban fantasy romance novella that contains steamy, adult content.

PROLOGUE



AN UNFATHOMABLE CRIME



IF THERE WAS A HUB FOR SUPERNATURAL LIFE IN AMERICA, IT WAS IN NEW YORK CITY. Much of the population was human, but many beings there weren't. Ancient gods and goddesses from known and long-forgotten pantheons walked the streets, and other supernatural beings had long called the city home.

Shifters prowled the shadows, angels kept a low profile, and demons were spoken of in hushed whispers. Vampires weren't real, but they served as a reminder of the kind of chaotic power that could exist, and they made for good movies.

On this night, the city sky lit up with a crackling burst of otherworldly energy. Most people didn't notice it, but it was immediately sensed by the angelic sentinels, ever-vigilant for signs of magic. It was unmistakably powerful and dangerous.

The scene in the mortal world told the terrible truth: renowned sculptor Misha Drake's body lay motionless in his art studio, his soul missing from its earthly shell.

It had been stripped from his body as if wiped clean from the face of reality. He was simply gone, and the world was a lesser place for it. It was also far less safe, because few beings possessed the power or the desire to kill in such a permanent manner. It was a crime against existence.

AURELIA



THE GREAT HALL OF LIGHT LIVED UP TO ITS NAME. SUNLIGHT STREAMED through its multi-colored windows, which showed the tenets of the angelic hierarchy in stained glass for all to see. This was a place of justice, duty and truth, and the figures in those high windows were the epitome of service for a just cause.

I'd been summoned here, which was a rarity, as it was the main chamber where the council conducted matters of business and judicial trials. The Great Hall of Light also served as a war room on the rare occasion it was needed.

"Aurelia," a female angel stated as she strode toward me. Her name was Joanne. "Thank goodness you're here."

I recognized her at once, as I knew her well. Joanne's hair was black with spiral curls, while her wings were a softer pastel gray. She was older than me in living years, but physically we looked almost the same age. She'd helped to train and mentor me, and now that I was fully qualified, she was my superior.

"Yes, ma'am. What's happened?" I asked in a soft tone.

I could hear the urge to please in my own voice, but working with her was typically my way of helping people in the world below.

"A terrible crime has been committed against a renowned sculptor. A man by the name of Misha Drake."

"His name sounds familiar," I replied as I tried to recall how I knew him. Or more precisely, how I'd heard of him before. I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

"He was being counseled and inspired by the muse, Melinda Grace. She too is missing, though we're certain her spirit lives on in the mortal sphere below. Misha Drake's soul is gone. Someone has unmade him."

My eyes widened in shock. Unmade him? It was the vilest of crimes. Murder was awful, though not unheard of, but to completely remove one's soul from existence? There could arguably be no greater tragedy. Only a monster would commit such a crime, and few possessed the raw power needed.

"You're here to investigate his disappearance," Joanne explained, her voice heavy with emotion. "We want you to track down the muse and old-world goddess Melinda, and bring her back to heaven for judgment. We will ascertain her guilt at that time."

I shook my head, because I didn't quite understand.

"Do you believe she's responsible?"

I found it hard to believe a goddess who now served heaven, and whose sacred duty was to inspire and guide a rare talent, could commit such a heinous crime. I didn't know her well, but I'd seen her before in the heavenly gatherings. She hadn't seemed the type to do this. Was I such a poor judge of character, or had something changed?

"At the moment, we have no other suspects. Don't let any fondness you possess for this muse convince you that she's not dangerous. She could be, and if you're to stay safe, you must not forget it. A dark force is undoubtedly responsible for Misha's passing, and we need your help."

"Why me?" I asked. It seemed a strange question to ask when there were larger matters at stake. It just wasn't lost on me that there were better-qualified angels than myself, and those with more experience in investigating the crimes of the mortal sphere.

"You were suggested for the task by a higher authority. That in itself should give you faith that you are suitably chosen for the job. You won't be working alone."

"Oh?" I asked, wondering who would be joining me. I wondered if it would be one of the superior angels present.

"You will meet with the archangel Raphael. He's already on the ground, and understands the terrain, so to speak."

"An archangel?" I asked, my eyebrows rising. "I assume I'll be assisting him then, and not the other way around?"

"Yes, the archangel," Joanne replied. "No, he won't have authority in the case, if that is what you mean. He has his orders while you will investigate on our behalf. Neither of you has jurisdiction, Aurelia. You are both independent agents, in a manner of speaking, serving the interests of heaven in different

ways."

"But with the same aim in mind?" I asked.

"In a broad sense, yes." Joanne smiled.

"Is Raphael not a healer?" I asked as my memories of him returned. Why would a healer be helping me investigate these crimes?

"Indeed he is," another angel replied. I recognized him as the angel Koriel. Like Melinda, he had been one of the old gods, before the uh... change in management. It had happened hundreds of years ago, before my time, but no one truly forgot about it, least of all those whose position had changed. Some served the angelic hierarchy, as Koriel did, and others simply refused to this day.



I WASN'T sure how long I'd be on Earth, but I knew my investigation could take a while. I was given a small, white card with an address on it, so I'd have somewhere to stay.

As an angel, I didn't need as much sleep as mortals did, but I would need somewhere to rest, retreat to and think.

I'd never been fond of heights, even when I was a human woman. That had been over four decades ago. While it was widely believed among humanity that angels were a separate race — and in many cases that was true — their ranks had been expanded to include humans, immortals and former pagan gods, as the population on Earth and the stakes for the future of all beings had grown.

I'd been back to New York many times, but the sights from high above still made me gasp with awe and my stomach flip with terror. I didn't have to worry about being seen, either by people or technology, as I made myself intangible until I set down in a back alley in Manhattan. There was no sign of anyone watching, though I knew people could walk past at any time.

I shifted my appearance into modern human female attire — though I kept my wings tucked close against my back. They were still there, of course, but they were invisible and intangible to most beings.

The smell of damp concrete and car exhaust was thick in the air, and the city hummed around me, unaware of my presence... or so I hoped.

I had no idea what I would find here, or how exactly I would use my

angelic powers to discover the truth. Perhaps it was my mind, or more precisely my investigative abilities I would need, and not my powers themselves.

I closed my eyes, feeling the energy around me with every breath. I could feel subtle fluctuations in the air — a kind of magical reverberation like a distant echo that seemed to be coming from somewhere nearby. I opened my eyes and focused on this sensation, searching for its source. As if responding to my presence, it grew stronger until an unmistakable aura of power seemed to pass through me.

The streetlights seemed brighter than before and the shadows darker as I slowly walked towards it, drawn by an invisible magnetism that beckoned me closer. As I walked along the streets, there were people bustling about, their faces a mix of joy, sorrow, and determination.

As I stepped into a small park less than a block in size, my sense of dread increased while a sense of familiarity grew within me.

The trees rustled softly as if they were whispering secrets only I could hear. The air felt alive and charged with magic, electricity singing along my skin. A figure appeared before me, tall and stately with his wings stretched out behind him — none other than the archangel Raphael himself.

Most mortals wouldn't have seen his wings, but to me, they glistened with threads of gold, and confirmed what I already knew. Only an archangel could possess wings so striking in their beauty and strength.

His skin was dark like ebony, yet radiant from within. His brown eyes showed great kindness. They were the eyes of a healer — of the heart, body and the world.

"Greetings, Aurelia," he said in his rich voice as he bowed his head ever so slightly in respect. "I have been tasked by heaven to work with you on our mission."

His piercing gaze never wavered from mine as he spoke. Perhaps he was seeking to understand me and why I'd been assigned to the job. I wasn't sure about that myself. I was concerned I didn't have enough experience, and I didn't want to fail in my task. It felt like a test, and I wondered if it might be. Was I ready for it? I felt that I shouldn't let my thoughts about it hold me back in any way. After all, Misha Drake deserved justice.

"It's a pleasure to meet you properly," I said as I inclined my head respectfully to him in return. "What I mean is — I know I've seen you before, but I don't think we've ever met."

He smiled at that.

"I would remember if we had," he said simply. "Would you like to visit the crime scene, or would you prefer some time to get situated?"

I'd already made up my mind on the way down to the city. "I think we're best visiting the crime scene as soon as possible, before too much evidence is removed. Have you already been there?"

"I've walked through the scene, yes. The last I saw, it hadn't yet been discovered by the police. I would suggest we make ourselves invisible before making our approach, lest we become suspects ourselves."

I nodded silently as I thought it over. I wondered at the risk of becoming a victim and not just a suspect. Angels were typically immortal — in a manner of speaking. But angels could still be killed in a very narrow range of ways. One of those was by having their soul destroyed, which sounded as though it was what had happened to Misha Drake — the poor guy. I didn't want the same thing happening to either Raphael or myself. After all, the perpetrator was still out there.

"I'm ready to go when you are," I replied.

I glanced around, as there was a small group of people nearby in the park. Raphael obviously caught on that we couldn't just become invisible here, and when he walked over toward the trees, I followed.

When we stood beneath the branches, out of sight from onlookers, he made himself invisible and intangible, and I followed suit.

We could still sense one another, but he was hard to see, even to my eyes. Almost like a ghost. I wondered if I appeared the same to him, or if his power and insight as an archangel allowed him to see more than I could.

We didn't teleport, we flew. It felt good to unleash my wings, and the air was cool and refreshing as we glided over the city. My fear of heights was triggered, but Raphael kept us low enough to the ground that it wasn't as bad as the descent from heaven had been.

I already knew the crime scene was in Misha Drake's studio, and Raphael and I hovered above the building so we could get a good view of it and its small back yard. When we set down outside the back door, I was glad to be standing on solid ground again.

Raphael walked straight through the door in front of me, and I followed.

The air in the studio was cold, with an odd smell that I couldn't quite place. The walls were lined with sculptures of all shapes and sizes, some made from materials I'd never seen before. Some kind of stone, perhaps?

There was a window at the back of the room, but it was covered with thick curtains. In the center of the room was a large wooden table piled high with tools and pieces of metal and stone. On one side was a doorway leading to what appeared to be Misha's living space, but there were no signs of life coming from that area.

On the floor near one wall lay Misha Drake's body. His eyes were closed, his face peaceful as if he were merely sleeping. But I knew better — his soul had been ripped away from his body, leaving him in this state.

His clothes were in disarray, as if he had tried to struggle before succumbing to death. I felt my stomach turn, and my heart ached at the sight of him. I don't think his loss had truly struck me until this moment. It was easy to discuss a murder in theory, but heartbreaking to see the results of it firsthand.

Raphael knelt down beside the body and examined it closely. He seemed to be searching for something, so I stayed quiet and watched. After a few moments, he stood up and said, "There are signs of a struggle here. It appears that Misha Drake was attacked by someone with supernatural strength."

He walked around the room, studying everything carefully. He pointed out where furniture had been knocked over, books thrown from shelves, and pieces of art broken on the floor.

Then Raphael noticed something on one of the walls — a small symbol carved into it near the window. It looked like some kind of rune or sigil, but I didn't recognize it. Its shape reminded me of an hourglass, but with a jagged line that ran through it.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked me as he ran his finger over the runic carving.

"No," I replied. "But maybe we can find out who did this if we can figure out what this symbol means."

Raphael nodded in agreement and then began to search for more clues around the studio. Meanwhile, I studied the symbol more carefully. I pulled out my phone and took a photograph of it, as well as several other places in the room. I avoided photographing the body. While I had an enhanced memory for detail, it didn't hurt to have a visual record. It would make it easier to discuss it with others.

I discovered another symbol on the wall beneath Misha's work bench. Raphael found another on the ceiling. Both of the symbols were the same as the first one we'd found.

"I have to wonder if Misha might've carved these symbols in his home. Perhaps as part of some kind of protection spell," I surmised.

"That's possible," the archangel replied. "If he did, I wonder if it was for his general protection or if it was because he knew someone was coming for him."

"It's hard to say. I'd be inclined to think general protection. If he was anticipating an attack, you would expect to see more weapons and better defenses."

"I have some contacts who might be able to tell us more," Raphael said.

We shifted furniture and investigated trinkets, taking note of anything out of place or unusual. It didn't take long before we found something else — a scrap of fabric tucked into one corner near Misha's body.

It appeared to be made of a material that was beyond the mundane — not quite cloth but not metal either. Even stranger was its color, which seemed to swirl and change as it moved. It wasn't merely reflecting the colors in the environment.

Raphael picked up the scrap with one finger and held it closer to his face, examining it intently with his eyes closed, as if he were trying to get a better sense of it. After a few moments, he opened his eyes and said softly, "This fabric is imbued with angelic power."

My breath caught in my throat as a realization dawned on me: this could be evidence suggesting an angelic murderer.

"The question is whether someone wearing this attacked him or if something else happened here. It could have been planted so we'd form the wrong assumption," I said.

"I fear that's likely," Raphael replied as he turned it over in his fingers. "If it was planted, it was a reckless choice. If the police had found this, it would've raised questions about its supernatural origins. It isn't any normal cloth."

"We're already looking for Melinda. It seems strange that the killer would plant this when we have a suspect in mind."

"You're forgetting that they don't know that," Raphael said. "Maybe they weren't sure we'd suspect Melinda, or it might've been Melinda who planted this, in the hope we'd suspect someone else. Still, we shouldn't assume this isn't genuine, though it isn't the angelic way to commit a crime of this magnitude."

"Could there be any fallen angels in New York City? Would anyone

know?"

Raphael glanced at me, as though studying my expression, but he didn't answer me. I had to wonder why.

MELINDA



THE HOUR WAS LATE AND THE RAIN WAS PELTING DOWN. I PULLED MY HOOD forward and hurried through the crowded Manhattan streets.

They were coming for me. They had to be. It didn't matter that I wasn't guilty. That I hadn't been the one to kill Misha Drake. I was the logical suspect, unless or until they had proof otherwise. How many supernatural beings in the city of New York had the power to destroy the soul of another, and how many had known the victim? I was guessing the number was close to one.

Only it wasn't one, because I wasn't the one who did it. There had to be someone else, but I had no idea who it could be.

I had to find Misha's murderer before the cavalry did, or let them find me, because I had to prove my innocence. As much as I trusted the angelic hierarchy to be thorough, I couldn't trust them to care as much about finding the truth and proving my innocence as I could. After all, my freedom was at stake. It was why I ran after finding his body, even though it made me look guilty. I was sure they'd have arrested me otherwise.

But poor Misha. I knew him well, and I cared about him. The bile rose in my throat at the thought of what they'd done to him. He was incredibly talented, and inspiring him with my muse magic had been an honor. I'd supported him financially as a patron as well — that was the part he knew about.

It was fascinating and rewarding watching his creations come to life, and Lucia — oh, she'd be heartbroken. She was a lovely young brunette with brown eyes. Misha had been dating her for a matter of months, and they were so in love, they'd talked about getting married. He'd told me all about her

with a smile on his face. When they killed him and ripped away his soul, they broke more than Lucia's heart — they also broke mine.

I dashed away tears as I entered a tall white building with grubby glass double doors. They really needed a good cleaning. Maybe the rain would help. This really wasn't one of the better hotels, but I was hoping not to be noticed, and just needed somewhere safe to escape to for a while. I couldn't risk going back to my home in the city, so I was making do with what I had on me, a magically-altered credit card, and several bags of shopping I'd picked up en route. I didn't have a vehicle, but in Manhattan, I didn't need one.

An older man with gray hair and a mustache looked up from the hotel desk as I approached.

"Good evening. Can I help you?"

I gave him a polite smile, and handed over my enchanted credit card. It wasn't just the name on the front that was altered, but the account the money would be drawn from. The less said about that, the better.

"Yes, I'd like a room please."

He nodded and began tapping on his keyboard. "Do you have any ID?"

I did, but not one that would match the name on my credit card. I hadn't planned this far ahead, so had nothing prepared.

"Uh, not really," I said. "Does my credit card count?"

Lucky for me, he didn't press the matter and handed me a key with a smile.

"Room number 14 — enjoy your stay."

He waved me on, as though he couldn't wait to be alone again in the foyer.

As soon as I was in my room, I closed the door behind me and glanced around. It was small and sparsely furnished, and it felt private — perfect for what I needed it to be: somewhere I could lay low for a while and figure out my next move.

I pulled off my hoodie, which was damp from the rain, and sat down on the bed with my shopping bags. One had food and bottles of drink, and I set that aside for later. The others contained magic supplies I would need if the angelic hierarchy wasn't going to find me. I lifted out a half dozen white pillar candles, along with essential oils including lavender and freesia, crystals of various colors — amethyst being predominant — plus herbs including white sage. Sage was typically used for cleansing an area, and it

was always wise to do so before casting an enchantment of this sort to be safe.

Hotel rooms typically have a lot of guests staying in them on a daily basis, and people leave imprints on the areas where they've been, especially during emotional times. I didn't want those imprints or any spirits interfering with what I had in mind. I would typically use incense sticks too, but the sage would be smoky enough. I didn't want to trigger the fire alarms. I opened the window wide, and got to work smudging — or in other words, cleansing the area.

The ritual took almost twenty minutes, but soon the candles were lit and I began the chant. I'd chosen the words for their protective power, and also their ability to conceal me from any prying eyes or minds seeking out my location or identity.

When done correctly, they created a spiritual barrier that no beings could easily see through, and their senses should slide past me, as though there was nothing of interest in the area. There was no easy way to be sure it was working, but I trusted in the magic, as my worshippers had once used it — as few and far between as they might've been. That was back when I was still the Goddess of Mischief.

Those had been fun times. I smiled at my memories of all the crazy shit I got up to, though I still mourned the change in the status quo. It was a different world now, and I'd found my place in it... for a while. Now, I was having doubts because I was sure the angelic hierarchy wouldn't trust me. The old rift between the angels and the gods still hadn't mended, and doubts and rivalries were common.

Perhaps it was time I found a way to fall back on my old ways and indulge in some mischief once again. Hiding out in a dank hotel wouldn't be a lasting solution. I wanted some sleep, a meal and time to strategize. I needed to find out who was behind Misha's death, and the only way I could do that was to go out and investigate.

It might be possible to fashion a talisman to hide my presence after leaving the hotel. I would need to tinker with the resources at my disposal, but I was sure I could do it. It could be a portable version of the spell I'd cast on my hotel room.



SIX HOURS LATER, I'd fashioned a simple safety pin I'd found in the corner of the room into a talisman decorated with dangling crystal shards. Crystals could be used to store, focus and amplify energies, and I'd managed to imbue these with enough power to hide my aura, so long as I wore the pin. My aura was not as simple to hide as a human's, but the talisman should work all the same.

I pinned on the talisman before leaving my hotel room, feeling a little better prepared for what I was about to do. I felt eyes on me as I walked. It was comforting in a way, as I didn't fear most people. I knew with the forces at work, it was unlikely any mortal, friendly or otherwise, would be in a position to tip the balance.

I had no idea what exactly I was looking for, but I knew I couldn't risk returning to Misha's home. I'd been in the city for long enough to have gained a number of acquaintances. There was a bar called Enchant that catered to a supernatural clientele, and I knew I could find help there, but it was too public to walk in the main door when my freedom was at stake. I had a better idea on how to approach it.

AURELIA



THERE WERE POLICE CARS PARKED OUTSIDE MISHA'S HOME AND STUDIO. A forensics team stood outside with their gear, waiting to access the crime scene. Misha's body had been found by the cleaning staff, and the police had launched a criminal investigation.

Raphael and I interviewed the cleaners in the guise of detectives. We also spoke to Misha's neighbors. It was a semi-commercial area, and there was a mixture of houses, apartments and several small shops. We didn't have any trouble convincing the police that we were detectives, but that was mainly down to Raphael's influence. He was skilled at convincing others that we were meant to be there.

It wasn't long after that Misha's girlfriend, Lucia, turned up on the scene. She mustn't have been notified of his death, as she appeared to find out in person outside his studio. I don't think I've ever seen anyone so devastated before. As her tears fell, I knew it wasn't the time to talk with her.

This case had been confronting in ways I hadn't expected. Maybe I'd been away from the mortal world for too long. There was a lot more to deal with than in heaven, and the emotional weight of the crime and its impact on others shocked me to the core. I did my best to remain professional, outwardly unemotional and on task, but it was challenging.

I was impressed with Raphael's cool resolve, and the way he approached the investigation with compassion and a logical mind. It made him an asset, as I felt like I wasn't qualified enough to have the investigative insights he did. Maybe I was wrong about that, but I was normally a teacher and guide in heaven. It wasn't often I was called on for a duty like this one.

With the day winding down, Raphael suggested we find a place to rest

and review what we'd learned. I pulled out the card I'd been given, with an address where I could stay. Then it hit me, the perfect spot — Enchant, a bar I knew of that specialized in catering to supernatural beings. I felt like unwinding in a social atmosphere would serve us better than speaking alone.

There were beings with different abilities present in the kind of establishment Enchant provided, so there was always the possibility of encountering someone who might be able to help us with the case. I hadn't been told to keep the investigation fully secret, so I reserved the right to discuss the case with others to a limited extent if it served our interests.

Raphael nodded in agreement as I suggested Enchant for our evening plans.

"Let's head over," he said, guiding me toward a nearby alley.

Once there, we changed form and rendered ourselves invisible. The flight to Enchant only took a matter of minutes. It would've been quicker if I hadn't forgotten the way.

It looked just as I remembered it — a two-story building with several trees out front, which offered a measure of privacy.

When we made our way inside, the smell of drink was strong. The walls were painted black with purple accents, and there were runic symbols etched into the fixtures. They were different from those we'd found in Misha's home, and yet there were similarities in how they'd been used. The bar area glowed with an eerie blue light, and somehow seemed inviting despite its darkness.

I glanced Raphael's way — his angelic aura was much more subdued now than when I'd first met him. "I've heard there's an enchantment around the building that makes non-magical humans avoid the place. It seems to be working."

Candles cast a gentle glow over tables filled with guests from many supernatural walks of life, whereas some were human magic users. I could feel the energy radiating from them that set them apart from non-magic users. The bar itself was well-stocked with drinks both magical and mundane; it seemed like they had a choice for every taste here.

We each ordered drinks and found ourselves two seats at an empty table in the corner, away from prying eyes. There, Raphael could easily blend into the shadows while we kept watch over everyone around us.

"Have you been here before?" I asked him.

He nodded. "I've known the bar owner for years. Jacob and I go back a long way, and I drop in sometimes. It was a good thought, coming here. I'll

keep an eye out for anyone I know who might be able to help us."

I was sure he meant from a magical standpoint, but the means didn't really matter so much as the goal.

I sipped my drink as I soaked up the atmosphere and listened to the music, which played over speakers in the bar. It was a heavy kind of rock, blended with metal, and differed wildly from the music I most often heard in heaven. It was closer to the music I'd listened to as a human.

As I was contemplating the music, I noticed a man in the corner who seemed to be watching us. When he spotted me looking at him, he averted his gaze and moved further away from our table.

"Someone's taken an interest in us," I told Raphael as I glanced in the stranger's direction.

"That's Kallen. He's a telepath, and I'm sure he had an interesting time trying and failing to read our minds," Raphael said. "Stay here. I'll have a word with him."

As Raphael left the table and guided Kallen outside to talk, I tried not to look awkward on my own.

The shifters over by the bar glanced my way, but I pretended I didn't notice. I paid attention to the bartender, who Raphael said he knew. That was if it was the same bartender. The man had a head of wild silver hair and a care-worn face; his eyes glinted with an inner knowledge that only those who've seen too much can have. After what I'd seen today, I could identify.

He looked up from polishing a glass and gave me a nod before turning his attention back to his task. I watched him for a few moments longer, my mind slowly piecing together snatches of conversation from all around me — stories of lost loves, forgotten places, and grand adventures.

This was what it meant to be alive in the mortal world — to be surrounded by beauty and mystery, both real and imagined, mixed inexorably with the mundane. It was intoxicating to me, even without the drinks that flowed freely here at Enchant.

Raphael returned to the table a few minutes later with Kallen in tow. Kallen was a tall, slender man with spiky white hair and striking silver eyes. He wore a dark-colored cloak that matched his somber expression.

"Kallen," I said, my gaze flicking between him and Raphael.

Raphael nodded. "He knew Misha."

Kallen sat down with us and I could feel the energy radiating off him like a tangible thing — it was electric and intense.

He kept his gaze on me as he spoke. "I knew Misha for many years," he said quietly. "He was troubled, but I never expected something like this would happen to him."

"Why was he troubled?" Raphael asked before finishing his drink and setting the glass down in front of him.

"He had a history that he feared would come back to haunt him," Kallen explained. "I trust you know some of it already?"

I traded glances with Raphael and he replied, "Not especially."

"I have a suspicion," I admitted. "It seems unlikely that he was human, given the company he kept. I could be wrong, of course."

"You're not wrong," Kallen replied. "Please, keep going. I'm curious to see what you've deduced."

I thought about continuing, but I wasn't ready to reveal my innermost thoughts, because the nature of the evidence we found contributed to the conclusion I'd drawn.

"I'm still considering it," I replied.

I had no obligation to tell Kallen anything that I'd learned. If anything, I'd already said too much, so I returned to my drink and let the conversation flow to other matters.

It did, though I noticed Kallen watching me. I realized it must've been a curiosity for him to be there with angels withholding information and whose minds he couldn't read. It might have even been frustrating.

"I'll help you both if I can, but it's important to me that I know what happened to Misha, and who murdered him. He was a friend, you see, and it saddens me that he might've suffered."

I wondered how much Raphael had already told him about Misha's death and the investigation.

"Are you sure there is no way to retrieve his soul?" Kallen asked.

"If time travel was possible, there might be, but unfortunately it's beyond the realm of us all. I cannot speak for the Powers that Be, but it isn't something I've ever seen on this world or any other."

"I understand," Kallen replied. There was a palpable sadness in his eyes.

I glanced away, giving him a moment of privacy. I wished there was more I could do. Perhaps justice would offer some measure of comfort to him.

"We're searching for a young woman named Melinda. She was Misha's patron and has been difficult to locate." Raphael glanced Kallen's way.

"Goddess of Chaos and Mischief Melinda? You can't think—?" Kallen left the question hanging.

"We need to speak with her and find out what she knows. Can you tell if anyone else here has seen her recently?"

"It would be inappropriate to pry into their minds without their consent," Kallen said. "So no, I'm not going to do that. Besides, I saw her not half an hour ago. I don't know where she went, but she was here before you arrived."

Startled, Raphael rose to his feet, and I caught his glass before he knocked it over. It had little drink left in it, aside from blocks of melting ice.

"Show us where," Raphael demanded.

Kallen immediately led the way, and we followed, close on his heels.

A doorway led to the games room, where a billiard table took precedence. There were couches on either side, a dartboard on the wall, and a large television set. The room was empty, but another doorway was on the opposite side of it.

We walked through and followed the corridor into the bowels of Enchant. The corridor took us through to the kitchen, while another corridor branching off led to another bar room. Stairs led down to the basement, and another flight went upstairs.

The kitchen had a single member of staff working — a man with sandy blond hair who appeared to be in his thirties. I could sense the energies from him, and I knew he was more than mortal. He felt like a shifter to me, as his form felt fluid. Changeable. He wasn't radiating any form of aggression, merely confusion about why we were there.

Raphael summoned a picture of Melinda so the staff member could see it.

"Have you seen this woman?" he asked, his voice firm but direct.

The man shook his head and went back to his cooking. Raphael glanced my way, and then had a look out the kitchen door before leaving the room.

I followed. We checked the basement, which contained little more than supplies of food and drink, and checked out the other bar room after that. It wasn't in use, but it had two doors leading out — one side door that was an exit, and a beer garden out the back. I reasoned that this bar room was probably used for private functions and gatherings.

By the time we checked out the beer garden, Raphael's hope appeared to be dwindling. There was a tall gate at the very back of the seating area. I opened it, and saw that it led out into an alley. There was no one there. Only a cat was out in the darkness, and its eyes reflected the light as it turned and

darted away.

"It's not her," Raphael murmured, as if to reassure himself.

It reminded me that Melinda had once been capable of shapeshifting, but she'd given up that power when she'd taken on a role with the angelic hierarchy. I wondered what that was like, having your natural abilities controlled, and if it had played a role in the path she'd taken. That was, if she had anything to do with this crime.

It was a rule of the angelic hierarchy that no being in its ranks could possess greater power than an archangel. In the mortal world, there were still some beings who did — most of them were gods. Some angels feared them and others respected them. Those beings were made aware that if they broke the rules of the new order, justice would find them swiftly. I wasn't sure how powerful Melinda had been before, but she must've been strong with magic. Some of her powers wouldn't have been locked away otherwise.

Melinda had been one of the gods on the angelic hierarchy's radar, so to speak. After Loki's untimely demise, she became the Goddess of Mischief and inherited his powers. That didn't mean she knew how to use them fully, even now, but she possessed the potential. The day she chose to join the angelic hierarchy's ranks eased many minds. Some angels might've doubted her now because they equated mischief with chaos.

I wasn't sure I agreed with the status quo in its entirety, but it brought a sense of order and peace to the world. It enabled me to walk again among the living and influence the future of mankind. It wasn't a perfect situation, but it was a good trade-off. My loyalty was with the angelic hierarchy, but I kept an open mind, you could say. I hadn't judged Melinda guilty just yet. I wanted to hear what she had to say once we caught up with her. It wasn't a matter of if, but when.

"She must be hiding her aura," I told Raphael, as we walked back toward the bar. "If she has a ward in place, do you think Kallen will be able to cut through it?"

"I hope so," Raphael replied. "I've been trying without success. Kallen's telepathy reaches people in a different way from my own. Have you tried?"

"I've been trying a little, and so far I haven't detected her," I replied.

"That isn't surprising. I believe she may have chosen a ward that's particularly hard for angels to break through. Let's check upstairs. I want to talk to everyone who came into contact with her here."

"She's looking for help," I mused aloud as I climbed the stairs behind

Raphael.

"I would say that's likely. I think she's on the run from us... or if she isn't responsible, then it's from the killer."

MELINDA



"YOU'VE TAKEN AN AWFUL CHANCE COMING HERE, MELINDA. I KNOW WHO'S searching for you."

I could see the concern in Riga's eyes. The elderly woman stepped past me to the back door of Enchant and opened it.

Her hair was gray and curly, and she looked small and frail compared to her younger years. I knew she was a powerful witch, and that hadn't changed as she'd aged. She was more experienced with wards and spells than any human I'd ever known.

I followed her outside into the beer garden. The paved area was filled with patches of light and shadow. It wasn't dark enough to disguise my identity, but the fence provided enough privacy that I felt safer here.

Riga looked me up and down before she spoke again. "You know why they're after you?"

"I do," I said, my voice soft. "But I'm not the one responsible for what happened."

"It doesn't matter," Riga said, her voice grave. "They suspect you and they won't stop until they take you into custody. Did you see it happen?"

It was something I didn't like thinking about. I shook my head, and technically my response was true, but I'd sensed it. I'd felt it, and I'd never be able to wash that feeling away.

We both knew that I needed help if I was going to evade those after me. Who could possibly help me? I wouldn't have come to see Riga if I didn't feel she could. I just wasn't sure how.

Riga lived on the premises of Enchant, and that gave the building certain protections other places didn't have. She was in her late-eighties now, so no

spring chicken. She was also the closest thing I had to a friend. I'd known her since my days as the Goddess of Mischief, and when she looked as young as I did now. She was one of the few who had supported my decision to join the angelic hierarchy, though I still wondered why.

"Come now," Riga said, her voice gentle yet firm. "We need to come up with a plan."

Riga gestured for me to take a seat at one of the tables in the garden, and gave me a reassuring smile. "If we're going to make a plan with any hope of success, we'll need a pot of tea."

"Do you want me to—" I asked.

"I've got this."

As she went off to have it made for her by the kitchen staff, I waited patiently for her to return. It was almost like a ritual for us, and Riga was like family.

While she was gone, I let my mind wander and tried to clear my head. I closed my eyes and took in several deep breaths in meditation.

As much as I wanted freedom from this situation, I also wanted justice for Misha. His killer was trying to frame me, or at least taking advantage of my proximity as a potential suspect. Did they want to kill me though or drive me into the path of my angelic pursuers?

Riga returned more quickly than I'd expected, with surprisingly empty hands.

"Two angels just arrived at the bar, as happy as you please. It might be time to get going, Melinda. You don't want them picking up your scent. That pin you're wearing is only going to carry you so far. Would you like me to meet you somewhere? I could make you a more effective pin..."

I shook my head. "I'll call you," I told her. "Thanks for warning me."

"What else am I going to do? Hand you over? Get going."

With a thankful smile, I opened the gate and hurried away into the night.

My heart raced at the realization that the angels were so close. This wasn't going to work. Sooner or later, they would catch up with me. Perhaps I could set a trap for the killer and lead them into the angels' path instead, but I didn't want any harm to come to my angelic pursuers. For all I knew, that might happen.

They needed to know that I wasn't the one responsible, but how could I tell them? And then it hit me. I needed to send them information, telling them my side of the story without risking a direct confrontation.

I was something of an angel now, but I was still a goddess at heart. I had powers that could be used for protection, and if I could find some way to tell them my side of the story, then maybe they would believe me.

It occurred to me that I didn't need to use magic for this. Technology could be an effective stand-in — email, for instance, or I could just ask someone to deliver a message to them. I decided that it was what I needed to do. I could call Riga and she would undoubtedly do it for me. I just wanted to avoid her getting into any difficulties.

I wouldn't have been surprised if they were monitoring my phone. I ensured I was a fair distance away before making a call from a hotel foyer, using their courtesy phone.

Riga answered at once, and I was relieved to hear her voice.

"Melinda..."

"Riga, do you know if the angels are still there?"

"They're here. Someone must've talked, and they've been searching the building."

That was disconcerting, to say the least.

"I'm wondering if you could pass a message to the angels. They need to know what I believe happened, and my side of the story. I can't keep running from them, Riga. I know there's a whole world out there, but they have their sentinels and I don't want to hide for something I didn't do. What's more, they're wasting their time chasing me when the real killer is out there and needs to be stopped."

Riga was silent for a few moments, contemplating my words.

"I can do that," she said. "It sounds like a positive step, but don't put yourself at undue risk because of it."

"Don't worry," I replied. "I won't."

I wasn't sure I wouldn't, but I'd try not to. Sooner or later I would need to meet with them or make my presence known, and I wasn't ready for that yet, but perhaps the risk wouldn't be so great when I did.



WITH MY MESSAGE SENT, I returned to my Manhattan hotel. I didn't particularly want to be there, but I wasn't in the mood to go out either. The risks of walking out in the open were negligible, but they weren't zero. I

didn't need to sleep much, but it was a peaceful escape for a little while and it might help to be well rested later.

As I climbed under the blankets, I remembered Misha and the love he shared with his girlfriend, Lucia. She was always around him — she'd become something of his shadow. It was lucky she hadn't been there on the day he died. She could've met the same fate.

My eyes shot open and I sat bolt upright in bed. I thought I knew why he'd been targeted. If it was true, even less people could be trusted than I thought.

I put on a coat against the chill, pinned on my talisman and left at once. The hour was late and it wasn't an appropriate time to spring a visit on Lucia, but I needed to confirm my suspicions and ensure she was alright.

AURELIA



"ANSWER ME THIS," I ASKED RAPHAEL ONCE WE WERE ALONE AND KALLEN had left. We'd been searching rooms at Enchant, but we hadn't found any other signs of Melinda, nor suspicious activity.

"I'll let you know if I can," Raphael replied.

He seemed guarded in his response, but then Raphael always had a mysterious quality about him. It was as though there were impenetrable depths to his personality, though his heart felt in the right place.

"Was Misha Drake one of us? I mean, an angel. Perhaps an angel who fell?"

"You're very perceptive, you know?" he replied as he glanced absently up and down the corridor. It was clearly something he didn't want overheard. "I can see why you were assigned to this task. Misha was indeed one of us. He committed an act of aggression against a fellow angel — it was before your time. A decision was made to place his angelic soul in a human body."

"I see," I replied with a grim expression. As much as I valued Raphael's compliment, I felt uncomfortable with Misha's fate. It might've been inappropriate or unfair based on the nature of his crime.

"This angel he wronged — could they have held a grudge against him?"

Raphael shook his head. "It was one of the other archangels, who was his superior at the time. I know for a fact he has forgiven Misha. I don't believe that angel was in any way responsible."

I nodded at that as I wondered what had happened. "If you'll forgive me for asking, which archangel?"

Raphael studied me for a moment in silence before finally answering with a name I knew well. "Gabriel."

"Thank you," I replied.

I felt uneasy about the fact the information hadn't been disclosed to me before, but it was reassuring that Raphael named Gabriel for me now.

"It would be best to avoid such questions in the future," Raphael said with a sudden aloofness.

It was the first time I'd seen him turn cold toward me, and it harmed my trust in him a little. If he was one to turn these responses on and off, he wasn't being honest about his true feelings, or so I felt. He was trying to manipulate me and coerce me into submission.

"I see," I replied, while making no promises.

If I'd known him better, I might've felt injured, but for whatever reason it didn't work on me. I just felt that Raphael was finally showing me who he was beneath the surface, and the little bit of hero-worship I'd possessed dissipated. It wasn't to say we weren't working toward the same goal, but I didn't appreciate being left out of the loop, especially when I was putting myself at some risk — however minor — to solve this case.

"It's not our policy to discuss those who've fallen, Aurelia, or who have harmed others within the angelic hierarchy. We feel it only brings about undue scrutiny of those who have left our ranks in less than ideal circumstances. Discussion on the matter is usually limited to the higher ranks. Withholding this information was not intended as a slight against you, Aurelia. It was decided it wasn't a significant point in the case as Misha was living a mortal life."

It reminded me of a description I'd once been told. 'Humans have souls. They're encased in matter. Angels are souls who have taken a form.' Ironically, I was a human who was now a soul, and no longer encased in matter. I had human and angelic forms. It didn't feel much different from being a regular mortal woman, except my perceptions were more finely-honed, and I possessed abilities like flight and divine magic. I could draw on the power of God to fight threats, but I was more a functionary than a warrior. More a thinker than a fighter. A lover too, when I had the chance to be.

I sighed. What could I do? I still felt I hadn't gone into this situation fully informed, and limited information was holding me back. Perhaps now it wouldn't, but I couldn't help wondering what else I might not have been told.

"Misha's form might have prevented him from being able to defend himself fully."

"Quite likely," Raphael replied.

"Is there anything else I haven't been told that is relevant to the case?"

I looked Raphael in the eye as I asked, and I could tell he didn't like the pressure I was placing on him.

"No, though the possibility was raised by Seraphim Joanne that this might have been a crime of passion."

I was surprised that Joanne, my superior, had made that connection. Somehow I couldn't envision a former goddess turned muse forming a relationship with a fallen angel, but stranger things had happened.

"What about Lucia?" I asked, remembering Misha's girlfriend.

"We're considering the possibility that Melinda and Lucia might've had a conflict of interest. Lucia is being watched by the sentinels, so we should be prepared in case she should become a target."

I shook my head sadly. It just wasn't a good situation at all. "I think we should speak with both parties before we reach a conclusion about that."

I wasn't sure Raphael liked my comment, but I was here to help with the investigation the same way he was.

Ahead of us, I noticed an elderly woman as she walked through an adjoining corridor. She wasn't someone we'd spoken with before, when Kallen was with us.

Noticing her, Raphael stopped her before she could climb the stairs.

"Yes?" I heard her question as I approached.

"May I ask your name?" the archangel asked.

"You may. I'm Riga Swann," she replied, "and I'm eighty-nine years old. Now who in blazes are you?"

"I'm the archangel Raphael," my companion said. "And this is Aurelia."

I gave her a small wave.

"Have you seen this woman?" Raphael asked as he showed her the same picture of Melinda that he'd shown the others.

Earlier in the interview process, Raphael had been more thoughtful with his questions, but I sensed he just wanted the job done and over with now. A bit like myself.

"What's it to you?" the elderly woman asked.

I noticed a slight hint of a smile on her lips.

Raphael studied the woman with interest and a surprising level of patience. "The angelic hierarchy requires her assistance in an ongoing investigation."

"Pshaw," the woman replied. "If you think Melinda had anything to do with a crime, you're sorely mistaken. She's not the one you need to be looking for, unless it's to protect her."

"Oh, why do you say that?" Raphael asked.

"Because I suspect I know why an assassin was hunting Misha Drake, and it had nothing to do with the goddess Melinda."

"Why were they hunting him?" I asked.

I know I shouldn't have shown I was accepting the stranger's worldview, but I had to know what she thought.

She took a deep breath. "There are those who don't approve of Ne—"

Without warning or even a sound, she was gone, mid-sentence. Raphael and I were standing alone.

I gasped, and glanced Raphael's way. His expression was grim, yet silent.

"Where is she?" I asked.

His gaze grew blank, and I knew he was sensing the environment trying to find her.

"She's... falling."

Like a flash, he surged through the ceiling in angelic form, passing straight through the roof and disappearing beyond the range of my sight and my senses.

I ran outside into the beer garden. I couldn't see much for a long moment, and then I saw two figures descending toward me. Raphael had the elderly woman in his arms. She appeared passed out or dead, but I could sense the life from her once Raphael landed on the ground. He set her down on the grass, and I knelt beside her.

It didn't take her long to awaken. Her eyes shot open, and she looked around her with wide eyes.

"You saved me. I'm a witch, but I can't effing fly."

"Yes, I did," Raphael replied matter-of-factly. "You're protected from teleportation now and no one will be able to listen in on us. The one who did this to you won't be able to do it again."

I didn't know what had happened, but I heard Raphael's voice in my mind.

'Someone just teleported her above the city and let her fall, but I caught her. They were probably listening in to our conversation from afar and didn't want her talking to us.'

"What were you going to tell us?" Raphael asked.

She looked terrified, the poor thing. She was shaking and grasping tufts of grass with white-knuckled fists.

"Maybe we should take her to the hospital," I said.

"No. No doctors," the elderly woman replied. "Fuck that. Someone might have wanted to stop him from creating Nephilim. He and Lucia were trying for a baby. She might already be pregnant."

"Really?" I asked, glancing Raphael's way.

I already knew what a Nephilim was. Usually, they were the offspring of angels and humans. Their nature was said to reflect that of their angel parent most of all, and a Nephilim sired by a fallen angel could cause others to fall in the mortal sphere.

They could grow to be powerful and dangerous, and it was said they were difficult to control. Could someone have removed the threat of any children he might've borne by destroying his soul?

'Why would Misha have tried for a child, knowing he was angelic?' I asked Raphael, speaking from my mind to his. I didn't utter my question aloud.

I wondered whether Misha even remembered his heritage. Could they have removed his memories too? If others like Riga knew he was a fallen angel, then perhaps not. It was possible he knew what he was but not the implications of his life choice.

Raphael took a moment in thought before he replied. 'People don't always think rationally when they fall in love. It can be a selfish state of mind where duty is overwhelmed by personal desires.'

I remembered from my time as a human that love could be more than that. It could be beautiful and meaningful, and change life from mundane to magical. Misha was lucky to have found that kind of love. It made his fate so much worse though.

Raphael sighed. "If Lucia is pregnant with a Nephilim, its existence could pose a danger to humanity and the intentions of heaven."

"Lucia has already lost the love of her life. Would you really take her child too?" the elderly woman asked.

"If I had to," Raphael said simply, his voice emotionless. "I could remove her pain."

He didn't think and feel as mortals did. I knew he had his mind on the larger picture. Unfortunately, that probably wouldn't involve Lucia's best interests.

"Then I hope she isn't carrying his child," I replied, rubbing my eyes.

I wasn't sure if it was tiredness or the edge of tears, but this case was wearing on me. So was Raphael, though I didn't want to say it. His actions had been heroic tonight, and yet I was finding it hard to be in his presence. The more time I spent with him, the more I began to suspect that our core values didn't align.

"Can I get you anything?" I asked Riga.

She was still sitting on the grass, trembling. She looked so frail and vulnerable, I was afraid she'd have a heart attack.

"You could help me up and bring me a pot of tea," she replied.

I helped her into one of the chairs. I was surprised when Raphael went to make the tea himself. As soon as Riga and I were alone, she turned to me.

"If there is a child, you mustn't let the archangel kill it," she said.

"I don't know what I could do, but I can try. If there's a child, I will speak for them," I said. "Even if the child is a Nephilim, he or she is Misha's legacy."

Riga appeared exhausted and sad, and I could feel her guilt at possibly having put another being at risk.

"Melinda wanted you to know this information. She didn't see the crime, but she sensed it. Her connection to Misha was strong, as she was his muse. And she doesn't want to keep running. She just doesn't want to be blamed for something she didn't do. Is there any way we can set this right?"

As eye-opening as this conversation was, it wasn't lost on me that Riga's desire for a cup of tea and the information she was sharing delayed us in the next step of our investigation. I suspected I knew where Melinda was right now, and it would be lax of me if I didn't act on it.

"I'm sure we'll find a way," I said simply to Riga. Turning toward the kitchen, I spoke to Raphael's mind. 'I will be back in a few minutes.'

I took my angel form and surged up into the sky, returning to a place I'd already been. I was going to check on Lucia, both to find out if she was pregnant and to see if Melinda was there. Somehow, my heart told me she would be.

Should I have gone alone? Probably not, but I knew I needed to.

MELINDA



LUCIA'S HOME WAS A SEMI-DETACHED HOUSE WITH A CONCRETE DRIVEWAY along the side. A lamp post stood outside, casting a golden light over the property, but there were an abundance of shadows where I could further mask my presence.

If any mortal had seen me, their gaze would've slid over and off me. Nothing to see here. There was no one visible outside, and it gave me confidence that I shouldn't be disturbed.

I knew I wouldn't be hidden from angelic eyes, so I didn't delay. I placed my hand on the door's lock, urging it to open for me. A small glow of magic radiated from the lock as it clicked open. Once inside, I walked straight to the bedroom as I expected to find Lucia asleep.

She wasn't. Lucia was awake and huddled in a fetal position, tears rolling down her cheeks. The room was dark, but the sound of her sobbing broke my heart. I could feel the depth of her sadness — her emotions were torturous, and it felt profoundly wrong that she should be alone at a time like this.

I wanted to comfort her, but I knew I wasn't supposed to be there. She wouldn't react well if she found me in her house, especially after what had happened to Misha. So I stayed silent, listening to her cry and bearing witness to her pain as I extended my senses to detect any sign of a child.

There wasn't one. I only sensed Lucia, alone. I reached out with my energies, providing her strength and reassurance, in the same way I'd provided inspiration to her fallen partner. I turned away, preparing to leave, and I discovered I wasn't alone.

I stifled a gasp, not wanting to alert Lucia to my presence, or the stranger's. A woman stood before me with the most beautiful features. Soft

ringlets of blonde hair fell around her face, but she wore a coat and jeans like a random New Yorker. I could tell at a glance that she wasn't mortal. She placed her finger against her lips and nodded to the hallway. I followed her out of the room, wondering what this meant for me.

We got all the way outside the house before we spoke. I could see the outline of her wings, almost translucent to my sight. I was sure they'd be entirely invisible to mortals. She was an angel then! Her features appeared soft in the light of the street lamp, and she didn't treat me like a threat. I appreciated that.

"I've spoken with Riga and I would like to talk to you about what you sensed," she said. The angelic woman appeared to choose her words carefully. "We need to go somewhere else. The sentinels are watching Lucia's house and they will have seen us already."

My heart almost stopped when I heard those words. There was next to no chance the sentinels hadn't detected me, even with my magic. If only I could fly away or teleport the way I once had when I was a goddess and not a muse! But I no longer had that capability. Now I knew why — I was easier to control this way.

Tears of frustration formed in my eyes as I fought the locks controlling my powers, but it was no good. I don't know if the angel knew what I was trying to do, but she studied me, and I realized I hadn't answered her.

"Where do you want to go?" I asked, fearing captivity and the harsh judgment of angels. I didn't know whether I could trust her. A matter of days ago, I wouldn't have felt any doubt. She would've been a colleague, not a potential enemy.

"Let's talk as we walk, shall we?" she suggested.

I realized there might be a reason for her suggestion. It would keep me away from other people I could harm if I was Misha's killer, and it would distract me from the notion of taking her soul.

She could've been the one who killed Misha, for all I knew, but some instinct told me that wasn't the case. I didn't perceive any aggression from her, just a preternatural awareness coupled with caution. I wondered if we'd met before. She felt familiar, but I couldn't place it. Perhaps I'd seen her in a crowd?

I put the thought aside as I followed her along the road.

The blonde angel glanced my way and I felt my heart skip a beat. I was disgusted with myself that she evoked such a reaction from me. Now wasn't

the time to feel attraction.

"I'm Aurelia," she said, glancing back at me. "I'm one of the angels tasked with finding you, as well as Misha's killer."

"I didn't do it," I said instinctively. "I was on my way to his place when I sensed it from afar. His desperation and fear, and this sense of ripping. I don't know if it was his soul being torn away from his body or a wound inflicted, but it was eerie and tragic. There was nothing I could do for him. I couldn't get there fast enough."

"I knew you angels would be coming to find me, because I knew Misha well, and how many people possess that kind of power? But you should know, much of my power is locked away, and I couldn't have done something like this even if I'd wanted to. I wouldn't, in any case. I cared about Misha and I miss him."

Aurelia frowned as she listened to my defense. I felt a warmth flow over me, almost like the sense of comfort one gets from a hug, and I realized she might be sensing my feelings and analyzing the locks placed on my magic. I was still capable of some magic, of course, but I didn't have access to the raw power contained within me. The sense of mischief that embodied my nature begged to come out and play, even though this was neither the time nor the place. It felt as though for too long it had been caged.

"You're telling the truth," Aurelia announced as she looked me straight in the eye.

"Of course I am. I'm one of you, not your enemy."

I'd never expected the restraint I needed to be so difficult. I felt divided between escaping Misha's killer or letting them find me, so I could take my revenge.

Even before I was a muse, I was never an avenging goddess, but I suppose I'm as capable of it as the next person when given enough reason.

But who was the killer? If Nephilim was the reason, who hated the prospect so intensely that they'd kill a man because of his angelic heritage, before a child was even conceived? Unless there had been a child and now they were gone, but no. I was sure that wasn't the case. I'd have sensed it.

It was possible I was wrong and it wasn't what all this was about. If so, it would take me back to square one.

There was a burger restaurant ahead of us, and I asked, "Why don't we go in there?"

"We can. Do you know Riga well?" the angel asked.

"Yes," I replied.

I was tempted to explain she was my friend and had been for decades, but I didn't want to say too much.

"Someone tried to kill her tonight," Aurelia said, pausing outside the restaurant.

"What?" I asked as feelings of outrage bubbled to the surface.

"You should know she's alright," Aurelia replied, "but someone teleported her above the city. She'd have died if the archangel Raphael hadn't caught her."

"Are you sure he didn't do it?" I asked with unease. Hopefully she wouldn't take offense at that, but I wasn't feeling especially trusting right now.

"I'm sure. I was right there beside him. One moment Riga was there, talking to us, and the next she was gone."

"An angel must've done this," Melinda replied with a shake of her head. "Any of the old gods with unlocked powers are too well-watched by the authorities."

"Perhaps," Aurelia replied, "but we're still investigating. I'm surprised the sentinels haven't caught up with us yet. Do you still want to go to the restaurant?"

I shook my head. "No, I want to go back and check on Riga."

"Then hold on to me," the angelic woman said, "and I'll take you back to Enchant. Raphael is there, but he would catch up with us eventually anyway."

I stepped closer and wrapped my arms around her tightly, almost in a hug. I was afraid of not gripping her tightly enough, but I also felt shy, holding this lovely young woman. The fact she was an angel only confused my thoughts more, but my instincts told me she was trying to do the right thing. If I was going to trust an angel, it would probably be her.

The flight was quick and terrifying. I hung on for dear life as the world flashed by. It was like being on a rollercoaster. I closed my eyes, just focusing on her and the sweet, fresh scent of her perfume until we were on solid ground again. Only then did I let her go, and she glanced at me with wide blue eyes and a smile on her face.

My heart skipped a beat, but then as I looked around, I found two others staring back at me. One was Riga, thank the gods, but the other sent a shudder of fear through me — it was the archangel Raphael.

AURELIA



"AURELIA, PLEASE STEP AWAY FROM THE GODDESS MELINDA." RAPHAEL approached us both, one careful step at a time.

We were in the beer garden outside Enchant, and Riga was seated at the table with a pot of tea in front of her. She rose to her feet as she witnessed the confrontation.

I moved away from Melinda, but I raised my hands in a calming gesture. "She's innocent, Raphael. Most of her powers are still locked away, and she couldn't have done it."

"Locks aren't infallible. They could have been removed by another supernatural being if they're powerful enough. She might have an accomplice."

"It wasn't me," she declared with a hint of anger in her voice. "Scan me. Do whatever you like, but I'm telling you the truth. I cared about Misha. Just please, stop chasing me, and let me help you find out who did this. I want them caught as much as you do."

"I can tell you speak the truth," he replied, "as far as you see it. We have our orders, so we have to take you in so this can be resolved."

"I suspect that's not a good idea," I told Raphael, "and I'll tell you why. Not many beings could've teleported Riga above the city the way that happened tonight. Most of those possessing the power are angelic."

'I don't like where this is going,' Raphael said, speaking solely to my mind. 'Are you implying that an angel did this?'

'There are many reasons to believe one could be responsible,' I replied. 'I think it would be a mistake to send Melinda up to heaven before we know more. Besides, she sensed the murder from afar. She might be able to help us

with our investigation.'

Raphael studied the red-haired goddess, apparently deep in thought.

I wasn't sure whether the others could tell that we were communicating telepathically, but I suspected Melinda must've known a conversation was taking place, even if she couldn't make out the words.

'If she is responsible and harms anyone, it will be on us,' Raphael said. He continued the conversation aloud. "We were ordered to bring you to heaven. They didn't say when. You may remain while you help us with our investigation," he said. "But you will get rid of that pin." Raphael indicated the talisman that disguised her presence.

Melinda smiled, and there was more than that in her eyes — a deep sense of gratitude.

She removed the talisman from her coat and handed it over to him. "The killer will be able to find me now."

"That shouldn't be a concern, as we'll protect you," he replied. "Do you feel you might be targeted because you sensed the murder?"

"Yes," she replied, glancing between us. "I also think the killer intended me to be a scapegoat, and they won't want me going after them."

"That's entirely possible." Raphael's tension seemed to ease, though the difference might not have been noticeable to anyone who hadn't got the opportunity to know him.

"What of the Nephilim?" Riga asked.

"I'm not planning to have any," Melinda replied. "I'm a lesbian, in any case."

I grinned. There went Raphael's theory that she was secretly in love with Misha. Unless, of course, he meant Lucia?

"I understand," I replied, giving her a reassuring smile.

"Do you?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied. "Vividly."

It wasn't that complex a situation to understand. Besides, I liked women too. I also liked men. I just appreciated some people more than others.



RAPHAEL HAD BEEN quiet ever since we'd agreed to give Melinda a chance. I wondered if he might harbor some resentment, but I didn't sense that from

him. If anything, he seemed contemplative.

He was a more powerful being than I was, so he could disguise his feelings from me. I waited until we had some time alone to talk.

"You seem like something is on your mind," I said, wondering if it would encourage him to speak of it.

"It is. You shouldn't have left when I was with Riga. It was reckless to go into Lucia's home alone, just as it was to speak with Melinda and bring her to Enchant. You should've called me, and I have to wonder why you didn't, Aurelia."

My brow furrowed at his words, but I appreciated his directness and honesty.

"I'm sorry, Raphael, and I understand why you feel the way you do," I said. "I wanted to know if Lucia was pregnant, because it was the next logical step, given the relevance of Nephilim to our investigation. I also reasoned that it might be where Melinda was heading. I'm sorry I didn't consult you first, but it turned into a more complex situation than I'd anticipated."

Raphael studied me with a long glance, and then shook his head. "You would make a good politician, Aurelia. So Lucia isn't pregnant?"

"No, she isn't," I said. "I think she could be a target though."

"That's unlikely, given that she isn't expecting," he said. "Anyone as powerful as the killer could detect the truth as easily as you or I. I think if it becomes clear that Melinda isn't going to be arrested, then Melinda is likely to be targeted."

"It seems likely she's the intended scapegoat, but I'm having trouble seeing a pattern. Maybe it's that there haven't been enough incidents yet to get to the heart of why this person is doing what they're doing."

"Almost certainly," Raphael agreed. "And yet, the crime against Misha Drake speaks clearly of the killer's reasoning. They attacked someone who was powerful yet vulnerable. It might be why they attacked an angel on Earth instead of heaven. It could also have been easier for them to access the victim. If the killer was preventing the birth of a Nephilim, perhaps they sought to uphold the status quo while breaking its laws on a personal level."

"Why would they do that?" I asked. "I suppose people don't always need a concrete reason for the things they do. Some people harbor perspectives that aren't in most people's best interests."

"They could be trying to alienate beings of non-angelic heritage from being part of the hierarchy. While Misha did have an angelic heritage, the

crime could be used as a means of making suspects of those who the killer believes have no place being a part of it."

"Like me? That's possible," I agreed. "Then again, maybe we're interpreting it this way because it's a situation we know a lot about. The killer could be a complete stranger to such things."

"If there's no easy way to find out, perhaps we could do the next best thing... and set a trap for them," Raphael said. "With Melinda as the bait."

I almost laughed at his suggestion. I was starting to feel sorry for Melinda.

"I'll talk to her about it," I replied. "I suspect she'll go along with the plan. I think she's a far better choice for it than Lucia. When I looked in on Lucia, she was just so... broken. I'd like to do more for her to ease her pain. In a way, I feel glad that she doesn't know the full truth."

"I'll see what I can do to help her," Raphael replied, sighing. "Keep an eye on Melinda."

When he was gone, I was left alone, so I made my way back to Riga's room. We weren't keeping such a close eye on Melinda any longer, but then we knew we could find her now that her pin was gone.

I gave Riga's door a knock and Melinda opened it.

"You can come in," Riga called out from across the room.

It was like a hotel room, only with better facilities and more of Riga's possessions in view. I wondered what arrangement Riga had with the owners of the premises, unless of course she was the owner. She acted like it, and I was starting to wonder.

"Where's your friend?" Melinda asked as she ground salt over a meal of pasta she'd made, and sat down at the table.

"He had some business to attend to."

I could've told her more, but it seemed better not to, in case she wanted to intervene or influence the situation. I wondered if the 'trap' would be a harder sell for Melinda when Riga was here.

"We're going to set a trap for the killer," I explained. "We're—"

"I'm in," Melinda replied.

I grinned. That was faster than I'd bargained on.

Riga sighed. "You be careful with that."

"I will, of course," Melinda replied. "Do you think the hierarchy would be willing to remove some of the locks on my powers, so I can better defend myself?"

"I'm sorry to say it, but I don't think so," I said. "Even if they did, I wouldn't put it past the killer to capitalize on the situation, if their intention is seeing you blamed for this. The hierarchy wanted you brought straight back to heaven."

"Of course they did," Riga replied with a soft sigh.

"They shouldn't forget I'm one of their own," Melinda replied. "I've been working with them for years."

"I know," I replied, as my heart went out to her.

I understood her feelings, but I had to remember my loyalties and remain focused on the mission.

"Oh, that reminds me. I'm wondering if you might be able to interpret some runes for me. They were found at Misha's home."

I showed Melinda and Riga the symbols on my phone, for simplicity's sake. There was no point using magic when technology would do the same job just as well.

The same rune had been in multiple places in Misha's home.

"I'm not sure," Melinda said as she stared at the symbol. "It looks familiar, but it isn't typical Norse. Some kind of bind rune perhaps?"

I already knew a bind rune was a runic symbol made up of more than one rune.

"Really, Melinda? You can do better than that. It's a protection rune that also inspires courage. It's unusual to have a line bisecting the rune in the center. It isn't sufficient to negate the other meanings of the rune, so it must serve some purpose. It probably influences the flow of protective energy, helping to shore up the location's defenses. Rather than a constant trickle of power, it might build up behind something reminiscent of a dam wall that can be lowered at will."

"That's interesting," I replied.

It was even rather ingenious from a magical perspective, but ultimately it hadn't saved Misha's life. I decided to share my findings with Raphael later.



FOUR HOURS LATER, Melinda and I retired to a room at Enchant. I lay in a bed opposite, resting my head, if not my mind. Raphael still hadn't returned and I was growing uneasy.

He'd asked me to keep an eye on Melinda, but I decided to go out looking for him. Melinda seemed to be fast asleep, and a gentle check of her mind confirmed the fact.

Taking intangible angelic form, I soared up through the ceiling and into the sky above Enchant, looking for signs of the missing archangel. There were none to be found. When I extended my senses, I again found nothing. Could he have gone back to heaven to check in with the others? It seemed strange in light of our earlier conversation, when he'd chastised me for leaving without a word.

There was no sign of him at Lucia's home, and she now lay asleep in bed. I was glad she was finally able to get some rest. Perhaps Raphael had helped her with that.

I knew heaven might disapprove of the course we'd taken, but I was growing deeply concerned for Raphael, so I returned to heaven. I didn't like leaving Melinda, but she was in an appropriate place, and Raphael had ensured we couldn't be teleported away and no one could listen in on our conversations telepathically from outside.

When I reached heaven, I was immediately met with a sense of chaos. Joanne, my superior, was there.

"Aurelia, you're alive! We couldn't get through to you and feared the worst."

It occurred to me that it might've been the shielding. The intention was to protect us and the investigation, but we obviously hadn't considered the other potential repercussions.

"What's happened?" I asked, my stomach churning as I thought of Raphael.

"The archangel Raphael is being treated by healers. He was attacked in the air and someone tried to steal his soul. They failed, but he isn't well."

My heart sank, and I couldn't help wondering if he'd called out to me for help and I didn't hear him.

"Please, take me to him," I replied, urging her to lead the way.

MELINDA



I AWAKENED AS A GLOW FILTERED THROUGH THE CURTAINS FROM THE EARLY morning light. The bed was pleasantly comfortable, and I was in no hurry to get up. It took me a minute to realize Aurelia wasn't there.

I'd actually rather enjoyed the angel watching me, as odd as that might've sounded. I might've felt unsafe around most angels right now, but not Aurelia. It was as though she understood me, and I felt her heart was in the right place. She was the kind of angel who'd inspired me to join the angelic hierarchy in the first place, out of a desire to help people and be a part of something greater than myself.

Perhaps it helped that Aurelia wasn't angel-born. I wasn't sure of her heritage, but it was clear she'd begun as an outsider. She'd obviously been with them for a while in order to accrue the abilities she had. In time, I might develop new abilities too, if I remained steadfast and true to their cause, and if they kept me on.

I wasn't counting on that to happen.

I thought about returning 'home' to my other hotel room and picking up some things. There was also my main home where I'd been staying while I was working as Misha's muse.

I didn't need to stay at the hotel anymore, but some voice at the back of my mind told me to hang on to my hotel room, just in case. I'd enchanted it to mask my presence there, the same way the pin did before I gave it to Raphael.

It was too early to disturb Riga, and I didn't want to worry my angelic compatriots or risk danger just yet by leaving Enchant.

I picked up the remote control off the chest of drawers beside the bed, and

switched on the television. I laid in bed watching my way through morning cartoons before the news came on.

The news anchorwoman's face was deeply disturbed as she reported the destruction of a Manhattan hotel by a meteorite. That area sure looked familiar. There was a reason for it!

I sat bolt upright in bed. It was the hotel where I'd been staying. If I hadn't come to Enchant, I'd likely have been killed.

All of those other poor people at the hotel — gone! I felt sick to my stomach. This couldn't be pure chance. Someone had targeted the place, likely because they thought I might be there. How did they even know about it? I hadn't told anyone at all. I reasoned that they must've known since I'd first checked in.

And who in this day and age had the ability to throw meteors about? Literally no one, or so I thought.

Where was Aurelia? I wanted to tell her what was going on. Even the archangel Raphael would've been good to talk to, but they were gone. Maybe they'd already learned of this and they were investigating it?

Turning back to the news, I listened for more information.

"This may be the start of a much larger meteor shower. Only small objects have been detected so far. As we can see, they are still capable of causing serious damage. We encourage residents of the Greater New York area to stay in your homes. We will share a map of areas that could potentially be affected as soon as one becomes available."

Could this be a precursor to a more sinister attack? I couldn't help feeling that we were standing on the brink of an even greater peril than we'd imagined.

I looked around at my room at Enchant. I knew Raphael had shielded the building to some level, but would that shielding stand up against a physical threat from meteorites? I had my doubts.

I climbed quickly out of bed and hurried down the hall to Riga's room, still dressed in my pastel pink nightdress.

My knocks on the door went unanswered for around a minute until Riga called out, "What do you want? It's six fucking thirty in the morning and I need to fucking sleep."

"Riga, it's Melinda," I said. "My hotel was destroyed by a meteorite and I fear Enchant might be next. Please let me in!"

It took a very long time, by my estimation, before Riga opened the door.

"Start at the beginning," she said.



IT TOOK over forty minutes before the physical shield went up, protecting the building from meteorites and other material threats. Enchant was practically empty at that time of day, so for now it wasn't much of a problem. That might change if more people tried to enter the premises later. I wasn't sure what else we could do. It was that or we wouldn't have had any protection against physical threats like this.

With a sigh, I put the news back on and listened for more new information.

"It's common to see meteor showers on any given night, especially away from the bright city lights. What's rare is to see damage such as this from meteorites in a heavily-populated area."

I winced, unable to draw my attention away from the television. It wasn't a good situation at all. The news anchors explained that meteorites were what meteoroids were called after hitting the ground, while meteors or meteor showers were like falling stars.

I glanced out my window and saw the shield around Enchant shimmering in the morning light. Its presence was reassuring, but then I heard a clatter above, and I knew it had to be something bouncing off the shield. It didn't take a genius to figure out what it was. I rushed downstairs and outside into the beer garden to get a better view.

The meteorites were too small to see, but they were loud as they hit the shield. I spotted several larger ones as they hit it. They were still smaller than tennis balls, but large enough to be a threat. I glanced back into the building but there was no sign of anyone. Riga couldn't get down the stairs quickly anymore, magic or not.

Outside might not have been the safest place but I trusted in Riga's shielding. She was experienced with magic and I knew she understood what she was doing with it.

I heard something larger strike the shield, and that was when my heart was in my throat, because I saw a crack form on the shield's surface. Oh, this wasn't good! Several small meteorites smashed through. One took out the back gate, leaving it a splintered mess. I hoped Gracie, the neighbor's cat, was

well clear of it.

I rushed back inside the building and extended my powers, trying to bulk up what remained of the shield. It was difficult, and I didn't feel strong enough. I knew I'd need a ritual to properly protect us, but it would take time and I wasn't sure we had it. Someone had to be doing this, directing the meteor shower our way.

I turned to rush back up to Riga's room when I felt all the locks on my powers loosen. Turning around, I threw a massive surge of energy up into the shield, reinforcing it moments before a far larger meteorite struck it.

For now, I didn't ask how... or even who had helped me. I just did what I could to keep us all alive and intact until the meteor shower passed.

I left the physical shield in place for hours after, but created an exit in the side of it when people needed to come or go. It felt so good to have my powers back, and I could tell they extended much further than my ability to protect us.

My desire to play, at the heart of my nature, was growing too. It was a strange feeling under the circumstances, but as a being of chaos, the sense of freedom was exhilarating. I knew I'd never let the angelic hierarchy lock up my powers again, given a choice. My days as a muse were done.



I WALKED AROUND ENCHANT, checking out the damage the meteorites had caused. The ground was littered with small pieces of rock, many embedded in the earth, and shattered glass. Several of the windows had broken, including the main window out front. As it was, it seemed on par with a bad hail storm. Every car parked outside the premises, beyond the coverage of the shield, had broken windows. It could've been so much worse.

Someone had obviously made a strong effort to clear the board of certain people. I had to wonder if Enchant had been targeted solely because of me. Whoever had done this clearly wasn't averse to hurting or killing other people to achieve their aims, and they had a side of cruelty to them.

I sat outside in the beer garden on a sun lounge for much of the afternoon, a silent sentinel protecting this place and its patrons. Enchant was quiet, unsurprisingly, but it grew busier as the day went on. I waited for Aurelia and the archangel Raphael to return, while wondering if they ever would.

AURELIA



"AURELIA, I'M GLAD YOU'RE ALRIGHT," THE ARCHANGEL RAPHAEL SAID AS HE lay in the hospital bed, covered in hundreds of slashes that had been cleaned, but continued to bleed.

His wounds hadn't been bandaged, because — as an angelic being — he would be healed magically instead. In fact, he'd probably been partially healed already. I was shocked at his condition and the damage he'd sustained. I wondered how injured he'd been when he was brought back to heaven.

He was a kind and loyal archangel. He surely didn't deserve this.

"I was attacked in the air," Raphael said, though his voice faltered. "I think it must've been another angel, but they were so powerful. I don't know who it could have been. Not many of us could fight like that, and only a limited number are on Earth at a time."

I nodded, but I also knew they didn't have to be assigned to Earth. It didn't take that long to come and go from heaven when your wings could carry you at breakneck speed.

"Did you see what your attacker looked like?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "It was dark and they wore a mask covering their face. I couldn't see through it — just their eyes. I don't know what they were, because they were more powerful than any normal angel, but they couldn't be an archangel. There are only seven of us, beyond reproach, and we know each other well. I'd have recognized them — I'm certain of it."

I put my hand on his arm reassuringly, and sent him a steady stream of healing energy. I wasn't as proficient a healer as he was, but every little bit helped. The light of his spirit seemed to shine a little more brightly from my efforts, but the condition of his wounds hardly changed.

The cuts must've been deeper than I thought. I wasn't even sure they were physical wounds. Most likely, they were spiritual and this was their physical manifestation. The angel-born were very different to mortals.

"Where is Melinda?" he asked as he lay there, barely moving.

"She was asleep back at Enchant," I said. "I didn't leave her side until around half an hour ago."

"It can't have been her then," he said. "I don't know how they found me. Not only am I hard to track but the pin would've disguised my presence."

"The pin," I commented aloud. "Do you still have it? I should get it analyzed."

I took it from him, and just as I was thanking him, a young, female angel flew into the room. She looked no older than twelve or thirteen, and her hair was dark brown and worn in a ponytail. Her appearance probably wasn't a true reflection of her age.

"The city of New York is being attacked with meteorites," she said. "Most of them are on a trajectory for the bar called Enchant."

"Oh no," I exclaimed. Drawing on magic, I quickly opened a viewing portal to the mortal world, which looked down on the scene.

I saw the falling meteor shower, with the magical shield surrounding Enchant. And I saw Melinda standing out there in the garden, watching it fail.

"Please, you must unlock her powers!" I begged the angels around me, even though there might not have been time. "If you don't, she and a lot of other people are going to die."

"That could be exactly what she wants, Aurelia," the young angel said.

"I don't care if it is," I replied. "We need to do this. Please!"

Raphael was listening, and surprisingly, he added his support. "Please do it, Carriel."

The young angel left the medical room at speed. I watched the situation unfold, hoping she would be fast enough to make a difference.

There were no words for my relief at seeing Melinda survive and the threat of the meteor shower overcome. I left Melinda's pin with the young angel and asked her to inform me when the magical analysis was complete.



IT TOOK ten hours of energy healing and extensive treatment before Raphael

was released from the hospital. I met him near the entrance, and we walked together along a tree-lined path beneath the towering spires of heaven.

He looked tired, like all of the strength had been sapped from his body. Yet here he was, alive and safe, thank God.

"They tried to take my soul," he said, "but they couldn't do it. I don't have a soul within a mortal shell. I am my soul, and this is my truest form. The more they tried, the more they injured me. It makes me wonder if they were using it as a method of violence, or if they lacked an understanding of angels. Misha's situation was different, because he'd been given a mortal shell."

Raphael truly was lucky to be alive. My heart broke for him, and I could sense that he felt it.

"Did they use a weapon on you?" I flinched as I asked that question. I almost couldn't bring myself to ask it. How dare they!

"They hit me with some kind of magic dart or arrow. There were strands of energy connected... somehow, and they used it to drag me through the air. It was a weapon unlike any I'd seen before."

"I'm so sorry to hear that. I haven't heard of a weapon like that before either," I replied. "It has to have been magical, rather than a physical weapon."

"Perhaps it was both," he said. "Once they had me, I felt them trying to tear away my soul. There was this sense of darkness, and they were trying to pull my spiritual body into it, but... that's all of me. It was my energy body that I felt it grip. I didn't let it pull me in, but spiritually... it flayed me."

I was horrified at what they'd done to him. I couldn't think about it and stay focused. It made me angry and sad.

"You're very kind, Aurelia. I can feel your emotions, you know?"

I nodded, lost for words for a moment. Focusing my mind, I forged on with the conversation.

"Do you think taking Misha's soul could have given them greater power? It could account for why they were more capable than an ordinary angel, while not being an archangel."

"I think you could be right," he said. "Crimes of this type don't happen often. All of the—I'm sorry, I need to sit down."

I created a seat for Raphael out of thin air, and he sat down on it, resting. He almost certainly wouldn't be able to return to Earth and continue the investigation in this state. Even the flight would probably be too much for him.

"Thank you, Aurelia. What I meant to say is we don't know all of the consequences of the sort of act that befell Misha Drake. Thousands of years can go by between crimes like this happening. We can't be sure of much, but it makes sense someone might've done so for reasons of power. We might've had their motivations all wrong.

"They could've gone after Misha because he was an angelic soul. Maybe they didn't care what he was doing, so much as what they could take from him. We shouldn't have left him so vulnerable there. We mistakenly assumed he would be as safe as any other soul on Earth."

"You couldn't have known," I replied, as much to offer comfort as stating the facts. I wondered if other angels and supernatural beings could similarly be at risk.

"The other angels on Earth should be warned, in case they're targeted in the same way Misha Drake was. Maybe have the investigating done by those who aren't angel-born."

Raphael's lips quirked up into a smile. "You have my approval to work on the case with Melinda, though there are those who would prefer she wasn't there. I would feel better knowing you have the assistance of an archangel if you need it. I'll have a word with Gabriel, and see if he could have some backup at the ready.

"You be careful out there, Aurelia. I don't like the way this investigation is going. It feels like the perpetrator has been ahead of us every step of the way."

"Thank you, Raphael. I'll be careful out there, I promise," I replied softly. "They were likely listening in to our conversations more than once.

"I could feel Riga's emotions and sense how upset she was after being teleported above the city. This wasn't something she expected, and she genuinely feared for her life, so I suspect she's been honest with us."

Raphael nodded at that. "I was periodically sensing her, in case she might be the weak link, but I'm confident that she had nothing to do with this."

"I meant to ask you whether you helped Lucia. I noticed her sleeping when I went looking for you."

I wondered if he'd chastise me about repeating my actions, which he hadn't approved of, but Raphael didn't say anything about it.

"I helped her," he replied. "She should have an easier recovery from her grief now."



I SET down near the Enchant bar and re-took human form. There didn't seem to be anyone else outside. As I walked up to the shielded area, I carefully examined the physical shield.

I was sure a human mortal wouldn't be able to see it, but they could feel its physical presence. It was unclear whether the runes' area of effect would discourage mortals from going near it.

I could see the shield. It shimmered with a light golden glow. It wasn't as visible in the daytime as it would be at night, when its pale light would stand out more starkly against the darkness.

When I laid my hand against the shield, I felt a jolt of electricity, like a light electric shock, and a sense of physical presence. When I tried to use my mind to open a doorway in the shield, it didn't work at all. It was surprisingly effective magic.

Soon, I caught sight of Melinda as she walked from the front door of the bar and approached me on the inside of the shield.

"Do I have you to thank for returning my powers?" Melinda smiled as she stood there with her hands on her hips.

With her mane of fiery red hair, she looked like a force to be reckoned with — not the powerless goddess on the run she had been before. The difference was like night and day.

"Yeah, it was partially my doing," I replied. "I saw the shield was cracking, and Enchant wasn't going to last. I knew you were in danger, and so were the other people here."

Melinda didn't make me ask to be let in, though I was growing mildly impatient with her.

With a wave of her hand, she opened a doorway in the shield.

I hurried in, and saw her seal it again the moment I'd passed through.

It was interesting to see her with her powers back. Melinda seemed like more of herself than she had been before.

I didn't have any locks of the same sort, because I'd been a human spirit before my ascension to angelhood.

"Someone tried to kill Raphael and they almost succeeded," I explained as we walked together toward the front door. "He was attacked in the air."

"That's a disturbing thought. Raphael is so powerful, I'm startled that they could threaten him. Is he going to be alright?"

I nodded. "He's recovering now. I've been urged to continue the investigation, if you would still like to help me?"

She took a moment to ponder the situation before eventually nodding in agreement. "I would, though I fear it might be beyond our ability to defeat them."

"I'm told we will have angelic backup if we need it, so we won't be entirely alone in this," I replied. "I think we're both potential targets, as well as Riga, and the Enchant bar itself."

"How comforting," she replied with a pronounced note of sarcasm.

Melinda's expression turned apologetic as she sat down at a table near the bar, and I joined her there. There was no one else around. Everything was tidy except for a folded newspaper that had been left on the counter.

"Please, tell me what you have in mind. I'll go with you, but I want to ensure Riga can support the shield first. I'm tired of being on the defensive, and I want to hunt the one responsible. I mean, investigate. Mostly."

I smiled at her, because I felt the same way. I just wasn't sure if she meant that a bit more literally than I did. I was guessing she did.

MELINDA



THE SMELL OF DAYS-OLD TRASH AND ACCUMULATING LAUNDRY GREETED US as we took human form inside the house. It was the home the angels had assigned me and where I lived before I went on the run. The trash had been there even before Misha passed. I'd been meaning to tidy up and hadn't quite got around to it.

I looked around, grateful to be home, even if it was just for a little while. My feelings were bittersweet at seeing the sculptures decorating the shelves of a cabinet by the window. They were among Misha's best works.

"This probably isn't a good idea," Aurelia said, biting her lip softly.

It wasn't the first time either of us had said it. I just wanted some of my possessions back. The others had been destroyed when the hotel was hit by a meteorite. I didn't even have a change of clothes to my name.

"Probably not," I agreed as I grabbed my gym bag and hurried into my bedroom to gather up some clothes and possessions. Yes, I used to go to the gym. It was more a choice than a necessity.

Aurelia and I had planned out our fast-trip in advance. I could fly again! It was marvelous. Aurelia kept a lookout, which she was able to do through the solid ceiling of the house. At least it was a standalone house and not an apartment. It meant we weren't placing anyone else at risk.

The angelic hierarchy had made this address available to me, and they always endeavored to give their agents some privacy... when they weren't hunting them, apparently. I already knew a house in the city with this much space would be worth a small fortune.

I was in the mood to sell it, just to piss them off, but it probably wasn't wise when they finally trusted me again and were leaving me alone. I shelved

the idea for later, deciding to see how things panned out.

"You have a nice place," Aurelia said as she glanced around the house. "It reminds me that the angelic hierarchy gave me an address I could use too. I haven't even checked it out yet."

"It might serve as a useful backup location," I replied. "I'm sure Riga will let us stay at Enchant as long as we need to. She's grateful just to have the shield reinforced, and to have me around more. I think I've become something of a daughter to her."

"That's wonderful that you have," Aurelia replied.

I pulled out my drawers, rummaging through them to find what I needed. I knew it was reckless coming here. I could've gone and bought new clothes, but some things held meaning for me. This, for instance — the dress I wore on Misha's opening night at the Bullfinch Gallery. That was a night that would never come again.

With a sigh, I stuffed it into my sports bag, along with many other things — though not as many as I'd have liked. I'd lived in this house for years, ever since I'd first become a muse on my first assignment. The familiar atmosphere was comforting, even knowing the risks.

"Melinda, we need to get going," Aurelia said. "Time's a-wasting."

With a last look around, I hurried back out into the living room. I had to take a couple of Misha's sculptures with me. They were all that remained of him now.

Aurelia changed back into her angel form, invisible to mortals, and I changed to pure energy. My bag remained solid, so I extended my energy field around it to change it to the same form I had. I didn't need confused mortals seeing a gym bag flying through the air.

We flew back to Enchant in record time. It was truly wonderful to fly again. My power to fly had been locked away for years. I didn't know what I was thinking, letting them do that to me.

I felt like I was truly discovering myself again. I was free. I just wished that Misha was here to celebrate it with me. He hadn't even known I was a muse — just a patron who helped pay his bills and encouraged him to keep on creating, in exchange for some limited edition sculptures.

We arrived back at Enchant safely, and set down in the hallway outside the room we'd shared. The shield was left open in several places now so that people could come and go from the bar, but Riga had the ability to close it again at a moment's notice. She wasn't fast in her advanced age, but I was

certain she would be with this, if she had to be.

I took human form quickly, and gave my sports bag a shake when it was slow to transform back. With that done, I waited as Aurelia took form beside me. She was smiling, like she'd been on a fun adventure. Maybe my mischief was rubbing off on her, though I think it was more recklessness than anything else.

We were both relatively powerful beings. We didn't have to be super-careful, though Raphael was a reminder of the risks.

"I'm going to get a warm shower and change into some fresh, clean clothes," I said with a cheery demeanor.

"That sounds like a good plan," Aurelia replied.

I could tell she was happy for me. She really was incredibly beautiful, with her bright eyes and ringlets of blonde hair. She had a stunning figure, and I was sure shapeshifting had nothing to do with it.

"Want to join me?" I asked with a wink.

I was sure she'd say no. Absolutely sure. The blush of her cheeks and her silent nod caught me off-guard.

"Really?" I asked, completely dumbfounded.

She leaned in close to my ear and whispered, "Yes," before touching her lips to mine.

Shocked didn't cover it. Aroused did.

I drew her close into my arms as we kissed, hoping that somewhere high above in heaven, Raphael wouldn't be watching. It seemed unlikely with the shield in place. I wasn't even going to finish that thought. I had plenty of fun ones to occupy me instead.



AURELIA'S angelic lips were as sweet as they were needy. She pulled me against her, as though she couldn't get enough of me, and I held her in my arms. Soon, I craved more and I sensed she did too, so I helped her out of her jacket and top. She was lovely, whichever clothes she wore.

Her jeans were a little more complicated, as they clung tightly to her tempting curves. She smiled up at me seductively before removing them herself. There was nothing that could make me look away from her, though she kept distracting me with warm kisses.

Her smile was like sunlight, and the mischievous glint in her eyes made it abundantly clear she desired me. Aurelia wasn't wearing a bra, and she groaned as my hands explored her breasts. My thumbs teased her nipples, and slid lower to hold her petite waist.

Her skin felt like silk under my fingertips, and I couldn't help but marvel at the beauty of her. I wanted to make sure she felt desired and appreciated — something I'd felt missing from my life for far too long.

I kissed my way downward until I reached her soft, silken panties. Gazing up at her, I kissed her through the front of them, feeling her body tremble, and then I slid them down her legs. After all, we couldn't take a shower with clothes on, could we?

Aurelia moaned as I softly kissed her clit and teased her entrance with soft licks that made her pull my face against her.

"That feels so good," she whimpered as she indulged in the pleasure I gave her. "Let's take our shower together. Mmm, and take off those clothes, Melinda."

I did as she asked, removing my simple top and jeans, and let her take my bra off me. Her soft mouth claimed one of my nipples, sucking on it before I shimmed out of my panties and stepped into the shower with her. I had to remember how to switch it on, but it didn't take me long to figure out.

Soon, the warm water cascaded over us, washing us clean after our journey. With an intimacy that only comes from trust in one another, we embraced each other beneath the falling water. She felt so incredible, and so soft and warm against me, that I ached with desire for her.

I massaged Aurelia's shoulders as the warm water ran down our bodies. As we showered together, it was like time froze — all that existed was us.

I ran my hands through Aurelia's hair as she leaned back against me, feeling the softness of it between my fingertips. She sighed contentedly as I massaged in some shampoo, working it through every inch of her hair.

"You have such beautiful hair, you know? It's like gold."

Her closeness and the scent of the shampoo was intoxicating.

As she rinsed it off beneath the running water, my hands trailed lower, caressing her body and exploring each curve with a delicate touch.

Steam filled the bathroom with an air of intimacy as we created some steam of our own.

Her hands groped my breasts as I kissed her hungrily beneath the water. My hands slid down her back, pulling her tight against me, until I pushed her

back against the tiled wall and slid down, guiding her legs apart.

She grasped my hair, pulling me closer as I licked her warm clit and slid my fingers deep inside her. A day ago I would never have thought I'd be pleasuring an angel, but that was what I was doing now. I felt drawn to Aurelia, in ways both sensual and not. I felt like I could connect with her, and I desired her so much, that feeling overwhelmed all the caution I'd held in my heart.

As I sucked on her clit, she squirmed against my face, her cries reaching a fever pitch. Time and again, I slid my fingers into her tightening pussy as the warm water from the shower continued to rain down on us.

Aurelia cried out hard as she came against my face. I held her in place, licking her sensitive clit until she shuddered a second time, screaming out in ecstasy. She pulled away after that, moaning even as she caught her breath.

I rose to my feet, letting the water fall in my face for a moment before I took her in my arms. She seemed to enjoy that, and then with a wicked smile, she pinned me back against the wall.

"This is new," I said, grinning mischievously for her.

I was stunned — Aurelia held me there with magic. I knew I could intervene at any moment if I wanted to, because I had that power. I had no intention of going anywhere, and I was sure she knew it.

Her hands were all over my soft, wet skin. I breathed heavily as she took my nipple into her mouth, sucking on it gently and teasing it with the tip of her skilled tongue. Such a naughty angel, she was.

That felt so incredible, and as her hands wandered lower, I gasped. Her fingers slid over my lower lips, rubbing me and discovering just how wet I was for her. It wasn't from the shower. It was desire, and I ached to feel her mouth on my sex.

It wasn't often I was so caught off-guard. As she licked at my other nipple, I moaned her name, and she spread my legs wider apart with her magic. I couldn't believe what she was doing to me.

When she began to eat me out, I cried out softly and bumped my head back against the shower wall. It was ice cold, and the water falling over us was so warm. But her mouth, that was warmer still. She tongue-fucked my pussy, while her fingers — they were everywhere.

"You don't make love like an angel," I told her. "Not that I've done this with an angel before..."

I gasped as she spanked me and sucked firmly on my clit.

Her pretty face was buried between my legs, licking me, lapping hungrily at my sex, and I could barely take the pleasure of it. I almost drew on my magic for stamina, but I decided to let her bring me to ecstasy as she chose, and my climax was rapidly approaching.

My moans became harder, and deeper, and more desperate. I took everything she gave me, and when her fingers filled both of my holes, I squirmed atop them. She licked my clit, and didn't stop until I was crying out and coming on her face. She kept on going, and it took a sheer force of will to not break her magic hold and to take all of the pleasure she gave me, until I came again, shuddering, and she lifted me down from the wall, embracing me tightly under the running water.

I had no idea how much I needed that until she gave it to me. Until she made love to me in such an intensely pleasurable way. I had no idea she was capable of such a thing, and I knew that now I'd found her, I didn't want to let her go. Not just sexually — though don't get me wrong, I wanted more once I'd recuperated. I wanted to discover more of... this. What I might have with her. It intrigued me — and more than that, it consumed me.

AURELIA



I CLIMBED OUT FROM UNDER THE BLANKETS, GRINNING, AND SANK DOWN ON to the bed beside Melinda. She was beautiful, sexy, mischievous and she came so enthusiastically. I loved doing wicked things to her. That was why we'd been at it all night. I knew we had to get back to work on the investigation. Humanity would be waking up, and Misha's killer was still out there.

"That was so much fun," Melinda said as she stretched lazily, her expression calm and blissed. "Good thing I don't need much sleep."

"That's just what I was thinking," I replied. "I'm waiting for an analysis of the magic on your pin talisman. I'm hoping it might give us some insights."

"Wait a minute. I cast that magic myself," Melinda said. "I don't see how it could tell you anything of use."

"It's my belief that Misha's killer used it to pinpoint Raphael's location," I replied.

I didn't want to offend her, so I was careful with my words. "We believed they were tracking you. They found Raphael when they shouldn't have, especially as he was carrying the pin and it added an additional element of magical stealth. It's possible your pin was compromised."

Melinda looked confused. "I don't see how it could be, except... I'd cast a similar area-effect spell on my hotel room."

"The hotel that was later hit by a meteorite," I replied.

Just that realization made me feel sick. Melinda was my lover now and I had every urge to protect her. I knew my feelings for her went even deeper than that.

"I cast the protection spells myself using supplies I bought in Manhattan

on my way to the hotel. Aside from the pin, that is. I found it in my hotel room, not long after I moved in."

"I doubt that would give anyone enough of a chance to tamper with it," I said. "Most likely, someone had a way of scrying or magically searching out people or places that were protected using that particular kind of spell."

"I don't know who would have the ability to do that," Melinda replied, "or how. Maybe we ought to have a talk with Riga about it. She knows more about magic than me. She's a witch, whereas at my core, I am magic."

"I suppose in the same way, I'm light now," I said.

"Like the stars," Melinda said, and smiled as she embraced me.



RIGA OPENED the door of her apartment before we could knock.

"How did you know it was us?" I asked as she welcomed us into the room.

"The energy is coming off you two in waves. I know what you've been up to, ladies. So does half the hotel, more than likely."

Melinda laughed, and I couldn't help it, I blushed.

"We have reason to believe someone might've been able to track my use of a stealth spell. You know the one I used to create the pin?"

Melinda didn't seem to need to spell it out — so to speak.

"I've seen enough of it to get the gist," Riga replied.

She sat down in her armchair and put up her feet. She looked tired but in good spirits.

"You can't track a stealth spell, but you can track everything else, and the areas that don't show up as they ought to can be a telltale sign that someone is using a stealth spell. If you can find what's missing, you find what's hidden."

"That makes sense," I said, glancing from Riga to Melinda.

"I don't know why I didn't think of that," Melinda replied. "I guess I never thought anyone would be paying that much attention in a large-scale area."

"You're dealing with someone powerful. That means they're capable of seeing more and doing more. A standard stealth spell apparently isn't going to disguise your presence, unless you can conceal a large area or avoid using your powers. A goddess of your strength is going to flare any time you do anything magical, and that includes flying. It also includes sex."

"Whoops," Melinda replied.

"It's lucky we didn't run into them the last time we were out then," I replied.

It brought to mind our quick visit to Melinda's home to collect some of her clothes and valuables. It was a journey Raphael would've called reckless, but we couldn't solve the case by hiding away all the time.

"I imagine they're probably like everybody else, in that they can't be paying attention all the time. Now, it's possible they've enchanted an object, so extensive spellcasting isn't required when they want to search an area. It's also possible they have watchers — other beings or magic folk who are keeping an eye out. If it was me, I'd send them here," Riga said.

"Well that's not discomfoting at all," I said, a tone of sarcasm in my voice. "You could be right, though. We'll need to be careful and not assume Enchant is safe."

"I feel like we're no closer to figuring out who's responsible," Melinda replied.

"Maybe there's something I can do about that," I said. "I need to get the results of the magical analysis back. I might pay a visit to the sentinels and see what they've witnessed in the vicinity of the crimes."

"Do you want me to come with you?" Melinda asked.

Her tone was uneasy, which wasn't surprising, as she hadn't been on the best terms with heaven lately.

"No, I think this is something I'm best doing myself," I replied. "Don't worry, I'll be careful. Why don't you see if you can find out who would likely have access to that kind of magic, and what kind of magic they'd need to do it?" I asked.

Riga was listening. "A few types of magic spring to mind — shamanic, angelic, and scrying. It might be possible to narrow it down."

I nodded, and it wasn't lost on me that angelic magic was included. I strongly suspected the killer had connections to heaven, but we would see. Maybe it was just what they wanted us to think, in the hope we wouldn't do our due diligence.

When Riga turned her back, I kissed Melinda. The goddess smiled against my lips, and I heard a small huff from Riga across the room.

"Don't think I can't see you out of the back of my head," she said with a grin of her own.

I left through the door, and once I was outside the shielded area, I

changed form and flew upward toward heaven. I really didn't like heights, but I'd been flying so much lately, it didn't make me as uneasy as it had before.

I had a greater concern I'd be attacked like Raphael had been, but I didn't encounter any problems as I flew up into the sky. It only took a few minutes of flight before I surged through the grand entrance of heaven and set down on my own two feet.

I felt human, even though I was an angel now, but Melinda was right. In my heart, I was a being of light. I wanted to help people, and even though only a couple of days had passed since I took on the case, it still felt like I wasn't making enough progress fast enough. I wanted to catch the killer before they could harm anyone else.

That was why I was here. There were avenues I could only pursue in heaven, and perhaps, there were clues to be found here if an angel was responsible.

I dropped in on the young angel named Carriel first, who I found grooming the hierarchy's pegasi in the heavenly stables. Pegasi were winged horses, and though angels seldom rode them into battle these days, they were a sight to behold. Beautiful, certainly, with opalescent wings that reflected a myriad of colors when the light shone through them. They appeared friendly and sociable, but I knew in battle they had a reputation for being tremendously powerful and aggressive when needed. One should never underestimate a pegasi.

"Carriel," I called out as I approached her.

I was reluctant to get too close to the pegasi, even though they didn't seem to mind my presence. Their manes shone like the sun, and I resisted the temptation to shield my eyes as Carriel approached.

"Such beautiful beings, aren't they?" I asked. They weren't animals, exactly. They were more than that. Even many animals were more than humanity relegated animals to be, but that was a discussion for another time.

"Yes, and strong-willed," Carriel agreed.

"Do you know if the results of the analysis on the pin are back?"

"Oh, of course. Yes, they are. I gave them to Raphael — I hope that's alright."

"Of course," I said. "Why wouldn't it be? I'll go find him then."

She nodded to me, and then turned and went back to her work. It looked enjoyable, but given a choice I'd rather be on Earth because Melinda was there.



RAPHAEL FOUND me before I'd made my way to his quarters. It seemed quite by chance, but then as angels we knew that there was an undercurrent of destiny that ran through the world. Not every fate was defined by it — for example, Misha's, but it was there like a path in the sand that could help guide us in the right direction. I suspect that was why I ran into him.

We sat down on a white stone wall under the shade of a palm tree. It wasn't a busy part of heaven, but nor was it deserted, as one of the minor thoroughfares was located nearby.

"I've been meaning to contact you, Aurelia," Raphael said. "I would've returned to Enchant last night, but I'm still not quite well."

That would've been awkward if he'd turned up while Melinda and I were together.

"I'm sure you needed the time to heal. What did you find?" I asked him.

He pulled a collection of small pages from within a pocket of his trench coat.

"There was nothing untoward about the magic cast on the pin. It was a simple stealth spell created using goddess energy and stored in the pin's crystals. There wasn't anything else."

"Hmm, okay," I replied. "I've been thinking about that, and I spoke with Riga. She believes that it might be possible to detect the area of a stealth spell by the absence of an area that can be detected. For instance, by detecting the reverse. I think it might be how the attacker found you, Raphael. They could determine which area was disguised, and you were in that area, because you were carrying the pin."

"I was going to say to be careful how much you disclose to Riga, but that is a good insight," Raphael replied. "I think that was likely the case as well. I went to see the sentinels this morning."

"I was thinking of doing the same thing," I replied. "What were you able to find out?"

"They initially said there was no one seen leaving Misha Drake's studio, but we've discovered that wasn't entirely accurate. An angel was seen in the vicinity — two blocks away from the studio — but not included in the original assessment due to the distance and their angelic status."

"Do you know who it was?" I asked, growing more intrigued by the moment.

"Yes, it was Joanne," he replied. "Oddly, she has no recollection of ever being there."

"Joanne?" I asked with confusion.

She was my superior, and the one who had assigned me to the investigation in the first place, on the orders of someone higher up — or so she'd said.

"There has to be some mistake," I continued, as I wondered how this figured into the bigger picture. "She was in heaven, unless she could have slipped down to the mortal sphere? Is it possible a shapeshifter could've taken her form? But then, how would they know what she looked like?"

"You make good points," Raphael replied. "We've ascertained that she's telling the truth. She doesn't remember being near Misha Drake's home. It's questionable whether she'd be strong enough to rend his soul. If she had a source of additional power—"

"You think she did it?" I asked as I stared off into the distance. I couldn't put in words what I felt — it was a blend of outrage, shock, disappointment, and above all, confusion. I didn't see how Joanne could be guilty — I knew her, and she was one of the most honorable angels I knew, and yet, from an unbiased standpoint, her presence near Misha's home was suspicious.

"I haven't determined her guilt, so no, I cannot say I think she did it at this juncture," Raphael replied. "I would suggest you try to remain unbiased as best you can. If you cannot, it might be wise to re-assign the investigation to someone else who doesn't have a strong personal connection to Joanne."

I felt a little hurt that Raphael would say such a thing, and yet, he was right. I had to do what was right for the investigation above all else. I wanted to help Joanne, but I also knew that if she was guilty, I had to let justice take its course.

"I don't believe that will be necessary," I replied.

Goodness. Between my budding relationship with Melinda and now this worrisome situation with Joanne, it was shaping up to be anything but an unbiased case. It was time I reined in my behavior and got the job done, I knew.

"I think we must consider that Joanne might've been an accomplice or even a victim of someone more powerful," I said, voicing my thoughts. "She could've been controlled from afar, and made to carry out the murder."

"Those are possibilities," Raphael said. "It's also possible that she isn't who we believed her to be. As I'm recuperating in heaven for the time being,

I will see if she has an alibi."

I nodded at that. "We also know when and where you were attacked, and you could see if she had an alibi for that time as well. I'd like to check with the sentinels whether she was at Lucia's home at any point. I would expect the killer to check on her, if we were correct about our Nephilim theory."

"There's no need," Raphael said. "I'll take it up with the sentinels. Please, continue the search on the ground, then we can check in and see if either of us has further information."

"Sure, that sounds wise to me," I said. "I'd like to check on Joanne. Perhaps some reassurance from me might help her open up and talk to us."

"You have that right, but it might be preferable that you don't," Raphael said. "I'm thinking more for your sake than hers. You need to be unbiased, and her current mental state is only going to affect you, especially when you're such a strong empath. This mustn't cloud your mind. We're relying on you, just as you're relying on me and Melinda now, to get to the bottom of this case."

I sighed softly, but I didn't feel the motivation to challenge Raphael's stance on this. He was probably right, and yet I felt that a hug would probably be beneficial to Joanne's state of mind. The honest truth was there wasn't much more I could do for her right now except solve this case and try to clear her of any wrongdoing.

I nodded in agreement with him, and he seemed to appreciate my choice.

"Do you think Joanne could've been the one who attacked you?" I asked.

"My heart tells me it wasn't her, but I'm not sure. The mask my attacker wore wasn't in her quarters, but it could be stashed somewhere on Earth."

"I will keep a lookout for it," I promised him. "I'm confident we will find the one who did this to you, and the one who... harmed Misha. It occurred to me that despite visiting Lucia, we haven't interviewed her yet."

"I talked to her when I went to see her," Raphael replied. "She was returning from work when she found out Misha had passed. The only thing that seemed relevant was that Misha had called her and told her he loved her the night before. He seemed afraid, but he wouldn't tell her why."

"If need be, we can return to interview her further, but she's in a fragile state right now. She's going to need time."

MELINDA



"YOU SLEPT WITH ONE OF THE ANGELS INVESTIGATING YOU? REALLY?" RIGA asked as she sat with a cup of tea in front of her. "You could sleep with almost anybody..."

"I like her, and she likes me," I said, by way of explanation.

Now, admittedly it wasn't the best explanation out there, but it happened to be true. I sank back in the chair and glanced back at Riga.

"She's also very good in bed," I added, just because I found the comment entertaining. It was also true.

Riga rubbed her eyes, as though she was exhausted all of a sudden. "You're telling me things I don't need to know!"

"I suppose I am at that," I replied.

An impish smile formed on my face, and sure enough, I had Riga smiling before she could finish her cup of tea.

"So our task is to identify the kinds of magic the attacker has used," I said. "We know they flew when they attacked the archangel Raphael, so that narrows it down to deities, angels, demons, shapeshifters or shamans. Unless I'm forgetting anyone."

"Shapeshifters and shamans would fly by taking full or partial animal form. It's possible, but doesn't sound like the case here," Riga said. "Fae magic is also a possibility."

"Ouch, let's hope not," I replied. "Fae aren't supposed to have broken through into our world in several hundred years. We wouldn't want them to start now."

"I would guess we're either dealing with one of your kind, an angel or a demon, or a species hybrid," Riga surmised.

"A hybrid like a Nephilim?" I asked, remembering a previous discussion on the subject.

"It's possible," Riga said. "A Nephilim can be powerful, and so could another, similar hybrid. For instance, the offspring of an angel and a demon could become even more powerful than the child of an angel and a human. It's documented in some historical magical texts. There haven't been any instances that I recall of children born of angels and gods, or demons and gods for that matter, but that isn't to say it hasn't occurred. It isn't that they would need to be Nephilim, though. An angel, a demon or a god could become powerful enough to commit these crimes."

I tapped my lips as I gave it more thought. "When Aurelia gets back, it might be a good idea to ask her about the current status of demonic activity on Earth. My understanding is there are occasional instances of individuals breaking through, and a few operating in the shadows, but the old seals are holding — for the most part. Perhaps something has recently changed."

"The seals are always many times stronger than the being trying to leave hell. It's why weaker beings sometimes get out with outside help, while stronger beings have next to no chance," Riga explained. "If there were enough powerful beings helping them from the outside, they might be able to, but thankfully for us, there aren't."

"Could you use magic to detect how many gods, angels, demons or Nephilim there are in the city?" I asked.

"I'm afraid not," Riga replied. "The angels might keep track of their own... people," she said. "Gods — well, we know what you're like."

"Eh!" I replied, narrowing my eyes. "How many of those could best an archangel in a fight?"

"It depends on how powered up they are?" Riga asked, with a shrug. "A normal angel wouldn't. A god could, but there are very few with that kind of power. As for demons, I'd rather not think about it. And a Nephilim could."

"So that rules out most average-level angels unless they have an additional source of power — which they could. What do you call them, Seraphim?"

Riga nodded. "There are various types, but yes. Please continue."

"And as long as the seals of hell are intact, we can rule out a demon. So it's either a god, a Nephilim or another, similar hybrid. Quite possibly part-angel," I surmised. "It makes sense."

Riga nodded. "Most gods wouldn't care to target Misha Drake or our

acquaintance, Raphael. It also doesn't make a lot of sense. It would be a strange play for a god, but perhaps not for a Nephilim."

"I will speak with Aurelia about it," I replied. "So what do you think? Does our reasoning actually make sense?"

"I think so," Riga replied. "It's a guess, but an educated one."

"Indeed. Are we still thinking of setting a trap? Using the stealth spell attracted their attention before. It might bring them to us again," I said.

"Not at this stage. We will need to ensure we have adequate help if that becomes the plan. We know what this being did to Misha, and you're like family to me, Melinda. I couldn't bear losing you."

"Aww," I replied, beaming with a smile for Riga. "Sometimes I think you don't approve of me, and then you go say things like that."

"You know I do," Riga replied. "You just do my head in at times."

"Sounds like me," I replied with a grin.



IT WAS evening before Aurelia returned, and I was halfway through eating a double cheeseburger in the bar. While it was quieter than a usual Thursday night, there were still half a dozen people mulling about, drinks in hand.

"Oh wow, that looks delicious," she said as she pulled up a seat beside me.

"I'd magic you up another, but apparently it makes me flare with energy. You could order one?" I suggested.

Aurelia obviously liked the idea, because she did just that.

"We don't have a lot of privacy here, so I'll keep my voice down," she said. "There has been a development. An angel was spotted in the vicinity of Misha's studio around the time he was killed. A few blocks away, but still... close. She has no memory of what happened, or even being there. It's possible she might've been controlled by someone else... or she could've just carried out the attack herself. I'm reluctant to jump to conclusions as she could've been close by for another reason."

My eyebrows rose as Aurelia explained. "Would she have been powerful enough to do that? I've been talking with Riga. We believe a hybrid like a Nephilim might be responsible. That or a god, but a hybrid makes more sense. It's my understanding that most angels wouldn't have the ability to do

this, with the exception of archangels, unless they're more than they appear to be. Someone could have been working with her — or giving her greater power."

"I'll let you know when I find out more," Aurelia promised. "So long as I have a right to disclose the information. I just left heaven, but perhaps I should return and convey what we've discussed. Raphael should be able to check into whether she's a Nephilim... or a hybrid, or if there's one operating in the New York area without anyone noticing. The analysis on your pin came back just as you expected — there wasn't any additional magic cast."

I nodded at that. It didn't surprise me at all. I took Aurelia's hand and held it for a few moments.

It was nice, and despite the topic of discussion, it was romantic. A smile passed between us and a palpable sense of excitement that hadn't been there before. What was it about Aurelia that made everything better? Or maybe it was that the two of us were together. I meant together as in the same place at the same time. We weren't girlfriends yet, but maybe that was on the horizon. I sure hoped it could be. I wanted to spend all of the time with her that I could, because I wasn't sure what tomorrow would bring.

We paused our conversation as the server brought out Aurelia's burger and a side of fries. The whole world and the investigation was put on hold for a while as we spent some simple moments together, enjoying our dinners and each other's presence. Don't get me wrong, I'd have loved to whisk her away to the bedroom for some spontaneous shenanigans, but I knew the importance of our task.

It was nice just being with her like this. I hoped that after all of this was over, we'd get some more time together. I knew angels born of heaven were required to limit their relationships to others of their kind. The consequences could be great if they didn't, due to the nature of their offspring.

Aurelia was different though — she hadn't always been an angel. I was also known to the angelic hierarchy and had been one of them. In fact, I might still have been, as I hadn't technically quit yet. The angelic hierarchy ran by order, rules and regulations, so I didn't know for sure. It made sense to keep our relationship on the down-low for the time being.

I hoped the angelic hierarchy wouldn't have a sudden inclination to re-lock my powers, but they would need to be here in person to try it. Besides, I gave them permission last time.

"You look like you're a thousand miles away," Aurelia said before

gathering up two french fries and eating them at the same time.

"From you? Never," I said with a warm smile for her. "I was just thinking about heavenly obligations, but I can do that later. Tell me more about yourself. There's so much I don't know."

"Well, I have excellent taste in women," Aurelia said with a grin for me. "I was a human woman and I died sooner than I should have, but that's the way it goes sometimes. I was working on a cruise ship, and I fell overboard. I remember hitting the water — and that was it. I'd already been reunited with my grandparents in heaven, and spent some time there, before the archangel Uriel came to find me. He offered me a choice to join them, and I accepted.

"I still don't know why they chose me, only that they did. It's my understanding that they're guided in such choices by a higher authority, but beyond that, I can't say."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," I said, squeezing Aurelia's hand.

I didn't like to think about the idea that she'd died. I was glad she'd found her way back to the living world and become an angel. I couldn't help wondering what this meant for her if she chose to no longer align herself with the angelic hierarchy. Would she become a spirit again? That thought disturbed me. Still, there was no reason she should cease to be an angel. I was just contemplating the possibilities, that was all.

I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye as a figure approached. She was a young girl with brown hair, around thirteen years old. Was she even allowed in the bar? Probably not. It dawned on me almost at once that she wasn't human, and probably wouldn't have been at Enchant if she was.

"Carriel," Aurelia said, glancing up from the table.

Aurelia released my hand, and I felt a pang of hurt at the gesture, but of course she was going to do that if Carriel was someone she knew. With a name like that, she had to be an angel... or a courier.

"Ah, Aurelia. There you are. And you must be the muse Melinda," she said, nodding to me.

I nodded back, though I thought of myself as the goddess Melinda again and no longer a muse. I was done being a muse for heaven. You could say I wasn't amused by their recent actions.

"I come with news. I'm sorry to tell you that Melinda's residence was ransacked. We're not sure who was responsible, but I'm sure you might have suspicions about it, just as we do," she said.

"What?! How badly was it ransacked?" I asked.

After all, I'd collected a bag of possessions. It wasn't the tidiest house to begin with, once I got a hold of it, but that wasn't what she meant by the sound of things.

Carriel grimaced. "Many things in the house were broken and torn up, and the front door was sitting open. A cat and its kittens had moved in."

"Cats? Really?" I asked. "The house holds most of my possessions."

"The house has been sealed up for now and the cats relocated. It might not be safe to return yet. Someone seems fixated on you," Carriel admitted.

I feared she was right, and she wasn't talking about Aurelia, who seemed fixated in a good way. That feeling was mutual. At least I had her to take my mind off the other sort of fixation — the one of a killer who might have wanted to take my soul, such as it was. Goddess energy.

"I can hold off for a while, I suppose," I replied, my sense of unease growing.

"It sounds like they might've been looking for something," Aurelia said as she glanced between myself and Carriel. "Did they concentrate their efforts in any specific room?"

Carriel shook her head. "The living room and bedroom mostly. They even cut up the mattress."

My heart sank when I heard that.

"That area has CCTV coverage. See if you can get a hold of the footage, in case the person who did this appears on camera. Were there any sentinels keeping watch?" Aurelia asked.

Carriel shook her head. "Not at the time. I should get back to heaven. I need to report to Raphael before I begin my next shift."

"Shift?" I asked, wondering what she was referring to.

"In the stables," she replied.

My eyebrows rose at that.

"Could you please take a message back to Raphael for me?" Aurelia asked. "I just need to write it down, as it's somewhat complex."

Carriel nodded.

"I'll be back in a few minutes, Melinda. Keep my food warm for me, will you?"

"Of course," I replied.

When they left, I wondered if they were discussing angel business alone. For whatever reason, Aurelia seemed to want to send a written note and not a verbal one. Perhaps she didn't fully trust the messenger, but then written

messages could be read too.

Aurelia wasn't gone for long, and Carriel didn't return to the bar. When Aurelia sat down at the table with me, she leaned in close.

"I sent Raphael an update on our progress. The person or people who ransacked your home were obviously looking for something. It's hard to know whether they found it, but if they didn't, do you think it's possible you might still have it with you?" Aurelia asked.

"I — I don't know," I replied. "I suppose that's possible. I only brought a gym bag of possessions back with me. Why don't you finish your meal and we can have a look?"

AURELIA



IT WAS NICE TO BE ALONE AGAIN WITH MELINDA. I WAS GROWING MORE concerned though with the way she was obviously being targeted. I hoped they were only after something they thought she had, and weren't fixated on harming her, but either way her life was at risk.

"I can't imagine I have anything they're looking for," she said, as she dumped the contents of her bag upside down on the bed.

A pile of her clothes fell out, and I smiled at the lacy things, but what caught my attention most was the sculptures. "Misha created those?" I asked as I reached for the nearest.

It seemed to be white marble with gold veins, and showed two women embracing and melding together. It was on a carved, light wooden base.

"Yeah, he did. When he brought me that one, I always assumed it was his way of telling me that he knew I liked women," Melinda said.

"I get that impression too," I replied as I looked it over.

The sculpture was a lovely piece of work. It seemed simple, and yet it captured a great deal of detail, or maybe it was complexity. I could see his talent showing through.

Melinda handed me the other sculpture she'd brought with her, and I set the first one down.

This one was carved almost like a bonsai tree, only it had a small roof and an owl perched in the branches. As I looked it over, I smiled. I could understand why Melinda chose it from among the sculptures he'd given her to keep. Unlike the first one, it didn't have a wooden base, only a hollow in the clay material he'd used.

Neither sculpture was very large. The hollow made me think to re-

examine the first sculpture, and when I pulled on the base, it came off.

"Hey, don't break it," Melinda exclaimed.

"It's alright," I said as a piece of paper dropped out of the base and fell on to the bed. "It looks like it's intended to be opened."

Melinda snatched up the paper, then unfolded it.

I moved closer, leaning in so I could read what it said. It was effectively a last message to Melinda from Misha, so I probably should've given her more privacy, in retrospect, but I was curious.

"Crazy," Melinda said.

It contained a list of names and information, only it wasn't any ordinary list. It was entitled 'Sins of Supernatural Beings' and it had six names listed. One was particularly familiar.

It read as follows:

1. Archangel Gabriel — secret lovechild.
2. Archangel Uriel — fabricating prophecy.
3. Seraphim Joanne — bribery and coercion.
4. Fallen Seraphim Joaquin — aiding the escape of dark entities.
5. Goddess Thursa — fomenting rebellion.
6. Shapeshifter Tori Sarell — turning supernaturals.

"I don't know why he would give this to me," Melinda said, shaking her head. "I didn't have anything to do with this — you have to believe me."

"It's alright," I told her, and held her hand comfortingly.

I was stunned by the list. Could Gabriel's lovechild — if this was true — be the one we were looking for? The fact Joanne's name appeared in the list wasn't reassuring. If this list was real then maybe she wasn't innocent, or perhaps she'd made herself vulnerable through her actions. I wasn't jumping to any conclusions, though.

"Misha might've given this to you as a backup, in case something happened to him. It's really hard to say, though. If the killer is looking for the list, then how would they know you had it? And how would they know it existed at all?"

"Misha might've told them, if they tortured him," Melinda replied. "I really don't like to think about that. Maybe they don't even know of its existence and they think Misha might've told me what he knew?"

"Also possible," I replied. "I don't think there's any other way around this — we need to take this list up to heaven. If it's what the killer's looking for, it isn't safe here. Some of these supposed crimes can only be investigated

there."

Melinda nodded at that. "I don't want to put the non-angels in jeopardy if they're innocent, but I trust heaven to treat them fairly, as you have treated me."

"Then we should go right now," I said. "And stop on the way to warn Riga that the threat level might've increased."



WE CALLED AHEAD for an escort of angels to accompany us as we made our way up to heaven. I feared another attack, and sure enough, by the time we were halfway there, a winged figure was spotted in the distance.

"What or who is it?" I heard an angel ask.

I didn't know his name. "We need to keep going," I replied. "Fly faster."

We needed to make it back to heaven safe and sound. I hoped it wasn't a decision I'd regret, but what were the other options? Return to Enchant and hide out?

I felt uneasy about the approaching figure. We put on a burst of speed that took us up into the clouds more quickly. Melinda couldn't quite match our speed, but she was close, so we stayed together as a group. The winged figure gained on us, but they couldn't catch up before we reached heaven.

The moment we set down, I ordered more angels to go after our pursuer. I suspected they wouldn't catch up with the stranger, but I was hopeful.

Turning to Melinda, I asked, "Are you alright?"

She nodded. "A bit out of breath and windswept, but I'll be fine. What now?"

"We need to go see Raphael," I replied.

Around this moment I noticed a number of angels gathering nearby, looking at Melinda. It reminded me that she had been wanted and my task had been to return her to heaven. It no longer was, but I decided it might be best to leave before there were any mix-ups.

I led the way, and stretched out my senses searching for Raphael as we approached his quarters. We didn't get far before we were approached by an older female angel known as Erisiel.

"The archangel Raphael is in the Great Hall of Light and seeks an audience with you. If you'll both follow me."

Heaven isn't purely a physical place, and she bent space so the path would take us there more quickly. Soon we were at the entrance with its huge cherrywood doors, but two angels guarding it barred the way. Their swords were sheathed but offered a silent warning.

"The goddess Melinda can't proceed any further," the nearest of the guards said. "She will be taken in for questioning."

I wondered if they were choosing not to recognise her role as muse. Several more angels approached, and my eyes widened in shock.

"Melinda has been cleared of any wrongdoing," I said. "Besides, I will need her with me as we seek to explain the evidence we've found."

"You will have to manage alone," the angel said as he gestured to the others to take Melinda away. "A goddess with her full powers isn't allowed to enter the Great Hall of Light, and this is required."

"I promise, we'll get this sorted out soon," I told Melinda.

She looked upset, but more than that surprised, as she followed the angels away.

"Oh wait," she said, holding out her gym bag.

"Thank you," I told her as I took the bag from her.

"I have faith." Those were the last words she spoke to me before she was taken away.

I knew they'd haunt me until she was freed.

"Well done for fulfilling your mission and bringing Melinda back to heaven," the guard said with an approving smile.

"It was no longer the mission," I replied.

He merely shrugged as he resumed his work, and I made my way into the hall alone. The angel Erisiel didn't follow me.

I wasn't sure what to expect. I had aimed to meet with Raphael alone, but when I learned about the Hall, I expected more angels.

There were three archangels waiting there for me — Raphael, Gabriel and Uriel. Oh, this was going to go well. I sighed as I stood before them, Melinda's bag still in hand.

"Aurelia, I heard you were followed upon your return to heaven," Raphael said. "I'm glad you made it here safely."

"Thank you," I replied. "I think the one following us might've got away, but I'm not sure, as I left before the angelic patrol returned."

"Of course," he replied. "You're probably wondering why Melinda was taken into custody. It's mainly a formality, and we want to be sure she wasn't

involved in this. I have already spoken on her behalf."

I gave him a soft smile. His mere presence reassured me. I nodded to all three angels as I opened the bag and lifted out Misha Drake's sculpture — the one that had held the note. I wanted to get straight to the explanation, because I didn't want to leave Melinda alone. She needed to know she wouldn't be abandoned here.

"The angel Carriel informed Melinda and I that her angelic residence, which she'd occupied while working as a muse on heaven's behalf, had been ransacked.

"We didn't go there after receiving Carriel's information, but Melinda retrieved a bag of items before that. We believe the person who ransacked her home might've been looking for something, and there was a very small chance she might have it.

"There were two sculptures of Misha's that Melinda retrieved from among her belongings. One of them contained a hidden note with alleged information about the sins of supernatural beings, including angels — including two of you present here today."

Gabriel's eyebrows rose. He was a tall and solidly built man with pale skin and long, blond hair. In a word, I'd describe him as intimidating.

Uriel had red hair, which set him apart from the others.

"May we see this note?" Gabriel asked.

I took it out of the gym bag and brought it over to where the three angels sat at a higher table, where I gave it to them.

"This is the sculpture it was in," I said simply as I set it down as well. I inclined my head and stepped away to let them read the note and examine the sculpture.

I wouldn't have felt comfortable sharing the sculpture, given its sensual focus, if Melinda hadn't agreed to it. Thankfully, she had.

The three archangels leaned in closer to read the note at the same time. It was an interesting visual, almost like three brothers stepping close together to fit in the frame for a photo. They couldn't look more different.

I reminded myself of what the note had said.

1. Archangel Gabriel — secret lovechild.
2. Archangel Uriel — fabricating prophecy.
3. Seraphim Joanne — bribery and coercion.
4. Fallen Seraphim Joaquin — aiding the escape of dark entities.
5. Goddess Thursa — fomenting rebellion.

6. Shapeshifter Tori Sarell — turning supernaturals.

"It's interesting and troubling that such a thing should be written down and hidden within the sculpture," Gabriel said. "It's no secret that I have a child, though I wouldn't call it common knowledge either, especially among humanity."

"This is true. I'm his godfather," Raphael said simply.

"And I weave the prophecy God intends for the world," Uriel said. "There is a degree of interpretation about His wishes and I bring them about in the way I feel is best. In that manner, I do fabricate prophecies, but it isn't something I'm dishonest about. This note is twisting the truth in an attempt to shame us or turn people against us."

It was eye-opening to hear their explanations. I trusted them implicitly, but even had I not, my angel senses discerned that they were telling the truth.

"That also casts doubt that any of the other accusations are true," I replied. "I'm sorry I brought this to you when it contained such great untruths."

"Oh no," Raphael replied. "It's important that we know about this. The mention of Joanne is timely. You say Melinda collected these items from her home?"

"Yes, the night before it was ransacked," I replied. "That was last night. The days are blending together a little. I was with her when she put them in her bag."

Uriel studied the note. "It's possible someone anticipated Melinda's return home. Then after she collected her belongings, they could've staged the break-in to suggest no one interfered with the house until after she collected her possessions."

"That's possible," Gabriel replied. "It's also possible Melinda might've written the note and slipped it inside the sculpture. It seems like a simpler explanation."

"I don't think Melinda would do that," I said. "She's been working on the case with me, trying to find who was responsible for Misha's death. What could she have gained by doing that?"

"A distraction maybe?" Raphael surmised. "I know you want to trust Melinda, and I don't believe she was responsible for Misha's death, but everyone has an agenda, Aurelia. Her intentions might not fully align with yours... and with ours. She is a goddess, after all, and investigation aside, she no longer seems driven to serve the angelic hierarchy."

"How do you know?" I asked Raphael. I was concerned about what this would mean for her, and if I was honest with myself, for us, but I tried to focus on the case and the larger picture. I needed to remain focused on the moment.

"Because she has opted to keep her powers and not have them locked again," Gabriel replied.

"I see. I wasn't aware of that." I frowned slightly, wondering when she was going to tell me — and if she was going to. It was a personal decision of hers though, and to have them locked again would mean giving up powers like flight for her. "Maybe she feels better able to defend herself with her powers available. If the locks hadn't been removed, she'd likely have died when Enchant was attacked."

"We don't know that for certain but it's something to take into account," Raphael said. "Now, we haven't discussed Joanne's name on that note. There's nothing to suggest she bribed or coerced anyone. It seems more likely at this stage that she was merely a victim, and that the person behind this had tampered with her mind. We've found signs that a being has tried to tamper with her soul."

"What?" I asked in confusion. "Who would do such a thing?"

"It would seem that it was most likely an attempt to infiltrate or influence heaven by someone who doesn't have access," Uriel said.

"So, someone powerful who isn't serving heaven," I said. "We had a theory that it might be a Nephilim or another hybrid of two species."

"It would explain the situation," Raphael agreed. "We've ruled out the other gods who are known to operate in New York. A dark entity of that power level is highly unlikely, and a fae, even less so. We need only find the correct frequency of their magic to see when and where their powers flare. Its difference from the full-blooded varieties might be why it's so well hidden from us. We will work on it. Until then, you may go witness Melinda's questioning, should you wish to do so."

"Thank you for that," I replied.

"Oh and Aurelia," Uriel said, "please bear in mind that a conflict of interest could prove disadvantageous to solving this case, hmm?"

I nodded. "I understand." I bowed before leaving the room. My heart was beating wildly, but they didn't have any way of hearing that, as far as I knew.

I hurried down to the security office and gave my authorization. A viewing portal was opened for me to watch Melinda being questioned. I'd

have reached through and held her hand, if it were possible.

MELINDA



"YOU WILL WAIT IN HERE," THE ANGEL SAID AS HE LED ME INTO ONE OF THE interrogation rooms.

I knew they were seldom used, as it was rare for non-angels to be allowed in to heaven, except for when they were serving the angelic hierarchy in some capacity... as I had been, until recently.

The interrogation room sounded terrifying, but I had a degree of trust in the angelic hierarchy to treat me well. I knew I'd gained Raphael's trust, and as he was an archangel, his voice carried great weight in heaven.

Then there was Aurelia. I had faith in her, and given what we'd shared, and our time spent investigating the crime, I wasn't going to let fear overtake me. Even though it was mildly intimidating being left in the interrogation room alone... to ponder.

An older female angel entered the room a short time later. There was no reason to believe she was actually an older woman — largely, angels could appear however they wanted to. That was food for thought for me. They obviously had ways of recognizing each other, and I knew I would sense Aurelia based on her energy.

The angel stated the time and date, and I realized in some way she was recording our interview. Perhaps that wasn't surprising.

"I am Seraphim Ranley, serving as a local security officer. You're the goddess Melinda Grace, previously serving as a muse for the angelic hierarchy, and you were assigned to inspire and support the human artist, Misha Drake?"

"That's not correct," I said, slightly confused that the angel would phrase the question the way she did. "Well, not all of it is. I am the goddess Melinda

Grace, but Misha Drake wasn't human. He was a fallen angel in human form. You haven't been told this?"

She looked taken aback. "You... are you sure?" she asked.

I was surprised she showed more shock than doubt, and I nodded. "That was what I was told after his death. We believe it might be why he was targeted."

Ranley looked set to leave the room, but then she sat back down.

"Who was it that told you Misha was a fallen angel?"

"I think... Riga was the first one to talk about it, after the archangel Raphael confirmed it to her. Aurelia and I later spoke of it, and..."

"Who is Riga?" Ranley asked with some confusion.

"She's my friend," I explained. "She's old — approaching ninety now, and she's a mostly-retired witch. Someone tried to kill her by teleporting her above the city and Raphael saved her life. He flew right up there and caught her."

"I see," Ranley replied with a frown.

I got the impression there was a lot Seraphim Ranley hadn't been told.

"So what is it you want to know?" I asked her.

"Everything," she replied.

I knew that was going to take a while.

"I'll start at the beginning," I replied.

Tempted as I was to start at the very beginning of existence, I didn't fancy being here all night long, so I gave Ranley the information that was directly relevant and hoped it would be good enough.



RANLEY LEFT the interrogation room about an hour into the interview, and another, male angel came in to take her place. He named himself as Seraphim Leoriel, and the questions changed — taking on a rather odd shift toward my angelic acquaintances.

Aurelia never arrived, not that I thought they'd let her in, but a part of me had hoped they would.

"Do you have any reason to doubt the loyalty of your angelic allies?" Leoriel asked as he paced around the too-small interrogation room.

I was sure it was a design feature, to make the place even less pleasant

than it could've been.

"No, not at all," I replied with total honesty. "Raphael has demonstrated kindness, compassion, intelligence and he has approached the investigation logically each step of the way, as far as I can see. He saved my friend's life, and he came back up to heaven after being badly injured. Once here, he continued the investigation..."

"Continued in what way?" Leoriel asked as he leaned forward in his seat. I didn't know what to make of that.

"Doing research, I suppose. I know he received the analysis of a pin I wore to see if it contained any unwanted magic. Apart from that, I'm not sure. He seemed to direct the investigation, and Aurelia took him the information she learned each step of the..."

One moment, I was dwelling on the details of the investigation, and the next, the wall exploded inward, showering the room with dust and debris.

A figure floated through a massive hole in the wall, and it was only when the dust shifted that I noticed a hint of translucent wings on the angel's back. I didn't recognize the angel in question, though I could tell she was female. Her head hung down with her long hair sleek around her face. I could honestly say I'd never seen her before in my life, so why was she in my interrogation room?

"Joanne, what are you doing?" Leoriel asked.

I released a silent 'ah.' So this was Aurelia's superior, who was potentially the victim of the killer's mind control? And whose memories had been erased? She looked more a threat than a victim now, and when she raised her head, her eyes glowed in a distinctly unangel-like manner.

"Joanne has left the building," she replied as I felt a wave of energy sweep through the room. I ducked down, which was lucky, because it was almost like a net had been cast, and she was reeling it in. Only instead of dragging me... she dragged Leoriel's soul instead, and it seemed as though she was pulling it apart.

I heard a tearing noise — just as I had from a distance that day Misha had been killed. I might not have been a fan of my questioner, but I couldn't let this happen to him. Not if I had any say about it.

I sent out a blast of magic, fracturing the net into hundreds of shards of energy. The moment the net of magic broke, Leoriel's soul flowed back into its previous shape. He went from falling down to recoiling in a matter of moments, his eyes wide with horror. He knew what Joanne had just tried to

do to him.

"No, noooo..." he cried out as he backed away.

His eyes darted to me, and so did Joanne's... or what had once been Joanne's body.

I threw up a hasty shield, blocking the attacker's next attempt to snag us with a freshly summoned net. Then I threw all of my strength into bringing the ceiling down on our attacker. As it crashed down, pinning them to the floor, I glanced Leoriel's way.

"Help me... our attacker's too powerful for me alone."

He seemed afraid to do anything, but I felt him add his strength to mine. I wasn't sure if it would work, but I reached out to Aurelia's mind.

'Please, I need your help. Joanne is attacking us, only she's not herself anymore. Please come! We need you.'

I repeated the same message for Raphael. I assumed Aurelia was the most likely to hear me because of our connection, whereas Raphael was the most powerful.

I had no idea whether he could hear me or not — it was harder to communicate telepathically without line of sight — but I couldn't help but shout to his mind after what had just happened.

There was no way out of the cell, except through the hole in the wall behind our attacker, and there was no easy way to get past. Then I remembered — I was a goddess, and more than capable of tearing down walls if I put my mind to it. I didn't sense any beings on the other side of our cell door, so I momentarily opened the shield and blasted the door with every ounce of energy I could muster.

It shattered in a shower of splintered wood, and it was a blessed sight to see a means of escape. Leoriel ran straight for the door, and I followed, keeping the shield firmly in place in the interrogation room until I got halfway down the corridor and it was out of my range to sustain.

Raphael and Gabriel arrived at the scene moments later, flying past us toward the remnants of the interrogation room door.

Before I could have another thought, Aurelia's arms were around me, and then she was pulling me to safety, further away from the scene that was continuing to unfold further into the cell block.

"Are you alright?" she asked me as we ran.

I nodded, but realizing she didn't see, I spoke up. "Yes, I think so."

Crowds of angels gathered, and I sensed the danger might be over for us,

but I couldn't know for sure. Who or whatever inhabited Joanne's form was incredibly powerful and completely devoid of compassion. It wanted me for some reason — I still wasn't clear on why that was. As far as I knew, I'd never had anything to do with... whoever that was.

If Joanne had indeed 'vacated the building,' it had to be a god possessing or controlling her, I realized. That net — it wasn't a method of magic I'd have expected an angel to use.

Something about it seemed familiar, but I couldn't think why. We flew up several levels and down a long corridor. There, we took cover in what appeared to be someone's quarters. They were simple, but rather nice; sparingly decorated, but with a feminine touch.

"These are your rooms?" I asked Aurelia as we caught our breaths.

"They are. You're very perceptive," she replied.

I paid more attention. We were in Aurelia's living room, but I could see a bedroom beyond it through an open door. There was a four-poster bed with a silver and white patchwork quilt, and a soft rug spread over the floor. I couldn't see what else.

The living area held two comfortable chairs with velvet seats near the fireplace, which was lit. A few bookshelves lined the walls, filled with books on magic and mythology, as well as trinkets that probably held meaning for Aurelia.

A small table sat in one corner of the room, just beneath a window that overlooked a garden below. I wasn't sure the garden was real, as her rooms had been in a corridor with many similar doors, but it looked like it was. A child's drawing, framed in silver, had pride of place on the wall. It was created with crayons, but it was well done.

"What's the story of this?" I asked her, suspecting I already knew the answer.

"I had a daughter in my past life, as a human," she said as she sat down in one of the chairs. "She's still alive, and has a son and grandchildren of her own now. I was a spirit for a while before they chose me to become an angel, so what only feels like a few years to me has been far longer for her."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked her. I hoped I wasn't making her uncomfortable, but she didn't seem to be.

"It just never came up as relevant," Aurelia replied with a bittersweet smile. "I've been to see her a few times. They told me they'd prefer I didn't, but they never said I couldn't. I like to check in on how she's doing, and have

a chat with her over a cup of coffee."

"That's wonderful that you do," I replied. "Let me just say, you're not the most law-abiding of angels, Aurelia. Maybe that's why we get along."

"I'm not breaking any rules," she asserted. "I just believe that sometimes when dealing with authority, saying less is better."

I smiled because I agreed wholeheartedly with her.

"Melinda, can I ask you — did you tell the officers questioning you about... us?"

I hadn't expected her to ask; I wasn't sure why.

"No, I didn't," I said simply before I heard a loud blast in the distance.

The room rattled, and I took a step forward toward Aurelia, where she sat.

She flew several feet up into the air and I did the same, and it seemed as though we were standing in a tranquil void while the world shuddered around us.

"I should never have left Raphael alone there," Aurelia said as she flew to the door.

She didn't need to open it — she changed to an insubstantial form to pass through it and retook a solid form once she was outside.

With a sigh, I followed. I wanted to keep her safe, but I could understand her concern. It was a wonder we'd managed to stay away from the chaos for this long.

The hallways shook with eerie reverberations. The floor trembled and the lights clinked in their sconces. Without warning, another powerful vibration rippled outward, creating a wall of sound that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

As Aurelia flew back toward the security block, I did my best to keep pace. I also threw up a shield in front of us.

"It tried to take my soul, Aurelia, and the officer Leoriel's too. Please... please be careful."

She slowed her advance slightly to glance back at me.

I knew my words upset her, but she had to know the risk. "It had this net. I destroyed the net to free Leoriel's soul, but it just summoned it again. I don't know how it did it so quickly, unless... it's using a magical object to store the spell. That would account for the speed of it."

"The officers should've taken all objects off Joanne when she was placed in custody," Aurelia replied. "It's possible they missed something, or she got it another way..."

"I don't remember seeing any. If she does have a talisman, it must be hidden on her body."

"The others have to know," Aurelia replied. "I'll call out telepathically as we fly."

AURELIA



"I DON'T KNOW IF RAPHAEL HEARD ME, BUT I PRAY HE DID." IT WASN'T A good situation at all. I knew I shouldn't have left.

I should've known it would take more than two archangels to subdue that being in the tiny security room, but I liked to think they had it handled. And it was so important to me to get Melinda safely out of there. Now I knew I'd made a mistake leaving.

"Maybe you should go back to my quarters," I suggested to Melinda as we descended the levels toward security. "You know this... creature... wants you."

"I'm not leaving you there with it while I hide away," Melinda replied. "I like you very much, Aurelia. If your soul was destroyed, I don't know what I'd do."

"You like me very much?" I asked her, grinning back.

I could see the security section ahead now. It was rocked by another blast. This one was deafening — so much so, I couldn't fly straight. There was still no visual sign of it, but the area was littered with debris... and sadly, several corpses, and I could see several more angels rushing toward the crime scene.

"Alright, I love you, but don't get any ideas," she said as she stared at me with bittersweet worry in her eyes.

It had to be the sweetest and most confusing thing anyone had ever said to me.

"What kind of ideas are you thinking?" I asked her.

Another blast came before she could reply, and this time it took out the entire corner of the security office ahead of us. Wood, metal and other debris exploded outward, and despite our limited shield, Melinda pulled me behind

a nearby pillar. The shield was pummeled by debris, but we missed the worst of it.

"I can extend the shield into a sphere, but you've got to fly close to me, Aurelia, and stay within its range. And whatever you do, don't go attacking anyone without telling me to drop it first. We don't need a ricochet in there."

"That's fine," I told Melinda as we hung back behind the pillar.

It only took her a moment to extend the shield around us, and then almost as an afterthought, she increased the size. I realized it would've been hard to keep within its area, otherwise.

"It's in place now," she said as she moved out from behind the pillar, and I did the same. "It's not infallible, but it should help."

We moved together as a team, carefully passing the fallen bodies of angels. I tried not to look too carefully, except to ensure none were angels I knew well.

The damage to security looked much worse close up, and several large blasts down the hall confirmed combat wasn't far away.

My eyes widened in shock as I saw Gabriel thrown back in the corridor hard enough to splinter the wooden frame of the door behind him.

He fell to the ground, and I rushed forward fast enough I bounced off the inside of Melinda's shield. A blast shot out of the opposite room but bounced harmlessly off the shield, narrowly avoiding Gabriel. He didn't look well, but he was alive.

"Open the shield," I said, and Melinda was quick to open it and surround him with its protective barrier.

I knelt in front of him, healing him quickly with my angelic energy. He had more damage than could be healed quickly — it appeared physically as bloody slashes and burns on his skin, but the damage likely went far deeper into the spiritual level.

His eyes opened and he sat up, his breathing heavy from exhaustion, and I urged him to rest for a moment as I continued healing him.

"Is Raphael in there alone?" I asked, fearing for his safety.

"He's not alone," Gabriel said as he looked up at us. "There are other angels."

He seemed like he didn't quite believe what he was seeing, especially in Melinda's case.

"Can you stand?" Melinda asked as she glanced urgently toward the room.

I couldn't see what was going on inside, but I heard another blast that rattled the ground beneath us.

"I think so," he replied as he climbed to his feet.

I kept a hand on his arm, giving him as much energy as I safely could.

"It's after Melinda," he said, stating what I already knew — or at least, believed I knew.

"I know," she replied.

As Gabriel stepped forward to move out of the shield's range, she opened it for him.

After taking a deep breath, he flew into the room. As soon as Melinda had closed the shield, we followed.

An entire row of rooms had been blasted apart, and the shattered remnants of at least four rooms formed a larger space. Its splintered timber burned with wayward magic. Just inside the doorway, we found Raphael bleeding on the floor. Gabriel was flying towards a distant figure, which I reasoned must be the enemy we were fighting.

"Raphael," I said as I knelt down beside him.

I hoped to rouse him from the state he was in, and sure enough, his eyes were open. He looked in a bad way, but he was alive and he clearly still possessed his own soul.

"I know who he is," Raphael said as he tried to sit upright, and then thought better of it.

"Who are we dealing with?" Melinda asked, her eyes gleaming with a prospect of vengeance.

"A shard of your precursor lives within Joanne," he said. "Part of Loki must've survived, but he doesn't have your good heart, Melinda."

Her eyes widened at that, and she looked off toward the distant figure before taking Raphael's hand.

I put a hand on Raphael's shoulder and sent him healing energy. I was tired after helping to heal Gabriel, but Raphael needed my help. I didn't like the look of the condition he was in.

"I think we need to get him out of here," I said as I gave him all of the strength I could.

He already had injuries from his prior encounter, and they weren't fully healed. I was concerned about just how badly hurt he might be now.

"You need me," he said as he finally pulled himself up into a sitting position.

"We do. We need you alive," Melinda said. "Aurelia, please help him out of here."

I didn't argue with her about that. It also meant stepping out of the shielded area, but I helped Raphael walk, and we were quick to leave the room.

"Please, help," I said to several angels who were coming toward us.

They took over helping Raphael, and I called out to him, "Stay safe. I'm going to help Melinda."

By the time I got back, she had joined Gabriel in fighting the being who had once been Joanne, and now contained some shred of Loki.

The Norse god had once held the same powers Melinda possessed now. When he died in battle in his former life, his powers passed to a new host. That had been Melinda, but unbeknownst to her, a part of him must've lived on.

A blast of energy flashed past me, and I flew toward Melinda. I realized she no longer had a spherical shield around her. Instead, she carried a glowing blue shield in her left hand while she carried a spear of light in her right.

Gabriel approached the creature from her right side, where he'd drawn his sword, and it glowed with a light that was so radiant and pure, it was painful to witness.

"You're not escaping here today," Gabriel said as he lunged at the creature and narrowly parried a slash of dark claws that Joanne had mysteriously grown. "I don't know how you survived, but what you did to Misha was hideous."

A net slid from the creature's claws, and Melinda immediately tore it apart with her magic. No sooner had she done that, she threw the spear with all her might at the attacker.

It penetrated the attacker's chest, pinning Loki — in the twisted form of Joanne — back against the wall. That exact moment, Gabriel grabbed its hand. It took me a second to realize he was pulling a ring from its claw. The net — that was where the net had come from. Some kind of talisman.

Within moments, the body crumpled in upon itself, breaking down with unnatural speed, and turning into dust and fragments of bone. As an angel Joanne had become a being of light, but sadness overtook me as I realized these were her human bones.

I wasn't sure how long she'd been absent from her body, but she'd been a

good angel. My mentor and superior. It didn't seem right or fair that she was removed from existence. Just gone, forever — like Misha was.

I took Melinda's free hand and drew her back away from the corpse, and from Gabriel, who stumbled back, straightening painfully in his injured state.

I felt Melinda's arms around me before I even had time to think, and I held her there in that damaged room, Gabriel looking on, as her tears fell against my cheek.

I kissed her forehead and glanced back at Gabriel before reaching an arm out to him.

He took it, and I helped both him and Melinda away to a safer place where they could rest and heal.

Loki's defeat didn't come without casualties. Thankfully, Melinda and I, and Raphael and Gabriel, weren't among them. By the time the stress of the battle had worn off, the sun was already rising to mark the start of a new day.

We had won, and yet I had a bittersweet feeling. It would've been better if none of this had ever happened. I wouldn't want to have never met Melinda, though. She'd become the light of my life. I wasn't sure exactly when that had happened, but I was glad beyond words that she was safe now. But was she? I wasn't sure, but she was certainly safer than she had been before.

MELINDA



I COULDN'T GET PAST THE FEELING THAT THIS WAS IN SOME WAY MY FAULT. I knew it wasn't — not even remotely — but from my inability to help Misha, to the fact that it was a remnant of Loki... what? He resented my use of the powers for the angelic hierarchy or for good rather than evil ends? He wanted them for himself? It was hard to say. I had no choice but to accept that I wouldn't receive an answer about his intentions.

I was lost in my thoughts, many of them dark and foreboding, when Aurelia held my hand. I took great comfort from the feeling of her hand in mine, and knowing that she was here with me.

She led me back to her rooms, and I was relieved for a chance to escape to somewhere more private. I just didn't want to be around people — I was counting angels as people — with the exception of her. Somehow, her presence felt different to me. Better.

"There isn't anything more you could've done," she said as she sat down on the end of her bed opposite me. "We can only do what seems like the best option at the time."

"I know," I told her, glancing into her eyes.

I almost felt ashamed somehow, but I also knew there was no reason to be.

Aurelia looked wiser than I remembered her being. She wasn't really as young as she appeared, and every so often I felt like a hint showed through of something revelatory in her personality. I wasn't even sure I knew how to describe it. It made me feel like I knew why the angels had chosen her to be one of them. It wasn't just her words of comfort — it was as if a part of her nature shone with light. Her kindness was healing, or maybe it was the

warmth that she brought to the world.

I think that might have been why they chose her. And it didn't seem so strange a thing when she was an angel. I never felt like I'd quite fit in around them, despite having the best of intentions.

"Now that I've regained my powers, I don't want to give them up again, Aurelia. I think my time serving the angelic hierarchy is at an end."

"I was afraid you might say that," Aurelia replied. "I'm not surprised, though. It's not for everybody, and even if you don't work with us anymore, there's no reason we can't still see one another."

"You saved an archangel's life. That has to stand for something."

I'd forgotten about that, but Aurelia obviously hadn't. I still remembered the expression of surprise on Gabriel's face, like it was the last thing he expected of me. I wasn't sure if I should feel insulted about that or glad I'd had the opportunity to show him the truth about me.

"You've done a great service for heaven, you know?" Aurelia smiled at me. "And you have for me, too."

"I have?" I asked, not really sure how.

Yes, I'd helped protect her, but she'd done the same thing for me. If anything, she'd done more for me than I had for her.

"I'm just sorry I couldn't stop them taking you away to the security office," she said, her expression turning apologetic. "I didn't know you were in that degree of danger there. I used to work with Joanne. Even after she was seen near Misha's home, I never would've expected she'd pose a risk like that to you."

"It's alright," I told her, clasping her hand. "We only did what we could, and we're still here. That piece of Loki is not. What I don't understand is how he survived all of these years. He must've been completely insubstantial or living inside other people, possessing them. There's a lot we don't know about where he's been and what he's done."

"There could be more threats out there that he had a hand in," Aurelia said, grimacing slightly. "I don't think we should dwell on that too much today though. We've had a win, and we should take that for now, and deal with anything else that comes up later if or when it happens. Which it might never do."

As much as I wanted to rush out there and investigate further, I wouldn't have known where to start.

"Wait a minute. When we came up to heaven, someone was following us

and trying to catch up with us mid-flight. If it wasn't Joanne, or Loki possessing her, then who was it?" I asked.

"I don't know," Aurelia replied, "but you make a good point. Maybe the angelic patrol found something. Then again, maybe not."

"We'll find out," I told her as I sank down fully on her bed.

First though, I wanted to rest and clear my head. My thoughts were in disarray, and I was so tired, I could barely think. It must've been from the magic I'd used.

Aurelia let me rest, and she did the same, relaxing beside me. I don't know how long we slept for, but many hours must've passed before I awoke to a knock on the door.

I saw Aurelia rise into a sitting position beside me, and she looked as sleepy as I felt.

She got up and walked through to the living area, then opened the door. By that time I'd sat up on the bed and tried to look a bit more presentable. I probably wasn't succeeding, as my clothes were torn and scorched, and I could still see dirt and dust on my hands. My face probably looked as bad.

"Raphael," Aurelia said, loud enough for me to hear.

There was a sense of surprise in her voice, but not an unwelcome one.

"No one had seen you for a while after the battle, so I wanted to ensure you were both alright," he said.

"We are," she replied in a softer tone of voice. "We were so tired after the battle, we fell asleep. How are you and Gabriel faring?"

"Much better. Thank you," he replied.

I thought it was time I joined the conversation. I walked out through the doorway and approached Aurelia where she stood talking to Raphael, who was just outside the door.

"Melinda," he said, smiling at me as I joined Aurelia there.

Aurelia opened the door further and invited Raphael in. It only occurred to me then that I was the reason she hadn't before. Maybe she didn't know whether I wanted to make my presence known or not.

"Ah, I had a feeling you were here."

He was an archangel. I'd have been surprised if he couldn't sense I was here, but it was polite of him to phrase it the way he did.

"Aurelia made me feel welcome here."

"That's because you are, Melinda," she said, giving me a fond smile. "Raphael, has there been any word of the person pursuing us when we flew

up to heaven? It can't have been Joanne."

"I'm afraid not," he replied. "We'll do what we can to track down any other responsible parties. You should know, you've both received commendations for your bravery. Gabriel and I might not be here now if it weren't for you both."

"Thank you, Raphael," I replied.

Even though he'd been investigating me, I felt a lot of warmth for the archangel, and I wished the best for him, just as I sensed he did for us.

"There's no hurry to resume your duties..." he told me.

"I think I'm going to be the goddess Melinda for a while, and not muse Melinda, if you understand my meaning. I need some time, Raphael, and a chance to be myself again. It's the only way I'll know what I really want to do."

"It's alright," he replied. "Just talk to the ranking archangels in the Great Hall of Light when you're ready. After what you've done here tonight, I wouldn't expect anyone to be less than understanding."

"Thank you so much," I said, beaming with appreciation. "I know that without both of you we wouldn't have succeeded."

"Indeed. It was a group effort," Aurelia replied.

"I'll head off and give you two some time together." Raphael's hint of a smile told us that he knew we were more than friends.

He didn't say anything else — but then, he didn't have to.

Aurelia closed the door after he'd gone, and she embraced me there on the spot.

"Mmm, it's so good to hold you again," I said as I rested my head against her shoulder.

I felt safe in her arms, and as I held her, I knew I wanted her to feel the same way.

Her lips found mine, and I drew her closer as we kissed. Aurelia felt amazing against me, but more than that, I was so glad she was here, and alive, and that I was too.

Things could've gone differently, but they didn't. I pushed that thought aside as Aurelia kissed my throat, and I caressed a hand down over her back.

Trading knowing smiles, we returned to her bed, hand in hand. We left all of our clothes on the floor before slipping under the covers together.

We spent most of the day there in bed, making love and talking, and just relaxing together. It was wonderful. I was surprised no one else came by to

disturb us. Perhaps Raphael had made it clear that we needed some time alone to 'recuperate.'

AURELIA



ONCE MELINDA HAD LEFT HEAVEN AND MOVED SEMI-PERMANENTLY TO A room at Enchant, my life returned to a steady rhythm of work and rest, with frequent visits to see my lady love.

Work for me had often been carried out in heaven, but given my success with the investigation, I was offered the chance to join the angelic hierarchy's investigative unit.

I accepted their offer, because I knew that whether it was my assigned duty or not, I'd be on the lookout for any further activity that tied in with what we were now calling 'the Loki incident.'

We suspected there were still one or more accomplices of his out there. It was unclear who they were, or even their motivations. As for Joanne, I knew her before she became a vessel for the enemy. I knew the woman she was — my superior, but also my mentor and guide. She lived on in my memory, and whether her soul was lost forevermore or not, she would always be remembered.

I walked along the boulevard leading to a tall archway, and when I passed through it, I found myself in the fields of heaven. Here, the grasses grew golden and strong, stirred by a soft breeze that carried their scent over the land and down to the sea beyond.

There, a small altar stood, built of purple marble with a web of gold snaking through it. It had the name Seraphim Joanne written upon it. I created a small bouquet of white roses, wrapped with a lilac ribbon, and placed them on the altar.

It wasn't a grave, but a place where she could be honored. This wasn't just a random field of heaven, either. I knew she liked to come here sometimes to

walk and think, and it occurred to me now that I mustn't have been the only one who knew about it.

I'd joined her on those walks a time or two. As I breathed in the scent of the grasslands and gazed up at the distant mountains, I remembered our conversations. We usually talked about 'the work,' which more often than not was helping humanity, but she spent most of her time in heaven training and guiding angels to carry out those tasks.

Night never fell here in the fields of heaven. The sky was in a perpetual twilight with a hint of stars, and a golden light that seemed to radiate from all around. It was lovely, and somehow reassuring.

"If your soul is still out there, I'm going to find you, Joanne, and bring you back to heaven where you belong. You were a light for so many people. You deserve better than to spend eternity in darkness."

I knew she couldn't hear me, but the universe did. It was always listening, and I hoped my declaration of intent — my promise — would help make that possibility come true one day. Even if it took a hundred years, and even if all that was left of her soul were pieces.

It reminded me of a conversation I'd had with Melinda about how she was made of magic, whereas I'm light now. Like the stars, she'd said, and it was true. If Joanne had also been light, like me, how could Loki have possessed her? You can't possess light. A human form, on the other hand, can be possessed. When we defeated Loki, I saw her bones crumble. Her body must've been resurrected from the Earth or she'd been given a new one.

I realized at once that whoever had done this had changed Joanne's form to one that could be possessed, just as Misha had been locked into a mortal body as punishment. I wasn't sure what that meant yet, but I knew there were only three types of beings in the universe that possessed those unique abilities — angels, demons and necromancers. And I wasn't sure I was ready to accept that one of them had to be responsible, for Joanne couldn't have done it to herself.

I couldn't be the only one who realized, but I resolved to discuss it with Raphael all the same. He'd become a trusted friend, and he was as invested as I was in ensuring an incident like this one never happened again. For now at least, the world was as peaceful as it ever was. It felt more than that to me. Love had brought clarity, joy, and a whole lot of mischief that I hadn't had before. Melinda completed me in ways I never would've expected. She was my goddess of mischief and I was her angel of magic.

CONNECTIONS



LIFE WENT ON IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK. SUSPICIONS ABOUT THE METEOR showers were soon mostly forgotten by mortals once the threat had passed. The strangeness wasn't lost on some people, but it fell into the realm of conspiracies, and many of those weren't taken seriously, despite the grains of truth in plain sight.

The telepath, Kallen, bowed his head in respect before joining two other men at their table. The club was busy, but few patrons mingled nearby. Perhaps they sensed that doing so might be unwise.

"I've received word from up high that the remnant of Loki is no more."

The man who spoke had a strong voice, though his appearance was, in a word, ordinary. He had brown hair and a normal build. It was so plain, people's gaze might almost slide off him. Still, he carried himself with a certain charisma, which seemed to intimidate those around him. Perhaps they understood his capabilities.

"As have I," Kallen replied, lowering his head.

He seemed afraid to meet the other men's gaze.

"After contacting you, the angel and the goddess returned to heaven and I was unable to accompany them or influence their investigation," Kallen said.

"No one blames you, Kallen," the other man at the table replied.

He was older, with blue eyes that seemed almost to twinkle. His hair was white, and he had a short beard.

"But it's a shame that you weren't able to delay them. Now Loki is gone and we've lost one of our strongest assets," he continued.

Kallen glanced around nervously, and merely nodded.

"We will call on you when we need your help again," the dark-haired man

said. "If you cross paths with the angels, or even the goddess Melinda, you will build up that friendship. You understand?"

"That I do," Kallen replied. "Do you require anything else?"

The dark-haired man glanced at his older counterpart, who shook his head. Then he waved his hand dismissively.

"You may go."

As Kallen walked away, he felt immense relief that he'd survived his encounter with such powerful demons. He didn't want to fail them again.

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ABOUT CAILEE FRANCIS

Cailee Francis is an Australian author of LGBT contemporary and fantasy romance, mingling magic, friendship, romance and drama.

She loves to write romantic, steamy stories with strong female characters.

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THE END