

GOOD BAD WITCH

GOOD BAD MAGIC BOOK 1

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ABOUT GOOD BAD WITCH

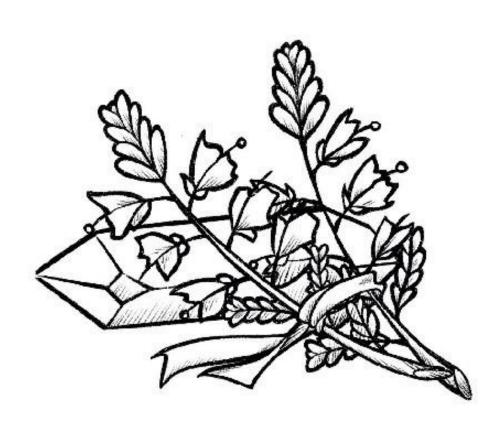
I'm a witch. Not a powerful witch, mind, but as Grandma liked to say, it's all in the kindness, not the power. Grandma is gone now, but her dream of having a witch shop lives with me. So, when the opportunity to run my own shop presents itself, I move across the country to take it, no questions asked.

But maybe I should have.

The sexy local bounty hunter shifter thinks I'm up to no good, my clients keep asking me to use forbidden dark magic, and someone's trying to sabotage my shop. Probably the same someone who reported me to the Witch Council and left a dead body in my bathtub.

Hah! Joke's on them. As Grandma also used to say, it's nothing a positive attitude, excellent cleaning supplies, and the complete annihilation of whoever has in it for me can't fix.

Paraphrasing.



CONTENTS

- 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
- Chapter 22
- Chapter 23
- Chapter 24
- Chapter 25
- Chapter 26

Reader Group

Also By Isa Medina

About the Author

ONE

It was on week two of owning my new witch shop that the first review came in.

Rating: 1/5 stars.

Not the worst thing to happen to me that day. No, that would be the dead body in my bathtub, but that wouldn't come until later.

I stared at my phone while lying on my brand-new and suspiciously cheap bed, the early morning light seeping through the equally new and equally cheap lacy curtains. It tinted my freshly painted bedroom above the shop in hues of lovely butter yellows and soft oranges. A cozy, happy atmosphere I couldn't enjoy through the huge single star burned into my retinas. With a hard, valiant swallow, I scrolled to the next paragraph.

Unbelievable! Have been a loyal customer for twenty years and now nothing is available?!! What happened to the old owner? Do yourself a favor and skip this tea shop. The new owner is very rude. Horrible, horrible service.

The reviewer might've been anonymous, but I knew exactly who had posted it. I remembered the encounter like it was yesterday.

Because it *had* been yesterday.

The old woman hadn't taken kindly to my offer of a special blend of chamomile and had been insistent I produce her "usual." When asked what exactly her "usual" was, she'd waved her hand and said, "You know, girl. The *usual*. Goodness gracious, do you even know what you're doing? Where is Bagley?"

After informing her that Ms. Bagley was dead and I had taken over the shop, she had grumbled some more, told me to get my act together, and stormed out.

With my tea.

Without paying.

Deciding that chasing after a dear old lady in the busy streets of Olmeda would not reflect well on the shop, I had chosen not to engage in pursuit.

Another reread of the review had the downward curve of my mouth dipping further. I should've gone after her. Then I'd at least have my six bucks. Now all I had was a one-star average, a profit balance digging its way toward the center of the earth, and a looming deadline to make the shop work within six months.

Or else it went to another witch.

Since it had been a minor miracle it had gone to me in the first place, there was no way I wasn't making a success of it. Opportunities like these did not come to average witches like me. Official witch shops were rare and went to popular witches, the ones with established witch families to back them up. The ones who had passed their internships with flying colors.

The reminder of my own internship produced another wince.

Too much wincing, I decided. Too many unhappy thoughts. This was not the way of the Oakes-Avery witches.

Filled with resolve, I jumped off the bed and approached my DIY dresser, where I kept Grandma's spellbook. Placing my hand on the cover brought immediate calm, and I felt the dredges of sadness abandon their clinging hooks on my soul.

Visualization was everything in my business.

Eyes closed, I inhaled deeply, and said, loud and clear, "Be the witch you want to be."

Affirmations might not be spells, but just because they invoked no magic didn't mean they didn't work. As Grandma liked to say, it's all in the intention, not the power.

Which was excellent, since my power wasn't exactly high on the scale. More like bottom fifteen percent. But it was there, and I had Grandma to thank for it.

My fingers traced the lovely embroidery on the spellbook's cover—begonias, chrysanthemums, and blue stars on a beautiful shade of green reflected in the dyed streak of my blond hair. As far as spellbooks went, this one wasn't overly thick or full of powerful spells worth protecting under lock and key, but it was the most important thing in my possession. That was why I kept it in my bedroom rather than down in the shop like any other witch might.

Carefully, reverently, I opened the book to the first page, empty but for a short list of names written in Grandma's beautiful script—a family tree of sorts. There at the bottom was her name, Hazel Oakes, birth year, death year, followed by mine, Hope Avery, birth year, no death date.

I wasn't sure if the absence of my father's name meant magic had skipped him, if he had turned out to be a mage instead of a witch, or if he'd cut all ties with Grandma the way he had with me and Mom after she'd remarried.

Why waste precious paper space on someone who wasn't interested?

At the bottom of the page, Grandma had drawn five small icons, one for each point of the pentagram—spirit, air, earth, water, and fire.

The only difference between a witch and a mage was which element they wielded. For witches, it was spirit that allowed us to imbue our magic into potions and spells. Those with an affinity to the other four elements—mages —were left hurling fireballs and things like that. Impressive, if you were into that stuff, but not nearly as useful.

After that first page, Grandma had written down simple spells, made illustrations and notes of different plants, and left plenty of space for me to keep up the records. This was no old book passed down through the centuries, and the family tree was no show of ancient lineage, but Grandma had started it, and by the Mother, I would keep it going.

All heirlooms had to start at some point.

Not for the first time, I wondered whatever had happened to Ms. Bagley's spellbook. The witch had no heirs to inherit it, or the shop would have gone to them instead of to the Council of Witches to be handed down to someone else.

Had whoever packed her possessions given the spellbook to the Council? Did the Council keep a library of dead witches' spellbooks? Did they have someone in charge of going through each spellbook and copying down useful spells before throwing the tomes into a fire?

With humanity at large being ignorant of the paranormal world, one

couldn't be too careful.

My phone's ringtone interrupted my mental meandering, and I read the time with unease. I needed to get moving or I was going to be late to open the shop. Not that it mattered with my average of one client a day, but the Council frowned on things like that during the probation period, and the one-star review was bad enough already.

"Hi, Vicky," I said into the phone. Yanking open a drawer, I pulled out some underwear.

"Hope," Vicky answered with a twinge of unhappiness. "I just saw the review. Are you okay?"

Moving across the country meant leaving friends and family behind, but Vicky had been there on opening day with a plate of cupcakes and a bottle of hot cocoa, ready to welcome me to Olmeda. While I'd done my best to swallow the hot beverage on an already sweltering August day, she'd eagerly told me all about her one-woman carriage tour business and how we businesswomen had to stick together. As someone who had occasionally worked at the shop in the past, she'd felt it was her duty to welcome me into the neighborhood.

She had been the only one. And for that, she was now my new best friend, even if she had no idea about the paranormal side of the world.

"Of course," I chirped, grabbing a T-shirt off a pile in the closet.

"You sound happy." Hesitancy filled her voice, as if she was unsure I had actually seen the one star or the content of the review.

"It's my first review. Now the floodgates are open and more will follow. You know how people love to be contrary on the internet. Soon I'll have a bunch of five stars just to show that old biddy. You know what they say," I added, my spirits truly buoying—by the Mother, I was *so* right! "Bad news at dawn means the day can only improve."

"Who says that?"

"My grandma."

"I thought she was dead. Rest in peace. She sounds like a lovely person," Vicky added in a rush.

"She is." I gave the spellbook another loving glance. "But her spirit remains with me." As did some of her affirmations. The saying, though—that one I remembered from my childhood days spent with her.

"People do love to show others they're wrong," Vicky admitted with a tinkling laugh. "You might be onto something. I approve."

She had a lovely voice and a sunny disposition that made my affirmations look like highways to hell. It was no wonder her tours did brisk business. No "horrible service" in her reviews. They were all "wonderful guide" and "I learned so much" and "I had so much fun, I'm bringing my family next time!"

I, for one, couldn't imagine my family having any fun on any tour, especially one involving a wagon and a mule. I loved my mom and stepdad and stepsister to death, but they had the sense of wonder of a brick. They'd only leave their comfort zones if I physically threw them across the line.

To say my parents hadn't understood my need to come take care of the shop would be an understatement. Magic was hidden from them, like it was from most of the world, so, as far as they knew, their daughter had moved far away to take care of some random tea shop. A terrible time for the service industry, Mom had told me, and wouldn't I rather stick to my five-year plan of expanding my online trinkets shop.

(The five-year plan had been going as well as my witch internship had gone; that is to say, not spectacularly well.)

It had been my sister who reminded them I was twenty-six, and it was time for me to fly the coop. She would know, being twenty-nine, married, with one kid and a manager position at a prestigious firm. We might not be blood related, but Nicole was the absolute best sister anyone could have.

"How are you going to celebrate?" Vicky asked.

I pondered this during the few seconds it took me to grab a pair of jeans and add it to the pile of clothes on my free arm. "A single red velvet cupcake from Fairy Circle Cakes. One, for the star. Red, for the mess."

"Mess?" she asked hesitantly.

"From my heart being stabbed repeatedly by each word in the review." She laughed. "Don't make me laugh. People are looking at me funny."

"It's my secret power," I agreed. That first day, I'd thought the Council had sent Vicky to congratulate me, but it turned out she knew nothing about the paranormal world. Sure, she'd worked at the shop at some point, but like in most magical-world-adjacent establishments, most of the clientele were normal people, and the magic part more of a side business. While a witch shop had an important role in the local magical community—the reason they were overseen by the Council—no business could survive on only spells and potions.

"Want me to pick up the cupcake?" she asked.

"That's all right. It's good for me to visit the local places."

One day, I swore to myself. One day I'd crack Fairy Cakes' owner's icy exterior and she'd smile at me the way she smiled at every other customer.

I left my bedroom and headed for the bathroom. Pushing the door open with my foot, I felt determination fill me like heady wine. One day, I'd get her to give me one of her discount coupons. It might take a thousand cupcakes, but one day—

I let out a startled squawk and dropped the underwear, the T-shirt, the jeans, and the phone.

There was a stranger in my bathtub.

And he was dead.

TWO

THE MAN WAS SPRAWLED in my bathtub, dressed in a light blue suit, arms awkwardly thrown over his chest and one leg hanging over the edge, his lips a bluish tint matching the color of his clothes.

I didn't know who he was, and I hadn't put him there, so I did the only sensible thing—I rushed down the two flights of stairs, fought to unlock the front door of the shop, and ran out into the street screaming for help.

A jogger ran past me, giving me a wide berth.

Ignoring him, I waved my arms in desperation at an approaching delivery truck. "Stop!"

It chugged right on. Didn't even slow down.

Cursing, I searched the street. This early in the morning on a Saturday, it was sleepy and empty. Old, quaint shops lined my sidewalk, and a series of Victorian mansions with lush, iron-fenced front yards filled the opposite side. I noticed a man walking a huge dog and a small one, and I hurried across the street to intercept him.

He was tall, broad-shouldered, dressed for a hot summer day in black. Black jeans, black T-shirt, black boots. Black metal buckle on his belt. It matched his shoulder-length dark brown hair and the dark expression in his green eyes as he studied me warily. Definite power vibes.

The contrast between the wall of macho goth and the small white fluffy dog at his feet panting happily at me would've made me explode into giggles any other morning, but even Grandma didn't have a saying to save this occasion.

"Help," I pleaded. "Call the police."

The large dog huffed—some sort of shaggy wolf. That, or a pony. The

man tightened his grip on the leash and it fell silent again.

"Police," I repeated, starting to wonder if the words coming out of my mouth didn't fit the ones forming inside my brain. "Call them, please!"

The man looked me up and down, saying nothing, and definitely not bringing his phone out.

I followed his gaze and realized I was only wearing my oversized sleeping tee. Not the most shocking thing to appear in the streets of Olmeda, I was sure, and I certainly wasn't going back alone inside to get dressed, grab my phone, or even breathe.

"Sir, please," I tried once again. Third time is the charm and all that. "Call the police—there's a dead body in my bathtub."

His gaze moved from me to the row of shops, then returned, a gleam of speculation entering his eyes.

He made no move to bring out his phone.

I was about to pivot and go find someone else when he finally spoke. "Shouldn't you call an ambulance?"

"A what?"

He appeared less than impressed by my surprise. Derision joined the speculation on his face. "An ambulance. For this supposed body."

Supposed body? Oh, he was *not* going there. "The police will send an ambulance, won't they?" I asked sweetly.

He watched me impassively, not impressed by my tone, either. Or the tightening of my mouth, or the crossing of my arms. The small white fluffy dog lifted to put its paws on my leg and I reached down automatically to scratch its ears.

What was I doing?

"Forget it," I muttered, stepping away.

"Where is your phone?" he asked, tugging on the small dog's leash. It returned to the big dog's side with a happy yip.

"I dropped it. In the bathroom. By the bathtub. With the body." *Ass*, I added silently, turning on my heel and stalking away. Carefully. Now that the adrenaline was ebbing, I felt every pebble on the ground prick my naked feet. And I didn't even want to think about what else littered the street. Crossing my fingers that the street cleaners had come that morning, I made my way back to the shops and knocked on the one next to mine.

After a minute or so, a woman peered through the blinds.

I knocked harder.

"It's Hope from the shop next door," I said loudly. "Help!"

Giggles from a passerby erupted behind me. I ignored them and focused with laser intensity on the woman on the other side of the glass door. I didn't know her name—she hadn't bothered to introduce herself, although her boss had. She was a full-time worker at Mr. Lewis's antiques shop, the Corner Rose, and part of the magical community. Or so Mr. Lewis had claimed at the time, since the woman had yet to do anything but look at me with suspicion.

Grudgingly, she opened the door a slit. Today she wore her tight black curls free, held back by beaded hair clips. Huge mosaic silver earrings dangled from her ears, twinkling in the morning sunlight.

"I need a phone to call the police," I said tersely. At this rate, I was going to have to walk all the way to the precinct. "Please."

She took stock of my oversized tee, the state of my hair, and the expression on my face that told her I was so done with this day. Then she glanced over my shoulder, and I twisted my neck to follow. The man with the dogs was still standing on the other side of the street like a black hole of empathy and neighborly charm.

I returned my attention to the woman. She didn't look any more willing to let me use a phone. What was wrong with these people? Had someone put a *beware*, *radioactive* sign on me?

Surreptitiously, I touched my back. Nope. Just the fabric of my sleep tee and a couple of tiny holes.

"What is going on?" a gravelly voice asked from inside the shop—Mr. Lewis.

With a scrunch of her nose, the woman turned to answer. "It's the Tea Cauldron's owner. Says she needs a phone."

Oh, for the love of all that was holy. "Help," I shouted, standing on my tiptoes to be heard over the woman. "I need a phone!"

Mr. Lewis appeared behind the woman, a tall and dignified gentleman in his late fifties or sixties wearing a cream summer suit. His black hair was cropped short, and almost completely gray.

"Druscilla," he exclaimed, scandalized. "Let her in."

Druscilla's expression soured, but she opened the door wide enough for me to squeeze by—sideways.

I gave her a polite smile and a sweet "Thank you," because honey catches more flies than vinegar—which, not only was a lie, but who the heck wanted to catch flies anyway.

The one time I'd come to introduce myself, the shop's dark and gloomy atmosphere had me itching to go back into the summer sun, but today it simply matched my mood.

Druscilla led me to the counter while Mr. Lewis cooed like a mother hen and handed me their landline phone. "Here."

Finally. The yellowed plastic of the phone all but glowed with divine promise. I dialed before Druscilla changed her mind and explained my predicament to the police operator. I was assured an officer would be on the way.

Goal achieved, I put the receiver down with a happy sigh. Grandma was right—it was no longer dawn and things were looking up.

I allowed Mr. Lewis to fuss while we waited for the police to show up but wished I hadn't accepted the cardigan he put around my shoulders to "protect me from the morning chill." The day was already hot, and the thing smelled of dust and having been stuck in a drawer in an attic for the last fifty years, but I couldn't find it in my heart to refuse the offer. Not with the lines of worry creasing his forehead and the look of outrage on my behalf shining in his eyes.

My gaze landed on the man with the dogs, still standing on the far sidewalk like he had nowhere else to go. *Yeah*, I told him mentally with an arch of my brows. *This is how you treat someone in need. Watch and learn*.

Dude didn't even blink.

Some days, I really regretted being a nice witch. Putting curses on people was not what my and Grandma's magic was about—not to mention it was highly illegal—but in times like these, I couldn't help but entertain the idea. I wouldn't do anything major, of course, but maybe a touch of indigestion? A little bleach on his wardrobe contents?

The thought of doing that made me feel immediately contrite. How would I like it if someone messed up my things only because I was having a bad day and was a little—or very—rude?

Ugh. Having a conscience sucked.

"They're here, dear," Mr. Lewis said, squeezing my arm. The pressure made a fresh wave of damp mothball aroma waft into my nose, and I hurried to take off the cardigan and hand it back.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Lewis," I said with true feeling. "I really appreciate the help."

He smiled, giving his older face a charming look. A true silver fox. "Of

course, dear."

The police cruiser came to a stop in front of my shop, and a policewoman stepped out of the car. I recognized her as the one who paid me a visit on moving day. According to the Council, Officer Nadine Brooks was one of the law enforcement personnel in town who was part of our secret magical community, and she'd do her best to attend to any police matters having anything to do with witches, mages, shifters, and any other kind of paranormal creature. I didn't consider finding a body in a bathtub something paranormal-y, but I supposed my address had been flagged as a place potentially involving magic. That might also explain why she'd come alone instead of in the usual pair.

I rushed forward to offer my hand. "Hello, Officer Brooks." I'd pondered what kind of magical creature she was, but it was impolite to ask. Something told me she wasn't a witch. A demon, perhaps? She didn't give off shifter vibes.

She ignored my hand, choosing to eye the small two-story building that served as my shop and newly inherited residence. "You know," she said in the irritated tone that told of interrupted breakfasts, "in all thirty-five years your predecessor was in charge of this shop, we didn't receive a single call."

Since she didn't look a day over thirty, I wanted to ask how she knew that for a fact, but I wisely kept my mouth shut.

At my lack of retort, she shook her head with disgust. "All right. What's the problem?"

I wriggled my hands together. Now that the police were here, the severity of the situation hit me anew. A body. In my bathtub! "I woke up this morning and found a body in my bathtub."

"A body?"

"Yes, a man. I think he's dead."

"You think he's dead?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

I remembered his lax pose, the white of his skin, the blue tint of his lips. "Pretty sure."

"Did you check?"

The notion of touching the body made me recoil. "No. I ran out to call for help."

"You know this man? Is he a friend?"

"No. I've never seen him before."
She peered at me intently. "Are you sure?"
"Yes."

Officer Brooks scanned the shop's front with its glass door and the two lovely, arched, multipaned windows on each side. Cozy, inviting, perhaps more fitting a sleepy town in television's Maine than the scorching August tourist streets of Old Olmeda.

No matter. That was why I had introduced iced tea to the menu. Besides, witchy vibes never went out of style.

"Let's take a look," she finally said. "Door is open?"

"Yes. The bathroom is on the second floor to the left of the stairs."

She opened the front door, one hand on her holster, and peeked inside. The sight of the gun made me swallow hard. In a world of spells and magic, human firearms were a rarity. They were loud and traceable and called for unwanted attention. If there was one thing every paranormal agreed, no matter how law-abiding or criminal, was that our magic must remain secret, hidden away from the general public. And a good ward would slow a shifter or berserker a lot more than a bullet.

"This is Officer Brooks with the Olmeda police department," she shouted into the empty shop. "Anyone here?"

We—the growing gathering of bystanders and I—held our collective breath.

Someone's phone rang loudly in the ensuing silence.

"Sorry," a man said. "Go on."

Officer Brooks shook her head and went inside the shop. I followed a few steps behind.

As always, the sight of the shop filled my chest with indescribable happiness. To a newcomer, it might not look like much, but to me it was perfect. A perfect mahogany counter on one side, two perfect tables with a perfect bench running the length of the wall ending in a perfect corner with a couple of perfect shelves filled with various knickknacks, tarot sets, and books on Wicca, herbs, and crystals—all for sale. At the end of the counter, an archway led into the back area of the first floor—a tiny bathroom, a small kitchen, a storeroom, and the door into the small backyard.

Small but perfect. It had all I needed—a kitchen with space to make potions, a backyard to grow herbs, and enough seats in the front to make the shop a refuge from the bustling street outside.

"Hello?" Officer Brooks called again at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the living quarters. Not waiting for an answer, she took the steps. Again, I followed a few moments behind.

"Stay here," she commanded on the U-turn landing.

I froze, hands held tight against my chest, and watched her take the second flight of stairs. I heard the thudding of her boots against the worn but lovely hardwood floors above as she walked back and forth. After a couple of minutes, she appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Miss Avery?"

"Yes?"

"There is no body up here."

THREE

"Wнат?" I squawked.

"Please come upstairs."

I went upstairs and followed her into the bathroom.

The bathtub gleamed a bright white under the light seeping from the window.

Empty.

"Huh?" I said.

"No body," Officer Brooks reiterated, in case my eyes were not working properly. "The other rooms are empty as well."

"But there was a body," I insisted. "It was there. Look, I dropped my stuff the moment I saw it." I pointed at my clothes and my poor phone as if they were plenty of proof that a body had lain in my bathtub.

Officer Brooks picked up my phone. "Did you happen to take a picture?"

"No," I said, taken aback. What kind of person thought of taking pictures of dead bodies before calling the police?

"Hmm. Too bad," she said, sounding like the kind of person who would take pictures of dead bodies before calling the police.

Well, perhaps she would. She was a police officer, after all.

"I panicked when I saw it and ran out of the house." My spine straightened, and I met her suspicious gaze. I would not apologize for a natural response to shock.

She put the phone on the countertop. "Perhaps you were still half asleep." A slight sneer curled her lips. "Next time, take your coffee before calling us."

Must not curse the policewoman. Not only is it illegal, but it's not nice, and karma is not to be messed with.

I followed her out of the bathroom and down the stairs. "I wasn't half asleep."

"Sure."

"I swear it. There was a body in the bathtub."

"It was probably a drunk idiot that got lost during the night, fell asleep in the bathtub, then woke up to your screams—"

"I didn't scream!"

"—and ran off through the back door."

"But how did he get in?"

"You must've forgotten to lock the door. You should pay more attention. Crime is on the rise."

"I did not forget to lock the door. I'm not that careless."

We reached the front of the shop and stepped outside. More gawkers had joined the first group. The black hole was still there with the two dogs, and Druscilla and her boss waited nearby.

Officer Brooks gave me a polite smile. "As I said, *if* there was a man, it was probably some harmless interloper who confused your house with someone else's. Going forward, please remember to lock both your front and back doors."

"The doors were locked," I said through gritted teeth.

"Obviously not well enough. Consider investing in new locks. Bagley never had a problem with break-ins, but with you being new and all, maybe someone thought to give you a fright."

The words dripped condescension, but the idea hit home. Could she be right? Was this someone's idea of a joke? The Council had changed the locks for me, but maybe some local witch had kept a copy and decided to have a laugh at my expense.

"Going forward, please think carefully before using the emergency number." Officer Brooks said sternly. "Or I will have to cite you for prank calling."

"Don't worry. Next time I'm taking a photo," I muttered.

"Let's hope there won't be a next time."

With these ominous parting words, she shooed the crowd away and got into her police car. The onlookers began dispersing as soon as she drove away, but a few lingered with the phones out to see what the weird barefoot woman in the old, oversized tee did next. With any luck, none of them would post videos online—or anywhere the Council would see, at least. And sure,

what were the chances of that? But one had to believe in the universe's innate sense of goodness.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Mr. Lewis prodding Druscilla inside the shop. She turned, but not before she looked at me down her nose. What was it with the people in this place? Did they dislike me because I was new, or because I had replaced Ms. Bagley?

I'd never had magical besties, so maybe being around my sister and all the other humans had given me magical-unfriendly cooties.

On the other hand, why wouldn't they resent me? Ms. Bagley had probably been a fine witch and neighbor. She'd probably brought muffins to Officer Brooks every morning, and that was why she'd been so curt and disbelieving—I hadn't paid my dues.

I wondered if there were more dues like that one, visits to certain neighbors, or talks with certain people that I was missing. I'd have to ask someone in the Council. Maybe they'd know. Or maybe Mr. Lewis would have an idea.

For now, though, it was time to get back to business.

Giving the remaining onlookers a bright smile, I said, "Shop opens at nine. Don't miss today's special brew!"

Disappointment filled everyone's expressions, but I didn't dwell on it. Maybe "brew" was too niche. I needed to go back to the basics. I went to the counter and grabbed the small blackboard announcing the day's specials and rewrote the header. Yep. "Tea" looked much more inviting than "brew."

Never go to bed without trying something new.

My ward at the bottom of the stairs remained unperturbed, which told me it was time to hire another witch to put a better one. As much as I believed in hard work, there was no getting around the fact that power had a huge impact on spells.

That was the way wards worked—they were a reservoir of magic, ready to spring into action, guided by the witch's intent as they sank their magic into them. The ward I'd put down would not physically stop someone, but Officer Brooks crossing it should've left a mark, given a warning.

This was what I got for being cheap. Good wards were expensive, and my savings non-existent after the move and the opening of the shop.

Whoever had packed up Ms. Bagley's things after her death had also taken all the furniture and household items. Good for a brand-new start, bad for someone whose previous income had depended on shifts at a local coffee

place and an up-and-coming cute trinkets and affirmation prints e-shop.

The bathtub was still empty—I caught a glimpse as I darted inside the bathroom to rescue my clothes and my phone. The myriad missed calls and texts from Vicky were a sight for sore eyes, more invigorating than the hardest hit of caffeine.

Feeling my soul recharge with the proof that someone *did* care, I dressed up in a hurry and sent Vicky a fast text explaining why I'd dropped the call so suddenly. No time for a shower, so I used the small bathroom downstairs to wash my face and put my hair in some order. Bed hair wasn't my best look, I had to admit as I fought with a rogue strand curving out like an anime character's haircut. I wore it in a wavy, loose bob almost reaching my shoulders, and even the green streak was not cooperating, trying to bury itself among the yellow.

Abandoning the errant strand, I focused on the reflection of my hazel eyes.

"You did not get elevated from the dregs of Etsy to fail two weeks into owning this shop," I told the mirror. "This is but a blip. A blip you'll conquer like the badass witch you are. Sure, your ward is crap, but at least you put down a ward, didn't you? And sure, you're not on anyone's top witch list, but you are good enough to be entrusted with this shop, and you will make it work. You will prosper and show your worth as part of this community."

I nodded at my reflection. My job here was done.

Back in the shop, I hung the heavy bead curtain over the archway into the back and made sure everything was in its proper place at the counter and ready—the different teas in their nooks on the shelf, the coffee machine, the water urn. I took out some cookies and arranged them on pretty plates inside the glass display case—no time to get fresh muffins—and made sure the tiny cauldron by the end of the counter was filled with individually-packaged organic sweets. A bit ironic, if you ask me, but past experiences at the coffee shop back home had taught me people did not like their sweets to touch the grime of the unchosen.

With the shop ready for customers, I drew up the blinds and flipped the old-style closed sign to open. Nine on the dot. Right on time.

No line of people waiting eagerly outside for the shop to open.

Not *yet*. But give it time.

Contorting over one of the tables, I snapped ten photos for the shop's social media, chose the best, and added a sticker of a cute cartoon witch

flying on a broomstick. I'd made a careful experiment, and on-the-nose branding was definitely the way to go—pre-sticker, three likes. Post-sticker, seven. The numbers didn't lie.

A notification popped up and my heart did a little jump. A comment already? I poked at my phone excitedly.

Hi! Promote your beauty products at—

I deleted it faster than I'd trashed my ex's wedding invite.

And still, a smile curled my lips. I was now popular enough to attract spammers. Next thing you knew, I'd have to hire a social media manager.

That was how Vicky found me, lying on the table, daydreaming about hundreds—nay, thousands!—of likes and so many comments I couldn't keep track of.

"I brought you something," she announced, holding out a carton box with Fairy Circle Cakes' logo on it. Her long, light brown hair hung loose around her shoulders, and her light makeup made her look young and bright and vibrant.

I gasped, sliding off the table. "No, you didn't!"

"Figured you were too busy here to go get it for yourself."

Truly a day of firsts—my first review, my first disappearing body, my first spam comment, the first time Vicky brought me a pick-me-up gift. I was so going to cry later.

I ran around the counter and opened the box with a small sniffle. A couple of lovely red velvet cupcakes peered back at me.

"You're the best," I murmured appreciatively. "Tea or coffee?"

"Tea, of course," she said with mock offense. She pointed at the blackboard. "Don't try to scam me out of your daily special. I had to wait in line for these, you know."

Grinning, I started the water urn. "Bet you'll love this one."

"I've loved all of them so far, so that's a silly bet to take." She took out the two cupcakes and placed them on the small plates I provided. With a hook of her foot, she dragged one of the four counter stools close and made herself comfortable. "Tell me what happened."

I took out a can of soda from the small fridge, ignored her grimace of distaste, and leaned on the counter. The snap of the tab echoed deliciously in my ears.

"Hope," she nudged, "soda with cupcakes is disgusting. Don't look so orgasmic."

"A woman must have her vices." I took a long sip and smacked my lips. "Best breakfast drink ever."

"Don't let your customers find out. You're supposed to be selling rejuvenating herbal teas and all that, remember?"

"It's okay—I'll hide it under the counter and it'll be our dirty little secret."

"Now you went and made it weird."

"It's my other superpower." The water urn beeped, and I made her tea. Spearmint with a pinch of ginger and a bit of lemon. Used to her tastes by now, I transferred the brew onto a tall glass and filled the rest with cold water. "Here you go."

"Thanks." She sipped, took a good bite of her cupcake, and chewed carefully. "What happened?"

"Do I really have to tell you?" I asked with the whine of a kicked puppy. "It was very embarrassing."

"Now you *have* to tell me. Spill."

I took a deep breath. I'd been kidding about it being embarrassing, but now that I was sorting the events, looking for the best way to explain things... It *had* been kind of embarrassing. Without the kind. Or the of.

"So, there was this body in my bathtub," I started.

Vicky spit cupcake all over the counter.

"Oh my God. I'm so sorry," she choked out, sputtering.

I grabbed the cleaning cloth and wiped the crumbles onto my palm. "It's okay. At least it wasn't the tea."

Vicky made more choking sounds. "Good point." Her gaze darted to the archway and the bead curtain. She'd worked for Ms. Bagley before, so she was aware I lived above the shop. "Whose body?"

"Wish I knew." It would answer so many questions, really. "I found it when I walked into the bathroom while we were talking, but by the time the police came, it was gone."

Her mouth fell open. "Gone?"

My lips twisted with displeasure. "Not a trace. The police think it was some drunk who stumbled into the shop by mistake. That, or someone playing a joke on me."

She shivered. "That's some joke."

"I know."

"Do you think they meant you harm?" she asked, worried.

I pondered this. The possibility hadn't occurred to me. If the man, or whoever had dumped the body in my bathtub, had meant me harm, they would've done harm instead of limiting their actions to the bathroom. "No, I don't think so. Plenty of opportunity for them to attack me if they'd wanted to."

Her next words came out hesitant. "Do you think you forgot to lock up the shop before going to bed?"

I suppressed a twinge of annoyance. "I'm sure I locked up." A flash of insight had me lift one finger. "Hold that thought."

Vicky followed me as I slipped through the bead curtain and went to the back door. I tried the handle.

Locked firmly.

FOUR

Satisfaction filled ME. Always trust your gut. Life is too busy to second guess yourself. Whoever had played the prank on me must've gone out the front while I was busy with the dog walker or at Mr. Lewis's shop.

"Locked?" Vicky asked.

"Tight as a fist." To demonstrate, I shook my fist at an imaginary Officer Brooks. Then I unlocked and opened the door and slipped a wedge to keep it ajar. The day promised to be sweltering hot and the ceiling fan of the shop could only do so much.

We returned to the shop and retook our positions once I'd opened the front door enough to allow a breeze.

Vicky worried her lip. "Does someone have a copy of your keys? Maybe you should have them changed."

"Maybe," I conceded. How much did a change of locks cost? Could I bill the Council for it? Somehow, I doubted it. Plus, it would put another black mark on my so far unimpressive run of the shop. How many black marks until they decided to cut the probation period short? Ice ran down my spine, forcing my back ramrod straight.

The Council wouldn't do that, would they? Cut my time here short? No way every single witch shop came out swinging right off the bat. Besides, the body hadn't been my fault.

Still, better not to ask them to foot another lock-change bill. I'd have to ram a chair under the knob of the back door and close the sliding door upstairs, something I hadn't done so far because it felt restrictive, like I was cutting circulation off one arm.

Grandma hadn't owned a shop, so the spellbook had no words of wisdom

to impart on the subject, but from what I'd gathered in my research of witchrun shops, there was an element of bonding between the owner and the shop, and I didn't want to impede the process in any way.

As much as I liked Vicky, it was in moments like these that magical friends would've come in handy. Or a living grandma.

I'd take the living grandma.

A wave of homesickness hit me at the thought. I'd been eight when Grandma died, and only a selected group of memories remained. Those, and the spellbook.

The need to run upstairs to touch it and make sure it was still there and safe was almost unbearable, but if I caved in to the urge every time I thought of her, I might as well tape the thing to my body and carry it everywhere.

"I don't think anyone ever messed with Ms. Bagley," Vicky said. She polished off the last of her cupcake and drank the last of her tea.

I noticed my own half-eaten breakfast and felt a pang of guilt. Hurriedly, I stuffed the rest of the cupcake in my mouth and worked hard to enjoy it. *Yum*, I repeated in my head. *Sooo delicious*. *Yum*, *yum*, *yum*.

It worked, of course. Otherwise, what would be the point of affirmations? Already wishing for another one, I asked, "How well did you know her?" She lifted a shoulder. "Not that well. But she was kind. And she paid on time."

"And she never created a police-worthy ruckus in thirty-five years."

"Oh?"

"Believe me. I have it on good authority."

"Sounds about right. She was kind of odd, but everyone loved her."

Ugh. I rubbed the front of my T-shirt, one of several I'd had printed with the shop's name. Five of them lay plastic-wrapped high on the shelf behind me because hope ran eternal and I had priced them competitively. "I guess it's a big step down from her to me."

She made an assenting nose. "It'll take some time."

It hurt a little that she was so eager to agree, even if she had a point. I supposed that, like my shop, our friendship also needed some time until it reached its full potential. "How come you didn't know her that well if you worked here?"

"Oh, I only picked shifts here and there. Not like she was around to mother me," she said with a lovely musical laugh.

"You must make a fortune with your tours," I mused, enchanted.

She gave me a wicked grin. "I do all right."

"Got any today?"

"Two walking ones." She had told me before that she did the carriage ones every other day and on the weekends, to give the mule she rented from the local stables some rest. "I've got a haunted one tonight. You should come."

I gave her glass and the two plates a quick wash in the small sink behind the counter. "Maybe next weekend."

I was looking forward to taking the tour at some point. I'd investigated the area the moment I'd been given the shop, so I knew about the Three Sisters and Petticoat Row, and I was curious to see them in context.

The cross-country move and opening the shop had occupied all my free time. I surveyed my empty shop with an unhappy sigh. Now I had plenty of free time, but only during opening hours.

"Do you want me to stay and keep you company?" Vicky asked. A line of worry creased her forehead.

"No, that's all right," I said with a chuckle. She gave me an odd look. My light-as-air laugh needed some work, I had to admit. Clearing my throat, I added, "I'll be okay, and you've probably got things to do."

"Some. But I'll stay if you need me to." She eyed the empty tables behind her, then leaned in. "Make the shop look a bit busy? Maybe someone will come in if they see someone already in here?"

"And what, you'll stay here all day long, every day?" I winced. "Sorry, that came out harsh."

She exhaled in a defeated woosh. "Nah, you're right." She hopped off the stool and stood there awkwardly. "I guess I'll see you later?"

"Any time," I said warmly.

It wasn't her fault the shop wasn't doing well. It wasn't her fault her exboss had been a pillar of the community. It wasn't her fault she wanted to be a good friend and help—all right, maybe that was her fault. Hah, look at me. Jokes on top of jokes. I was about to chide her for being such a helpful person when the door opened, hitting the old-fashioned chime and sending a cascade of tinkling through the air.

A girl entered the shop, looking around with unconcealed eagerness.

Vicky winked and gave me an exaggerated thumbs-up. "Guess you're busy. Laters!"

"Laters," I answered in my brightest customer-ready voice.

Once Vicky was gone, the girl's demeanor turned from curious awe to utter determination. She looked to be somewhere in her late teens, wearing a tank top and cut-off jeans. Local, I thought. Not a tourist.

"You the new witch?" she asked without preamble.

Trick question. What kind of magic practitioner would reveal themselves this easily to the world? "I'm the new owner, yes."

"Cool." She dug into the pocket of her shorts and produced a tiny vial. "Here." She placed it on top of the counter.

My gaze went from her expectant expression to the vial. The glass was thick, the stopper made of cork, and dark liquid filled the inside. It had an almost toy-like quality that made me think of amusement park gift shops.

"What is it?" I asked. I wasn't against selling merchandise from local artists on consignment, but there was something definitely off about the situation. And the vial. The more I looked at it, the more it screamed of rat poison.

The girl huffed. "It's for the spell, duh."

"I sell tea and knickknacks, not spells."

She traced the symbol of the spirit in the air—the same one Grandma had drawn on her spellbook. "A spell."

One of the best things about being a witch or a mage was that our power didn't show on the outside unless we were doing magic. Shifters, berserkers, and other creatures often had trouble disguising their innate power and gave off the wrong vibes. In the world of magic, being the most powerful in the room was great. In the human world, it made everyone else wary.

Potions could help with that—one of the many reasons there was a witch shop in any paranormal hub—but only up to a point. Witches, on the other hand, could pass as normal humans as long as they didn't practice obvious magic in front of anyone.

"What kind of potion do you need?" I crouched behind the counter and opened one of the cabinets, where I kept a stock of some of the usual materials used to make potions and spells. The bottles and containers were stacked and shoved together into the space almost to the point of hilarity, but the second cabinet on top was locked tight and I hadn't found the key yet.

"Love potion," the girl said.

Peering over the counter, I arched my eyebrows. "Love potion?"

She tapped the top of the vial. "I brought you his blood."

I jumped straight at that. Not because there was blood in the vial, but

because nothing good ever follows the phrase "I brought you his blood." Willing blood was a necessary ingredient in some spells or potions. *Willing* being the keyword here.

If she wanted a love potion—which didn't exist—and the guy's blood was here instead of his person, the offer of blood was unwilling, and unwilling blood was only used for dark magic. Illegal magic.

Nothing that would ever grace Grandma's spellbook. Or mine.

"I'm sorry." I eyed the vial again, debating whether to act like it was no big deal she had brought unwilling blood for a spell, to read her the riot act, or to keep it and dispose of it later. That might make her suspicious. She might go looking for another witch. "Love potions aren't a thing."

She crossed her arms, cocking one hip. "Sure they are."

"Are not."

"Are-are."

"Are—" I inhaled deeply. *No.* I would *not* lower myself to kindergarten level. "Look, I'm sorry. I don't know where you read about love potions, but no witch worth their salt can make one for you. How would *you* feel if someone messed with your head and made you fall in love with them? Imagine if the person you dislike most in school did that to you."

"I'm not in school. I graduated in June."

We held each other's stares for a few long seconds until her lips tightened.

"I know you can make love potions," she said. "My sister got one from the witch before you, and that's how she snagged a husband."

I rolled my eyes.

"She did," the girl exclaimed in outrage. "Kevin was barely paying her any attention, so she came here and got a potion and he asked her out the next day! They got married last week."

It sounded to me like Kevin was playing hard to get, then had a moment of divine inspiration. Ms. Bagley must've given the girl's sister some random beverage to act as placebo while he got his act together.

What a genius idea.

Snatching the vial off the counter, I crouched to access the cabinet again. If I kept refusing or warned her off about illegal magic, she'd try to find someone else and either get conned, put us at risk of being discovered, or end up finding a witch who dealt with dark magic and actually force some poor person to her will.

But if *I* was the one to con her, like Ms. Bagley had done with her sister, she'd either figure out a potion couldn't make her love life work, or she'd return to demand something stronger. Eventually, she'd give up and move on.

Perhaps not the most moral thing to do—Grandma would probably not approve—but even the best witches had to improvise sometimes.

"You'll do it?" the girl asked excitedly, leaning over the counter.

"Yes."

With a loud whoop, she disappeared from sight. Next came a rhythmic tapping of her sneakers against the floor. Dancing?

"I'm getting hitched. I'm getting hitched," floated in the air.

Definitely dancing.

Studying the collection of herbs, parchments, and powders inside the cabinet, I decided to go for something simple and mundane—small glass bottle, the remains of my soda, and a pinch of pepper for extra grossness, in case my backwash wasn't enough. The vial of blood I tucked away to be disposed of later.

The soda would go flat in the time it took the concoction to reach the girl's intended target, and he'd either spit it out or it'd act as a placebo. Either way, she would never know the difference.

To give the whole thing a bit more credibility, I dipped a finger in some moon water and drew the tiniest of tiny wards on the bottle, infusing my intent with magic. My soul responded, and my power blipped in the air.

"I felt that!" came from the other side of the counter.

Good. Now she had a magic bottle that would make people think twice about touching. Only twice, though. I couldn't spend more power than that on this. What if I had to make a spell or actual potion later on? I needed to keep my reserves full.

Once I got back to my feet, the girl snatched the bottle out of my hand and fished her phone out. "How much?"

"On the house."

Her mouth opened in horror. "But then it won't work."

I blinked, not understanding. "Of course it will work."

She grew agitated. "Borrowed magic losses potency."

Where on Mother's green earth had she heard that? "That's silly. Believe me, it'll work."

"It won't."

"Fine." I stepped sideways and opened the laptop. "Five bucks."

"Only? Sis's potion was like five hundred." She stared at the bottle with obvious doubt.

I barely refrained from whistling. Ms. Bagley might've been a friendly, doting old witch, but she'd had a sharp sense of business. "You can give me the rest when you get married. Oh! I almost forgot."

She slammed her phone on my card reader and looked at me excitedly. "What?"

"You have to wait at least a year to get married. Otherwise, the magic will lose its efficiency."

"A year? My sister got married in five months."

I took a shot in the dark. "Yeah, but she's older than you, right?" At her hesitant nod, I continued, "The potion is not just about the other person but you as well. The spell will break if you get pregnant too. Magic doesn't react well with youth."

Of all my bullshit, this part was actually true. Magic and children didn't mix—not even their blood, willing or unwilling. Even shifters and berserkers began their shifts in their midteens at the earliest. Mother's way of preventing paranormal extinction.

She pouted. "Fine. Whatever."

The payment went through, and she hurried out of the shop.

"Leave me a good review," I shouted after her.

Then I munched on one of the cookies reserved for my clientele because I had cause to celebrate again.

My first disappearing body, my first review, my first BFF pick-me-up, and my first magic client. Good things really did come to those who waited.

The following day dawned with the promise of scorching heat. The idea of turning the shop into an ice cream parlor grew more and more inviting as I squeezed excess water from a towel and used it to wipe my arms and armpits. The sink in the downstairs bathroom was quite small and didn't allow much maneuvering.

A shower would've been better, but unfortunately, this bathroom didn't have one.

Once my arms, torso, and nether regions had been thoroughly wiped, I

put my undies on and attempted to wash my hair. It only took a minute of waiting patiently for a measurement cup to fill—tilted, or it wouldn't fit under the faucet—to admit I was being silly. No way I could manage that miracle in this bathroom. I needed a proper place to wash.

A place like the spacious bathtub upstairs. The one with the disappeared maybe-dead body.

Outside hose it was.

The shop's backyard was almost as big as the footprint of the building, which wasn't saying much. Surrounded on all three sides by a tall iron fence covered by ivy and other vegetation, you could only see inside if you intentionally peeked from the high windows of the two buildings sandwiching me—the Corner Rose and a seasonal restaurant currently closed.

The buildings' shadows provided a welcome respite from the rising heat, even if the mess in the yard made me twitch. I had cleaned up some, but browning grass and weeds grew unkempt among the flagstones, creeping over cardboard boxes and a few abandoned metal buckets. A round metal fire pit occupied the center of the yard, and a rusting locker filled with more tools and cleaning supplies stood by the back door. On the opposite end, a break in the vegetation delineated the gate giving access to the back alley.

One day, it'd be a lovely herb garden. Today, it was my shower stall.

I unrolled the garden hose, bent forward, and let the water fall on the back of my head.

I cursed like no soap would ever be enough to wash my mouth. Icy didn't even begin to describe the water's temperature. All thoughts of ice cream parlors fled my mind, along with every other possible thought.

"It's only for a minute," I muttered over and over as I made a quick job of washing my hair. Forget about conditioner—I'd have to dare the age of frizz.

Still sputtering curses, I hurried to towel myself off in the small bathroom. My reflection looked as grim as I felt, my hair an apt comparison to the yard outside. Ah well, witches were supposed to be natural and all that, right? I fit the theme.

The reality of my situation hit me like a punch to the gut.

"What are you doing?" I asked my reflection. "You are a grown adult, Hope Avery. You come from an understated but wonderful line of witches. You fear no challenge. You are nobody's fool." I poked the mirror with a stern finger. "You will *not* allow a prankster to take your shower hostage."

Filled with the righteous burning fire of a thousand suns, I stomped my

way upstairs.

And dipped into my bedroom instead of the bathroom.

Clothes first. I wasn't against giving a peep show to my neighbors here and there, but tending the shop in my underwear would probably attract the wrong clientele. Not that a line of witchy panties and bras couldn't turn a profit. Something black with small broomsticks printed on them. Cute. Cozy.

I planted a hand on Grandma's spellbook on top of the dresser and allowed the familiar touch to infuse me with peace. "A new day is a new chance to shine. Do not let past failures stand in your way."

Also, I needed my hairbrush.

The bathroom door remained closed, as it had since Officer Brooks had left the scene and I'd rescued my phone. There was an ominous air about it, which was silly because it was only a door, and not even a thick or sturdy door. It was plywood or something cheap painted white, with a tiny frosted glass window too high for me to peek through.

"Witches don't peek," I reminded myself. "Have some pride, Hope."

Giving myself no more time to dwell, I twisted the handle and slammed the door open.

"See?" I cried defiantly. "You were being silly."

The body was back in the bathtub.

FIVF

I STOOD FROZEN for a few seconds, my brain taking its sweet time to process the visual. The same man, in the same blue suit, was sprawled in my bathtub, in the exact same pose.

You couldn't make this up.

My first instinct was to let panic overtake me again and run for the hills. Luckily, my body was slow to react. By the time I regained control of my limbs, I was able to stand my ground and take out my phone instead of going outside and screaming bloody murder.

"You want a photo, Officer Brooks?" I muttered as I took a picture of the body. "You'll get a photo."

Taking a step forward, I turned on the video and filmed myself stretching one tentative leg and poking the man's hanging foot with my sneaker. No reaction. No rosy color on his cheeks. Lips as blue as the sky. Deader than dead. I jumped away and called for reinforcements.

"I need your help," I said the moment Vicky picked up. A photo, a video, and a second witness account. This time, I was doing it by the book. No longer would I be the new witch who cried wolf.

"What is it?" Vicky asked groggily. Oh, right—it was Sunday, and she'd guided a night tour yesterday.

"Sorry to wake you up," I apologized belatedly.

"It's okay. What do you need?"

"Can you come to the shop?" The sight of the body made my skin crawl, but I didn't dare look away. "ASAP?"

"I guess."

"Thank you."

I ended the call and retreated to the door to wait. Thresholds were a tricky space, but in this case, my soul was content to have that barrier between me and the body. One step and I'd no longer share a room with a dead person. There was freedom in that.

Minutes passed, unendurable, and guilt ate at my insides. Perhaps calling Vicky had been a mistake—involving her in this was not a kind thing to do. But who else would help? My family was across the country, and nobody else but Mr. Lewis would willingly talk to me.

But if I had a civilian with me, seeing the same thing I was, Officer Brooks would be forced to believe me. The Council wouldn't be able to blame me for this, and no black mark would stain my ownership of the shop.

What's more—after Vicky saw this, she might add the shop to her guided tours. The thought brightened my mood. Bet I'd get a lot of clients then, curiosity-seekers looking to buy something from the haunted shop.

But was that the legacy I wanted to leave behind for myself and Grandma? A haunted shop that sprouted bodies?

"Sheesh. Way to put it in a marketable way, Hope."

My phone rang, startling me away from all the possible ways to spin the body in my bathtub into a positive, cash-earning opportunity.

Shame rose as I answered it. This man hadn't lost his life so my shop could prosper, as nice a move as that might've been. "Vicky?"

"The front door is locked."

Of course it was. I'd checked it and the back door ten times before going to bed. Which raised the question—how had the body made it back into my bathtub? Were my previous theories right and someone had a copy of my keys?

Or could it be magic-related? A twinge of unease made me squirm as I went downstairs. Calling Vicky looked more and more like a selfish, monumental mistake, and it was getting harder and harder to find any excuses to explain my decision.

Too late now. She was here, and she wouldn't let the matter go even if I told her I no longer needed help. Why should she? In her place, I wouldn't.

I unlocked the door and let her in. She wore a strappy blouse and sweatpants—the sort of clothes you grabbed at random when you were in a hurry to get somewhere.

Guilt warred with happiness that she'd come so fast, no questions asked. That was family-level friendship. The kind of friendship that would last

through the years. The kind of friendship that helped you bury bodies in the backyard because your grandma was dead and couldn't.

I might be wrong, but I'm pretty sure at that moment my eyes were shooting stars.

Vicky worried her lip. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"Can you come upstairs with me real quick?" That squirm of unease ran down my back again. "I need you to check something."

"Sure." She followed me across the shop and up the stairs. When I paused at the top landing, she prodded me. "What is it?"

"There's something bad in the bathroom."

Horror filled her expression. "Oh my God. Is the body back?"

Before I could stop her, she rushed by me and ran into the bathroom. A startled laugh followed.

"Hope," she exclaimed with relief. "What is wrong with you? You scared me half to death."

I joined her in the bathroom, my inner alarms blaring at full blast.

The bathtub was empty. White, gleaming, not a scratch or spot of dust marring the porcelain. Even the grout and tiles surrounding it were spotless, as if they had been laid down yesterday.

Well, now.

Feigning surprise, I gasped with the acting chops of a turkey. "It's gone!" "The man?"

"The spider."

Vicky frowned. "Spider?"

My arms opened the size of a basketball ball. "Huge. And furry." I forced a shudder. "I've never seen anything like it."

Vicky glanced uneasily at our feet. "Where did it go?"

"Must've escaped while I went down to open the door. Maybe through the drain?"

"Yeah, uhm. I love you, Hope, but I don't do spiders."

I looked contrite. No faking necessary. "I'm sorry. I was just so shocked, and I didn't know who else to call."

She licked her lips, still looking at the floor. "I get it. Moving somewhere new is scary. Maybe you imagined it, huh?"

"You're right. Want some tea? It's the least I can do after asking you here."

I crossed my fingers, wishing hard. If intent was the source of magic, at

that moment I was the most powerful witch in the world because the last thing I wanted was for her to stick around.

"No, that's okay." Slowly, she retreated toward the stairs. "I'll come by later. After you've made sure that thing is gone," she added in a mutter.

"Sorry, again," I called after her.

She blew me a kiss, then disappeared down the stairs. A few seconds later, the chime above the front door tinkled, and the soft thud of the door closing reverberated in the absolute silence.

"Come out, come out. Wherever you are," I shouted into the empty house. Gone was the shock and surprise—I was now in the land of complete, utter irritation with no affirmation in sight to bring me back into the happy zone. "The joke's over."

No sounds broke the silence.

So, it was going to be like that. I ground my teeth, went into my bedroom, and opened the nightstand drawer. I had no guns or blades to defend myself, no claws or extra strength, but no witch worth their salt went to sleep without having a weapon handy.

Potions were handy. Very handy. Especially ones that cost a year's worth of savings and were assured to freeze your opponent long enough for you to make your escape. I grabbed the small vial, careful not to break its thin glass, and returned to the landing. To my right, the bedroom and empty living room. To my left, the bathroom and kitchen. In front of me, a closet.

We'd start there.

Potion at the ready, I jerked the door open and jumped back.

A vacuum cleaner and a shelf stocked with sheets and towels stared back at me.

Closing it firmly, I moved into the kitchen. Nobody in the cupboards, upper or lower—and believe me, there was plenty of space in there, since I owned a total of one pan, one pot, and a couple of dishes. I didn't peek outside the window to the backyard. No reason to.

I'd kept an eye on the archway the whole time I'd been downstairs to open the door for Vicky. Nobody had made it down.

Whoever was messing with me was hiding on this floor.

I moved into the living room and checked behind the door. Either the man was alive and wearing makeup to look like a corpse, or someone was literally hauling a corpse around. Even if I'd missed it yesterday, no way they could carry a corpse up and down the stairs in the time it had taken me to bring

Vicky upstairs.

Nothing in the living room, nothing in the closet, and nothing under the bed.

Time to look for secret compartments. And check my ceilings for hidden cameras. I went through every inch of the closets and every room downstairs. I even checked the locked cabinet behind the counter. It rattled under my pulls but didn't open. Not that anything but a toddler would've fit in there.

Frustrated, I returned upstairs.

The bathtub remained empty.

No problem—I had video and photographic evidence of the dude and his face. I had a grand total of zero contacts in the police force, but even Officer Brooks would agree to follow up once I showed her my phone.

But when I checked the photo gallery, the images showed an empty tub. The video consisted of my foot nudging empty air.

A chill permeated my veins.

Magic.

Spells, magic, elemental powers—things that appeared to the naked eye, naked senses, but could never be committed to the art of video or photography. Otherwise, we'd all be in huge trouble in this era of personal phones.

Slowly, I backed away from the tub, something in me screaming to leave well enough alone. That this was none of my business.

Then I caught my reflection in the mirror, my hair dried in a frizzy, wavy mess, the green strand sticking out at an odd curve. I remembered the small bathroom downstairs with its tiny sink. The icy cold of the water coming out of the hose.

No. I would *not* be held hostage by a magical disappearing corpse.

I was making a spell, and I was getting rid of it.

Lost souls, ghosts, were a strange phenomenon in the paranormal world. Discussions about any afterlife were as much of a hot topic in the magical community as in the human one, but nobody could deny that some unlucky souls became trapped in the mortal world.

I'd never heard of one being so strong as to be solid to the touch, though.

Luckily for me, there were spells to deal with these kinds of things, to show any vestige of the souls and set them free. Unfortunately, I didn't know any.

I returned the freezing potion to the nightstand drawer and went to Grandma's spellbook. I'd read the thing front to back, back to front, and upside down about a dozen times, and in my heart of hearts, I knew there were no spells dealing with lost souls in the book. My good-natured, herbloving grandma would've stayed far, far away from dead bodies.

It didn't stop me from flicking through the pages, hoping against hope—it was my name, after all.

One day, the book would be full of my own wisdom, but for now, I had to depend on hers.

When no miraculous new spell about ghosts appeared on its pages, I switched my research to the internet. Spells of this kind were not illegal—no dark magic was needed to reveal or dispel a ghost, only the magic that might've killed them—so it shouldn't be too hard to find one. And if I didn't, I had learned enough through the years that I could cobble one together.

What I couldn't do was ask for outside help or tell anyone about it.

If news got to the Council that I had a ghost guest, they'd investigate for sure. That would put me in the spotlight, and I couldn't afford it, especially if

Officer Brooks had told them about my call. How could I be entrusted with a witch shop—a pillar of any local paranormal community—if I couldn't tell the difference between a ghost and a real corpse?

That and the less-than-stellar reviews and earnings might convince them to cut the probation term short and kick me to the curb. I'd never be given a shop again, and would never be approved to open my own if I were ever in the position to do so. My and Grandma's dream would die a fast, painful death.

The thought made me turn off my phone. Forget the research; I'd do it by instinct. Less chance to get caught that way.

Pacing on the landing, I began a mental list of ingredients. Clear quartz, to augment my magic, amethyst, black obsidian, certain herbs. All common things I stocked in the shop. The only thing I didn't have was dirt.

To make this kind of spell, I'd need grave dirt. The older, the better. Grave dirt absorbed the remains of those interred within—the longer it soaked in the dead, the better. Otherwise, the spell might do nothing even if my lackluster power made it work.

Back to the phone. A quick search told me there were three cemeteries around town. Two were too new. The third was small, old, and nearby. Perfect.

I clicked on the link.

Small, old, nearby, and privately owned, closed for visits. *Tsk*. Not so perfect.

Online shopping it was. I checked my new suppliers and some of the old ones. Only one had old grave dirt for sale. Out of stock—ten days estimated delivery.

Ten days!

I imagined using the small bathroom and the hose outside for the next ten days. *Estimated* ten days. It could be twenty for all I knew.

Nope.

A sharp knock on the glass of the shop's front door startled me. Pocketing the phone, I went down and checked the newcomer's identity through the blinds. It was a young man, looking normal enough. He smiled when he saw me.

"Are you open?"

Was I? I checked the time on the wall clock. Apparently, I was.

I opened the door immediately.

"Sorry." I tugged at the cords by the windows, bringing the blinds up. "I'm running a little late today."

"No problem. I'd have come later, but I need this before class."

Blinds and open sign dealt with, I rushed around the counter eagerly. "What can I get you?"

"Glamour, please. D type."

Looking into his eyes, I noticed red speckles coming through. Demons appeared perfectly human until they chose to show their claws and horns, but their red irises betrayed them. No hiding that abnormal color except with glamour or the excuse of contacts.

"Sure thing." Crouching, I opened the potions cabinet and grabbed a glamour one. I'd made these before the shop's official opening day, and seeing the group of vials earn empty spots here and there filled my heart with glee. If all went to plan, this cabinet would soon be in serious need of restocking, and I would be looking for an intern of my own to help me make the potions.

Something my own internship had never taught me because the only thing I'd been shown was where Tammy's favorite coffee shop was.

But that was the past. "And the future is built on the blocks of the present."

"Excuse me?" the man asked.

"Nothing." I presented him with the vial and a smile worth of rainbows and unicorns. "You can return the container when you need a refill for a discount."

He grinned. "Sure thing. How much is it?"

I quoted the price, and he paid without comment. I'd kept my prices the same as Ms. Bagley, so as to not shock customers, and I didn't expect any balking. Before leaving, the man gave me a last, lingering look.

I waved goodbye.

Not the sexiest move, but although he wasn't bad looking and seemed nice enough, I wasn't here to romance. Maybe down the line, after the probation period ended. After I made friends with my neighbors and showed the town that I was a dependable businesswoman worthy of everyone's witchy needs, touristy and real.

Guy gone, I returned to my phone. Where was I? Ah, yes, cemetery dirt.

Grave dirt and small, very old, privately owned, closed-to-the-public cemeteries.

You can guess where this was going.

Night came late in summer, so I was forced to cool my heels for a bit after closing up the shop for the day. Night was the best time to gather grave dirt—something to do with the moon and the lack of sun heat—and it also happened to be the best time to sneak into cemeteries.

Yay, coincidences.

Once the level of darkness was acceptable for covert operation purposes, I dressed up in black jeans and my shop's T-shirt uniform turned inside out because I had no black T-shirts without bright logos. My blond hair was a dead giveaway, so I hid it under the Obscure Treasures tarot deck's cloth because I had no scarves, black or otherwise.

Some days, it paid to own a witchy shop.

I left through the back door, making sure not to make any loud noises as I locked the iron gate behind me. The alleyway was empty, all windows dark. Excellent. I consulted the map on my phone one more time, then began making my way with confident steps. Not fast enough to rouse suspicion but still maintaining a good pace.

Nightly cemetery excursions wouldn't get me out of waking up early to open the shop, and I got angsty if I didn't get enough sleep.

The cemetery was a good thirty-minute walk from the shop, past Petticoat Row and all the pubs and bars of Guiles and Romary. Since tomorrow was a workday, no overflow of drunkards and partygoers filled the surrounding streets, and I made my way unnoticed.

Greenhill Cemetery occupied its own small block in the oldest part of the old town among some of the old mansions—a square spot of dark land devoid of any light except for the streetlamps lining the street. It was surrounded by a fence half brick, half scary iron spikes. The main gate, when I got to it, looked like it hadn't been opened in years.

Peering through the iron bars, I got the impression of a gravel path, lots of grass, trees, and the telltale specks of stone slabs leaning at different angles as they formed neat rows in the distance. There was a small hill on the left side, topped by the silhouette of a big house.

I had seen it in passing once as I acquainted myself with the

neighborhood, but I couldn't recall much aside from old brick and timber and tiled gables. According to my research, the house and cemetery had belonged to the Cavalier family for over a hundred years after they had inherited it from the original founding family, although it would take quite the extended family to fill all the headstones visible in the shadows.

Maybe it was a family & friends kind of thing.

My attention returned to the house on the hill. It remained obscure, not a light in sight. The owners probably didn't live here. Who wanted to live next to a cemetery?

Silly question—plenty of people would love to live next to an old cemetery. "Just because it's not your thing, Hope," I murmured as I resumed my walk along the fence, "doesn't mean it's not somebody else's."

There didn't seem to be any extra openings except for a second gate closer to the house. The owners' entrance, likely. This one was all metal, with a smaller door on the side and a modern doorbell.

For a moment, I considered ringing the bell, introducing myself, and explaining my need for a couple of handfuls of their finest, oldest dirt. At eleven at night. While dressed in an inside-out T-shirt with a tarot cloth wrapped around my head.

Or I could make the request the next day. Through email. From my witch shop's domain, where I sold all kinds of weird stuff. Nothing bizarre about the request at all.

Back to fence-jumping, then.

I settled on an expanse of fence facing a patch of forest land instead of the rows of houses and mansions. That way lay the local shifter pack territory, and I doubted any human prowled it at night but for the occasional jogger. Whoever had set the ward around the forest to keep people at bay had done an excellent job—I felt the slight urge to walk away, and I was all the way across the street.

The brick part of the wall reached up to my thigh. Getting a good grip on the metal rods, I hefted myself onto it. The spikes now came up to my chest, but there were two handy iron rows I could use as a ladder to get over—the photographs online had told me as much.

"What are you doing?"

I choked on a scream, my heart tumbling everywhere inside my chest. My hands squeezed the iron bars convulsively as I glanced down. Druscilla from Mr. Lewis's shop stood by my side, arms crossed, clearly unimpressed.

"Hi, Druscilla," I said brightly. A little shakily, but I got the job done.

"Dru," she said automatically, then glowered as she caught herself a second too late.

I turned up the smile voltage. "Hi, Dru."

"What are you doing?" she repeated, almost in a growl. I hadn't thought her a shifter before, but I was reconsidering my conclusion.

"Out for a stroll." I lifted one shoulder in a careless gesture.

"Over the fence?" she asked dryly.

I tilted my head as if the answer was the most obvious thing in the world. "Gotta get my cardio in."

Without breaking eye contact, she took out her phone and began dialing. Yeah, she was calling the police.

"Wait." I jumped down, and she stepped back. "Don't call Officer Brooks."

"Sure." Her fingers moved again.

Probably calling some other officer.

"I don't mean any harm. I just need some grave dirt."

Dru's glare morphed into curiosity. Her gaze strayed to the fence and the graves beyond. "Grave dirt?"

"For a spell."

"What kind of spell?"

"There's a ghost in my bathtub."

She laughed.

"I'm serious," I said earnestly. "Remember the body from yesterday? Well, it was back today, but when I called a friend to come and check, it was gone again. Disappeared from my photos and video too."

"Disappeared, huh? Maybe because it's only in here?" She tapped her head.

The idea that it might've been a hallucination due to the stress of opening the shop was unwelcome. Was she right?

Guess I'd find out if the spell showed zilch.

"I'm reasonably sure it's a ghost. I need the dirt to make a spell to free his soul."

Like most paranormals, Dru must've gone down the rabbit hole of looking up bizarre magical occurrences at some point in her life, so I was sure the notion of freeing trapped souls was familiar to some extent. She lowered the phone and gave me an assessing look. "Why this cemetery?"

"I need really old grave dirt, and this is the only place nearby that fits the description."

She made a noncommittal noise.

"How did you find me?" I doubted she took a walk this far from Mr. Lewis's shop this late at night. Unless she lived nearby. And wouldn't that be my luck?

"I saw you slinking around dressed like a cat burglar and wanted to know what you were up to." She made a sound of disgust at the pleased expression on my face. "Oh, please. Don't look so smug. You look like a bad Halloween costume."

Perhaps, but the sentiment remained. A new idea came to mind. "Do you want to help?"

Nothing like sneaking into a cemetery together to form long-lasting friendships. Hadn't I been looking for a way to bond with the local business owners and workers?

She gave me and the fence a long look. "Sure, I'll help."

The beginnings of a beautiful friendship right here. Grabbing the iron rods again, I hefted myself onto the brick section. The first iron step was fine, but the second was a bit too high. It took some maneuvering and Dru pushing from below, but I made it onto the second row. From there, it was a piece of cake to go over the spikes and drop down on the other side.

I dusted off my hands. "Coming?"

"Nope."

Not exactly unexpected. She didn't walk away, though, so I gave her a small wave and headed deeper into the cemetery. The woman was probably waiting to see if I raised a zombie army or something. As long as she didn't tattle on me, I'd consider it a win.

But, realistically speaking, she was likely calling Officer Brooks right that moment. I needed to hurry, grab my dirt, and make my exit through the opposite side of the fence before I got nailed for trespassing on top of making false emergency calls.

The ten days (estimated) delivery time was starting to gain some appeal. Explaining my bathtub-ghost-slash-possible-hallucination to the policewoman was an experience I'd rather skip.

The moon was on its way to First Quarter, the half sphere hidden behind a covering of clouds and on its way down. It provided enough light to make the stone slabs and other pieces of sculpture and small mausoleums visible in an

eerie kind of way. Cemeteries had never scared me, but they weren't my favorite place to visit, either.

I glanced at the looming house on top of the slope. Nice views and lots of yard space, but you couldn't pay me to live there.

The distraction cost me a stumble, and I chastised myself sternly. I was here to do a job, preferably before getting arrested for grave robbery.

Daring to turn on my phone's flashlight app, I checked the nearby stones until I got a sense of where the oldest graves lay. Most of the plots seemed to be family groupings, but there was a definite order to the randomness. I made my way toward a series of graves guarded by three big, droopy trees.

Before I got there, a slam reverberated in the air.

Immediately, I sank to my fours behind the nearest headstone. What was that? A police cruiser door closing? No, I was too far from the street to hear so loudly. Someone from the house?

I peeked around the stone slab. The house appeared as dark and uninhabited as before. Not the owner, then.

A few soft thuds followed the initial noise.

Cold sweat gathered on my neck. Someone was out there. Maybe a couple of someones. Nobody shouted my name, so I doubted it was the police. Dru coming to get me? No, she wouldn't make so much noise—she was a woman, not an elephant.

The answer hit me with a good dose of horror—grave robbers. I swallowed hard. Actual grave robbers had come to mess around, and I didn't have my freezing potion with me. In a pinch, I could make a spell or ward to defend myself, but it'd drain me completely, making my escape dubious. Hard to run when your legs had turned into jelly from using your magic.

I shifted behind the slab, making myself smaller. If I walked away, they might spot me easily. My best bet was to stay put and wait them out. Then I'd grab my dirt and sneak away. My luck hadn't been the best so far, but the universe wouldn't be so cruel as to have these grave robbers come to dig up the person buried right under me, would it?

Just in case the universe wasn't feeling gracious, I crossed my fingers and concentrated on making my wishes true. There was magic in affirmations, I reminded myself. There was power in wishing for something. There was something special in hiding behind a tomb slab and pouring all your intent while soft thuds came your way instead of abandoning ship and running for the fence.

A soft panting noise broke my concentration. Slowly, I turned my head to find a small, fluffy white dog looking at me expectantly, mouth open, tongue out, tail waving excitedly. It let out a small bark of excitement when our eyes met.

"Good girl," said a deep, male voice. For a moment, my brain short-circuited, wondering what I'd done to deserve the compliment. Hide well? Make it this far? Then the dog gave a happy yip and looked up.

I followed the direction of her gaze to find a tall, broad figure looming over us.

"You're trespassing on private property."

SEVEN

I DIDN'T NEED a full moon to recognize the harsh features of the man—the little happy dog was enough.

Here loomed the rude dog walker who had ignored my requests for help.

Was he a grave robber? No, of course not. What kind of grave robber came with their dog? A heavier panting coming from my other side made me look over my shoulder uneasily. Scratch that—with their two dogs. The second one was an enormous dark shadow daring me to try anything.

With a sense of deep foreboding, I got up to my feet. Slowly. This man was obviously the owner. A member of the Cavalier family. The small dog gave another happy yip and pawed at my thigh, looking for pets.

"Fluffy," Cavalier said curtly.

The small dog went back to him, tail wagging at full speed, bright eyes fixed on me, happy tongue tasting the air.

I about melted. *Fluffy*. Oh, my goodness. A sound escaped my throat, and I slapped a hand over my mouth to muffle it.

"Are you okay?" Cavalier asked, voice gone from curt and harsh to curt and irritated. If he recognized me from our street encounter, he didn't show it.

"Yes," I managed. I cleared my throat and tried to compose myself. "I'm good."

"Great. Now you can get out." He pointed to the side.

He was wearing all black again, his T-shirt straining against his chest as he pointed. On any other man, it would've been sexy. On him, it was... well, yes, sexy. But also a reminder of what an ass he'd been.

Straightening, I tugged my T-shirt down, trying to appear just as formidable. "Could I get a handful of dirt before I go?"

"No."

"I only need a bit. You won't miss it. It's for ah—"

I clamped my mouth shut. Was this man part of the magical world? How was I to explain why I needed the dirt without sounding completely bonkers? A dozen different possible reasons for wanting the dirt ran through my mind, forcing me to admit that no, there was no plausible explanation that wouldn't make me sound like a complete weirdo. I gave it a shot, anyway. "I have a collection of sand and dirt gathered from different locations. This would make a lovely addition."

The look of contempt he sent me was obvious in the dim light. "Scrape it off your shoes."

Sadly, that wouldn't be enough. I opened my mouth to tell him, but he stopped me with another snap of his arm.

"Out. Now. Or would you rather I call the police?"

I would definitely *not* rather he call the police, so I shut my mouth again and began walking the way he was pointing. He and the dogs followed close behind.

As far as walks of shame went, this wasn't the worst—at least we hadn't hooked up before he'd kicked me out.

"Fluffy, no," he said curtly.

A soft whine came from my side, and I guessed the small dog had come to get her pets again. I wasn't much of a dog person but—adorable.

We went up the slope and reached the road leading from the owners' gate to the house. No headstones around here. Nothing but open grass and a few trees and boulders. In spring and the light of day, it must've been incredibly green and beautiful. At night, it exuded a shadowy eeriness that made goosebumps appear on my arms.

A place fit for a gothic novel. No wonder he liked to dress in all black.

We arrived at the gate, and he opened the small metal door on the side. Barely. I had to squeeze by him, my arm coming in contact with his chest. Warm instead of the icy cold I'd expected.

To my surprise, Dru was waiting on the other side.

"Dru," Cavalier said with a curt incline of his head.

"Ian," she answered in kind.

Ian Cavalier. It suited him, and also not. No knight here coming to rescue a princess. When his focus snapped to me, I squirmed like a naughty kid caught eavesdropping.

"Don't ever sneak in again," he said, icicles dripping from his voice. He slammed the door closed, and I heard the snick of bolts locking into place.

I rounded on Dru. "You know each other?"

"Yep."

She began walking away, toward the shopping streets. I followed.

"Why were you waiting there instead of at the fence?" I asked. "Did you call him?"

"Nah, I heard the barks." She shrugged. "And I expected you to get caught."

I grimaced. "You could've warned me." But then, I supposed, where would be the fun?

"Sure."

The word felt like a pat on the head. The condescension would've irritated me if I didn't fully deserve it. I had told her about why I needed the dirt but had asked no questions about the cemetery, simply assumed if there was anything I needed to know, she'd tell me. This time, it was all on me.

"Who is he?" I asked. "Ian Cavalier." The name had a graceful rhythm to it. It brought images of castle tapestries, not haunted cemeteries at night.

"He's the local bounty hunter. Semi-retired."

Bounty hunters took care of misbehaving paranormals—as long as someone put a bounty on them. While shifter packs policed their own, most other paranormal species didn't have that level of organization to depend on when it came to criminals. Even us witches, as powerful as the Council was, used the bounty hunters to track down and apprehend dark magic users or others who used their magic for harm rather than good.

On rare occasions, when the threat was big enough to compromise the secrecy of the magical world, the bounty hunters would do it pro bono.

As for what happened to these people once they were in custody, that was up to each faction. Human laws and morals didn't always apply—the paranormal world could be a harsh place.

Which was why it was so important to have shops like mine—a refuge from the outside world. A place where goodness resided.

Goodness and dead bodies in bathtubs.

My fingers contracted, as if I were digging into rich, damp soil. I should've known he was part of the magical world. The man threw off power vibes like the best of them. Hadn't I noted this in our first meeting?

"Is he a demon?" I asked, the politeness of not asking for someone's type

of creature be damned—he'd been rude first. "No, wait. Shifter?"

"Shifter," Dru agreed.

That explained the two dogs. Even lone shifters liked to be around a pack. If he was semi-retired now, his bounty hunter buddies no longer created that connection for him.

"He looks young to be retired." I had put him at about thirty or early thirties. Bounty hunters usually were in it for life, too stubborn to quit until they got quitted by their prey.

"I heard he made a bunch of money from bounties, so he decided to come home."

"You heard? You don't know him well?"

She gave me an odd look. "Should I? Am I supposed to exchange diaries with every paranormal in town? Go on sleepovers and braid each other's hair?"

Dru did not like me very much. My superb intuition told me as much. "Would you like to?" I eyed her hair. "I can look up tutorials online."

She snorted. "Touch my hair and die, witch. Did you get the dirt you need?"

"No. He caught me before I could." We were back in the tourist area now, with its rows of quaint shops and restaurants. In the distance, the lights of the tall buildings of downtown could be seen between the local two- and three-story buildings.

Dru grew thoughtful. "Does it have to be human corpse dirt for this spell or does anything that's been long dead work?"

"Corpse dirt is the best, but a substitute might do it." The thought of using pet cemetery dirt didn't sit well, but I was open to ideas.

"I have something that might work. Come."

Beware of freely offered gifts by those who do not like you very much. "Why are you helping?"

She crossed her arms, studying me. "If Cavalier thought you were up to no good, I wouldn't have seen you again."

I tugged at the neck of my inside-out T-shirt. Too tight. Next time, I was ordering V-necks instead of crew necks. "I see."

"And the dogs like you."

"Otherwise you would've seen me hanging from their jaws?" I asked.

Her nod carried approval. "Exactly."

She led me to the alley running along the back of the shops and opened

the gate into Mr. Lewis's backyard. He lived on top of his much larger shop, like I did, but Dru lived somewhere else. It felt strange going into his backyard after closing hours, but Dru didn't seem to care.

She turned on her phone's flashlight and aimed it at a neat row of potted plants. "Will these work? They've been dead for years. A decade, at least."

I crouched and examined the soil. Whatever had lived there and the bugs that had eaten it no longer showed on the surface.

Eh, why not?

Dru handed me a trowel, and I filled one of the small freezer bags I'd brought with me. Then she kicked me out of Mr. Lewis's backyard and chose to wait by my back door for the results.

I understood—raising the dead was not for everybody.

Alone in my bathroom, I spread the dirt into a circle inside the bathtub, added the crystals and herbs, and focused my magic.

The circle responded for half a second, then the magic dissipated, as if there was nothing strong enough to catch its attention.

The spell and my intention had worked, but the dirt hadn't found anything to latch onto. Only dead people here; no plant corpses.

After telling Dru the dirt hadn't worked and watching her go on her merry way, I wrote down the spell and its components on a blank page in Grandma's spellbook. My handwriting wasn't as neat as hers, and my drawings left something to be desired, but pride filled me at the act of adding something new of value. Handwriting and art could be improved, and by the time I died, the spellbook would be overflowing with goodness.

Then I crashed on my bed, exhausted by my use of magic.

Morning came all too early. I struggled to reach my phone and shut down the alarm, confused when I didn't find it on the nightstand. It hit me then that I was still dressed, and my phone was chirping from my jeans pocket.

Yawning, I dragged myself to the small downstairs bathroom for my morning business. My jeans were covered in dirt and grass, and now so was my bed cover. I dragged everything into the washing machine in the storage room and started a cycle. Back upstairs, I heated some leftovers for breakfast and ate at the tiny table in the kitchen among my mail and shop-related paperwork. At some point, I really needed to get around to buying furniture for the living room.

After I dealt with the bathtub situation.

The night excursion might've failed, but not all was lost. Ian Cavalier was a magical bounty hunter, a shifter, which meant he might listen if I approached the problem like a normal person.

Besides, his dogs liked me. One of them, anyway. That had to count for something.

I dressed in my best jeans and one of the shop's T-shirts, scrubbed grass and dirt off my sneakers, and attempted to put my hair in some order.

Fairy Circle Cakes was open bright and early, and I stood in line for a serving of four muffins.

Thirty minutes later, I arrived at the metal door of Ian's cemetery. It was open, so I went inside and up the gravel path to the house.

What a difference the sun made.

The grass slope was lush even in summer, wildflowers peeping here and there. Weeping trees bowed elegantly, their canopy providing cool pools of shadows. If you ignored the headstones spreading to the right, this might've been one lovely country home in the city.

To the left, a second path forked toward a small garage with a large white van parked in front.

The house itself looked a lot less scary in daylight. Warm brown and red bricks made up the facade, and a neat slate gable rooftop completed the architecture. It was two stories high, with an added attic. Not a grand mansion by any means but big enough that I wouldn't want to be in charge of cleaning it.

A veranda ran the outside of the first floor, swing included. I could imagine Ian and the big dog sharing it while he held the small one in his lap. A happy family.

My chest constricted. I was fully committed to the shop and leaving a legacy in the witching community, but for a few seconds, the thought of having my own house with someone waiting for me at the end of the day was near overwhelming.

Maybe someday I'd find that someone special. Maybe not. There was joy to be found in many things, and the thought of being alone had never bothered me. More bed for me; fewer empty milk bottles in the fridge. And if I didn't get to have a swing, then I'd put a couple chairs in the back garden

and invite Vicky over for beers and burgers.

After the bathtub corpse was gone.

Reminded of my problem, I took the couple of steps up to the porch and knocked on the heavy wooden door. Like my bathroom door, it sported a frosted glass window. Bigger, prettier, and of much better quality.

The door opened after a minute, and Ian appeared on the threshold, giant dog looming behind him. If the cute little one was Fluffy, was this one, Giganty?

"What do you want?" he asked roughly. The only changes between last night and this morning were his mussed long hair and his T-shirt hanging loose over his hips rather than tucked into his jeans.

"Good morning." With a sunny smile, I offered the bag of muffins. "I brought breakfast. I thought maybe we could talk over some muffins."

He grunted. "Did you bake them?"

What an odd, odd man. "No."

He plucked the bag from my fingers and closed the door in my face.

EIGHT

I pounded on the door. "Mr. Cavalier!"

A series of retreating thuds came through the thick door—he was making sure I knew he was stealing my muffins and ignoring me. Nobody made that much noise walking away unless they wanted to be heard.

So, it was like that.

Giving the door a last glare, I turned on my heel and stomped down the gravel path. A couple of young men were loading some sort of equipment into the van. They looked to be about twenty. One had surfer looks, the other sported short hair and an eye patch.

I forced a smile and waved at them. "'Sup?"

They ignored me and kept loading the van.

"Bad beginnings make for wonderful sequels," I muttered to myself.

I was still fuming forty minutes later when I flipped the Tea Cauldron's sign to open and left the doors ajar for the extra breeze. A good dose of chamomile tea did crap-all to soothe me, and the two cans of diet soda that followed left me thrumming and ready for action. Any kind of action.

The door chime tinkled, and I looked up, eager for a distraction. Dru entered the shop and gave the place a slow perusal. She was wearing an elegant summer blouse with a pastel yellow paisley pattern that complemented her light brown skin and left me wondering about adopting a more cheerful summer T-shirt uniform.

"Nice place," she said begrudgingly.

With those two simple words, I felt my anger toward the morning events drain out of me like dirty water down a pipe. A compliment coming from this woman was worth ten muffins. My smile, when it came, was a hundred

percent genuine. "Thank you."

She approached the counter and sat on a stool.

"Tea?" I asked.

"Iced coffee."

I busied myself preparing the brew and served it in one of the glasses I reserved for special clients. They had little cauldrons and stars printed all over them—a shop-opening present from my sister.

Dru eyed the glass dubiously but took a tentative sip. "So, did it come back?"

"Did what come back? Ian?"

"The corpse. In your bathtub."

"Oh. Hmm." I drummed my fingers on the counter. "I haven't actually checked."

She looked disgusted. "Are you for real?"

Easy for her to say. She wasn't the one with a disappearing corpse in her bathtub. "It's not like I can do anything about it until I get my dirt."

"You could ask another witch to help."

Asking another witch was out of the question. I shouldn't even have told Dru about the ghost. "I can deal with it myself. If Ian won't give me the dirt, then I'll order it online." It was still August. I could deal with hose showers until October if needed.

"Maybe you should try asking him instead of trying to sneak in."

I harrumphed so loudly she blinked, startled.

"I went by this morning," I explained.

"And?"

The sound of his door slamming in my face reverberated in my head.

"And he stole my muffins." I grabbed the cleaning cloth and gave the counter a fast, hard wipe. "Can you believe it?"

She arched her brows. "Did you bake them?"

"What does that have to do with anything? I got them from Fairy Circle Cakes. Stood in line for ten minutes."

Dru took a long sip of her coffee, hiding her reaction behind the glass.

Not suspicious at all.

Narrowing my eyes, I asked, "What is it?"

She put the glass down and dabbed her lips with one of the paper napkins. "Nothing."

Was it too early in our friendship to strangle the truth out of her?

Possibly. And Grandma would not approve.

"Is it some Olmeda hospitality rule I'm breaking or something?"

"You're not used to shifters, are you?"

I plopped down on my stool and leaned my elbows on the counter. "Not really. There are no packs where I lived, and my internship didn't teach me much about other supernaturals." Or anything. "Is it a shifter thing?"

"Okay, listen," she said with the air of someone about to impart some wisdom. "It's like this—you don't show up at a shifter's house with food you didn't cook. Especially if you want something from them. It's insulting."

"Really?"

"Really."

I tried to recall Ian's expression during our exchange. He'd closed the door so fast, it hadn't given me a chance to read it. "But he took the muffins."

"He's a shifter, not stupid."

I made a face. "I hope he shares with the dogs, at least."

Dru rolled her eyes. "Dogs can't eat muffins."

"I might be a little clueless about things and people with fur."

She laughed. "No shit, Captain Obvious."

"What else should I be careful with?"

"Nothing major. The food thing. Don't be disrespectful to their alpha unless you want to get your ass kicked. Oh, and they get touchy if you call them furries."

"Speaking from experience?"

It was her time to grimace. "The joke sounded so much better in my head."

"They always do." I grabbed her empty glass and washed it absentmindedly. Until now, I'd thought I had a good grasp of the paranormal community and all its members, but there were obvious holes in my knowledge. The kind of things you learned by living. "Ian is a shifter but not part of the pack? I saw a couple of young men loading a van at his place. Is he remodeling?"

"Nah, that's his side business. Those were Alex and Shane. They're his strays."

Strays were shifters without a pack. Ian would technically count as one, but the term was usually reserved for younger shifters looking for their place in the world. From all indications, Ian was way past figuring out his life. "Not part of the pack, either?"

"Not so far. They came to town a couple of years ago, and Ian gave them a job. They've been working for him since. Officially, he runs a repairs and remodeling business, kind of a jack-of-all-trades thing where if you need something in your house fixed, he'll do it for you."

"Seems like a weird career for a bounty hunter." Who owned a cemetery and was loaded enough to semi-retire.

"Guess he needed something to do. Can I have a cookie?"

I put a couple on a small dish and presented them to her. I'd have to eat the rest for lunch and dinner soon or they'd go to waste. The thought made me a little sad.

"What else can you tell me about Ian?" I asked. "What's his favorite food?"

Dru gave me an odd look. "I've no idea. I'm not friends with him."

"But you know each other."

"Once you live here long enough," she drawled, "you'll also know everyone."

"Big city, small place, huh?"

She stared at her cookies and muttered, "Too small. Way, way too small."

I couldn't wait to be a part of the community and grow absolutely, horribly sick of it.

"You should be careful with Cavalier," Dru said.

"Why?" I frowned. "Is he dangerous?"

The look on her face told me she was regretting ever talking to me. "Of course he's dangerous." The duh followed unsaid. "He's a bounty hunter. A bounty hunter shifter loner who doesn't mix with the local pack. God knows what he did while working for the guild. There are rumors about him."

Interesting. "What kind of rumors?"

"His old partner died mysteriously some years ago. They say Cavalier might've killed him."

A laugh escaped me.

Dru appeared unimpressed by my sudden bout of joviality. She stood, spine straight, and put her purse on the counter. "How much do I owe you?"

"No, no, I'm sorry. I wasn't laughing at you."

Her lips pursed. "All rumors have a basis in reality."

"Sure, but he has dogs. Nobody who owns a dog called Fluffy and hires strays can actually be evil."

She sat again, somewhat mollified. "Have you thought about the fact that

maybe he hired them to atone for something? Or because he plans on using their loyalty down the road?"

"They're strays. They have no true loyalty to him." The alpha of a pack commanded loyalty through an antiquated power hierarchy determined by the power in one's blood. An alpha shifter begot alpha heirs, and so on. Very old-fashioned, very rustic. And that wasn't even starting on the whole mating thing. Romantic on paper, problematic otherwise.

"You do realize that bounty hunters are no angels, right?" Dru asked. "Even if he didn't murder his partner or get him killed, he's done plenty of killing on his own."

Not all bounties were equal. Just because witches liked to keep their faction's criminals in jail—the ones that made it there—it didn't mean everyone else was as considerate. "I know."

But I had to agree with her—knowing was not the same as accepting. My brain could make peace with the fact that bounty hunters employed deadly force when the situation required it, but that was an ocean apart from seeing it with my own eyes. Part of my growing up so separated from the magical world, no doubt.

Ian did look like the kind of man who could kill others. I'd noticed a thin scar on his jaw and a couple on his arms. He had taken part in fights. Had won those fights. And not all opponents would've survived.

Dru was right—he was dangerous.

Good thing I'd be done with him once I got my dirt.

The shop's landline phone rang loudly, and I automatically lifted the receiver to my ear. "The Tea Cauldron, how can I help you?"

"It worked," a familiar feminine voice exclaimed on the other end.

I tried to place it but came up short. "What worked?"

The next words came in a low whisper. "The potion."

Ah, the girl with the love potion. "I'm glad," I said cheerfully. Disaster averted.

"I put it in his coffee, and he barfed it all over my top, and he felt so bad he asked me out for dinner!"

"That's great. Way to go."

"I'm not paying you the rest until we get married."

That explained why she was calling instead of coming around. "Remember, don't—"

"Yeah, yeah. No marriage for a year. Or babies." Judging from her tone,

the eyeroll must've been monumental. "I don't want kids anyway. Thanks, dude."

"No problem." I hung up and took a deep, satisfying breath.

"Who was that?" Dru asked.

"A satisfied customer," I told her with a huge grin.

The door opened, and we turned our attention to the front of the shop. Another satisfied customer?

A woman in her early thirties with lightly tan skin and raven hair held in a tight bun entered the shop, her cane thudding against the hardwood floor. She scanned the shop with a curl of her lip, then focused on us. The curl intensified.

"Sonia Aguilar." She approached the end of the counter and stretched her hand over the glass display. "Paranormal Business Owners Association."

Her handshake was dry and firm. Curt. "Hello. Hope Avery."

"I know."

Yes, I supposed that was obvious.

"Hello, Sonia," Dru said.

Sonia spared her a glance. "How are you, Druscilla?"

Only the tick in her eye betrayed Dru's irritation at the use of her full name as she smiled, pleasant as pie. "Doing good, thank you."

"I hope we'll see you or Mr. Lewis at the next meeting?"

"Sure," she said blandly.

Sonia refocused on me. "I hope we'll see you as well, Miss Avery."

"Of course."

"As a business owner in the community, it's important you attend these meetings," she continued, as if I hadn't spoken. "They might seem boring, but they're necessary. Operating our businesses in tandem with human ones needs a delicate balance. One misstep and the whole house of cards will come tumbling down."

"She gets it, Sonia," Dru said dryly.

"Does she?" Sonia's lips tightened.

"She does," I assured her.

"Then why didn't she come to the last meeting?"

Her tone was censuring, but I felt no guilt. "I wasn't aware of the place and date. I never got an email about it."

"It's your responsibility as part of the PBOA to figure out these things instead of waiting for the information."

It was? I crossed my arms, feeling slightly belligerent now. I wanted to make friends in the community, but it didn't mean I'd allow myself to be steamrolled. "I'd just opened the shop and was busy at the time. I figured any association worth its salt would be run efficiently, so I didn't feel the need to look up things on my own after I signed up as a member. The confirmation page said I'd receive all pertinent information through a newsletter."

Sonia Aguilar did not like that. Not one bit.

She stiffened, lifted her chin, and managed to look at me down her nose even though she was a hair shorter than me. "We are a perfectly oiled machine, Miss Avery. I understand it's a busy time for you, but we are also busy. Please do not waste our time."

I offered her a smile of truce. "We are all busy nowadays. I'm sorry for missing the last meeting. I'll make sure to attend the next."

"You do that. You can turn in the paperwork we're still missing while you're at it."

That was news to me. "What paperwork?"

She checked her phone. "We're missing forms PBO-56 and 57. And you still need to fill in the permit request for spells category eight and above."

My brow creased into a deep frown. "I turned those in along with my membership."

"They're not in our records."

Spell categories were a complete crock, but the Council liked things neat. I already had permission to sell things like the glamour potions, but a level eight and above permit would allow me to sell my services legally outside the shop for things like wards and other in situ magic. Witches could use their magic wherever they wanted, but being the local witch shop made me an official Council representative. Permits like this made the bureaucratic nightmare of me messing up any magic outside my shop an easier pill to swallow for everyone involved.

"I will make sure to fill them out," I assured her dutifully. Lacking permits would make the Council itchy, and I wanted them nowhere near the shop.

"Theodora Bagley came to every meeting," Sonia said. "Never missed one unless she was sick. And she turned in all her paperwork on time."

I scratched the side of my neck. Every mention of the old witch added a weight to my stomach. Filling in her shoes was going to take some effort. "Did she bring cookies too?"

"Yes."

I glanced at Dru, who nodded in agreement.

Guess that was my duty now. "Any shifters in the PBOA?"

"You'll know when you show up," Sonia answered curtly.

Definitely shifters, then. I eyed the cookies inside the display. Perhaps this is what Ms. Bagley did with them instead of throwing them in the trash. And this time, if someone asked if I'd baked them, I'd lie through my teeth.

"There's something else I need to talk to you about." Sonia looked pointedly at Dru. "Alone."

Dru grabbed her purse and stood. "Guess I'm going."

"See you later," I told her with a small wave.

"Sure."

As soon as she was gone, Sonia got to the point. "There have been some complaints about the shop. That it's not up to code."

My mouth fell open in shock. "What?"

She studied the shop once more. "Unsafe magic handling. Low quality products."

I snorted. "I've had a few magical clients, and none have had a complaint so far." As for the magic handling, we both knew it was a bullshit claim. None of the spells a magic shop like mine provided could do any real harm even if prepared incorrectly. I wasn't a mage who could light something on fire if their magic went sideways.

Unless "unsafe magic handling" was code for dark magic. I bristled at that. "I'm not a dark magic user."

"I didn't say you were. I need to make a visual inspection, if you don't mind."

I could refuse, but then she'd call the Council, and they'd send someone over. Besides, I had nothing to hide.

"Go ahead."

"Where do you keep your magic supplies?"

"Behind the counter and in the storage room."

She came around, the thuds of her cane a lot softer, which told me the stomping earlier had been for the sake of making a grand entrance. I opened the cabinet with my crystals and herbs and she gave the contents a cursory glance. Then I showed her where I kept the already-made potions, all labeled discreetly by color and single letters. Next, I took her through the bead curtain into the back, and let her peek into the storage room.

"You make your potions here?" she asked, looking at the downstairs kitchen.

"On the counter," I answered, glad that I kept the place clean out of boredom between my few clients.

"It all looks up to code," she agreed. To her credit, she didn't sound disappointed.

She would never tell me who had lodged the complaints, so I didn't bother to ask. We returned to the shop, and she left with another reminder to go to the next PBOA meeting.

Not ten seconds later, my phone rang. Vicky.

"Hey there," I said. I used the shop's laptop to log into the members' area of the PBOA's website. Sonia hadn't given me the forms, so it was up to me to find them in their convoluted system and print them out. Luckily, I'd had to print so much stuff in the process of taking ownership of the shop that my small printer was primed and ready to go.

"Did you get the spider out?" Vicky asked, light as a breeze.

"Caught it and threw it outside," I said, because I wanted her company at the shop again. It got lonely with nobody to talk to.

"Thank God." She made shivering sounds. "I couldn't have gone to sleep knowing a monster spider was prowling around."

I couldn't either, which was why I made my own anti-spider peppermint spray.

"Did you figure out who played that bathtub prank on you?" she asked.

"No." My gaze strayed upstairs. Was the corpse visible right at this moment, waiting for me to stroll in and set him free? "Not yet."

"People are such jerks. I'm sure it was a one-time thing."

"I'm crossing my fingers."

She chuckled. "I'm crossing my fingers for you too. Want me to come over? I'm busy today, but I think I can manage a visit."

"Nah, don't worry about it. I'll be all right."

"Okay then. See you tomorrow?"

"See you tomorrow," I agreed cheerfully.

The reminder of my corpse problem put things back into perspective. For a short while there, I'd forgotten my purpose in life—to use my magic for good. And what was good-er than helping a lost soul move on?

I flipped the open sign to closed and turned the lock, then went upstairs and surveyed my kitchen supplies with a critical eye.

The shifter expected homemade muffins, did he? I'd show him homemade muffins.

A short trip to the nearest grocery store and a couple of hours later, my kitchen was a mess, and all I had to show for my efforts were chew toys in the form of muffins. Too bad muffins didn't agree with dogs, or Fluffy would have a field day with these.

I should've given up and ordered the damn dirt online, but I had determination, grit, and the power of online recipes on my side, so how could I fail?

Needless to say, I went to bed quite frustrated.

NINF

ALL THE FRUSTRATION of the day before must've coalesced into divine inspiration overnight, because the moment I woke up, I knew exactly what I was going to cook for Ian.

I jumped off the bed, got dressed, and went into the kitchen. The remains of my (many, many) failures were written all over the counter, but I ignored them and threw the fridge door open.

My luck had finally turned—no further grocery trips would be needed for what I had in mind.

I took out the butter, a pack of ham, and sliced local cheese. A half-empty bag of sliced bread joined them on the counter. As I spread the butter on the bread, careful not to dig holes, I was brought back in time.

How many times had I stood at Grandma's kitchen counter as we prepared grilled cheese sandwiches? Countless. I would butter the bread, very careful not to mess up the fluffy part of the toast, then she'd put it on the pan and allow me to, also very carefully, stack the ham and cheese on top, followed by another buttered slice.

Then we'd sing whatever song I liked at the time, and once it ended, she'd flip the sandwich and we'd sing all over again at the top of our lungs without a care in the world.

I found myself humming a tune in rhythm with the memories filling me. Grilled cheese sandwiches had been Grandma's favorite comfort food, and, by default, mine. With time, the grilling had fallen to the side, leaving a simple cold ham and cheese sandwich as my go-to on-the-run choice of meal. But now that I was using the pan again, I didn't think I'd go back to the cold version. The few minutes spent buttering and heating them up were well

worth the effort.

Sandwiches done, I cut them into triangles and put them in a plastic container. The delicious smell of fried butter invaded my nostrils, and I licked the knife clean of melted cheese globs. Delicious.

My stomach grumbled in appreciation, but I resisted the urge to eat one half. Shifters were known to eat a lot, and anything less than an optimal amount of food would knock points off in Ian's estimation.

As to why I was spending so much effort in acquiring his dirt instead of driving to literally any other old cemetery, I didn't want to inspect too closely. Pride, probably. The need to see a plan come to fruition.

If I couldn't get over a few hurdles to get the dirt, how did I expect to get over whatever problems life threw at my shop? Life was a river, after all. Going around the boulders was the easiest way, but water also broke rocks given enough time and persistence.

Today, I was that water.

I stuffed a slice of bread in my mouth and found a tote bag for the container. The morning air was brisk, the sun coloring everything in lovely hues of golden oranges. As usual this early in the day, the streets were filled with joggers, dog walkers, and delivery trucks.

If my luck held, Ian would be at home like yesterday instead of out walking his dogs. And I had a feeling it would hold—it was that kind of day.

The cemetery's gate door was open again, so I went inside and trotted up the path. Sweaty and out of breath didn't exactly scream professionalism, but I was eager to claim victory.

Happy barks inside the house announced my presence, and Ian opened the door as I took the two steps up to the porch.

He wore no T-shirt today, just jeans and belt.

My gaze snagged on his pectorals. There was some hair there, a couple of scars. Muscle. They looked hard and defined and so pokable my right index finger itched with the need to press against his skin.

"What?" he asked.

I allowed his brusque tone to flow over me and fixed him with a bright, morning-person smile. "Here." I held out the plastic food container. "Breakfast."

He narrowed his eyes at the offering. Sniffed a couple of times.

"Grilled ham and cheese sandwiches." My voice turned coy. "Homemade."

An echo ringing *hooome maaade* seemed to envelop us as he licked his lips.

"Fine," he snapped. He took the container and disappeared inside the house, leaving the door open.

I punched my arms into the heavens and basked in the radiance of victory.

"The hell are you doing?"

"Nothing." I stepped inside and toed off my sneakers. The man was walking barefoot, and it felt bad to mar the rugs and beautiful hardwood floors.

Fluffy rushed forward and barked for attention, tail wagging madly.

"Hello, Fluffy." I patted her head dutifully, and she kept up with me as I followed Ian through the living room and into his kitchen.

The place was bigger on the inside than it looked on the outside. A little messy, but spotless, with a lived-in atmosphere that spoke of long winter nights gathered around the heavy kitchen table for a warm meal, and of open windows and fluttering curtains in the summer breeze. The same pang of longing I'd experienced when seeing the swing outside hit me anew.

This was, above all, a family home, nearby graves or not. I rubbed my chest as Ian opened the container and picked up a sandwich triangle. I might've moved all the way to Olmeda on my own accord, but I missed my family something fierce.

The big dog ambled into the kitchen and sat on his back legs by Ian. I was glad it hadn't come to greet me the same way Fluffy did because the thing was the size of a pony and I'd have gone down in under a second.

Ian took a large bite of the sandwich. After a few seconds of thoughtful chewing, he hummed appreciatively and broke off a chunk for the big dog.

Deciding food was better than new friends, Fluffy abandoned my side and came to stand by the big dog. Ian fed her a smaller bit.

Was this a test? I held my breath, but when neither dog barfed all over the floor, I allowed myself to relax again. My muffins might suck, but there were few ways to screw up a ham and cheese sandwich.

Ian grabbed a T-shirt off the back of a chair and put it on, then sat at the table and started on a new triangle. "Why do you need my dirt?"

I took the chair opposite him. "To blackmail you, of course."

His lips twitched. "Blackmail me with dirt to get more dirt? My, you're a dirty one."

My brain immediately went to dirtier places. It was the way his lips moved as he chewed. I'd never paid attention to things like that—nothing sexy in watching crumbles fly out of people's mouths while they ate—but this was apparently the price I had to pay for him bringing up the dirt issue without me prodding.

"Mom did say as much when I was a kid," I admitted. "Followed by 'go wash your hands right now, Hope."

He snorted. "A witch's tribulation, I'm sure." He offered me a sandwich half.

"Is this a test?" I asked, eyeing it. "This wasn't included in yesterday's lesson."

"Nah. On the house."

"Don't mind me, then." I grabbed it and took a good bite. Delicious.

He got started on another one. "Explain the dirt."

"Remember the other day when I ran to you for help and you ignored me?" I asked cheerfully. "While you were walking your dogs."

"I do." There wasn't a drop of regret in his voice.

No matter. I'd get him for that one some other way. "There was a dead body in my bathtub. But you probably already heard all about it?"

He shrugged a shoulder, his expression telling me nothing. "I saw you and Brooks go in."

"The thing is, the body went and disappeared. Which is why you saw Officer Brooks go out and drive away."

"Brooks suffers no fools."

"Not my fault the body disappeared." For a cop in the-magical-known, Officer Brooks really should've been a little more understanding. "The thing is, it did disappear. Then it reappeared the next day and disappeared again."

Ian nodded, his attention drifting off out of boredom. Fair. I supposed a conversation about dead bodies wasn't exactly shocking for a bounty hunter. I decided to cut to the chase.

"I think it's a lost soul. I need old grave dirt to make a spell to set him free."

A gleam of interest entered his green eyes. "I see. Why my cemetery? There's also Farlow and St. Benedict's."

"The older, the better." I cleared my throat. "My magic isn't very powerful, so I need the extra oomph. The graves here are perfect—the soil will have absorbed a lot of power from the dead bodies through the decades."

"I'm glad my family's bodies and final resting place are perfect for your pesky, little problem." His lips twitched again.

Heat infused my cheeks. "I don't need to dig them out or grab their bones or anything like that. Some dirt from around the oldest graves will be enough. It won't perturb the burial grounds at all."

"What do I get in exchange to allow you to steal some dirt?"

My gaze fell to the plastic container in front of him.

He smiled faintly. "These are for the trespassing."

"And the muffins from yesterday?"

"A lesson for the future."

I harrumphed at that, but a grin broke free. "What do you want?" I made a fast mental run of my upcoming bills. Somehow, offering money seemed insulting. "I can pay you in potions. Glamour, memory, the works."

The big dog's head snapped up from his position on the floor, and a moment later there was a loud knock on the back door.

The two strays came inside, stopping short at the sight of me.

"Hullo," the surfer-looking one said.

The other grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. "Hot as ba—hell out there already."

Ian met my gaze, as if daring me to feel uncomfortable in the presence of his goth lordship and his two stray shifters.

"Hi, I'm Hope," I said brightly.

"She took over Bagley's shop," Ian added.

A small chorus of "Ooh" followed his explanation.

The tallest one, the one with tan olive skin and an eye patch stepped forward to offer his hand. "Shane." Unlike his friend, he wore his dark hair cropped short.

The other stray followed. "I'm Alex."

I shook both of their hands. "Nice to meet you. Feel free to come to the shop anytime."

They looked at each other, then shrugged.

"Sure thing, lady," Shane said.

"Will do," Alex added.

Brothers from different mothers, clearly. They stood by the table, awaiting their marching orders.

"Crampet Street job today?" Ian asked.

"Second-floor bathroom." Shane's gaze flicked my way. "Gonna come?"

"I'll catch up later. Go ahead and get started."

The two young men nodded and filed out of the kitchen. The big dog kept track of their exit, his huge tail thumping lazily against the tile of the floor.

"What's his name?" I tilted my head toward the dog.

"Rufus."

The dog's ears perked up.

"Seriously?"

Ian scowled. "What? It's a great name."

"It does seem to fit him," I admitted. It wasn't Ian's fault that he wasn't gifted with a great imagination where pet names were concerned. He probably called his car Speedy. I checked the time on my phone. Opening time was fast approaching.

"Running late?" he drawled.

"I have opening standards to maintain."

He grunted and stood. "I guess we better get going, then."

"Going where?"

"Do you want your dirt or not?"

I got to my feet. "I do. But could I come for it later tonight?"

"Why tonight?" A touch of curiosity entered his voice.

"It's better to gather these kinds of things under moonlight rather than sunlight."

"I see."

"I can send you some links about it, if you want," I said hesitantly. I hated to be a bother, but since he seemed amiable to giving me some dirt, I might as well do it well and proper. "The difference between sunlight and moonlight might make the difference between the spell working and not."

"Aren't they both sunlight?"

He was amusing himself at my expense—any bounty hunter would know about the difference between sunlight and moonlight where witches' spirit magic was concerned—and I would graciously allow it because I was getting my dirt. If mocking me made him happy, who was I to take his joy away? "The devil is in the reflection, as they say."

Conceding the point with a nod, he checked his wrist, found it free of watches or bands, and frowned in surprise. With a slight shake of his head, he waved toward the back door. "I'll come around to pick you up tonight, then. What time do you close?"

"Eight. Unless I've got customers, then I might keep it open until nine."

"Nine thirty, then."

That would place us back here at around ten. Plenty dark by then, even by summer standards. "Sounds good. About the payment...?"

He opened the door for me and I stepped outside.

"I'll think about it."

That wasn't ominous at all.

We were near the small garage building. It had been transformed into some kind of workshop, and tools and machines littered the inside. The angle gave me a better view of the big van's side. "Cavalier Repairs & Renovations," was written in bold letters on the side, and below, slightly smaller, "Slay all your troubles with one call." A tiny black knight wielded a sword at the start of the line, and an equally small dragon roared at the end.

I covered my mouth and shook with laughter.

"My mother's suggestion," Ian said without inflection.

"It's good," I admitted. "If I have any trouble, I'll call you to slay it for me."

"Good. Shane and Alex need the experience."

He and Fluffy walked me to the gate. The dog gave me a happy bark as a goodbye. The man didn't even grunt.

I didn't take it to heart. People showed friendliness in all kinds of ways—not everyone was going to be a Fluffy. Without the Rufuses, the world would be too noisy a place.

TFN

I MADE it back with a minute to spare. Flipping the sign to open on the hour filled me with a sense of pride and excitement. The need to tell someone, anyone, of my stunning victory over Ian was all but bursting out of my chest as I stood behind the counter, reorganizing every glass and plate and knickknack, waiting for Dru to walk through that door so I could share my tales of triumph.

Next time, I'd ask for her phone number.

As the adrenaline rush settled into a comforting murmur, I fell into my usual habit—appearing to read a book and listening intently for the door's chime. Friendly and nonthreatening was my shopkeeper mantra, and after much debate, I'd settled on carefree reading to fill the lulls. Potential customers might feel threatened by my laser-sharp focus—nobody liked to feel like ants on display.

My phone pinged with a notification. I caught my breath, then released it in a disappointed exhale when I saw it came from the shop's social media. Another spammer, no doubt. Or, if I was really lucky, someone asking for nudes.

To my shock, I had a proper new follower—Cavalier Repairs & Renovations.

My pulse fluttered as I stared at the name. Ian had followed me? I followed back, then made a deep dive into his profile. A photo of the van stood as his profile picture, and a series of photographs of what I assumed were successful renovations followed—exteriors, bathrooms, a lovely old fireplace—each with the barest of descriptions and a couple of hashtags. Some posts showed the strays posing in front of the van. Not one photo of

him.

Somewhat disappointing.

There was, however, a picture of Fluffy and Rufus among a sea of chewed-up cardboard boxes with the caption "Employees of the month."

My chest shook with repressed giggles. Adorable.

The door opened, the chimes tinkling melodically.

I put the phone away, smiling brightly. The newcomer was a tall, lean man with cropped midnight-black hair and green eyes that reminded me of Ian. His jaw held a similar squareness, but his features were softer. Prettier. He looked younger too. In his late twenties rather than thirties.

The hairs on my arms rose as his presence filled the shop, sending a shock of unpleasant awareness through my veins—the instinct to flee or fight.

"Good morning," I said, forcing myself to remain cheery instead of wary.

He came up to the counter and scanned the shelves behind me before his gaze settled on my person. The green of his irises was lighter than Ian's. Less striking. "You're the new witch?"

Ah, this must be a shifter or a demon looking for potions. "Yes." I offered my hand. "Hope Avery."

He inclined his head but made no move to take my hand. I dropped it gracefully to the counter.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"The pack needs a refill of memory potions. I assume you still provide those?"

"I do. How many?"

His eyes narrowed, as if he wasn't sure if I was pulling his leg or not. I kept my expression bland and amiable. Nonthreatening. Between him speaking of the pack and the power vibes, I had a good feeling I was in the presence of their alpha.

Dru's advice came to mind—do not piss off the alpha if you don't want to get beaten up. Paraphrasing.

"Twenty will suffice," he said. "Do you have that many at hand?"

"I have ten. I can have the rest ready by tomorrow."

"It'll do for now."

"Do you want anything else? Tea? Coffee?" I tapped the glass covering the plate of cookies. "Cookies?"

A sneer pulled up the side of his mouth at the offer. "No."

I turned to grab a box and crouched by the potions cabinet, somewhat offended. The cookies didn't look that bad, and he couldn't know I hadn't baked them. Were all shifters this prickly or only the macho men in the pack? Only the macho men, I decided, folding the box into shape. The strays had appeared normal enough.

"Did Bagley leave the shop to you?" His cold tone had my skin prickling, and not in a good way.

"The Council awarded it to me." After approving my business model proposal. "I'm more than capable of keeping up with the pack's demands, I assure you."

Silence followed my statement, so I let it go and began transferring the potions to the box. This would not be the first unpleasant paranormal I'd have to deal with, so I'd better start seeding my reputation as unflappable in the face of rudeness.

Once the vials were in the box, I added some packing brown paper and put it in a paper bag with the shop's logo. Memory potions weren't as scary as they sounded—their reach was short, and they only affected things having to do with magic.

Say a normal human happened to see a shifter transform into their animal form, something not easily explained by a costume or a trick of the light, then a memory potion would make recalling the shifting blurry. It'd fool the brain into thinking it had been the viewer's imagination, not an actual thing.

On the other hand, if a paranormal got into a fight with a normal human and they beat the shit out of each other, the memory potion would do diddly squat.

I put the bag on the counter and pushed it toward the alpha—Hutton, if I remembered correctly. "Ten potions. I assume you run a tab with the shop?"

"Call the house to settle," he said.

"And where should I send the other ten?"

"Call the house."

By house, I assumed the pack's headquarters. "Do you have a number?" He grabbed the bag. "Call the house."

If this was a test, I was determined to pass. "Will do. Please, come again —always happy to do business with the pack. Returning the empty vials gets you a discount," I added loudly as he walked out of the shop.

My words were still hovering in the air when Dru came inside, looking over her shoulder at the retreating figure of the alpha.

"Derek Hutton visited?"

"Checking me out, I think." I tapped my mouth. "You know, he looks like

"Ian." Dru sat on one of the stools and put her phone on the counter.

"Are they...?"

"Half brothers."

Interesting. That explained the resemblance but not the age. "But he looks "

"Younger."

So Ian was the older brother. How odd. According to shifter hierarchy, "Shouldn't that make Ian—"

"Alpha? It's complicated."

I took out the remaining cookies and placed them in front of Dru. "Explain. I got time." *I* did. But how did she? "You know, I've never seen you around during work hours. Did Mr. Lewis cut your shifts?"

Dru picked up a cookie and asked for the daily special—a wild berries mix tea with a drop of honey. "He was worried about you after the police incident, so he's been sending me to check up on you."

Ouch. I rubbed my chest. I could almost feel the sting of a steel blade right in the heart. "That was nice of him."

Dru snorted. "Nice, my ass. He's a busybody."

I remembered his kindness as we waited for the police to arrive. "I guess old people are like that. Are you getting paid at least? For hanging around instead of being at the shop, I mean."

"Wouldn't be here if I weren't."

Sincerity, I reminded myself, was the foundation of any true friendship. I made her tea and served it in a cauldron-shaped mug. Dru's usual blasé expression broke into a half smile at the sight.

"Did Ian give up his alpha status for his brother?" I asked. "Or do they share the non-alpha parent?"

"It's a long story."

"Apparently, we both have the time. I won't even tell Mr. Lewis that you spilled the beans about being his sneaky spy."

Dru frowned. "I'm not a sneaky spy."

"You will be, in my version of events, unless you start talking." I topped my words off with a sly grin.

"The Good Lord save us," she muttered. She wasn't fooling anyone,

though—her brown eyes were full of eager anticipation. I had a feeling Dru quite enjoyed explaining the facts of paranormal life in Olmeda to fresh meat like me. "Ian's mother and the local alpha used to be an item long ago."

"She was a shifter too?"

"No. A witch."

That might explain Ian's initial dislike of me. Except he had sounded proud of his mother's idea for the tagline on his van, not embarrassed or disgruntled in the least. "What happened?"

"They were happy together, and there were talks of marriage and making her an official part of the pack."

Serious words for a pack's alpha, especially with a non-shifter partner. "But?"

"When Ian was about three, a new shifter moved into town."

"Oh, no." My heart sank a little. I knew where this was going.

"Oh, yes. Beautiful, elegant, etcetera, etcetera."

I grimaced. "How cliché."

"It was a bit more complicated than that." Dru paused her explanations to take a few sips of her tea, letting me stew a little. "Turns out Teresa was the alpha's mate on top of everything else."

"For real?" Instant mates were incredibly rare in the paranormal world. Love at first sight happened all the time, but a true mating bond usually formed over many years.

"For real. Ian's father dumped his mother, married Teresa, and they lived happily ever after until he died a few years back. Hutton inherited the alpha power, so he took over as the pack's alpha."

"What happened to Ian's mom?" The story pulled at my heartstrings. I couldn't help but be sad for her. To be so happy and then have that happiness smashed to pieces through no fault of your own... Life really did suck sometimes. At least Ian had been too young to fully understand what had gone on. At eight, I had barely understood it when Grandma had passed.

"She stuck around for a couple of years," Dru said, "tried to make it work for the sake of Ian, but the new wife got territorial, so Ian and his mother moved away."

"Who wouldn't?"

Dru nodded in agreement.

"Ian also has alpha powers, right?" It wasn't as extreme as Hutton's, but there was something there. "How come he's not the leader of the pack if he's the oldest son? Is it because his mother was not a mate?"

"That, and Ian refuses to have anything to do with packs. It was good he didn't attempt to take the pack. Who would accept a new alpha who's never been involved in the shifter world?"

Alpha power only went so far, even in old-fashioned factions like shifters. A pack would rather disband than stick around under the leadership of someone they didn't feel had earned their loyalty.

"Also..." Dru leaned forward. "Apparently, Ian doesn't shift. Ever. Imagine having an alpha who never shifts."

Shifters didn't have any natural urge to shift, but a shifter who didn't at all was a rare thing. That was some hardcore shifter dislike right there.

Dru sipped more tea. "That's the rumor, anyway."

"Why did Ian come back with all the bad history with his parents? It must bring back bad memories. Is he hoping to reconnect with his brother?"

"They don't talk to each other. Pretty sure Hutton hates his guts. I imagine Ian came back because of the house. It's a great property for retirement, and his family has owned it forever."

"On his mother's side?"

"Yep."

"Stranger and stranger," I murmured.

She lifted the mug in salute. "Welcome to city life."

A soft knock on the glass door made us look up. Vicky entered the shop, a box from Fairy Circle Cakes in her hand.

"I brought you dessert," she announced cheerfully. She smiled politely at Dru. "Hello, Druscilla. How are things?"

"Dru," Dru muttered under her breath.

"You know each other?" I asked, surprised.

"Oh, just in passing," Vicky said. She passed me the box and sat on one of the free stools. "From my few shifts here."

Had Mr. Lewis sent Dru to spy on Vicky like he had for me? Probably not in the same capacity, since Vicky wasn't part of the magical community. No need to check if she was on the edge of hysteria and about to set the world on fire trying to get rid of imaginary corpses.

And after tonight, there would be zero chances of that. Eagerly, I opened the box to find two cupcakes topped with their height in frosting and coconut shavings. Two. Awkward.

"Thanks, Vicky. They look delicious."

She reached over and plucked one. She licked at the frosting delicately and moaned loudly. "Oh, my God. So good."

Dru was eyeing her like she was used to her antics and wanted no part of them.

I offered her the other cupcake. "Wanna share? I'll grab a knife."

Vicky made a sound of protest, then covered it with a cough.

"I'll pass, thank you," Dru said dryly.

"Just eat it already," Vicky said. "It's so good. Seriously."

I dutifully bit into the frosting and cake. Sweet, smooth coconut flavor coated my mouth, contrasting with the crunch of the shavings. A wonderful cupcake under any other circumstance, but the mood in the shop felt all kinds of weird, spoiling the experience.

Unable to stand the tension, I broke off a piece and offered it to Dru. "Try it."

With a small shrug, she took it and popped it into her mouth.

"Not bad," she admitted.

"It's a-m-a-z-i-n-g," Vicky said with a long sigh. "I might go back for more later."

"Next ones are on me," I said. "But I should quit cupcakes for a couple of days or I'll become too addicted." I didn't want to sound rude, but with Ian coming later, I didn't want any delays in closing the shop. As much as I enjoyed Vicky's company, I enjoyed the thought of using my shower a good deal more.

"Sounds good. You can bring them, and I'll take you on one of the tours."

"Have you done the tours?" I asked Dru.

"Nope." She popped the p like it was a bubble of chewing gum.

"I gave them tickets for it," Vicky said, her mouth drooping at the edges. "But they never want to come."

"I live here. I don't need the tour." Dru stood in a graceful motion. "And now it's time to go back to work. Nice seeing you both."

"Bye," Vicky said brightly. The moment Dru was outside, Vicky turned to me and scrunched her nose. "She's always been a bit unfriendly."

"She's nice," I said, taking care of the empty mug and the box.

"Probably wants free stuff."

Vicky made a fair point. Dru hadn't even asked about paying for the drink. She likely considered that part of her neighborly duty, and I couldn't blame her for it. If I was forced to check on someone for my boss, I'd also

aim for some side benefits.

"She was just worried after the police visit. I did bother them, asking to use their phone."

"You mean asking them to be normal, helpful human beings?" Vicky snorted. "God forbid their day is tainted by your request for help." She shook her head. "Doesn't matter. You're awesome, and they're not."

"You've met Mr. Lewis too?"

"He came to talk to Ms. Bagley sometimes. Lazy old dude. Expects everyone to do as he says. You know I applied for a part-time job at his shop and he refused me? Said he had no time to train someone new." Another snort. "As if he does anything himself. He makes Druscilla do all the work. That's probably why she's so dour all the time. All work, no pay raise."

He *had* seemed the managing type of boss in our brief interactions, but some people made better managers than shopkeepers. Couldn't fault the man for playing to his strengths. Although it'd be a shame if the kind, helpful man I'd met turned out to be a jerk boss. Perhaps I should visit Dru at the shop and do some spying of my own.

I was the local witch now. It was expected that I'd butt my nose in other people's business.

ELEVEN

THE SHOP HAD BEEN CLOSED for an hour, and I was moving inventory boxes around in the storage room to pass the time, when there was a knock on the back gate.

Excitement cascaded through me in waves as I hurried into the backyard. For some reason, I'd expected Ian to knock on the front door, and the change of location had me all out of sorts. The yard was drenched in shadows, a welcome coolness after the hot day.

The knock came again, a demanding clang against the iron rods. Funny, I hadn't thought Ian was the kind of person to get irritated if people didn't appear the moment he demanded their presence.

I unlatched the gate and opened it with a wide smile. "Hey, Ian, I didn't expect—"

The words died on my lips as I caught sight of the man on the other side.

Not Ian.

Not anyone I knew.

"Uh, hi?" I said, nervous now.

The man was tall and thin, his face long with high cheekbones, his hair a light blond color, one lock falling over his forehead. He wore a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a black vest. In any other universe, he might've been a vampire.

Retreating would've been an invitation for him to come in, so I stood my ground. "Can I help you?"

Thunder cracked in the close distance, not a cloud in the sky.

"I need my stuff."

"Your stuff?" The house had been squeaky empty when I'd moved in,

although there could be something in the locked cabinet behind the counter.

He snarled, revealing a row of white teeth. No fangs. "You're the new witch, yes?"

I relaxed slightly. "I am."

"I need my potion." Lifting a hand, he created a slight flame in the palm of his hand. "The usual."

I'd met one or two mages, and unless they were powerful, their magic reserve didn't last that long, so I wasn't too worried by the flame or his threatening glare. "I have no idea what your usual is."

The flame disappeared, and he let out a long, suffering sigh. "The old hag must've left some instructions. Fetch my potion. Now."

One glance at the night sky told me it was nearing meeting time with Ian. "Could you be more precise?" I asked politely.

His chin lifted at an imperious angle, the cheekbones becoming more prominent. "The potion for my power. Don't make me ask again or I'll take my business elsewhere."

Something I couldn't afford. "Wait here," I told him and closed the gate in his face. I went into the shop and checked the potion cabinet. No memory potions left, but there were still some glamour potions as well as some focus ones and dreamless sleep tonics. After careful consideration, I picked a focus one. It was meant to clear the user's thoughts, allowing them to concentrate on one thing for one or two hours. It worked wonders for creating complicated spells, and mages weren't that different from spirit witches. This had to be what he meant by power potion—nothing else fit.

I returned to the back gate to give him the potion. He lifted it up to the sky, examining the counters in the shadows. "It looks different."

"Ms. Bagley might've used a different color system." While some potion colors were standard due to their ingredients, the Council had set up a color system to help differentiate potions without putting damning labels on the bottles. Food coloring, great for fondant and potions.

Me, I only used the hint of color, almost-clear potions being my favorite when possible.

The mage grunted, then his head snapped to the side, and he slipped the potion into the pocket of his dress trousers. "Someone's coming," he hissed.

Ian, hopefully, and not another customer with cryptic requests.

The mage spun and began walking away.

"Hey," I said. "Payment?"

"The usual place," he said over his shoulder.

"What usual place?"

He didn't answer. His stride hastened, and then he was gone around the corner of Mr. Lewis's backyard fence.

Loud steps announced the arrival of the other newcomer. I turned to face them.

"Ian," I exclaimed, pleasure tinting my voice. I felt the need to dance like the girl with the love potion while chanting, *I'm getting rid of the corpse*, *I'm getting rid of the corpse*.

His attention was fixed on the other end of the street. He must've seen the mage scurrying away.

"Late night customer?" he asked, still focused on that corner. His bounty hunter shifter senses were probably trying to figure out if it was a predator he needed to take care of.

"Mage," I said with a wry twist of my lips. *The usual place* better mean a direct deposit into the shop's account. "Let me finish closing up the shop and then we can go."

He followed me into the backyard. The old light bulb above the back door turned on automatically, and I saw him give the shampoo and conditioner on the windowsill by the hose an odd look.

Resisting the urge to explain myself, I breezed through the house and locked the front door. I drew the blinds down, then switched off the light on my way out. Ian stood in the middle of the hallway, studying his surroundings with curiosity. I decided to give him a tour.

"Living quarters up there." I pointed to the stairs to my left, then to the tiny room to my right and the other doors. "Restroom. Kitchen. Storage room. The backyard, you've already seen."

He nodded, his scrutiny returning to me. I had the feeling he was measuring me, studying me in my natural element, and it flustered me. I didn't like the calculating gleam in his eyes or the lack of questions or niceties. The warmth his presence had invoked turned into a chill against my skin.

"Shall we go?" I asked, to break the icy silence.

He turned and walked toward the back door. I followed him into the street, locking the door and gate behind us. The warm air outside was a welcome change, and I sneaked a peek at his face. His expression was unreadable, but he no longer exuded that harsh coldness he had inside the

shop. I wondered if he'd had some bad interaction with Ms. Bagley. That would be a first, since everyone else had apparently loved her. Maybe she had been rude to him because he was a bounty hunter. Maybe she had refused to serve him cookies.

I, on the other hand, had an open mind. And cheese and ham sandwiches trumped cookies any day.

"Do you ever visit the bars?" I asked curiously as we passed Guiles and Romary. For all his dark and gothic aesthetic, I could see Ian at ease in one of the more old-fashioned pubs, nursing a beer at the counter while playing with peanuts.

"I do karaoke sometimes."

I huffed a laugh. "No, you don't."

His eyebrows raised in challenge. "Ask the kids."

The kids—Shane and Alex. My mouth hung open. "Are you serious?"

A smile played on his lips, and I couldn't tell if he was pulling my leg or not.

"What's your favorite song to sing?" I asked.

"Fly Me to the Moon."

The image of him on top of a small stage serenading a bar full of drunks was too good to be true. "Nope. I don't believe you. I'm going to need proof."

He laughed then, a short burst of warm sound. "I'm sure Alex has a video or two on his phone."

I was going to have to find Alex's social media—bet he'd posted the videos there. Something with the caption "Look at my boss acting like a fool," followed by a row of laughing emojis.

The rest of the walk was spent in a comfortable silence, and I found myself almost humming with pleasure. The night air was cooling but still carried some of the day's warmth, the streets were filled with people but not so much we had trouble getting through, and the area leading up to the cemetery carried a cozy feeling to it. Almost like we were walking back home instead of making a grave dirt pit stop.

"Hutton came to the shop today," I said.

Ian didn't react other than with a bland, "I see."

"Needed memory potions for the pack."

This one didn't even produce a response.

"Dru told me he's your half brother."

"Are you trying to figure out if we hate each other?" Ian asked.

The man liked to get to the point. "I guess so. Yes."

"Ask him next time he comes for potions."

"But I'd rather ask you. You're nicer."

He gave me a look that told me he thought me crazy. "My relationship with Hutton is none of your business."

His curt remark was meant to chastise. Might've worked on someone else too. "All right, I'll ask him."

Shaking his head, he took a set of keys from his jeans pocket. We had arrived at the private entrance of the cemetery. "Don't sound so happy. Gossipers usually come to a bad end."

"But how else will I entertain my return customers?"

"Talk to them about herbs or crystals or something."

"If you're going to be like that..." I sighed resignedly. "I suppose I can write you and your brother off my list of gossiping targets."

His smile was something feral in the growing moonlight. "I'm glad we could come to an agreement."

I followed him through the small door and toward the cemetery side of the property.

"Did you bring a trowel?" he asked.

"I forgot. But I'm always down for getting my hands dirty."

My jest landed flat. Without a word, a smile, or a huff, he turned sharply and walked back toward his garage, leaving me standing alone with serious doubts about my sense of humor. A small chorus of welcoming barks came from the house, but he didn't stop. A couple of minutes later, he returned with a small trowel, which he dropped into my hands.

"Thank you," I said, more subdued.

He led me to the three weeping trees circling the old group of headstones.

"Careful," he warned, turning on the flashlight on his phone.

The harsh pool of light made the headstones look eerie and otherworldly. The thin slabs leaned at precarious angles, the inscriptions all but erased with time. I knelt between the two closest graves, took out two freezer bags from my back pocket, and left them open on the side, careful to not place them on top of the graves themselves. It'd be crass and uncaring, and if I had to use the remains of people to help, at the very least I wanted to be respectful about it.

I stuck the trowel into the ground and popped off the top layer of grass. I

dug again, the scent of soil filling the air. It didn't take long to fill the bags, and I replaced the patch of grass carefully, whispering my thanks and appreciation to the soil and those who had imbued it with their essence in death.

Ian had been paying no attention. At first, I thought it was out of respect, but then I realized he was completely fixed on the night sky. I followed his gaze. The night was clear, the moon well on her way to full. Being close to the big city meant there weren't many stars to be seen, but the longer I looked, the more I distinguished the tiny little pricks of light coming out of hiding to grace my presence.

"Beautiful," I murmured.

"Yes." He tore his gaze back to me. "Ready?"

I held up the bags. "Yup."

"Let's go back."

We made the trip back to the gate, stopping by his house to return the trowel and let out the dogs. Fluffy shot out, running around Ian first, then me. Rufus was slower, his big form sauntering like he owned the place. He rubbed a friendly head against Ian's thigh, and Ian scratched him behind his ears. After snapping their leashes on and grabbing his black dog-walking bag, he indicated we should go.

"You're walking them this late?" I asked, curious.

"Why not?"

I said nothing else. I wasn't a dog owner—what did I know?

Rufus walked calmly by his side, stopping to sniff things here and there. Fluffy trotted adorably, mouth open, tail bouncing. We hadn't talked about what would happen after the cemetery visit, but I was secretly pleased that Ian was accompanying me home.

Then again, with the dirt in my hands, everything in life was incredibly pleasing.

Once at the gate of my backyard, I turned to thank him and say my goodbyes. Ian stretched an arm past my head and pushed the gate all the way open, then walked forward.

I stepped back with a small squeak, allowed him passage. He crouched and unhooked the leashes from the dogs' harnesses. Rufus began sniffing the center fire pit while Fluffy pawed at the overgrown weeds.

"What are you doing?" I asked blankly.

"They can stay here while we do the spell." In a stern voice, he told the

dogs, "Rufus, Fluffy, quiet."

The dogs whined in understanding.

"We?"

"Sure."

It hadn't occurred to me he'd want to witness the spell. I hesitated. While I had seen other witches do magic, I wasn't used to doing it in front of witnesses. "Might be better if I do it alone."

"It's my dirt."

And I hadn't even paid him for it. "I guess it is. Come in, then."

I unlocked the back door and went up the stairs. He followed close behind but made no attempt to peek into the other rooms. His gaze stayed locked on me, drilling holes through the thin fabric of my T-shirt.

"Ta-da," I said inside the bathroom, glad it wasn't a mess. Not using it for several days in a row had helped with that.

Ian strode in and studied the bathtub closely. It was a free-standing type, placed in the center of the light blue and white tiled wall with space for a narrow shelf on one side and the towel rack by the window. The shower curtain was drawn open, giving the room a sense of openness. During the day, the sunlight made it cozy and inviting.

"No corpse," he said.

"No kidding."

His lips twitched as he stood back, ready to watch me do my magic.

I still had the crystals and other supplies from the previous failed attempt, so it didn't take long to set up the circle. I used all the dirt, wanting to make sure that if the spell didn't work, it was because of my lousy power, not the setup itself.

"Done," I said once everything was as perfect as possible.

"Still no corpse."

"You're going to be the corpse if you don't stop talking." I lifted an imperious hand. "Let the master do her magic."

A deep chuckle answered me.

I leaned over the edge of the bathtub and sank my fingertips into the circle of soil. Magic was focus, intent. I cleared my head of all thoughts and concentrated on my memory of the corpse, the way it had appeared, the give of his leg as I'd prodded it.

Deep down, spells only needed forceful intent and no words, but when you dealt with powerful spells, words had a way to help focus the magic.

Some witches said their spells aloud, some repeated the words in their minds. For me, it depended on my mood and the level of magic required. According to Grandma's spellbook, she'd been the talking type. In this instance, though, I'd do the talking in my head.

Death is unavoidable.

Death leaves an imprint.

But *life* is never truly *lost*; it simply moves on.

The dirt warmed under my hands, and I felt it suck the magic out of my soul.

TWELVE

THE CONNECTION ENDED WITH A SNAP. I blinked, feeling faint.

A sharp intake of breath came from behind me, and I felt Ian move closer.

The man—corpse—had reappeared in the bathtub, looking as real as the other two times I'd seen him. One of his legs pressed against my arm, and my left hand was buried under his torso. I stopped myself from snapping it back—direct contact might be the only thing keeping him in place.

"Hello," I said in the deafening silence. "Can you speak?"

The man's eyelids fluttered open, his pupils trying to focus on his surroundings. They and his mouth were the only parts of him that moved; the rest appeared set in stone.

"What is happening? Where...?" His voice was rough, guttural, like sandpaper on my soul.

"You're in my, er, bathtub." I aimed for a soothing tone. "Do you remember how you got here?"

The tendons of his neck strained, as if he was trying to tilt his head but his muscles refused to obey. "I feel... strange. Am I dreaming?"

"I'm sorry." Deep regret filled me. "I'm afraid you are deceased."

"I'm sick?" Panic tingled his voice.

"Deceased—dead." A familiar tingling spread from my chest into my arms, accompanied by a wave of dizziness. In a normal potion-making situation, I'd rest for half an hour, then go again, but for this spell, I needed to keep it going or he'd disappear again.

"Dead?" The word came out in a croak of shock, but then a kind of awe overtook him. "Yes. Yes, I think you're right. I'm dead."

"Do you remember what happened?"

"Yes. No. I was walking... then nothing. No. Pain, so much pain. Then nothing."

Sweat gathered along my spine, the tingling morphing into an unpleasant trembling. "You don't remember coming into the house? Maybe you were visiting someone?"

"Walking. Pain. Blood. On my hands. In my head. Everywhere." His eyes found me, so rolled sideways it was mostly the whites showing. "Help."

I swallowed hard. "What's your name?"

"Pain. Blood. Help me."

"Life is never lost," I whispered, squeezing my soul for every drop of magic it had left. "It simply *moves on*."

The man's features relaxed abruptly. His body shimmered for a second, then slowly faded into nothing, leaving me with an intact spell circle and barely enough energy to keep my head up.

I slumped against the bathtub's edge, my breath coming out in short bursts, then gave up and slid all the way down to lie on the bathmat. Brand new, still carrying the scent of its plastic wrap, and so, so comfy.

I heard Ian leave the room and rummage through the kitchen. A minute later, he was back and nudging my shoulder.

"Sit up for me, blondie."

"Hope," I murmured in irritation. "Name's Hope."

"Sure, angel. Up you go."

Muttering, I allowed him to pull me into a sitting position, my back against the bathtub, then accepted his offering of a slice of bread and a glass of water.

I took a few long sips and dutifully munched on the bread.

"You weren't joking about your magic power," Ian commented, crouching in front of me.

"Nope." You didn't need great power to be a great witch. You just needed to help your community to the best of your abilities. I managed a weak wave toward the bathtub's inside. "What do you think?"

He rubbed his chin, his expression thoughtful. "It was interesting. Never seen a ghost before."

"You live in a cemetery."

"I guess they're shy."

I chuckled at that. "I guess. But I meant, what do you think about what he said? Walking around and being in pain sounds like some kind of attack.

Maybe he was mugged."

"Or it was a heart attack."

"If it had been a heart attack, then how did he end up in the bathtub? Why did he remember blood?" I mentally went through all the research I'd done on stuck souls during the last couple of days. "It's common for the soul to not remember much about their life or how they died and instead fixate on certain memories. He could be misremembering."

"What would make a soul stick around with so much strength?"

"A violent death. Murder." I pursed my lips. "Or..."

"Go on."

I drummed my fingers on my thighs, working through the possibilities in my head. "If he was a magic user and died mid-spell, that would account for his appearance while I'm around, and how my spell brought him back with so much substance, even with my lack of power."

"Why would he be doing magic in your bathtub?"

"Easier to clean?" A sudden thought popped into my head, and I scrambled away from the tub in horror. "Oh, no."

Ian watched me with curiosity. "What?"

"He could've been taken from the street—walking, then knocked out—then brought here for a spell, but either he died during the spell, or the witch got interrupted."

Understanding dawned on him. "A blood spell."

"Dark magic." I stared at the bathtub, but it looked so white and bright and clean, it was hard to imagine something like that going on inside. "Unwilling blood. A bathtub makes cleaning the mess easier."

"That would be a lot of blood. How much blood do you need for dark spells?"

He must've known the amount from his bounty hunting days, but I answered anyway, "It depends on the spell. Not a body's worth, though. If that was what happened, the killer must've used another spell to make the blood last longer." The words tasted sour in my mouth. "Why steal some blood, when you can get a few bottles worth to keep at hand for the rest of the year?"

"Smart."

"Gross. Bad. Evil."

Ian shrugged. "But smart. So, the man was dragged here. Why?"

"They must've known the building was empty."

"What makes you think that?"

"They couldn't have done it while Ms. Bagley was in charge of the shop, or she'd have seen the corpse too. It must've happened during the few weeks the house was empty between her death and me moving in. A crime of opportunity." A shudder ran down my back, and it had nothing to do with my temporary weakness. "I can't believe someone murdered a man in my bathtub. To do dark magic."

Not that murder by itself was good, but the dark magic part was twisting the knife.

"Someone who was aware the building would be empty," Ian reasoned.

"A member of the community." I looked at him sharply. "Do you know who it could've been?"

"Do you know every witch in town?"

"Fair," I conceded. If a witch didn't register with the Council and took care to not be caught using magic, who would know? Not me, not the Council. "But you must keep an eye on the less legal side of Olmeda. You're a bounty hunter—I can't believe you don't."

"I do, but nobody comes to mind. Nobody who's still around, anyway."

His lips curved slyly, and I chose not to ask for details. "There must be a way to find out who it is."

"The Council might help."

"No." At his look of surprise, I added, "I don't want to involve the Council or the police. There is no body and no magical traces—what could they do?"

"Make you sit for a sketch artist and search through missing people's reports for someone matching the description?"

I opened my mouth, then shut it. What could I say to that other than, *Please*, *stop making sense*?

After a few long moments of silence, which I spent unsuccessfully trying to come up with a suitable excuse for my wishes, he said, "You don't want to involve the Council. Why?"

Giving up with a sigh, I told him. "The shop is not doing so well, and with the police call the other day... If I tell them about the corpse, they'll take over and close the place until everything is looked into. Who knows how long that'll take? And after they're done with their investigation, they might decide to close the shop for good—or give it to someone else." My voice trembled at those last words. To have a dream come true and then have it

wrenched away? My heart couldn't take it.

"And at the end, they might give the job of hunting the murderer to the guild, anyway," Ian mused.

"Probably."

"Are you certain you don't want to involve the Council? Think about it hard. You might be letting a killer loose."

"If the killer sees the Council involved, they'll make a run for it. If they're not registered, with all the tourists coming and going, they would never be found. If they're still around."

"Also true." He mulled over things for a few moments. "I will help you."

I abandoned my slump against the wall to sit up straight. "You will?"

"I can ask around, use some of my contacts to see if there's been an increased use or sale of dark magic." He spared the bathtub a glance. "I'll also ask about missing persons. If we can find out who he was, we might get a clue of who killed him."

"You would do this for me? Why?" Not that I was in a position to reject his help. Not if I wanted to sleep at night instead of feeling guilty about not doing something to find the dark witch killer.

He shrugged again. "I'm bored."

"How much is it going to cost me?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Like I said, I'm bored. It'll give me something to do in my free time."

I stared morosely at my bathtub. I wasn't sure that someone murdering in it was any better than having a disappearing corpse. "Could you replace my bathtub too?"

"Not that bored."

With a laugh, I got to my feet. "I need one more favor."

Ian stood as well—a tall, looming blot of black in my cheerful white and blue bathroom. "Oh?"

"I need your dog. The little one."

He fetched Fluffy from the backyard, and I placed her inside the bathtub. She stood there, unaware of all the atrocities committed on its gleaming surface, panting at us like the happiest puppy in the world.

"What are we doing?" Ian asked after five minutes of staring at Fluffy and Fluffy staring back.

"I'm too weak to do a cleansing spell." I waved toward Miss Happiness

Dogified. "So I'm filling the space with good vibes. As Grandma liked to say, 'A dose of goodness shoos evil away."

"Grandma?"

"We all have one."

His full grin was immediate and devastating. He put it away fast, but not before my heart skipped a beat. It had been a long while since I'd been attracted to someone, and while I welcomed the fluttering in my senses as a distraction from my problems, I doubted it'd go much farther. Especially while we stood in front of the murdertub.

"You can tell me more about your grandmother when I come back for the dog," Ian said before walking to the door.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm leaving Fluffy with you."

"You are? Why?" I asked, surprised.

"In case. Since a dead person ended up in your bathtub, the good vibes might not be enough."

With that, he trotted down the stairs and let himself out.

THIRTEEN

"You can't depend on the lottery, but you can on a positive attitude," I told my reflection in the upstairs bathroom mirror the next day.

Fluffy yipped in agreement. Aware that it was early morning, she'd kept her vocal affections to a minimum, simply pawing at me until I woke up and took her out into the alley to do her business.

"Fluffy," I told her in a stern but friendly voice, "stay."

The dog panted and wagged her tail, looking up at me expectantly like the happiest little derp in the world. Nothing bad could ever happen with so much eager happiness filling the room. With a noise of utter contentment, I stepped into the bathtub and proceeded to shower under delicious warm water.

A three-minute shower, mind. But a shower nonetheless.

Afterward, the normalcy of the day felt strange—eating a fast breakfast, getting the shop ready to open, and finding a blanket for Fluffy to use as a bed by the counter. No bathtub body to worry about.

Unfortunately, all my problems had migrated from the tub into my head.

Someone had murdered the man, and I had agreed to be in charge of figuring out who had done it, and if they were a resident of Olmeda or some transient witch. It felt like a monumental task—probably more than I could chew—but there was little point in worrying about it until I heard from Ian. Once he gathered information from his contacts, then I would worry about the next step.

I turned on the kitchen faucet, and water splashed into the sink—some of the ingredients for the memory potions needed a long soak for maximum efficiency. As the sink filled, I looked up nearby pet shops on my phone. Ian had left his dog-walking bag with me, but Fluffy needed real dog food, and I didn't remember seeing any at the grocery store.

Fluffy gave out a short bark, and her tail began wagging madly.

"What is it, girl?" I asked warmly, turning off the water.

Soft scraping sounds reverberated through the pipes, and I glanced down in time to see a shadow disappear into the faucet. Maybe. I leaned in, trying to peek inside, but everything appeared normal. In need of some scrubbing, but normal.

After the ghost upstairs, I wasn't taking any chances, though.

I lifted Fluffy up to the sink.

"Fluffy, exorcise."

Fluffy pawed the water excitedly.

As a great believer in the power of animal instincts, I took this as a sign of approval.

Someone knocked on the shop's front door, and I put Fluffy down. When I peeked through the blinds, I found Shane and Alex standing by the door, the van parked in the street behind them.

I opened the door. "Why, hello, there. What brings you to my humble shop?"

Shane dumped a bag of dog food in my arms. "Boss said you'd need this."

"Oh, thank you." Surprise gave way to warmth. There was something so alluring about Ian remembering to send supplies my way.

"Can we come in?" Alex asked. He was carrying a bucket full of different plastic bottles.

"Of course. You two want a drink?"

He stepped inside and surveyed the inside of the shop. "We're here to clean."

"Clean?"

Shane joined him. "Boss sent us to clean a bathtub."

Fluffy barreled into the shop to shower the two strays with affection.

"Hello, Fluff Puff," Alex said warmly. "Have you been a good girl?"

"She's been amazing," I told him proudly. "The best."

Shane bent to pet her. "Of course she has." Straightening, he fixed me with a commanding one-eyed stare. An alpha in the making. "Bathroom?"

I pointed at the archway into the back. "Take the stairs, then to the left."

"Let's go." He led the way, and Alex followed with a grin.

Fluffy remained by my side, although I had a feeling she'd rather go play with them. I poured some of my newly acquired dog food into a dish for her and went upstairs, running into Shane coming down.

"Supplies," he explained as he rushed by.

Inside the bathroom, Alex was busy deconstructing my shower curtain. He nodded toward the bathmat, which was folded on the side. "Hot water cycle. Don't use the drier. Let it air-dry. Shouldn't take more than half a day in this weather."

After following his instructions and starting the washing machine, I returned to the bathroom to find Shane carefully placing my creams and other things in a box.

"You two clean many bathrooms together?" I asked. The term "stray" brought uncertainty to mind; it gave the impression that whoever was called that didn't know where they belonged—wanderers from place to place, lost. These two knew exactly what they were doing. They moved like a well-oiled machine, and I wondered if Ian had told them about the dead man.

"They're usually a lot dirtier," Alex said. "And in need of repairs."

"Way dirtier," Shane agreed. He placed the box with my countertop stuff in my arms.

I dutifully brought it outside into the landing area. "Have you been with Ian long?"

"Couple of years," Shane answered.

"And you like working for him?"

"Boss's tough but fair," Alex said. He finished disassembling the shower curtain rods and placed everything on the side.

"He pays well, and the job is fun," Shane added. He had moved to checking out the toilet's cistern.

"You don't want to join the local pack?"

They snorted in unison, as if the question was the silliest thing they'd heard all year.

"Pack has nothing to offer," Shane said with derision.

Alex paused unloading the plastic bottles from the bucket. "Some of them are cool, but their alpha's an ass."

"Huge ass," Shane agreed.

Something told me they knew about Ian and Hutton's parental mess. Their loyalty was commendable. It wouldn't have shocked me if Alex's long locks were more of an attempt to imitate Ian rather than a surfer look. "So if

it was another alpha, you might join?"

"Nah," Shane said. "We're good."

"Yep," Alex said. "Don't need a pack."

Probably because whether they realized it or not, they had formed their own tiny pack. Was Ian aware of what was happening? I didn't think so. He might have an inkling at a subconscious level, but his rational mind probably had his relationship with Shane and Alex filed as *Strictly business*, *nothing to see here. Just helping two kids in need*.

Ah, the power of manifesting. How wonderful to watch it happen live.

While Shane and Alex finished with my bathroom, I left them in charge of Fluffy and visited Dru. Unlike my shop, the Corner Rose had a couple of visitors milling around the shelves and showcases. Dru was sitting behind the counter, keeping a sharp eye on them.

"Hello, Dru," I greeted brightly.

She grunted in acknowledgment, her eyes fixed on the browsers.

I spied a chair by the wall. "Can I sit?"

"If you must."

I dragged the chair to the end of the counter and made good use of it. It was made of wood and uncomfortable, and might've had a price tag hanging somewhere, but it'd do. The counter's glass was cool under my hands as I placed a folder on top.

"What are you doing?" Dru asked.

"I need to fill out some forms for the PBOA." Clicking on my favorite dollar store pen, I began to read the first page. "I swear I filled these before."

"Why are you filling them here?"

"It's my lunch break. I thought I'd keep you company. Repay the favor and all that."

"I'm not feeding you."

Using my best uppercase script, I wrote my name and address. "That's okay. Didn't expect you to."

The couple of browsers left the shop without buying anything, and Dru focused on me.

I nibbled on my lower lip, debating how to approach the real reason I'd

come over. Ian's inquiries with his bounty hunter contacts would take some time and in the meantime, it wouldn't be a bad idea to learn if there was any known dark magic activity in town.

Best to be direct, I decided. "Are there dark magic users in Olmeda?"

Dru's brows arched with surprise. "Probably. Bound to be in a city this size."

And a popular one with tourism, on top. "But no problems that you know of?"

"Why are you asking?"

"I'm curious."

Until I had more information, I didn't want to tell anyone else about the bathtub murder or my theory that it had been dark magic related. What if Dru was a dark magic user herself? I still didn't know how she fit into the magical community, or what kind of paranormal she was. She had known the building would be empty during the shop owners' transition and could've lured the dead man into the back alley with little effort.

My gut told me she was a decent person, but when murder was involved, gut instincts should only take you so far. Not Grandma's advice but my sister's. She liked to read thrillers.

"A mage came to my shop yesterday," I said.

"There are a couple of them around. Both are bad news."

"He had a standing potion order with Ms. Bagley, from what I gather."

Dru grimaced. "I guess when you run the town's single potion shop, you don't get to choose your clients."

"I doubt anyone would harm a nice old lady, anyway." I had found photos of her online, most taken during a small ceremony for a lifetime award. Ms. Bagley had been in her seventies, short with broad shoulders and a mop of curly white hair. Her smile had been infectious, her eyes full of joyous mischief as she held the plaque. Someone must've taken it because there had been nothing of the sort left in the shop—unless it was in the locked cabinet.

I had no interest in hanging the plaque, even if I found it. It hadn't been my award, and the Tea Cauldron was no longer her shop. It was mine now. Mine and Grandma's and whoever became my heirs—our legacy.

Still, I couldn't deny that Ms. Bagley had done some good work to cement the shop, and I was reaping the benefits of her life as Olmeda's local witch. So, perhaps I'd hang the plaque somewhere after all as a nod to her hard work over the years. Somewhere out of the way. Above the coat hanger,

or on the side of the shelf behind the counter where I wouldn't have to see it all the time. Grandma would approve, I was sure.

"Mages don't care who they hurt," Dru said darkly. "Be careful with them."

"I will, thanks." Could the mage from last evening have been responsible for the murder? He had clearly been a fire mage, but that didn't mean he didn't have a dark witch buddy.

Without more information, all theories were plausible.

"Who else should I be aware of?" I asked.

"Would you like a list?" she asked drolly.

I tapped my chin with the pen. "I mean, that'd be great."

"Piss off."

Shaking my head in mock disappointment, I returned my attention to the forms. "Rude service. Three stars out of five."

"Better than you've got so far."

"Been snooping on my reviews, have you?"

"Like you haven't with ours."

"A witch never reveals her secrets."

"Your secrets are clearer than a glass coffin."

"Morbid." I turned the page and began filling out another form. Another form I'd filled out a month ago. "Do you think Sonia does this to every new business? Make them refill forms as some sort of trial by fire? See how much people complain?"

"Doubt it," Dru said, sounding slightly disappointed I had dropped my inquiries about paranormal gossip. "Who has time for these kinds of games? Sonia runs her own business on top of being the president of the PBOA."

"Maybe someone misfiled the forms," I mused. Or it could go deeper than that. First, there had been that first customer, complaining about not getting what they wanted, then there had been the girl with her love potion, something highly illegal. She had mentioned her sister getting the potion from the old shop, but what if it had been a bluff and I'd fallen for it?

On top of that, there had been complaints about the shop not being up to magical code.

"I think someone might have it in for me," I said.

"For you?"

"The shop. I haven't been open for three full weeks, but someone already complained about me to the PBOA. That might be why she's making me

refill these forms on top of the visual inspection."

"People hate change. I'm sure it's nothing personal. If someone's making trouble, they'll get over it. Do you need help with those?"

The slight note of wistfulness in her voice caught my attention. "You like filling out forms?" Weird, but who was I to knock other people's hobbies?

"No, thanks."

That and the accompanying eyeroll told me I was slightly off base but hadn't completely missed the mark. "Ah. You want more responsibilities in the shop?" I studied the space. It was at least double the size of my shop, with huge show windows letting in plenty of light that didn't stop the room from carrying an old-and-musty atmosphere. Shadows lingered between the heavy bookcases and pieces of furniture strewn around—a mix of antiques and curio items. Smaller items were kept in the showcases and under the glass counter. The perfect spot for tourists looking to buy a souvenir more serious than a plastic copy of the statue in Balton Square.

"It's none of your business," Dru said.

I fixed her with a knowing look. "You *want* more responsibilities. You want to be manager, right?"

"I am the manager." She pursed her lips in displeasure. "Lewis doesn't like sharing some of the work."

"Some people find it hard to delegate. They think only they can do things right."

"You don't say."

"You could find another job. I'm sure you have more than enough experience to land a great position elsewhere in Olmeda. You don't have to stick to magical places." I tapped my chest with my pen. "I lived in a non-magical city all my life, and I've done fine."

"Yeah, so fine you don't know about shifter stuff."

"I know some," I protested. "Not my fault I focused on witches." I reconsidered my words for a second. "Okay, that might have been my fault. But what I mean to say is, it'll be fine."

"It's not that. Lewis... He has promised to leave me the shop when he retires. The man has no children or close relatives, so it's a good deal."

"Seriously? That's amazing!"

"If you clap your hands, I'm kicking you out."

I let my hands rest on top of the counter. "I'm so happy for you."

She looked uncomfortable. "We'll see if it actually happens."

"I'm sure it will. I'm so glad you want to be a shop owner too." Growing up around big-business-oriented people had made my small-shop wishes seem insignificant in comparison. "Are you coming to the PBOA meeting later?"

"Not today. Lewis is going."

At least there would be a friendly face among all the ones I hadn't met and who might potentially hate me. With that comforting thought in mind, I finished filling out the forms and returned home.

FOURTEEN

THE PARANORMAL BUSINESS OWNERS ASSOCIATION gathered at a meeting space in Olmeda's downtown business area. As I'd guessed, the group of about twenty consisted mostly of people I hadn't yet met, but there were a couple of familiar faces in the crowd. Mr. Lewis approached the moment he spied me entering the room.

"Good evening, Hope, dear," he said warmly. "I'm so happy you came."

"Glad to be here." I lifted the aluminum tray in my hands. "Sand-witch?"

He guffawed at my joke but made no move to take one of the small triangles of grilled ham and cheese sandwiches. "Let me introduce you to my good friend Arthur Bosko." He waved another older man close. "Arthur, this is Theodora's replacement, Hope Avery."

Arthur was a tall, thin man with long limbs and a longer face. "Hello." "Snack?" I offered the tray.

He eyed the mini sandwiches like they were rotting. "Bagley always brought cookies."

I'd guessed as much, but bringing store-bought cookies or another kind of pastry would've given the impression I was attempting to supplant Ms. Bagley. I didn't want to take her place—not in that way. I was my own witch, and I needed to prove it to everyone.

"These are healthier." I waved the tray enticingly. "Freshly made, too." "They look cold."

So did his soul, but I wasn't remarking on that, was I? "Still delicious."

"I'll pass." He patted Mr. Lewis's shoulder and turned to go. "I'll see you later, Terry."

"Don't mind him," Mr. Lewis said after Arthur had walked away. "He

can be a grouch at times."

"No insult taken. Which business does he own?"

"An apparel store on Cadence."

If it was the shop I had in mind, its apparel consisted of flashy T-shirts with puns, flip-flops, and hats aimed at tourists who had misjudged Olmeda's temperatures in summer and winter. Not the kind of business owner who should be sneering at my lovely sandwiches.

"Ah, forgive me, dear. I need to go talk to Desmond over there."

Mr. Lewis didn't wait for a response and went up to a short, sturdy man dressed in a fancy suit. Too important a person for a newbie like me, I supposed.

"Miss Avery."

I turned to face Hutton. The scowl on his beautiful features appeared permanent, and, after what Dru had told me, I couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for him. It couldn't be easy taking care of a pack at a relatively young age and then have his older half brother show up. A half brother his mother had run out of town. I wondered if his father had harbored some resentment at being pulled away from one of his sons, and if it had translated into a bad attitude toward his wife and other son.

"Snacks?" I lifted the tray again. He opened his mouth, but I cut in. "Healthier than cookies."

His lips pulled up in one corner. Without a word, he picked one of the tiny sandwiches and ate it in two bites.

"Not bad."

"Family recipe."

"Try cookies next time." He turned and walked away.

At this rate, I was going to get a serious complex.

"Nothing good ever came easily," I murmured.

"Nothing good ever came from talking to yourself, either," an amused voice said behind me. Ian. "I see you brought your specialty."

The tray was offered once more. "Ham and cheese. Freshly made. Lukewarm but delicious."

Ian picked one triangle and ate it slowly, as if testing for hidden surprises. "I never liked cookies."

I snorted. "You'd be the first one." By now Hutton had moved across the room and was pointedly giving us his back. Had Ian's approach made him leave? "Your brother is a business owner?"

Ian's voice grew a few degrees colder. "The pack owns a couple of sports equipment stores in town."

"How stereotypical."

"Says the witch with the witchy café."

"Touché. Why are *you* here?"

As much as I welcomed his presence, I hadn't expected to find him at the meeting.

Ian pointed at a series of tables by the side. "You should put your offering over there. The cemetery is registered as a business."

"Why?"

"My mother and grandparents did tours."

I placed the tray by a coffee machine and a few stacks of pamphlets and ate one triangle. If it looked like they were running out, maybe people would eat them. "You don't wanna do them?"

"No time."

"You have the strays."

"They're busy."

He could simply hire someone else to do them, someone like Vicky, and earn some money on the side, but he clearly had no interest in continuing the family business.

How strange that we were both here because of our grandparents yet we had chosen such different paths. Still, it linked us in a way, and the notion gratified me.

A couple of sharp claps echoed through the room.

"Attention, people," Sonia said loudly from the small stage at the far end. "Let's get this started." Her eyes found me with unerring aim. "You."

The entire room turned to look at me.

My smile was blinding. "Hi, all."

"Did you bring those forms?" Sonia demanded.

I patted my tote bag. "Right here."

"Give." She extended an imperious arm.

Working in the service industry had made me accustomed to strangers staring, but it still felt unnerving walking up the human corridor. Once I reached the stage, Sonia snatched the folder from my hand and began perusing it.

Her lip curled. "Everything seems in order." She added the fold to her own stack of papers. "Please mark your calendar for the permits that need

renewal. It's not my job to chase you around to turn things in on time."

"Yes, ma'am."

The lip curl became more accentuated.

"Sir?"

Now her glare might've as well been cutting a hole into me. "Stop while you're ahead."

Excellent advice. I whirled around to find everyone had found a seat and was watching us with avid curiosity. Sonia waited until I'd found an empty seat in the last row to clap her hands again and claim everyone's attention.

A woman of about my age sitting in front of me turned to whisper, "What did you do to her?"

"I've no idea."

She seemed disappointed, but nodded and turned toward the front. On the stage, Sonia sat behind a folding table and opened her thick stack of papers. So, she wasn't like this to everyone, just me. Personal or a newcomer thing? Or was I right and someone had it in for me and they were influencing her?

I could only hope things would get better by the next meeting.

My name didn't come up again, although I caught a few curious stares leveled my way. Sonia went through a long list of topics, most related to some sort of summer tourism campaign that didn't include me.

As she and others discussed things, I found my thoughts drifting to Ian. He sat on the opposite aisle, his expression neutral and focused ahead. Not once did he tilt his head in my direction, and not once did he do it to look at his half brother, who sat in the front row. If Dru hadn't told me of their relationship, I wouldn't have known they were related but for the few facial similarities.

When the meeting ended, I gathered my tote and the half-empty tray of sandwiches. With a great sigh, I eyed the trashcan by the side. Even I had to admit that the poor things had lost their appeal.

Ian found me as I decided to leave the tray where it was, in case someone was feeling peckish.

"Hungry?" he asked.

I rubbed my stomach. "A little."

"Let's get a bite."

The request surprised me, but it would give us a great opportunity to talk about the murder away from supernatural-enhanced hearing. "All right. Where?"

"Come."

Ah, those alpha tendencies. Can get the wolf out of the pack but can't take the pack out of the wolf. He nodded to a couple of people as we marched out of the building but didn't stop to talk to anyone. I wondered why he'd come at all since nothing discussed had involved him. Sonia's doing? I couldn't imagine her intimidating someone like Ian.

I couldn't imagine anything intimidating someone like Ian.

A few minutes later, we were seated at a cozy mom-and-pop restaurant. We ordered our drinks—a beer and a soda, no need to say which for whom—and a couple of burgers and sides.

When the food arrived, Ian arranged the plates on the table, then moved some of his onion rings on top of my side of fries. A shifter territorial thing? I said nothing, amused.

"Did the man reappear?" he asked once he was content with the arrangements.

I ate an onion ring. *Very* good. "No. The spell worked—I don't expect him to. But..."

He took a bite of his burger. He'd ordered a large one, and it fit the size of his hands. His harsh, lightly scarred face was at home with the burger and the beer, but I got the feeling this wasn't one of his usual haunts.

His green eyes pinned me. "But?"

I checked nobody sat within hearing. "There might be something in my pipes. A dead goldfish, maybe." The noise in the kitchen had been bugging me. On its own, simple old house noise, but with a maybe-moving shadow? After a ghost-raising spell? Maybe the man in my bathtub hadn't been the only thing lost in the house.

He coughed and took a swig of beer. "A what?"

"A dead goldfish. You know, maybe someone flushed it down the sink and now its ghost is stuck in my pipes."

If it was an animal, its death would've had to be infused with magic for any kind of remnant to stay behind. Witches in the past had liked to experiment in breeding animals with magic to create familiars, but since nobody would choose a fish as a familiar, my best guess was that it had been someone's pet and its owner had attempted to keep it alive longer through magic.

The pursuit for a longer life was a popular topic among the witch community—normal and dark. Some argued such a thing could only be

achieved through dark magic, others were convinced the key was contained in Mother Nature, no unwilling blood needed. There had been no recorded cases of any attempt actually working, but that didn't mean a witch desperate to save their beloved pet wouldn't have tried it.

If Grandma had lived to be terminal today, I couldn't say I wouldn't have tried it myself.

Did Ian and I have this all wrong? Perhaps it hadn't been a murder at all, but someone desperate to keep a loved one alive.

I gave the idea some thought.

No. Definitely murder. You didn't use a stranger's bathtub to try to keep someone alive.

"An animal's ghost? Is that possible?" Ian asked.

"There have been sightings," I said, my tone a touch defensive.

"If that's true, why didn't your spell set it free too?"

"Good question. I don't know. When I did the spell, I was concentrating on the man. It could be that my intent worked better on the freeing part compared to the summoning, or..."

"Or?"

I poked at the fries on my plate. "Or my magic was running low by the time we got to the end, so the range was smaller and it only worked on him."

He didn't comment on my power or lack thereof, which I appreciated. I already had my list of affirmations relating to my magic level, and I didn't need others to add to it.

Instead, he said, "Or maybe there is no ghost and it's random pressure noises. I'll have Shane and Alex check it out. Do you need more dirt?"

That brought out a smile. "I don't think the spell will hold in water. Although I should do some research on that—if I do have a ghostly goldfish in my house, I should free the poor thing at some point." Feeling hungrier, I took a good bite of my burger and closed my eyes in bliss. Excellent. "Fluffy didn't sense anything bad. If there is a ghost, she likes it."

"Fluffy likes everything."

"Even me?" I wriggled my eyebrows suggestively.

"Apparently."

"Unlike you, huh?"

He looked me up and down. "Eh. You grow on people."

"Like a weed in a cemetery?"

He grunted in agreement.

"Speaking of dead people. Have you heard from your contacts yet?"

"Not yet, but I've started doing some digging."

"How?"

"Looking at local newspapers for articles on disappearances."

"I'll help." The idea should've occurred to me right away. "We're looking for murders or accidents where the blood was missing from the victim?"

"That detail might not be in the press," he admitted. "But if we focus on the unresolved murders, I can run the names by the guild. See if any of the victims had magic."

I stilled, a fry halfway to my mouth. "The bounty hunters keep a list of local paranormals?"

"Of course not." He ate more burger.

Nope, not unsettling at all. I wondered what my entry looked like. Hope Avery, low-level witch, makes decent sandwiches but should try cookies next. One day, she might get to reach the soles of Ms. Bagley's greatness.

"How did you become a bounty hunter?" I asked. "Did you want to be one when you were growing up?"

Ian kept eating, unperturbed by the change of topic. "No. It was handy at the time."

"Handy how?"

"I was seventeen and itching to do something useful. The bounties paid well, and the action appealed to me."

Appealed to his shifter self, likely. "You never wanted to join a pack?" "No."

"What about running your grandparents' tours? Did your mother do it?"

"For a while."

"She didn't like it?"

He gave me a short, wry smile. "We moved away."

"Oh. Oh."

"Oh," he agreed and started on his onion rings.

I ran a finger along the neckline of my T-shirt, feeling uncomfortably hot. "Is she still alive? Your mom?"

"Yep." His voice grew warmer. "Alive and well with her husband."

That made me feel better. The love affair with Ian's father might've gone to hell, but at least she'd found someone else. "That's wonderful. You know, my mother remarried too."

"I did not know."

"My father left when I was little, and Mom moved us away." Strange how in this we were so similar as well. "Eventually she met Dan and got married. Dan had a daughter from a previous marriage as well. Do you have any stepsiblings?"

"None. Only child."

Was that how he saw himself or was it a diss toward the pack? It made sense, since all he had known was living with his mother. Perhaps this was what made him hate shifting—in his heart, he was his witch mother's son, not his shifter father's.

"Bounty hunting sounds like fun," I said, deciding to steer clear of family drama.

"It's parking in front of a motel for hours waiting for your prey to return."

"But the actual catching is exciting, right?"

He ate one of my fries. "You watch too many movies."

What I watched were the thin scars on his face and the memory of the ones I'd seen on his torso and arms. Those didn't come from just sitting at the wheel, bored out of one's mind.

"Tell me about your family," he said. "Are they all witches?"

"Oh, no." I laughed at the thought. "My parents and Sis are as human as it gets. Mom is an accountant and Dad's an engineer. My sister's a manager. Married with a baby too. I don't know how she does it."

"But not witches?"

"Not a drop of magic. My grandma on my father's side was the witch in the family."

"And your father?"

"No clue. As I said, he left when I was little. Never got around to marrying Mom. I used to visit Grandma as a kid, but she never mentioned him." I smiled fondly at the memories of my visits. "She's the one who taught me about being a witch."

"Is she..."

"Dead? Yes. When I was eight. Heart attack."

"I'm sorry."

I fought to swallow through the sudden knot in my throat. "I think she'd be proud of the shop."

He reached over and squeezed my hand. "I'm sure she would." A moment later, he was back to nursing his beer. "So opening a shop was

always your dream?"

"Not exactly." I drew a circle on the condensation of my glass of soda. "I was studying at college and had mostly forgotten about my time with Grandma when I got her spellbook. That rekindled things. I joined the Council and had an internship."

"Didn't go well?"

The distaste in my voice must've given him a hint. "No, but that's okay. It taught me how to not do things when I get my own intern one day." If there was one thing I was sure of, aside from magic ought to be used for good and that the shop would flourish, was that when it was my time to mentor a witch, I would a) not call them interns, and b) actually teach them something.

"So why the shop?"

I looked at him blankly. "What do you mean?"

"There are plenty of things to do as a witch."

He made no sense. "It's what you do. How else am I supposed to help people?"

"I wonder."

What was that supposed to mean? Before I could ask, he took out his wallet and fished for some bills. I swallowed my question and hurried to pay for my half of the dinner.

"Need a lift?" he asked once we were standing outside.

"I can call a ride."

"I'll drive you."

I accepted, expecting either the van or a bike. Instead, I got a black SUV.

"Where do you hide this monstrosity?" I asked in awe, studying the clean interior. No balled-up burger wrappers or discarded coffee cups littered the floor. No hints that anyone spent long nights in here, parked outside a motel waiting for their target.

"I park it around the garage."

He drove fast, and we made it back to the shop in no time. We spent the drive in a comfortable silence, and I was sad to see it end.

I jumped out and faced him. "Do you want to take Fluffy?"

"Keep her a little longer."

"Will she be okay this long away from you?" I asked worriedly.

"Oh, yeah. She's used to being at the house all day. Good night."

"Good night." I closed the door, but he didn't pull out into the traffic.

Waiting for me to get inside? What a gentleman.

With one last wave, I turned and unlocked the door. Once I was inside, I heard him drive off.

"Fluffy, I'm home!"

Enthusiastic barking came from the backyard. When I opened the back door, Fluffy all but flew at me.

"Hello, girl," I cooed, giving her a good petting. A moment later, she disentangled from my ministrations and rushed to the gate to bark again.

Strange. "What is it?"

I approached the gate and peered through the vines draping around the iron rods. The alleyway was drenched in shadows.

Thunder cracked in the distance.

"Witch," hissed a low, angry voice.

FIFTEEN

THE MAGE WAS BACK.

"Sorry, the shop is closed," I said.

"I don't care. Open up."

He sounded angry. Pissed, even. I patted my jeans even though I had no potions on me. "You'll have to come tomorrow."

"I have waited enough, witch. What kind of game are you playing with me?" His voice had gone deadly quiet. So cold, I wondered for a moment if he could wield ice along with fire.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"My potion," he roared.

I jumped. Fluffy barked, startled.

My blood turned into ice at the thought of him harming Fluffy while I wasn't around to protect her. From now on, I was locking her inside the house.

"The one I gave you didn't work?" I asked warily.

"The one you gave me was shit!"

Out of habit, my mouth stretched into the fake, placating smile reserved for unhappy customers. "I assure you, the potion was of the best quality."

"It didn't work."

"You didn't specify—"

"Don't play with me, witch."

The bars under my hands grew hot, and I snatched my hands back. "Hey, don't burn my stuff."

"I said, don't play with me, witch."

"Yes, sir," escaped my mouth, once more out of habit. "What exactly is

wrong with it?"

"You know perfectly well what's wrong with it."

"Ms. Bagley might have known, but I'm new. If you could be more concise, sir."

His voice lowered to a harsh whisper. "I want the potion that augments my magic."

Fluffy let out a soft whine, as if she, too, was aware that what he was asking for was impossible. Crystals to focus a spell? Yes. Potions to increase a mage's power? No.

Unless you used dark magic.

My mouth went dry at the thought. Was that what he was asking for? Dark magic?

And when I told him I couldn't do it, would he jump over the gate and burn me to ashes so I wouldn't report him to the bounty hunters?

"I—I'll need some time."

"Why?"

"I don't have the ingredients at hand."

A heavy pause ensued, then, "I'll be in contact."

His heavy steps echoed through the alleyway as he moved away. Thunder cracked again, underscoring his grand exit.

I grabbed Fluffy and retreated inside the shop, locking the back door behind us.

Dark magic.

Covering my mouth, I paced the length of the building, from the shop's front door to the back door. Back and forth, back and forth, Fluffy trotting worriedly at my side.

No matter how I approached the problem, there was only one solution: I had to report him to the Council. He wanted dark magic—if he didn't get it at this shop, he'd find it elsewhere. And once I reported him, they'd ask why he had come here in the first place. Would they believe me when I told them he hadn't been seeking me specifically, but that he had a standard order at the store?

After the "fake" corpse report, would they believe me at all?

"What's wrong, child?"

I jumped with a shriek. Fluffy whined.

"Who is that?" I demanded, hands pressed to my chest. Had I missed a patron hiding inside the shop before closing down? The harsh beat of my

heart made it hard to listen to any other noise. "Hello?"

"Hello, dearie."

The voice was female, with a timbre that brought fairy-tale grandmothers to mind. "Who are you?" I peered over the counter, but the space was empty.

The voice clicked its tongue. "Don't they teach manners to young people these days?"

Now past the initial shock, Fluffy didn't appear traumatized in the least. She stood by my side, tongue lolling, tail wagging. Nothing too evil, then.

"I'm sorry." I approached the archway and snapped a peek into the stairwell. Empty. "I'm Hope Avery." Bathroom—empty. Kitchen—zero stowaways. Storage room—not a soul.

The thought made me pause. An old, grandmotherly voice seemingly coming out from the walls? I returned to the shop.

"Ms. Bagley?"

"Yes, child."

"What on Mother Earth?"

"I am not so sure myself, but I presume I am deceased?"

I'd been wrong—the voice didn't come from the walls, exactly. The more she talked, the more the words seemed to come from a specific spot. "Yes, Ms. Bagley. You passed away, sadly."

"How? Do you know, child?"

My search for the source of the voice took me behind the counter, to the shelf of glasses and mugs. "I believe you had an unfortunate accident on the stairs."

A gasp followed my statement. "Oh, my goodness."

"I'm sorry." I felt for her—tripping down your own stairs was not the most heroic death. "They said it was quick."

"Quick indeed. Why, I don't remember a thing!"

Ah-ha. I picked one of the tall glasses with the tiny witches pattern and put it on top of the counter. "I fear that's common for, uhm, lost souls." Ghost sounded a bit tacky, given the circumstances.

"It doesn't feel right," Ms. Bagley said from the glass. "If it had been an accident, I should've moved on without trouble. Oh, child," she suddenly exclaimed.

"What's wrong?"

Other than being dead and stuck in a glass.

"I remember now—it was no accident." Outrage colored her voice, and I

could imagine her face in my mind, that benevolent expression filled with fury and passion. "Someone pushed me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, child," she snapped. "I'm sure."

Could it have been the same person who had murdered the man in the bathtub?

"What I'm unsure of," she continued, "is how I ended up here, now. Shouldn't my ghost be tied to my place of death?"

The man had appeared where he'd died. So why wasn't Ms. Bagley a ghostly corpse on the stairs? I appreciated the universe giving me a pass on this—avoiding the stairs would be a lot more troublesome than avoiding the bathroom—but it was strange. "I'm not sure. Maybe something to do with my spell?"

"What spell?"

I told her about my spell to release the soul stuck in the bathtub upstairs.

"Someone killed a man in my bathtub?" Her voice was strident now. "How dare they?"

"It's all very sad," I empathized, nodding in understanding.

"Sad! Yes, child, it is sad. It must be the same person who murdered me," she added in a whisper, as if she was afraid the killer was lurking inside the house.

A shiver ran down my spine, and I glanced at the archway with some apprehension. Fluffy would've told me if there was a stranger upstairs waiting to stab me with a kitchen knife, wouldn't she?

"Why would anyone want to kill you, Ms. Bagley?" I asked, still eyeing the hallway.

"I don't know. Perhaps I was in the way?"

"It would be good if you could remember anything out of the ordinary that might've happened in your last living days." I thought of the mage. "Did you get any special potion requests? Maybe someone thought you were a dark magic dealer?"

"Dark magic." She spat the words. "No, child. Nothing like that. Has someone accused me of doing dark magic? Are they trying to ruin my reputation now that I'm no longer alive to defend myself?"

"I think someone might have it in for me, but as far as everyone else is concerned, they all love and respect you."

"Oh, how wonderful." Her tone had returned to dear-old-lady. "I have an

idea about what we could do, if you're willing to help."

"Of course. Anything."

"There is a spell that you can cast that will give me a more human presence than an inanimate object. Once I can move around, I'll be able to find out what happened."

"I've never heard of such a spell being possible." Nothing in my research suggested it was possible to enhance a lost soul in a permanent way, and necromancy was a myth—not to mention I had no access to her body.

"Ah, my dear, you have so much to learn. Once this is over, I'd love to mentor you."

"I appreciate the offer, but wouldn't you rather move on?"

"I would not! This is such a great opportunity for me to stick around and make good use of my magic."

"I don't think lost souls can use magic."

"We can see once you do this spell, yes?"

"Yes, of course. What do I need?"

She rattled off a list of crystals and herbs. All mundane, everyday ingredients. Not one mention of grave dirt.

"Let me grab some of that," I told her, then went into the backyard.

Fluffy followed, a lot more subdued than usual. Maybe she had the same feeling I did.

None of the items the witch had listed were to be found in my backyard, but the tool locker was. I wrestled it open and chose a crowbar. Its curved end gleamed with promise under the moonlight. It would do.

I returned to the shop and moved behind the counter.

"What are you doing, dear?" Ms. Bagley asked.

Sticking the end of the crowbar between the doors of the locked cabinet, I pushed hard.

Ms. Bagley gasped. "Child, no! That counter is an antique."

The cabinet doors popped open with a satisfying snap, revealing a collection of magic items.

I crouched as the witch's sputtering filled the air, and rubbed my lip thoughtfully. Black notebooks were stacked on one side, followed by a vast group of vials filled with different liquids, most of them a dark crimson red. A few crystals with markings etched on them, and a few rolled-up scrolls brought up the rear. The entire collection exclaimed evil intent. There was also a plastic container filled with chocolate chip cookies.

"Cursed cookies, seriously?" I asked. "Who were you going to give them to?"

"Hmph." Gone was the warm, grandmotherly voice. "I guess you're one of *those*."

"Witches who refuse to do dark magic? Yep."

"Figures. How did you know?"

"You overdid the sweetness. No real person talks like that outside the movies."

She harrumphed. "I do talk like that."

"Maybe to people you don't like. Or seven-year-olds." Was that how people saw me? As an extremely naive child who'd fall for any lie? "Besides, there's no spell that can do what you said unless it finishes a spell already started. And nothing but dark magic could make a soul corporeal enough to move around for an indefinite amount of time."

"Look at that—the witch is sharper than she looks."

Also, people kept coming to the shop asking for dark magic. It might've taken me a while to see the obvious, but at least I'd gotten there.

"It's a gift." I mulled over my explanation of the spell. "You couldn't find a way to extend your life, so you put a dark magic spell on yourself, hoping to remain as a ghost. But it failed."

"It was a design of my own doing," she said, offended. "I'd say it worked rather well, considering I didn't test it on anyone else."

I bumped my head against the counter. "You killed the man in the bathtub for your blood supply, didn't you?"

"Maybeee."

"And you ran a dark magic side business."

"A girl needs to make a living."

My predecessor, the old witch universally hailed as an irreplaceable pillar of the community, was a damn dark witch. Had been for years and years. From opening day, likely.

I was sharing my shop space with the antithesis of Grandma.

Sighing, I stood and went for the stairs.

"Hey! Where do you think you're going?"

Ignoring her demands, I walked into my bedroom.

Time to test the witch's range.

"Ms. Bagley, you were an evil, ugly hag who deserved to be murdered," I whispered.

No reaction.

I repeated the words louder, but no outrage rose in the air.

I went down into the shop and stood under the archway.

"Ms. Bagley—"

"Yes, deary?"

"—you were an evil, ugly hag."

"Now, now. No need to insult my lovely face. Beautifully aged, as I've always said."

Relieved, I grabbed a bottle of moon water and retreated to the steps. The witch appeared to be restricted to the shop, but I'd put down an extra ward, in case.

The exertion of magic on top of the long day left me blissfully exhausted, and I crashed onto the bed, too tired to think or even begin to cope.

The PBOA complaints, the evil witch, and the murders could all wait a few more hours.

SIXTEEN

THE NEXT MORNING dawned bright and sunny.

"No, no, no," admonished Ms. Bagley, the evil witch. "You put the citrine in front of the tourmaline, not in the back."

I closed the cabinet holding my supplies and went into the kitchen for some peace. Fluffy yawned from her bed at the end of the counter, unperturbed by the witch's endless stream of *How to properly set up a witch shop*.

Ms. Bagley and Grandma had very different opinions on how to store supplies. And everything else.

How would Grandma have reacted to the dark witch's presence? Would she have extended an offer of peace, agreed to a middle ground so she could slowly convert Ms. Bagley to the non-evil side?

Or would she have stepped aside immediately and called the Council like a dutiful witch?

I wished I knew. My hazy memories told me of a kind, always-smiling witch who took good care of everything around her, whether it was plants, people, or magic. You could be kind and still call the Council on someone for the good of others. For the good of punishment. Grandma had never punished me or anyone else, but I'd never done or witnessed anything worth punishing.

The murder of the man in the bathtub might be solved, his killer out of the reach of justice—or having received divine justice, depending on how you looked at it—but that still left me with another murder: Ms. Bagley's. Another murder and the witch's dark magic clientele. Those people had to be stopped, but if I called the Council and told them all of this, they'd immediately close the shop for an investigation, and then it'd never reopen.

Who wanted to shop at a place used for dark magic for decades? Nobody the Council wanted around.

Being the one to discover all these evil deeds would not earn me another shop. Might as well forget that dream and become a bounty hunter like Ian, dedicate my life to sitting outside motels playing phone games and waiting for things to happen.

Mind, that wasn't too different from my current life as a shopkeeper, but it was still nowhere near the same.

No. Telling the Council wasn't an option. I'd have to weather this storm one way or another. Grandma would've tried to make the dark magic users see reason, that life was more than your power or instant gratification... maybe. After all, what did I really know about Grandma? Nothing beyond my blurry memories and all she had written in the spellbook.

I inhaled deeply.

This was not the time to start doubting Grandma. Or myself.

I opened the shop as usual, and the witch fell quiet, as if she had a public persona she donned as soon as the open sign flipped over. That was how she had fooled everyone in Olmeda for years—it must've been so ingrained in her it had lasted beyond death.

Vicky bounced in a short time later. No cupcakes today, so I offered her the last of the cookies. That reminded me of the ones hidden in the cabinet of horrors, and I shuddered.

Then it dawned on me that the witch must've used the upper kitchen to cook them because the bottom one had no oven. Thank you, Mother—both of them—for not giving me the gift of baking.

"How are things?" Vicky asked. She took a bite of the cookie, then frowned and put it back on the plate.

Couldn't blame her—they were probably pretty stale by now. Among everything else, I also needed to go get fresh pastries. Who'd want to stop for tea at a teashop that offered no snacks whatsoever?

"Good, good."

The words sounded unconvincing to my own ears, and, for the first time, not being able to tell her about the paranormal world truly bothered me. I wanted to unload, talk about the PBOA meeting and Sonia's obvious dislike for me, about my growing suspicions that someone had it in for me. Dru already thought I was being overly dramatic, Ian didn't seem the type to engage in idle speculation, and I didn't know anyone else.

"Doesn't sound so good." A line of worry appeared between her brows. She pointed a finger at me. "You know what you need?"

An exorcism? A total cleansing of the building? Going back in time and never entering the upstairs bathroom? "What?"

"A tour!"

"Oh."

"Just relax while I drive you around and tell you all the old stories about Olmeda."

The idea had merits. "That does sound good. Fresh air and entertainment."

"Exactly."

Fluffy abandoned her bed and came around to sniff at Vicky.

She stiffened. "Uh. I didn't know you had a dog."

"Oh, it's not mine. I'm babysitting for a few days."

Fluffy gave a happy bark, and Vicky jumped in her seat, alarmed.

"I'm not good with pets," she said, squirming.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Fluffy," I called sternly over the counter. "Go back." I pointed at her bed.

The dog let out a small whine of disappointment but trotted back to the folded blanket.

"Is... Is that even legal?" Vicky asked in a whisper. "To have a dog in the shop? Doesn't it break sanitary laws or something?"

"I'm not sure."

She eyed the end of the counter warily, where Fluffy hid from view. "You might wanna check before someone lodges a complaint."

Sweat gathered on my lower back, the morning heat suddenly unbearable inside the shop. "You're so right. Give me a moment."

I gathered the dog under one arm and her blanket under the other, and carried them upstairs.

"I'm so sorry, Fluffy," I told her as the dog stood in the middle of the landing, looking up at me with happy, expectant eyes. "You're going to have to stay up here until we get you a therapy dog vest or permit or something."

Fluffy yipped. Poor thing had no idea of what I'd just said.

I patted her fondly. "I'll be back to check on you in a bit, okay?"

After leaving her a bowl filled with water, I closed the sliding door separating the landing from the steps and returned downstairs.

"People shouldn't make you take care of their dogs without checking if

it's okay first," Vicky said in a censuring tone.

Ian didn't strike me as the kind of person to care about workplace permits —he had no use for them with his cemetery closed. "They didn't mean anything bad."

Vicky snorted. I was glad that even in death, Bagley knew to remain silent in the presence of humans.

A couple entered the shop, ooh-ing and aah-ing at the cozy setup. I surreptitiously wiped the sweat on my forehead when their gazes ambled away from my smiling face. I'd dodged that pet complaint bullet.

"Thank you," I mouthed to Vicky.

She lifted her iced-tea glass in salute and winked.

The couple ordered tea and coffee and sat at the table near the windows, engaging in casual conversation.

"Things are looking up," Vicky said with a grin. "Next thing you know, you'll have people lining up at the door."

I showed her my crossed fingers, and she laughed softly.

My phone began ringing—the Council. I excused myself and retreated to the far end of the counter before answering.

"This is Hope Avery."

"Hello, Miss Avery. This is Emily Doyle from the Council."

"What can I do for you?" I ran through my to-do list in my head. No standing items with them, aside from my indecision over whether to report the dark magic incidents and the witch haunting the shop.

"Some issues with the Tea Cauldron have been brought to our attention, and I'm going to need you to come in."

Vicky was looking at me quizzically. I gave her an appeasing smile. "Issues?"

"It's better if we discuss this in person, Miss Avery. The sooner we clear these things up, the better."

It was Thursday. "Sooner as in next week?"

"Sooner as in tomorrow. When can I expect you?"

Closing on a Friday was going to suck. "Would twelve be okay?"

"Perfect. See you then."

Doyle ended the call before I could say my goodbyes, and I stared at my phone for a few seconds. What kind of issues warranted an urgent visit?

"Everything okay?" Vicky asked when I returned to my usual spot at the counter.

"Yeah. Nothing serious." I unstuck the back of my T-shirt from my skin and waved it, hoping to get some cool air in there. Way too hot in the shop. I might need to buy extra fans. "Do you know a good place to rent a car?"

"Rent a car?" she repeated, surprised.

"I need to go to Montel tomorrow." A good three-hour drive. There weren't enough witches in the country to justify a permanent Council representation in every city, and Montel covered the entire area.

Asking Ian for his SUV seemed a bit much, and I didn't know Dru well enough to ask to borrow her car, if she owned one.

"Oh. Staying overnight?"

"A day trip." My mouth curved downward. "I'll have to close for the day."

Her expression filled with understanding. "That sucks."

It did, but one day wouldn't break the bank. It'd do me good to get out and smell the roses.

Feeling a bit more cheery, I told her, "It is what it is. I guess there must be some car rental places in town?"

"You can use mine."

"Your car?"

"Sure. I don't need it tomorrow, and it'll save you some money." She winced at her own words, then smiled sheepishly. "I didn't mean to offend."

"No offense taken," I reassured her. "Are you sure? About the car."

"Yeah. You'll have to refill the tank on the way, but you can use it. No problem."

At least something was going my way. "That's so great of you. Thank you."

"Anytime. I'll send you my address and you can pick it up tomorrow morning."

"It's going to be an early start," I warned.

"On second thought..." She dug into her purse and took out a set of keys. "Here, keep these. I'll walk home today. The Honda is parked two streets over. Press the fob, and it'll beep."

"Oh, you don't have to."

She pressed the keys into my hand. "I insist. I love long walks. Just take care of my baby, okay?"

It felt like too much pressure, but her face was so radiant I couldn't refuse. "I will. Thank you so much."

A few hours later, Ian found me in the backyard.

Fluffy became a whirl of excitement the moment he came near the gate, and I opened it to let him in. With the day dragging, and my concern about the meeting growing, not to mention the feeling that Bagley was watching my every move with avid ghostly eyes, I'd closed up early and taken care of some standing items on my to-do list.

"Front door was closed," he said, bending to give Fluffy some well-deserved pets. "Hello, girl."

I said nothing, simply resumed my position by the lit metal fire pit in the middle of the yard.

Ian straightened and came to stand at my side. He was wearing his usual black T-shirt-jean combo and black boots.

"It's early for a bonfire." He tilted his head skyward.

I copied him. The sky was just darkening.

"And too hot," he added.

"Don't stand too close." Fire was a good cleanser, but there was the slight possibility some magic could linger in the smoke.

He jerked his chin toward the box by my side. "Not cooking, I see."

"Nope." I picked up a vial from the box, popped the stopper out, and drained the contents into the fire.

The flames rose for a moment, burning violet, then settled back down.

"Failed potions?"

Strange that he was asking so much when it was usually me who started our conversations. "You could say that."

Fluffy came over, my wooden spoon in her mouth. I took it and threw it into a corner of the backyard. The dog huffed happily and chased it, then stood at the spot, jumping up and down.

"Good girl," I said and petted her when she came back, sans spoon.

Grabbing another vial, I repeated my earlier motions and emptied it into the fire.

Between finding stuff to start the fire, then having to look up videos of how to start a fire, it had taken me a while to get going on burning the items in Bagley's cabinet of dark magic horrors. I was halfway done with the potions, and some of the crystals were already cozy inside the flame, getting thoroughly cleansed. The cookies? Those had been the first to go.

I was saving the spellbook for the grand finale.

It didn't matter that the spells inside might contain knowledge beyond my wildest dreams, or that any tricks the witch might've used to cast her dark magic could improve the efficiency of mine. I had read enough books, and watched enough shows, to know what happened to any evil that wasn't destroyed immediately.

It always came back to bite you in the ass.

And if someone found an inkling of dark magic in the shop? Reporting murderers getting murdered would be the least of my problems.

No, the only thing that was going to survive this fiery apocalypse was the witch's client ledger. Which happened to be in code.

"Wanna tell me what's going on?" Ian asked.

I exhaled wearily. "I should, shouldn't I?"

"I don't like s'mores." He surveyed the backyard, the overgrown grass and weeds and abandoned tools glinting red in the fire's light. "You need to get chairs."

"It's on the list. Along with a living room table, a sofa, and some shelves for my books in storage." AKA my bedroom back home.

Oh, Mother, but I was making a mess of my life. Everything had been so clear in my ten-year plan. Hard, but achievable if I put in the work and willed it to happen. Getting the shop ahead of time had been a blessing, but now... Now I remembered that no good deed went unpunished, and no gift came without a price.

Grandma would not approve. She loved giving gifts with no expectations in return. Unfortunately, Grandma had not gifted me the shop.

"You sound defeated," Ian noted.

"Just gloomy."

We watched the flames turn violet as another potion hit the pit.

"I discovered who murdered the man in my bathtub," I said.

"You did?"

I had to give him props for not sounding dubious in the least. "It was the old witch—Ms. Bagley, I mean."

His eyes narrowed but not with shock or distrust. "Are you sure?"

Cheered by the fact he wasn't laughing in my face, I said, "Remember the

noises I heard and my idea that the spell in the bathtub might've awakened a goldfish ghost along with the one upstairs?" I waited for his nod. "Turns out, it also awoke Ms. Bagley."

"Her ghost told you she killed the man?" he asked in a deadly serious voice.

A shiver ran across my shoulder blades, and I resisted the urge to put my hands out to the fire to warm myself up. "No, her ghost told me she was a poor old lady minding her own witchy business who got shoved down the stairs." I waved at the box of vials and things on the ground. "Finding her dark magic stuff told me she's been doing dark magic for years and years."

"Could be someone else's."

"There's more. People have been coming around and expecting me to sell them dark magic. At first, I thought it might be someone spreading rumors, but after I found her collection, it all made sense."

He nodded again, satisfied with my line of reasoning. It felt good. Like I was finally doing something right.

"And she's now a ghost? On the stairs? That's where she died, right?"

"No, thank God. She's haunting a glass in the shop."

Ian was taken aback. "Haunting a glass?"

"She put a dark magic spell on herself while alive, hoping to stay around as a ghost when she died, but it misfired. Then she tried to convince me to finish the spell and give her a movable body," I grumbled.

"Not a very smart woman," he said, as if it was obvious to anyone who'd been in my presence for over a second that I'd never do dark magic.

An immediate grin stretched my lips. "No. No, she isn't."

"Show her to me."

I led him and Fluffy inside the house, leaving the back door wide open so we had a clear view of the fire, and went into the shop, switching on the lights. The witch remained silent in Ian's presence, and I pointed at the glass on the shelf. I'd moved it away from the others, so I wouldn't unintentionally use it to serve someone's drink.

He tapped it. "This one?"

"Yes."

"Grab the dog."

I grabbed the dog.

He took the glass, weighed it in his hand, then threw it at the floor.

SEVENTEEN

GLASS WENT FLYING EVERYWHERE. I jumped onto a stool, startled. Fluffy barked with distress.

"What are you doing?" I demanded.

"Getting rid of the trash." Bits of glass crunched under his boots as he walked past me. "Where's your broom?"

"H-hallway closet. Ian?"

He went into the hallway, opened the small closet under the stairs, and found my sparkling new broom.

"Ian?" I repeated more firmly once he was back.

"Yes?"

"Why did you do that?"

He looked at me, no emotions showing on his face. "You want the witch to stick around?"

"No, but..."

"But?"

"She could've told us so much! About her murder, or why she chose that man or the evil she's done."

"Irrelevant."

I sputtered. "You can't go around deciding stuff like that."

"Why not? I'm the bounty hunter here. I deal with shit like this." He finished sweeping the broken glass onto the pan. "The witch is bad news. People like that—they know how to sweet-talk others into doing what they want. Even someone like you."

My arms constricted around Fluffy. "Never. No way."

"Everyone is susceptible to manipulation."

"I'm not a child. I wouldn't do something just because she told me to."

"You let her stick around, didn't you? You said that was her goal—to stick around as a ghost after death."

I closed my mouth with a snap. Damn if he wasn't right.

"Eventually, she might've found a way to contact someone else to finish the spell."

"But now we can't ask her anything about her past deeds or who the dead man was."

"We don't need her help. Never did while she was alive and won't while she's dead. The world doesn't need another bad guy."

"I hate it when you make sense."

He flashed me a grin. "Just my job."

The sight of his smile left me slightly flustered and completely disarmed. It was because he didn't do it often that it slammed all the harder when it appeared. How could one ever get used to it when it rarely happened?

"You think she's gone now?" I asked, a little breathless.

"That's your field, not mine."

He returned the broom and pan to the closet, but I remained sitting on the stool, a confused Fluffy in my arms.

"She should be gone," I said slowly. As the effect of his grin wore off, something else started to bother me. "As long as nobody does another ghost-related spell in the house. Ian?"

He stood in the archway, back straight, arms crossed over his chest. "Yes?"

"You said you never needed her help while she was alive. Did you mean you didn't get your potions here, or that you never needed potions?"

"All paranormals need potions at some point."

"Where did you get yours?"

"I have contacts."

Meaning *not here*. Why?

The answer slammed into me. Carefully, I put Fluffy on the floor, telling myself that surely I must be mistaken. But as I walked up to him, his green eyes never once flickered away, daring me to voice my conclusion.

"You already suspected she was a dark witch, didn't you?" I asked.

He didn't demur or tell me I was being silly. He kept our gazes locked and said, "Yes."

Anger made me bristle. "Is that why you were so rude to me when we

first met? You thought I was a dark witch too?" The possibility changed all our interactions. It turned them from warm memories into cold, calculated actions. It made me see red. "Was that why you offered to help with the grave dirt? Why you insisted on being present for the spell? Did you think I'd use the dirt to cover up my tracks or something?"

"Yes."

His harsh honesty, once one of his greatest assets, now made me want to slug him.

And I was pretty sure Grandma would approve.

"Is that why you took me out for dinner yesterday?" I demanded. "Were you looking to get an admission of guilt?"

"No. I no longer suspected you after the bathtub spell."

"Then why didn't you tell me your theories about Bagley? You must've suspected she might've been the one to kill the man after I explained about the dark magic."

His jaw clenched. "It wasn't the time."

"You thought it was none of my business," I guessed.

He didn't answer, which was a resounding affirmative.

I opened my arms wide, encompassing the shop. "Literally, my business."

"What she did has nothing to do with you. I wasn't aware her old clients were coming to you for dark magic. I also had no concrete proof of her doings."

If I kept going down the road of why he hadn't told me, I really was going to punch him. "Why didn't you report her if you suspected she was doing dark magic?"

"Not a bounty, not my business."

"That's bullshit."

He uncrossed his arms and loomed over me. "Is it? Should I go after everyone who acts dodgy? Should I fill the complaints ledger with every name that might have done something illegal, even if I have no proof? Should I change my job from bounty hunter to inspector?"

"You should've said something," I insisted. "If you had told the Council about her, she might've been stopped before she killed someone. You had a moral obligation."

"If I had told the Council, they would've come to investigate, found nothing, and dismissed the complaint. She was a dark magic user, not dumb. She knew how to cover her tracks." "But she'd have been forced to stop."

Pity entered his expression. "She'd have been more careful about how she dealt with her clients, but she wouldn't have stopped. Magic users never do."

"You could have forced her to stop."

His features turned neutral, like a stone mask slipping over his face. "I'm a bounty hunter, not a hitman."

Right now, he was an ass.

I pointed at the back door. "I don't care what you are. You need to leave."

He turned around and left without a word. The heavy thuds of his boots against the hardwood floors echoed long after he was gone. By my side, Fluffy let out a high-pitched whine.

My chest wanted to let out a similar sound. It wanted to use my phone and tell him to come back so I could ask if he even liked me at all or had simply suffered me being around. But I didn't have his phone number. He had never given it to me. Nobody had of their own free will except for Vicky—I'd had to beg Dru for hers—and the reminder was a stab in the heart.

Sure, Ian had followed me on social media, but that was when he suspected me of being a dark witch. He was happy to dissect my words and movements, see how my brand of magic affected him, but only because I'd wanted his grave dirt.

Had I gone with one of my suppliers, he'd have never gotten involved. He'd have stayed away, getting his potions elsewhere, uncaring of any crimes I might commit.

To him, I was simply a new piece on the chessboard. No need to get personally involved—simply figure out the newcomer's motives and move on.

How aggravating.

Fluffy pawed at my leg unhappily, and I bent to pet her.

"It's okay, Fluffy. Not your fault your owner is a jerk."

I went into the backyard and locked the gate. My anger was a thrumming river of lava coursing through my veins, slow and steady and burning down any affirmations that might've helped with the situation.

The fire in the pit was dying, and there wasn't much left to burn from the witch's leftovers box. With a snap, I threw the spellbook into the flames. They licked at it sluggishly, and I focused all my anger on making them work faster. Ah, to be a fire mage.

That reminded me of the fire mage visitor, and my ire rebuilt like a

phoenix. To think Ian had suspected Ms. Bagley's dark magic use all along and done nothing was maddening. To think that he hadn't told me his suspicions about the old hag even though he no longer considered me suspect, and that he had allowed me to go on trying to guess who might've killed the man in the bathtub was downright embarrassing.

Once the spellbook was ash, I doused the fire and stared at the night sky. A couple of stars twinkled in the blue darkness.

"I need a bath." No, I *deserved* a bath. A long, wonderful, relaxing soak.

Good thing I had a great bathtub upstairs in my freshly professionally cleaned bathroom. Thanks to Ian.

Even though he hadn't had to.

Just like I hadn't seen fit to report my dark magic suspicions to the Council.

Oh, for the love of Grandma. I was in no mood to make excuses for the man. I was in the mood to stew in my anger while plotting horrible ways to get back at him.

But it was hard to keep my ire afloat when relaxing in a rose-scented bath, with a gurgle or two coming from the faucet, and Fluffy demanding to be held over the edge so she could play with the colored water.

This was my life now.

At least I still had the shop.

Poor consolation—I might not have it for much longer if things kept going sideways. Dread was an unwelcome visitor, and I spent the night turning in bed, torn between righteous anger and apprehension about what the urgent meeting with the councilwoman might bring. About what the future had in store for me, if the past few days were any indication of what was to come.

I woke up bleary-eyed and unrefreshed, but a shower helped with that. There was a hollowness in my chest that I wasn't sure how to fill, but the shower helped with that too. The bathroom was airy and beautiful, and the early morning light filtering through the window carried the promise of a new day.

"A new day, a new start," I murmured in front of the mirror as I toweled my hair dry.

A passage from Grandma's spellbook flitted through my mind: *Each day* carries its own indefinable magic. The sun can scorch magic, but sometimes that's what a witch needs to see a new path, to find another way to cast a

spell. A new day is a new opportunity to use the magic you gathered under the Moon.

Grandma was wise. I met my reflection and forced a smile. "A new day, a new start," I repeated loudly. With meaning. With intent.

The smile stuck on its own, and my spirits rose. I would face the day, then worry about everything else. If the Council had wanted to take the shop from me, they wouldn't be calling me to schedule a meeting. They would've served me a pink slip.

This was only another hurdle—and I'd become pretty good at jumping over those.

I made sure Fluffy had enough food and water for the day, apologized profusely for leaving her alone, and went searching for Vicky's car. Had Ian not been such a block of arrogant granite, I would've asked him to keep Fluffy for the day or send the strays to check in on her. Alas, now we all had to suffer.

Vicky drove a cute, compact blue Honda. I had pegged her for more of a candy-red kind of person, but maybe they hadn't had it in stock. The interior was well taken care of, the seats comfy and the tray full of grocery and fast-food receipts. It put me at ease—this was no pristine out-of-the-box vehicle. This had probably seen worse driving than mine.

I left my purse on the passenger side and adjusted the seat a smidge —Vicky was taller than me. No jeans and T-shirt to meet the Council. That called for a white blouse and my one pair of dress slacks.

The drive to Montel was uneventful. The early morning traffic was miraculously light, and I was free to course down the highway while singing along to popular songs on the radio. I wished I had brought Fluffy along. She'd have enjoyed the trip.

A pang of guilt for leaving her behind made me rub my breastbone. Fluffy would be okay, right? *Right*? I almost took the closest exit to make a U-turn, but then reminded myself that Ian had assured me Fluffy was used to staying back at his house all day, and I'd left her plenty of food, water, and, against my previous vows, the door to the backyard half open.

But next time I got into the hot seat with the Council, I'd bring her for sure.

The farther I got from Olmeda and the shop, the lighter I felt, and the more air I could fit into my lungs. Poor reason for a drive, but damn excellent idea.

At one point, my phone rang with an unknown number, and I debated whether to answer it or not. Did I really want more bad news? My spirits were on the way up; why would I intentionally trample all over them? I let it go to voice mail, but when the caller rang again, I was too curious not to answer.

"It's Ian," came over the speaker.

I swerved. "How did you find my number?"

"Guess."

"I'm still mad at you."

"Okay."

He hung up. Had to give it to him—the guy knew boundaries.

When it suited him.

And if my singing became a little more enthusiastic from there on, and my chest a little less hollow, it certainly wasn't because of his call.

Montel lacked the lazy tourist charm of Olmeda, but it was beautiful on its own. Downtown was filled with a mix of old brick buildings and shiny new structures. The Council occupied one of the brick office buildings. From the outside, it looked like a library, with its wide doors inviting anyone to walk in and make themselves comfortable while perusing for their next read, but on the inside, it was all business.

The doors led into a tiny foyer guarded by a security guard.

"Council business. I have a meeting," I told her, pulling out my Council ID.

She inspected the card closely, then pointed to an elevator and a set of stairs on the right. Where did the ones on the left lead? A fake office for anyone trying to pass as a witch? A hole in the ground for those who were too nosy for their own good?

The stairs led to a proper reception area on the second floor. A man sat at a stairs-facing desk, while three witches typed at their computers behind him. Bright light flooded the room, giving it an old-style office vibe.

"What can we do for you?" the man asked without looking up.

"I'm here for a meeting with Emily Doyle."

He pointed to one side. "Through there."

I thanked him and made my way over the worn carpeting to a hallway, where it took me a few seconds to find the door with a plaque that matched the name.

"Midnight is the darkest hour," I whispered. "Good news comes at dawn.

Like the riders of Rohan." I knocked on the door.

EIGHTEEN

"Enter," came a severe voice.

I opened the door and entered a small office. Shelves in blond wood lined the side walls, filled with folders, books, and crystals, and a big window on the opposite side opened onto the front street.

A woman sat behind a desk. She was as stereotypically new-age witchy as you could get, with her salt-and-pepper hair gathered with a clip and flowing freely down her back, and a loose ombre dress that made me feel all kinds of overdressed.

I should've worn the jeans and shop's T-shirt. Marked my territory.

"Miss Avery?" At my nod, she indicated one of the two chairs in front of the desk. "Please have a seat."

Once I was seated, she pierced me with stern blue eyes.

"How are you finding your new position as a shopkeeper?"

Awesome was likely not the kind of dignified answer that would keep me on the Council's good books. "It has its difficult moments, like any career, but I'm enjoying it very much."

"Would you say it's overwhelming at times?"

Oh, yes. "Not at all, Ms. Doyle."

"But difficult?"

"Opening a new store always has its challenges."

She nodded, but I couldn't tell if it was in agreement with my words or if I'd confirmed some internal suspicion. "I see you've been diligent in sending in your weekly report."

My chest puffed out. "Of course."

"And your business model was approved without a hitch."

That was what happened when you had a manager for a sister like I did. "Yes."

"Your magic level is low compared to other shop owners, but you obtained all the related permits for selling potions."

"I've had no complaints so far."

Her brows arched. "That's not exactly true, is it?"

I scrunched my nose. "Every business gets bad reviews."

She turned her monitor my way. The Tea Cauldron's reviews were on the screen—a long list of one stars.

My mouth went dry as I leaned in to get a better view. I'd turned off notifications, and with all the dead body and dark magic shenanigans, I hadn't gotten around to check lately. This was news to me.

I noted the dates and was slightly reassured. "These were all posted the same day. Some troll is review bombing me."

Doyle returned the monitor to its original position. "Why?"

"Someone must not like new people in the neighborhood. Or hates witches. Perhaps Ms. Bagley sold them the wrong thing and they're blaming me."

"No other Council shop has had this reaction."

"I will write to the site admins and lodge a complaint," I told her with professional assurance. "I'm sure they can check that all the reviews were posted under the same IP and will remove them."

"Hmm."

She let me sweat for a few moments as she typed something on the keyboard.

"Your sales aren't what we like to see."

"They are low," I admitted, "but my clientele is growing, and once fall arrives, business will pick up."

"How would you describe yourself as a shopkeeper?"

"Friendly and helpful."

"Do you think the local magical community agrees?"

"Everyone has been happy so far." Although I still had to finish that second batch of memory potions for the pack.

"Unfortunately, that is not the case."

I sat up straight. "Excuse me?"

"We've received a complaint about the shop's services."

"What kind of complaint?"

"I can't say."

"It must be the same person who review-bombed me."

This time, her nod of acknowledgment was all about my theory. "Yes, it could be. You should still consider this meeting as a warning."

"Yes, Ms. Doyle."

"You are aware of the six-month deadline?"

"Yes." Just thinking about it made me break out in a sweat.

Six months to prove I was a viable shopkeeper or they'd give it to someone else. Less if my shop did spectacularly bad.

Could the attempts at sabotage be about trying to get me fired rather than simple petty malice? Now that I'd thought of it, the possibility was glaringly obvious.

"If I were to be replaced," I said, "who would take over the shop? The next person in line?" Whoever that was would be an excellent candidate for the saboteur.

"The lists are created anew every time a shop opens up; otherwise it wouldn't be fair."

Not that the lists were fair to begin with. Things like family status and power level always played a part in the order. Still, I'd topped one, hadn't I? Perhaps there was an amount of fairness involved.

"So if I get fired by the Council, there is no clear candidate set to inherit the shop?"

Doyle sent me an odd look. "No, Miss Avery. Whoever ended up second to you in the original list is not guaranteed to acquire the shop in case of your removal."

Asking for the names wouldn't look good, so I swallowed the question. "Thank you for explaining."

"You're welcome. Now, I see here that you got a warning from the local PBOA over some late forms."

I ground my teeth. Who filed a warning over that? Maybe Sonia was the one bent on getting me kicked. Maybe she'd been number two on the list and was now bent on petty revenge.

"It was a misunderstanding. Everything is sorted out now."

Doyle's expression hardened. "If I were you, I would avoid any other 'misunderstandings' for the foreseeable future."

I held her gaze. "Yes. I will do so."

"Good." She leaned against her chair and waved toward the door. "We're

done for now. Get your stuff together, Miss Avery. I don't want to see you again until our three-month review."

"Yes. Thank you, Ms. Doyle." I stood abruptly, eager to escape. "Have a good day."

Outside in the hallway, I sagged against the wall, relief filling me in a wave of dizziness. Not fired. Not in big trouble. No official black mark on the shop.

Yet.

Whoever wanted me fired was trying their hardest. I had to figure out who it was and put an end to it. The list might seem random, but someone obviously thought they had a good chance of getting the shop after me.

Or maybe it went beyond owning the shop. Maybe it was about the building itself. What if someone thought the building would go up on sale after Bagley's death? That might be a motive for her murder—if the evil witch was saying the truth.

Mr. Lewis, trying to expand? He didn't look like a murderer, but what did I know?

If someone wanted the building, however, all they had to do was lodge a complaint about dark magic. The Council would shut down the place in the blink of an eye and put it up for sale to recoup costs.

Unless the saboteur was unaware of the dark magic part and it was a coincidence they wanted this specific shop.

Never one to ignore a rabbit hole when I saw it, I made some inquiries about the building itself. As the Council center for the area, they kept an archive of information about all the buildings registered for magical use.

The nice man at the reception desk pointed me to an elevator that took me to the basement level. Here I had to present my Council ID again and was shown to the archives area.

It was more of a library, with its own old-fashioned indexing cabinet. The librarian spent a few minutes finding the entry for the building, then led me to the correct shelf.

"You can use the tables over there," he said. "Make sure to return this to me. Don't put it back on the shelf. We also have local newspapers' microfilm, if you want to look at old news stories related to the shop."

I'd only heard of microfilm in TV shows, but it wouldn't be a bad idea to take a look later, time permitting.

Thanking the kind man, I moved to the table he'd indicated and sat down

with my bounty—a thick folder closed by twine. I unwound the cord eagerly, opened it, and began studying the contents.

The first items were lists of Council inspections over the years. Strange that they were public knowledge, but maybe they'd been added after Bagley's death. All had passed with flying colors, of course.

Maybe that was what the cookies in the cabinet were about—spelled to mellow the Council inspectors and get them on their way with nary a bad thing to say.

There were no records of any complaints about Bagley. There were some about the owner before her, scribbled in old cursive penmanship that took me a while to decipher. A fellow Council member had lodged a complaint about lewd behavior. There were also a couple of official warnings for loud noises at night.

The Council wouldn't have liked the shop to attract the police's attention, so loud noise complaints were taken more seriously than they would otherwise. The records for the owner before that became nebulous, with a series of deed transfers and little else. It appeared every witch who had owned the shop had passed away with no witch heirs, and the building had reverted to the Council's ownership.

What that meant for my future, I didn't want to examine too closely.

Along with the warnings and contracts, there were several sets of floor plans, depicting how the shop had changed through the decades as it got modernized. I found myself fascinated by the oldest plans. When it had first been constructed, there hadn't been a kitchen on the second floor, only the one by the shop. There had been three habitable rooms on top: one for the witch, one for her student, and one for studying the craft.

I flipped the papers around but didn't find any firsthand accounts of how things had worked back then. That was too bad—I'd have loved to read a diary of some kind.

I gathered everything up and returned the papers to the folder. It hadn't taken me long to go through them, so I asked the librarian to show me how to look at the old newspapers, and he was eager to demonstrate how to use the microfilm reader. Watching the headlines sweep by took me down memory lane, and I had to stop myself from reading random articles that piqued my curiosity. Olmeda had gone through some serious crime waves in the past. Serial killers preying on tourists, strange disappearances, more serial killers

I paused as the facade of my building came into view. March 10, 1946. Local shopkeeper found dead in shop's backyard. Mysterious body disinterred nearby. Arsenic and Old Lace become reality?

The similarities with Bagley's death were so striking, my heart began to pound. According to the article, the police had inferred that the old lady had died from a heart attack while trying to bury the body of an old enemy —Loretta Clarence, medium and owner of a nearby tarot parlor.

No mentions of the body having been exsanguinated.

I kept going. October 31, 1935. *The spirits are among us—prodigal son's ghost goes on a rampage inside local shop*. There it was again, the cozy rounded windows and brick facade of the building in all its grainy black and white glory. A group of four women had attempted to contact the dead son of one of the victims and instead had attracted an evil entity who had killed one of them and mauled the other two, leaving only the shopkeeper at the time sane enough to tell the tale.

Dread building, I went back all the way to the twenties. War hero returns home to find murdered fiancée. He survived the war but lost his heart. On this occasion, the dead woman had been trying to save up for her wedding by part-timing between the shop and a secretarial pool. She'd been found dead in the lower hallway by the shop owner, still dressed in her nightgown, and rumors that she had been killed by a scorned secret lover had spread far. No such lover or exact cause of death were ever found.

I sat back, stunned.

Was I living in a witch murder house?

And how had I never heard of these? The murders had happened a while ago, but that was the kind of reputation that stuck with a building. At the very least, Vicky should've known about it—prime spooky tour territory. If the Council hadn't used dark magic to bury these events, they must've come close to it. The one in the twenties had probably been natural causes—an aneurysm bursting when the poor woman had gone to grab a glass of water or something similar. The one in the forties might've been a case of taking competition too far—witches and mediums had never gotten along well.

The one in the thirties, though. Definitely suspect.

I clicked on the up and down arrows absentmindedly, watching the pages roll back and forth. It was entirely possible I had missed other strange happenings in the previous years, but it looked like either the witches after the forties had been proper, law-abiding ones, or they'd been a lot more

careful to cover their evil deeds. Like Bagley.

Surprising, really, that only three ghosts had stuck around. Surprising, but lucky. For me.

I observed a few seconds of mental silence for the victims, then returned to the librarian.

"You're done?" he asked, disappointed. He probably didn't get many visitors down here.

"For now." I drummed my fingers on his counter. "Hmm."

"Yes?"

"If I wanted to find things a bit more gossipy about Olmeda, where would I look? The kinds of news that doesn't make it to human newspapers, if you know what I mean."

The magical community had its share of private forums, but I didn't want to be the one to ask about dark magic, and setting up an anonymous account would take ages.

"What do you need to know?" the librarian asked.

"I'm curious about the illegal side of Olmeda." I leaned in, twisting my lips into a sad arch. "I just opened my shop there and I've been hearing rumors. I'm worried."

"Ah, I see. Well, Olmeda has always been a weird place, to be honest."

I let out a chuckle. "Honesty is what I'm looking for."

He brightened at that. "There have always been rumors about dark magic and rituals, but I think those are just hearsay. It's too crowded by paranormals for there to be any high-level illegal magic ring, in my opinion. You should be fine."

"So no dark-magic enforcers will come knocking on my door demanding I pay my dues?" I asked with a grin.

"Doubt it. The pack or the PBOA would take care of them."

"You know Olmeda's PBOA?"

"Sonia comes often to do research."

How interesting. "She's nice to you?"

"Always. Brings me muffins sometimes." He winked. "I'm not above bribery."

"I'll remember for next time."

I said my goodbyes and returned to the streets. It had gotten late, so I grabbed a quick bite and started the long drive back. By the time I got anywhere near Olmeda, it was late evening, and not even the radio's happy

pop music lifted my tired spirits.

Driving alone at dusk had a way of underscoring how alone you were in life. Nobody was waiting for me to return home except for Fluffy, who wasn't mine, and the possible ghost of a goldfish.

No lover or companion, no family member.

With a heavy sigh, I turned onto a series of side roads the GPS recommended over a growing traffic issue on the highway. The glimpses of the countryside made me feel better. There was beauty in solitude. Peace.

A large mass jumped in front of the headlights.

I swerved with a curse and stomped on the brakes.

With another curse, I opened the door and stepped outside. The car had stopped at an angle, the lights illuminating a stretch of empty road surrounded by thin trees.

No, not empty.

In front of me stood a wolf as tall as my waist, gleaming yellow eyes fixed on me, mouth pulled back in a snarl. Magic wafted lightly in the air—the remains of a power surge used not long ago.

A shifter.

It launched itself at me.

NINETEEN

I JUMPED INTO THE CAR, closing the door right before the shifter slammed into it. The car shook and slid sideways.

Oh, Mother.

Hands shaking, I tried to start the car, but it flooded—of course it did.

The shifter slammed against the side again, moving the car farther into the ditch. Their head pressed into the passenger window, a savage growl filling the air.

I fished my phone from the console and scrolled to my contacts. Calling the police wasn't a good idea—Officer Brooks might not be on duty. Ian would help, no matter how at odds we were, but a shifter would mean shifter business, and his weird position with the pack might be a problem.

If this wasn't the pack trying to make me disappear.

The car shook again, making me yelp.

I needed to call the pack, but I didn't have their phone. So I dialed Dru.

"Yes?" she answered.

The shifter disappeared from view. A moment later, magic drenched the air, and a rock smashed against my window. I saw a male torso, and that was almost scarier than the hulking wolf beast.

"A shifter is attacking me." I flinched as the rock landed again. I wasn't sure what it would take to break a car window, but the man was determined.

"What?" she demanded. "Where are you?"

"Like twenty minutes outside town. Robin Creek Road, or Revel Creek, I'm not sure. The one that goes through—"

"I know where that is. Stay put."

The window shattered.

I dropped the phone and scrambled into the passenger seat. A human arm snaked through the window and tried to grab me. More magic filled the air, then a huge wolf's head was peering through the opening. His yellow eyes made me shiver, the white of his teeth beacons of carnage as he snarled again.

The shifter was big, but he *would* fit through the window. Once he did, I was done for.

I rescued my purse from under me and searched inside, adrenaline pumping through my veins like the most powerful potion. My hands seemed to move on their own, my brain lagging behind. They found my emergency freezing potion.

The shifter's growls and snarls filled the inside of the car as he squeezed more of his body through the window. Whoever this was, he packed a good punch of magic—it wasn't common for shifters to change back and forth in succession with so much ease. Shifters' transformations were fast, but jumping from one form to the other always necessitated a delay.

Unless a dark magic potion was augmenting his magic.

Was this shifter working with whoever was bent on kicking me out of the shop?

The shifter squirmed forward, his deadly claws finding purchase on the driver's seat.

Questions to ponder later.

I threw the potion at him. The thin vial broke on contact, and he hissed in anger. A second later, his body froze in place. No frost clung to it or any kind of theatrical effect. His body simply stopped moving, like I was staring into a taxidermy animal instead of a real being about to eat me.

I opened the passenger door and stumbled out of the car and into the small ditch.

My options were limited. I couldn't outrun the shifter. I didn't have another potion. My magic wasn't enough to defeat him.

But it might be able to hold him.

The car's headlights cut a harsh cone, leaving everything outside their range a pool of darkness that no longer appeared cozy and beautiful. Somewhere in my head, my brain ran a countdown of the potion's freezing timer. Already half done.

I scrambled onto the road and grabbed the stone the shifter had discarded after breaking the glass. It was big, sharp enough to scratch my fingers and

palm.

Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

No time to find a better spot. I crouched on the road and pressed my hands to the ground, then spun to my right, dragging them firmly over the grit and asphalt to form a circle around me, feeling every break in my skin and hoping they went deep enough.

Protect.

The countdown clock receded; intent filled my mind. Magic tickled in my veins. My heart soared, as if it had missed the feeling of power pouring through me, big or small, a drop or a waterfall.

Willing blood was the greatest conductor, the most powerful element—spirit, given bodily form.

The shifter slammed into my ward, and I fell on my butt, shocked out of my concentration. My magic twinkled in the air, forming a protective wall around me. Hurriedly, I got onto my knees and leaned forward, keeping my fingertips in contact with the circle.

A protective ward of this kind would not remain active without constant magic being poured into it. It would also only work against paranormals. If the shifter had a human buddy lurking around...

Cold sweat gathered under my blouse when the wolf stopped its assault to sniff near my fingertips. The need to snatch my hands away crawled under my skin, made my fingers twitch.

If I did that, I'd be done for. Dead.

This way, it'd take me at least five minutes to get murdered.

Already, the magic being pulled by the ward was waning.

I'd never lamented my lack of magic until now.

What did I care if others could make forty potions instead of ten before they had to rest? My quality was as good as theirs. Yes, at times, I'd wished I could make stronger wards, but nothing a good alarm system or security camera couldn't fix.

Now, though. Now I wished I was the most powerful witch on this side of the country.

Dying by shifter mauling was not the way I'd like to go.

The shifter growled, tested the ward again, then decided to wait me out and began to circle around me, his creepy yellow eyes never leaving my form.

Hoping he couldn't tell the difference, I throttled the magic going into the

ward. A risky move—if I was a heartbeat late in returning the ward to full power the moment he attacked, I'd be toast, but I had no choice. Magic management—a lesson every weak witch learned fast.

This might buy me a few minutes.

But buy them for what?

I'd only called Dru. What if she was the one behind everything? She had been checking up on me—being sent by Mr. Lewis could've been an excuse —and she wanted a shop. She could be a witch, for all I knew. It would have been easy for her to gain access to the Tea Cauldron and shove Bagley down the stairs.

She could be working with this shifter.

If that was the case, then I was waiting for nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Fear tasted sour in my mouth. Acrid, like the bile that threatened to run up my throat. I tracked the shifter's progress around the ward through the edge of my vision, wishing I could unload all my doubts in the form of spoken questions. A useless endeavor—he couldn't answer, and I couldn't afford the energy.

Sweat dampened my temples and the back of my neck. Every witch had a limit to their power. It wasn't something you could exercise or build over time. It wasn't a muscle that would grow if given enough attention and training. You could fine-tune the way you used it, teach it to flex faster, but it would always remain the same at its base.

The spirit was infinite, but its powers had hard limits.

Specks of my blood being mixed in the spell made it easier for my magic to fill the ward. How long it lasted was up to me.

And "me" was waning.

A whisper of intuition warned me before the shifter lunged. My magic reacted before my brain could, and the ward strengthened right in time. The hit reverberated all the way to my soul.

Mother, that had been close.

The shifter snarled and resumed its pacing. I lessened the outpour of magic, but I wasn't sure how much I had left in me. My arms and back were feeling the strain of the forward-leaning position, my hamstrings felt tight, and my right foot twitched with the beginning of a spasm.

If the shifter resumed constant attacks, I wouldn't last a minute.

What would Grandma have done in my place? She would've remained calm and gotten the car started, instead of panicking like a ninny. She would be back in town, talk to the—

The shifter slammed into the ward. One of his paws made it through, leaving a scratch on the asphalt right through my ward. I moved instinctually, sweeping my fingers over the break.

The barrier held. Barely.

I shook my head, trying to clear any errant thoughts. I couldn't afford to lose my focus.

Woman vs. shifter. Someone should make that show—

Another slam. Panicked, I pushed all my magic into the ward.

Big mistake. Huge mistake.

The shifter's hind legs bunched, ready to launch himself again, and all I could do was watch.

This was it. That had been the last of my magic. I was hollow, empty. Finished. The only thing keeping me upright was my muscles locked in place.

Another wolf slammed into the shifter.

They went rolling over the road. A second wolf appeared, a third. They surrounded my attacker, growling low as he snarled at them. They were all different shades of gray and brown, slightly smaller than the one wolf, but scary nonetheless.

They were the most beautiful sight in the world.

The bigger wolf snapped at the others, trying to assert domination. The other three growled in response, uncaring of his attempts.

My hamstrings gave up, and I sat back, ankles protesting at the weight and the angle, arms falling freely to my sides. A sheen of perspiration covered my forehead and neck, but I didn't have the energy to wipe it off. Adrenaline still filled my veins, my heart making a valiant effort to keep pumping. My lungs chose to reawaken at that moment, and I took in big gulps of air. My body was trying to react to the sudden lack of danger, and it had no clue which part should return to working properly in which order.

The big shifter, realizing that the other wolves were pinning him in place, went in for the attack. It tried to bite the smallest wolf in the neck, but the wolf moved back in time. The other two jumped at the big wolf, clamping their jaws onto his sides. He snarled in pain and tried to dislodge them, opening up his neck to the smaller wolf. They didn't miss the opportunity.

I closed my eyes, still too exhausted to look away. Growls and whines and the sounds of thrashing filled my ears. A car approached, and I dug deep

inside to twist my neck. A pickup truck braked right behind me, its powerful headlights illuminating the area. I blinked and lifted a hand to shade my eyes.

Look at that, my arms were working again!

Hutton stepped out on the passenger's side. He walked up to me, his mouth set in a tight line, and studied the asphalt surrounding me.

"The shifter attacked you?"

"Yes," I croaked.

He moved to where my attacker lay limp on the asphalt, its gray fur matted with blood. I swallowed compulsively. Shifter justice was swift and not to be messed with.

The three pack shifters moved away, waiting to hear from their alpha.

He examined the dead wolf for a few seconds. "Not one of ours." He jerked his head toward the way they'd come. "Go back."

The three shifters barked once in acknowledgment and moved along the road, trotting by me and the pickup truck.

Hutton followed them, reaching for the truck's door.

"Wait," I said.

"What?"

"You can't leave him there." I pleaded, forcing my dry throat to work.

His scowl deepened. "Right."

He ducked into the cab and said something. The driver's door opened and a man I'd never seen before stepped out. Without a word, the two dragged the dead wolf to the side of the road.

Not exactly what I had in mind, but it'd have to do. Not like I was in a position to complain.

Another car approached. Ian's SUV came to a screeching halt right behind the pickup truck.

And my body turned into jelly all over again.

The SUV doors opened. Ian and Shane stepped out, the stray surveying our surroundings with a sharp eye. Through the windshield, I could see a big, furry form sitting in the back seat. Another shifter? No—Rufus.

Ian approached as Hutton and his shifter walked to their truck. The shifter acknowledged Ian with a small nod. Hutton and Ian might as well have been walking in different dimensions for all the attention they paid each other.

The slams of the truck's doors jolted me. They backed it by the SUV, then made a rough Y-turn and drove toward town.

Ian crouched in front of me and studied me intently. There was something

still surreal about the whole situation.

Had I really been attacked by a shifter?

Had I really almost died?

"Can you stand?" he asked curtly.

Slowly, I got to my feet. Intense pins and needles pricked at my legs. Wobbly, but I remained upright. I gave him a bright smile. "Yes."

He didn't smile back. "Keys?"

I blinked in confusion. "In the ignition."

"Shane," he bit out.

"On it, boss."

The stray got into the car. It started on the third try, which made me feel better and gave me renewed strength. Not enough to drive myself, but I would get there eventually.

"He'll drive it back," Ian said.

"But the window..."

"We know a guy. He'll fix it tomorrow."

I bit my lip. "Okay. Oh, wait!" I hurried to the car and reached inside. "My phone."

Shane passed me my phone and purse, then waited for me to step aside before driving off.

"The shifter?" Ian asked.

I pointed to the side of the road. He walked over and stared at the dead wolf for a few moments before returning to his SUV. He stood by the driver's side, his face carved in stone. Sighing, I moved to the passenger side, threw my purse in, and hesitated.

"What is it?" he asked.

I looked at my scratched palms and fingers. "My hands are dirty. I'll mess up your car."

Without a word, he opened the trunk of the SUV and rummaged inside, then brought out a small bottle of water and a towel. After instructing me to extend my hands, he poured the water over my palms.

I winced at the sting, then jolted when he took a hold of one hand and wiped it with the towel. His touch was gentle, and I blinked away a sudden pressure behind my eyes.

When he was done, he examined the scratches and cuts under the interior light of the SUV, deemed them fine, and returned the bottle and towel to the trunk.

Left to my own devices, I got inside. Only by the strength of pure conviction did I make it up into the car without the need of dark magic. My muscles ached as if I'd just completed a marathon session at the gym.

Ian started the car, made an elegant turn, and then we were driving back. In absolute silence.

The kind that weighed on your shoulders and slowly squeezed the life out of your lungs.

TWENTY

"Hello, Rufus," I told the dog before I asphyxiated.

Rufus woofed sharply.

Ian's expression was still made of stone, his hands curled tight around the steering wheel.

"Dru called you?" I guessed.

"How much magic did you spend?"

Surprised the change of topic hadn't swerved the SUV right into the ditch, I said, "Uhm. A lot."

"Shouldn't you be too tired to speak?"

That was blunt, even for Ian. I glanced back at Rufus. He looked as grouchy as his owner.

We're still mad at him, I reminded myself. I checked that my phone had survived the experience, then called Dru.

"Hope?" she asked in a terse voice.

"The one and only." Glaring at Ian, I rubbed the slight ache in my chest.

"You're okay?"

"Yes. You called Hutton?"

Ian didn't react to the name of his half brother.

Right now, I doubted he'd react to anything but the imminent destruction of the world via a giant meteorite.

"You're right outside their territory," Dru said.

"And then you called Ian?"

The man, again, showed no reaction to his name being brought up.

"Yes." There was a slight *duh* quality to Dru's answer, but I saw nothing obvious about it. Why call Ian after calling the pack? Had she guessed the

pack would simply take care of the attacker, then leave me in the lurch?

"Thank you."

"Are you on your way back?"

"Ian's driving me home."

"Talk to you later, then. Glad you're okay."

"Me too," I told her, feeling guilty for all my earlier doubts.

Silence filled the car again, growing heavier by the moment.

"You think they killed the shifter?" The whole thing still seemed like a strange dream.

"Yes."

"You didn't check."

"They wouldn't have left it by the side of the road if it was alive."

"It was a man. Huge."

"He transformed in front of you?" A hint of surprise broke through the emotionless tone he'd kept up so far.

"He jumped as a wolf in front of the car. At first, I thought it was a wild animal, so I went out to investigate, but when I realized it was a shifter, I got back inside the car."

"And then?"

"He shifted to human form to break the car window, then shifted again."

"Dark magic," he guessed.

"Could he have been the one who killed Bagley?"

"Now we'll never know," he said with some reproach.

As if it was my fault the pack had killed the shifter before anyone could interrogate him. "I guess we'll know if things go back to normal, and people stop trying to get me fired."

"Or killed."

A shiver ran down my spine. Or killed.

"Sorry for snapping," he said.

I felt his forehead.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, swatting my hand away.

"Checking for a fever. Big, bad alphas never apologize."

"Then they won't get far. I am many things," he said darkly. "But not feverish."

No, he wasn't. He was angry. Now that his impassive facade had cracked, I recognized the ire simmering below the surface. Ire because I'd been attacked, or because he'd been the last one to be informed of the fact? Or

perhaps because he'd been forced to get involved at all.

That last option didn't ring true. I hadn't known him long, but it was obvious nobody could force him to do anything. If he hadn't wanted to get involved, he would still be home, watching the stars or whatever it was he did before bedtime.

Thinking of Ian and bedtime was a tempting trail of thought; unfortunately, I was still numb by everything that had happened to follow that path. As much as my brain wanted the distraction, my whole being was stuck.

"They killed him so fast," I whispered. "Nobody was bothered by it."

"He attacked first."

"But still..."

"Your first time seeing death?"

My answer was barely audible. "Yes."

He didn't pat my knee or tell me it got better, or say that the shifter was an awful person who had attempted to maul me so he got what was coming. For some reason, it settled my spirits, this silent acknowledgment that death was horrible and could come at any time. That I wasn't being weird for finding everything awful and didn't need to be told stories to make me feel better. That I should feel this way. I should feel it and process it and come out on the other side with whatever conclusion I arrived at. Mine and not someone else's.

How many people had he been forced to kill during his bounty hunter career? His response to the whole situation told me he was familiar with the act, and I hoped not a lot. This attack had left me killing-adjacent, and it was weighing heavily on my soul. To be directly responsible? That thing would need some serious buoyancy devices.

Grandma's diary didn't mention bounty-hunting murder rates, and neither had the Council's archives. It wasn't the kind of thing you asked someone, but I couldn't help be curious about it. It was human nature.

"Why would anyone attack me out in the open?" I asked. "How did he know where to find me? You think it was random?"

"Not random." He tapped the wheel. "Someone must've followed you. Where did you go, anyway?"

"I had a meeting with the Council at Montel."

"The shop?"

"What else?" I asked dryly.

"Good news or bad news?"

"Something news."

His lips twitched. "You still have the shop?"

"Yes."

He grunted as if to say, then that's all that matters.

"Live to fight another day?" I asked lightly.

"In your case, basic survival seems more apt."

"Ha-ha." I grew serious again. "If he was following me, why choose to attack me so close to the shifters?"

"If he was following you, he probably was told you haven't grown roots with the pack yet."

"You think he was following me that long?" I asked, surprised and a little horrified. The thought of some stranger lurking outside the shop spying on my every move was deeply unsettling.

"No. I think he was a hitman and someone else has been watching you. When they saw you leave for a trip, they saw an opportunity."

Being watched by a non-hitman stranger didn't make the idea any easier to swallow. "Two murders back-to-back in the shop would've raised suspicion."

"Yes."

"Are there many? Hitmen?"

His jaw hardened. "A few."

What else were evil mages and other mean paranormals supposed to do with their powers, I supposed. "You've caught a lot?"

"A few."

A wall of sheer rock would've been softer than his tone. Hitmen were definitely not his thing. "Did you find anything about the dead man?"

"My friend is going through missing cases reports. He'll let me know if he finds something."

"My attack and Bagley's death might be unconnected. Someone might be trying to stir trouble with the pack. The Council wouldn't be happy if a shifter had killed me right outside pack territory. It might have nothing to do with the shop."

"It's a possibility," he admitted.

"I think I'd almost prefer it if it's related to the shop sabotage," I said with a shiver. "Being the target of two different conspiracies is going to keep me up at night."

"The shop doesn't have an alarm system?"

"It has wards." I paused. "Mine."

"Uh oh."

"Hey, now," I exclaimed with mock outrage.

A slow smile spread his lips. "We can install an alarm system for you."

"I can't afford it yet."

"We can talk payment plans."

Having an alarm system in the shop felt constrictive, like I shouldn't need it if the owner before me hadn't either. But then that owner had been an evil dark witch. I was a helpless baby in comparison.

"I'll think about it."

"Where's Fluffy?"

Rufus whined softly, as if he missed his buddy. I commiserated—the thought of the little happy dog waiting for me at home infused me with warmth and hope for the future.

"She's home. I left her a mountain of food and several bowls of water."

"I'm not cleaning your floors for free."

I laughed. "Hopefully, she was a good girl."

We arrived at Olmeda proper, and Ian had to slow down for the Friday night club-goers that spilled into the streets during the weekends.

"How many people do you think Bagley killed before someone offed her?" I asked.

"How many spells could she do with the blood of one body?"

"Forget I asked." The possible number brought up another question. "How come nobody noticed? Even if she only killed a person every three of four years, that forms a pattern over time."

"Long enough between murders for nobody to notice, especially if she didn't maintain a type. People go missing all the time, and if the body didn't turn up anywhere... Besides, looks like she killed paranormals, who tend to keep a low profile."

"The community would've missed them easier than the general public," I pointed out.

"Not if they were transient or dealt with the illegal side."

The thought the man in the tub might've been a bad guy made me feel somewhat better. The thought that the backyard was the only place in the house one could use to make bodies disappear, not so much.

But the backyard wasn't that big, to begin with, and making holes took

considerable time and effort. No, it'd be easier to bring a car to the alleyway and drag a body into the trunk in the middle of the night, then drive them somewhere else unconnected to the shop.

"How would I go about making sure there are no bodies buried in the backyard?" I asked casually.

"You dig it up."

"I was thinking of those fancy ground-penetrating radars. Maybe I can rent one somewhere."

"You can't afford furniture. Or an alarm," he reminded me.

He was right. "Fine. I'm sure Fluffy would've noticed if there were bodies buried in my backyard."

"Fluffy lives in a cemetery."

I eyed him warily. "You're enjoying this, aren't you? The thought of me staying up all night thinking about corpses in my backyard is making you all tingly with happiness."

He spared me a glance. His lips pursed. "No."

What an awful liar. Ignoring the satisfaction pouring out of him, I called Vicky.

"Hope? Is everything all right?" She sounded eager and breathless, and I hoped I hadn't interrupted one of her tours. The clock on the dashboard told me I probably had.

"Sorry for calling this late. Just wanted to let you know I made it safely but had a small scuff on the way."

"Oh, no! Are you okay?"

"Yeah, everything is fine. A friend of a friend is checking out the car, so I'll have it ready for you at some point tomorrow. I'm sorry."

"No worries. I'm sure it wasn't your fault. Glad you're okay. Listen, I need to go—I have a tour waiting."

"Of course. Talk to you tomorrow?"

"Sure thing."

She cut the connection, and I felt like someone had slammed a door in my face. It wasn't her fault. She had a job to do. I'm sure I hadn't been exactly talkative whenever someone called me in the middle of my shifts.

"Is your friend mad?" Ian asked.

"Nah. Busy." I would need to wake up early and go to Fairy Circle Cakes to restock on cookies and buy whatever expensive cupcakes Lucy had on sale as a peace offering. Did *sorry I trashed your car*, *but it's all fixed now* fit on

one of those tiny chocolate disks to put on top?

"Hutton will want to talk to you about the shifter," Ian said.

"I didn't see his face. Just the wolf form and his torso when he shifted back."

"He'll be interested in that too." There was a note of warning in his voice.

"You think he'll think someone is dealing with dark magic in town?"

"Logical assumption. But he's not dumb. He'll also be aware the shifter came from another town and him bringing his potions along is likely."

If I wasn't mistaken, there was a hint of pride in his voice. A big brother's pride over his little brother's prowess? Adorable.

Ian must've gotten over whatever had irked him earlier—me not having called him or him being the last to know about the shifter attack—and was letting the stone mask slip here and there. The knowledge left me with a sense of contentment at odds with how unsettling the whole day had been.

We were no longer mad at him, I decided.

"What color is your wolf?" I asked, lulled by the closeness inside the car into asking things that seemed suddenly intimate. I licked my dry lips and added, "Aren't Rufus and Fluffy scared of you when you shift?"

"No."

The word was dropped with the subtlety of an iron pan on iron burners. Too late, I remembered Dru mentioning rumors about him never shifting. First rule of the magical community: don't ask about people's paranormal side if you want to keep doors open.

Ian didn't look like he wanted to close the one between us and add a few extra bolts, but the grim line of his mouth told me whatever easy companionship we had found on the drive had taken a back seat to his issues with the shifters.

My curiosity could wait.

Fluffy was a flurry of happy yips and jumps when we went into the shop. She dutifully offered her attentions to Ian first, and once he had given her a proper hello, she transferred all her energy to greeting me.

"Do you want her back?" I asked while being slobbered by wet kisses.

"Keep her a little longer," he said easily. "I think she likes you more than me."

"Who wouldn't?"

He snorted a laugh and left the shop.

I hurried to wipe my face, then grabbed Fluffy's leash and harness and

the dog-walking bag Ian had left behind. "Let's get you out of here for a bit, Fluffy."

She was all too happy to oblige.

The streets were lively this late at night, even a few blocks away from the bars and clubs. It made for a wonderfully energetic atmosphere, and I allowed it to fill me and replace the unease and worries plaguing me. My hands stopped shaking every so often at the memories of the shifter attack, and Fluffy's comforting presence and curiosity about everything in our path was a welcome distraction.

By the time we got to the shop, I didn't even mind if the backyard was filled with bodies. Their souls would be gone now, and they would make for great fertilizer. At some point, they might make for decent grave dirt.

I hummed, buzzing through my second wind, and checked the floors to make sure Fluffy hadn't left a present in the shop. It'd felt mean to constrict her to the upstairs for the whole day.

"You stink of adrenaline," a familiar grandmotherly voice intoned. "And you're all dirty. What the heck happened to you?"

TWENTY-ONE

I SPUN, looking for the source of the voice.

"Ms. Bagley?"

"Who else, child?"

It came from the shelves behind the counter. "You're still alive?"

A heavy sigh permeated the air.

"You're uh, still here?" I corrected myself.

"As the day I was born. I imagine."

The witch was talking from a cute black cauldron decorating one of the top shelves by the specials blackboard.

"Oh, no," I groaned. "That's my favorite cauldron."

"Should've moved it upstairs, then," she said with an evil cackle.

Maybe I could hang it outside before Ian discovered it. If she talked in the street, people would think it a speaker for gimmicks.

"Now, tell me what happened," she coaxed.

"No." I turned, ready to leave, but something she'd said made me pause. "You can smell?"

"Tell me what happened and maybe I'll answer."

This. This was what Ian had warned me about. Give a hand, and she'd take an arm. She'd figure out how to ingratiate herself into my good graces, and next thing I knew, I'd be finishing that spell for her to take mobile corporeal form.

Still, talking to the witch could be of some use, as long as I kept the downfalls in mind. The more I learned about her dark deeds, the more prepared I would be to deal with her clients.

"A shifter attacked me on the way home," I said. "Was that who killed

you?"

"How would I know? They pushed me from behind."

Like I was going to believe that.

"Now, tell me, dear, did you use blood magic?" She made no ghostly effort to hide her eagerness.

"I put up a ward around me."

"And then you killed the shifter?" If she had a body, her eyes would've been filled with gleeful stars.

"And then the pack arrived and took care of business."

"Oh, jay-eff-cee. What kind of newbie did they leave my shop to?"

I switched off the lights and went upstairs. The witch's mutterings about the doomed fate of the witches' world receded into the distance.

Why couldn't I have gotten stuck with a nice, good witch instead of the devil's spawn?

Loud chirping woke me up early in the morning. At first, I thought ghost birds had taken over the bedroom, and I was halfway making plans to move the bed into the living room when my sluggish brain caught up with the fact it was my phone ringing.

My eyelids were so heavy I could barely read the screen. 6 a.m.

"Yes?" My jaw split into a huge yawn. "Who is this?"

"You know who I am," intoned a deep voice one hair away from theater melodrama.

I sat up straight. "Mage?"

"I have a name, witch," he snarled.

Holding my breath, I waited for the telltale cackle of thunder outside. Only early morning silence. Excellent. At least he wouldn't burn up the house. "I have no idea what your name is."

"Brimstone and Destruction."

"Brimmy Dee?"

There was a pause. "Mage will suffice for now."

I rubbed my eyes and yawned again. "What can I do for you, Mage?"

"I need my potion today."

That cleared the rest of the cobwebs in my brain. Between the road trip

and the shifter attack, I'd forgotten about his dark magic request. "Today? I haven't got the—"

"Today."

Ah, Mother, what bad luck.

"We close on Saturdays," I lied.

"I don't care. I will come at three. Be ready, witch. And wait until I'm there to make it."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't trust you. I want to know you aren't giving me another bullshit potion. I want to see it done in person."

"That's not how things work."

"It is now." His voice turned dark and sly. Slick like oil. "If you don't, I would have to make sure everyone knows your wares aren't up to par. Who knows, the warning might even reach the Council, and we wouldn't want that, would we?"

We most definitely wouldn't. The complaints, the review bombing, my friction with the PBOA, and a rumor that I'd sold faulty dark magic on top of that? I'd be lucky not to end up in a windowless room, waiting for serious interrogation.

I'd never see the inside of a shop again, never mind getting to open my own.

My dreams would've been wasted. Grandma's. Might as well give up witchcraft and go back to the information management degree I'd abandoned.

The idea hollowed me, leached the color out of the world.

"Didn't think so," the mage said. "See you at three."

He cut the call, but it took me a few minutes to snap out of the dreary vision of my future.

"Play to your strengths, no matter how silly they might seem, and you will reap the reward," I announced to the world.

The words filled me with renewed strength, and I got up from bed. I was a doer by nature, so I would do. Taking Grandma's spellbook with me, I went into the kitchen and grabbed a soda. Once I'd taken a few rejuvenating sips, I sat on the table and began reading the spellbook from page one.

Unfortunately, Grandma's wise voice and spells gave me no insight into how to fool someone into believing they'd consumed dark magic.

A loud motorbike speeding through the alleyway broke my concentration. With dismay, I noticed it was already close to eight. My back hurt from

hunching over the spellbook for so long, and my hands and arms ached from the strain put on them the night before.

By my side, Fluffy waited patiently for her turn.

"Aw," I said, standing and stretching. "You're such a good girl. C'mon, let's go for a walk."

Fluffy was ecstatic to see me grab her leash and harness, and followed me downstairs, tail wagging at Mach speed.

Dru caught up as I used the back gate. Going out of the front of the shop in one of my ratty T-shirts, old sweatpants, and flip-flops wasn't a good look.

"You're going out?" she asked.

"Taking Fluffy out for a walk before opening."

Fluffy sniffed Dru's shoes, then gave a happy bark.

"Is that Ian's dog?" she asked, clearly shocked. Warily, she bent to pat Fluffy on the head.

"She's staying with me for a few days. Her goodness is cleansing my house."

"You think the corpse won't return if she's around? Or does that mean Ian gave you the dirt?"

I blinked, my brain working to decipher her words. Then it hit me—she wasn't aware that I'd done the spell, freed the trapped soul, and everything that had come afterward.

"He did. The lost soul is gone."

Her lips pursed, and I felt guilty for not updating her on the corpse situation. Then I reminded myself that until I figured out who was trying to sabotage the shop and had sent the shifter after me, everyone was a suspect.

Dru fell into step by my side as we walked Fluffy through the empty streets.

"What happened with the shifter last night?" she asked.

"Ian didn't tell you?"

"He didn't answer the phone."

For some reason, that made me happy. Not that I had any guarantee he'd answer mine—I'd yet to call him first. To make sure I stayed on this high ground, I would simply never call him.

"And the pack?" I asked.

She snorted. "They only answer to themselves."

"Packs, am I right?"

"You sound very perky today for having been attacked by a shifter

yesterday." The pursing of lips returned. "Or were you lying?"

"Not lying at all. The shifter was massive." I opened my arms wide. "This big." Fluffy thought it was a new game and began jumping, trying to paw at my arms.

"God save us," Dru muttered.

"I'm serious. He was bigger than the three pack shifters that came to my rescue. Ian thinks it was a hitman."

"What happened to him?"

"The bottom of the ditch."

She winced. "Derek Hutton doesn't like shifters creating trouble near his territory."

I wondered if Bagley had been the same way—offing anyone who came sniffing around her business. Oh, no. What if she'd killed a member of the pack in the past? I did not need their alpha coming after me on top of everything else.

"Why would anyone want to hurt you?" Dru asked. "You're new here. You think it was personal?" There was doubt in the question. In her estimation, I clearly didn't have the guts to do something worth killing for.

It should be insulting, but what can I say? She was right. "I think someone's trying to sabotage the shop. They've been review bombing me and lodging complaints to the Council."

"Murder seems a step too far."

"Perhaps they didn't mean for the shifter to go that far. Maybe he only wanted to scare me out of town."

"Clearly, they don't know you."

"I am new here after all. Takes a while to appreciate my deeper qualities."

"Or maybe they've already guessed them and are trying to avoid a catastrophe by running you out of town."

"I can't tell if you're trying to insult me or not."

She smirked. "Don't let it keep you up at night. Why would anyone want the shop to go to someone else? Whoever was after you on the list?"

"That's not how it works. If I give up the shop—or they take it from me—it'll go to someone at random. As random as the Council can be," I clarified at the roll of her eyes. Was Dru a witch, familiar with the Council's ways? I itched to ask, but I didn't want to get on her bad side if she was innocent in all this.

Ian was a great ally, but I couldn't depend on him forever. I needed more

friends in the magical community. If Dru was becoming one of them, I couldn't afford to piss her off with nosy questions about her paranormal side.

"Do you have any idea how you're going to find out who sent the shifter?" she asked.

"It could've been the shifter himself."

"Wouldn't that be neat?"

"Too neat?"

"You tell me."

The suspicion was back in her voice, so I shrugged in a noncommittal way. "I'm hopeful, but then, I live on hope and good vibes."

Dru gave me one of her best disgusted looks and turned toward Mr. Lewis's shop. I followed a few minutes later and got the Tea Cauldron ready to open.

Weekends saw an uptick in customers around these parts, my shop included, so I found myself busy most of the morning. Whenever there was a lull, I sneaked a few minutes of research on the laptop about different—legal —spells that would satisfy the mage. Brimstone and Destruction. I harrumphed. The man needed a better moniker. Something snappier, like Worldender, or Firesoul.

"Why so studious?" Bagley asked during one of these moments of solitude. "Are you searching for something?"

"A spell to satisfy one of your old customers," I muttered.

"Which?" she asked eagerly.

"The mage."

"Which one?"

I hung my head in despair. I still hadn't gotten around to looking into her ledger and its code, with the Council meeting, almost mauling, and all, but I clearly needed to move it up the list of things to do.

"Brimstone and—"

"Brimmy," she exclaimed, and I felt sick at her use of the same nickname I'd given him earlier. "I miss that boy."

When I ignored her and went back to my research, she said, "Ah, girl, do a little dark magic and send him on his way. What could it hurt? I'm sure you kept some of my vials. A smart girl like you wouldn't have destroyed everything."

"One." I lifted a finger. "I'm not going to do dark magic. It's repulsive and wrong and shame on you. And two." My hand was now a victory sign. "I

destroyed everything and would destroy you if I could."

"You don't mean that." She sounded outraged.

"You're right. I would free your soul right into Hell, where you belong." I'd also have to do some deep research about that. How to detach souls from houses and force her to move on.

She harrumphed. "You don't believe in Hell."

"And yet the proof is right here."

A cackle echoed in the room. "You could leave town. No need to worry about me or mages asking for dark magic."

"I'm not a quitter," I told her brightly. "Are you going to tell me who's behind the sabotage? Who murdered you?"

"I will tell you everything you want if you finish the spell or—" A sharp inhalation of delight cracked the air. "Put me into a new body. Oh, my. Yes, let's do that."

"Or I could destroy you permanently instead." The thought made me incredibly cheerful.

"Forcing me to move on is beyond your capabilities. Unless you use dark magic," she added slyly. "Isn't it tempting?"

"I'll hire someone."

"They might tell the Council, and then the Council will shut down the shop for investigation." She tsk-tsked in disappointment. "Wouldn't want those vultures picking around, would you? They'll blame you for everything."

"You'd still be gone," I pointed out gleefully.

"And what a loss that would be! Think about it, dear. All the knowledge I could give you, if only you'd listen to reason."

I stood and grabbed the cauldron. "Mom did always say I am an extremely unreasonable child."

"Now, child, what are you—"

Her voice cut off as I stepped through the archway into the back. Since I had no way of knowing if she was faking it—or if she was aware of everything even though she couldn't talk outside the shop—I moved her out into the backyard and set her on the fire pit. Perfect.

On my way back, I decided to check on Fluffy upstairs. She showered me with affection, then barked happily when I threw one of her new toys—a knotted-up old T-shirt—across the empty living room. As she made the trip to retrieve it and we repeated the process a couple of times, I thought about

the problem at hand.

The mage—calling him Brimmy made bile rise in my throat—wanted his potion, and he wanted it done in front of him. He was obviously aware of how dark magic potions were made, and that included unwilling blood.

No way around that.

Could I use my own blood just for show? Cutting myself to extract enough blood to satisfy the mage's expectations wasn't exactly enticing, but the thought of him burning the place down or reporting me to the Council was a lot less palatable.

I left Fluffy and returned to the blessed silence of the shop. If I was lucky, the witch would remain in the cauldron. Realistically speaking, though, the witch was tethered to the shop room itself, which meant that her spirit would eventually snap back into some other item inside, just like Ian breaking the glass hadn't worked in the long run.

Dark magic and blood.

A genius idea started forming in my mind. Full of excitement, I flipped the open sign to closed and called Vicky.

TWENTY-TWO

"Fake blood?" Vicky asked blankly.

"The kind they use at movies and attractions," I said. "You used to work at some kind of haunted house, right?"

"Yeah, but... why?"

"Oh, and it needs to be edible."

"Edible?" she repeated, as if she was considering checking the caller ID to make extra sure it was really me calling.

"I had a great idea for a Halloween item." I projected as much innocent excitement as possible. "I want to test it."

"Ah!" The relief in her voice was palpable. "I see now. Fake blood. You want to make cookie frosting or something like that?"

"That won't work. It needs to look like real blood. But not anything that might poison anyone."

She chuckled. "Yeah, not good for business."

"Exactly. Can you help?"

She fell silent for a few moments. "Yes. I think I know the place. There's a shop in town where Jim—that's the guy who owns the haunted house—gets all the supplies for his actors."

I checked the clock on the wall. Plenty of time until the mage's deadline. "Great. Give me the address?"

"Do you one better," she said. "I'll be there in five and take you there."

"Your, ah, car isn't ready yet." Peeking through the windows, I noticed Shane on the other side of the street, talking to a couple. Coincidence, or had Ian told him to keep tabs on me and the shop in case anyone else attacked me out of the blue?

"Oh, don't worry," Vicky said. "We can walk there."

True to her word, she was at the shop five minutes to the second. When I asked her if we could take Fluffy along, her face scrunched with comedic reluctance, but she agreed.

I locked up, and we made our way through the busy street. It was packed with tourists of all kinds and ages, dressed in shorts and long, flowing dresses for the hot summer morning, and I felt a pang of regret at missing out on so many potential clients.

Better than the alternative.

"How was your trip?" Vicky asked, walking opposite the furry ball of excitement that was Fluffy.

"It was great. Sorry about scuffing your car." No insurance, which meant I was going to have to pay for the window in full. I hoped Ian's friend would give him a buddies' discount.

"It was nothing major, right?" she asked.

"Yeah, nothing bad."

"Then don't worry about it. The important part is that you didn't get pulled over by the police or anything like that."

That would've been such a lovely cherry on top of the day that I shuddered at the possibility. "Tell me about the haunted house."

"It's amazing," she gushed. "It's one of the Three Sisters, the one on the left, and they do a theme per room. It's like taking a tour through a Gothic mansion with added jump scares. Last year I was the ghost of a local Victorian lady strangled by her husband, then buried behind the wall of the bedroom." Her voice lowered into a dramatic whisper. "Except she wasn't actually dead, and when she woke up she couldn't get out—they even found scratches on the inside of the drywall—and now she spends her death clanging the walls and walking around the house, weeping."

"Jesus."

"It was great! I hid inside the wardrobe in one of the bedrooms and jumped out when a group of visitors walked past. Scared the shit out of them."

I swallowed hard. "No kidding."

"Year before that I got stuck doing the window scare."

"The window scare?"

"I put on a ghost sheet thing and rattle the windows and go—boo!"

She accompanied her sudden shout with a flash of her hands. I screeched,

leaping sideways and almost trampling Fluffy.

Vicky burst out laughing. I put my hands on my chest, as if that would stop my heart and soul from escaping through my throat.

"I think you just killed me," I said, voice faint.

"I'm good at what I do," she said proudly.

I was never *ever* going to that haunted house. "Give me the address so I can stay far away."

She laughed again. "I love it. It pays great too. Jim's a great guy."

We started moving again. I glanced over my shoulder but didn't see Shane. If he had followed us, there were too many people for me to pick him out.

I wasn't sure how I felt about the possibility that Ian might've told his strays to stick with me. Glad that he thought I might be still in danger and might need help? Or annoyed he didn't think I could defend myself?

The latter was clearly a pride problem. Who was I kidding? I couldn't defend myself from a fly.

"There used to be another haunted place," Vicky was saying. "But they only paid me to mention them on my spooky tours. They went out of business a couple of years ago." Glee edged her declaration—place must've paid really badly.

"Sounds like Olmeda gets pretty fun for Halloween."

"Halloween, and Christmas, and New Years, and anything we can put a spin on."

The thought of so much celebrating made me feel all fuzzy inside. Olmeda would always have something going on, something to look forward to. It suited me, I thought. It filled me with an eagerness to get started planning special events.

"Do you ever go by my shop when you do your spooky tours?" I asked.

Her brows dipped into a frown. "No, why?"

"You never heard of anything odd about the building?"

"No. Never. Do you want me to look into it?"

I weighed what the extra clientele being part of the spooky tours would bring me against the reputation for being a ghoulish place. Not a decision I could make in the moment. "Don't worry about it. I was just curious."

After a few blocks, we came to a shop with various costumes in the show window—a pirate, a maid, a fairy—all meant to impress with their exaggerated pieces of clothing and flashy colors.

"Nice," I said, admiring the fabrics. Did they have a witch one? It might be worth investing in one for Halloween. Perhaps they rented?

"Let's go in," Vicky said. She started to push the door open.

I peeked through the glass. Sonia stood behind the counter. I grabbed Vicky's arm and pulled her back.

"What?" she asked in confusion.

Shuffling backward, I dragged Vicky out of sight. "I can't go in there."

She blinked repeatedly. "Why not?"

"The woman behind the counter doesn't like me."

Her gaze flicked to the windows. "Sonia? Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"But she's always been so nice. She owns the store, you know. Jim is half in love with her."

Just like everyone had loved Bagley. The comparison made me itch with suspicion. As head of PBOA, Sonia might've known what the old witch was up to, might've struck some kind of deal to keep quiet—or even taken part in the dark magic potions business. She might've had plans for the shop, contacts in high places in the Council to make the shop hers.

And now, I was in her way.

"Is there another place we can go?" I asked, hopeful.

"This is the only shop around." Vicky bit her lip, then her face brightened. "I'll go in alone. Wait here."

Before I could answer, she had slipped inside the shop. She returned a few minutes later, looking crestfallen. "She's out of stock. Ordered more, but it's going to be a week, at least."

In a week, I'd be long-forgotten specks of ash.

"You can't wait that long?" Vicky guessed.

"I need to do it today. Otherwise, I might not get my plans done in time," I improvised. After a moment of thinking about it, I took out my phone. "Plan B."

Vicky huddled close to look at the screen. "Plan B?"

"If we can't buy 'em, we'll make 'em."

Sure enough, the internet was full of fake blood recipes for Halloween candy decorations.

"Amazing," Vicky breathed.

Glad she thought so, I settled on one that required the fewest exoticsounding ingredients. We made our way back via a grocery store, and a long walk later we were standing in the ground floor kitchen, unpacking the bag of supplies.

I tried not to think of all the horrid potions that might've been made on top of the counters. Spelling my own here was going to suck. I'd have to ask Ian to send Shane and Alex to super-wash this room too. Maybe cover the counters with a plastic sheet.

Vicky inspected the kitchen closely as I worked on not messing up the instructions.

"It looks so similar, but different," she said with some awe, touching the wall. "Looks like they repainted the walls."

Probably because blood was hard to wash off. "Would Ms. Bagley approve?"

"No chance. The old lady had a fondness for this kitchen. Said you could feel the weight of history in it."

I eyed the old tiles that formed the backsplash. The wall paint might be new, but the grout was not. It had yellowed with age and dark spots speckled it liberally. I wondered how much Ian would charge to redo the whole thing.

"How was it working for her?" I asked.

"Not bad. I didn't do many shifts, honestly. One here and there when she had to go out for business. That's what she told me, anyway. I think she was getting old and couldn't keep up with the shop but was too prideful to admit it."

Going out to do some business was right. The old witch had dragged a body up to the bathtub. Help or no help, she'd not been feeling the years. "So she was nice to you?"

"Yeah, tried to grandmother me." She made a face. "Always sending me home with cookies or some other shit, trying to poke her nose in my life."

I choked on air at the mention of the cookies. "The cookies seem to have been her thing."

"She did like to give them away. They weren't bad"—she smiled slyly —"but I'm more of a cupcake or muffin person."

"Same," I agreed with a laugh.

A knock on the front door interrupted us. I peeked into the hallway and saw Alex standing outside. He waved a set of car keys.

"Your car is here," I announced, pleased.

Vicky joined me at the threshold. "Is it?"

Alex grinned at us and waved his hand again.

"Awesome," Vicky whispered.

I wondered if she had a small crush on Alex. She was about twenty-four or twenty-five to his maybe twenties—not exactly a May-December situation, and the stray was handsome enough.

And if I was a little disappointed that it was Alex returning the car and not Ian, I hoped it didn't show on my face as I unlocked the front door.

"Here are the keys, ma'am." He dropped them in my hand. "Car's as good as new. Parked it around the corner."

"Where's Ian?" I bit my tongue too late.

"Busy today."

Busy looking into the dead man's identity or whoever the shifter hitman had been? Or busy living his actual life? At some point, I should come clean about the mage, but at what point would the luggage accumulating on my shoulders become one suitcase too many? Even a friendship built on deceit, trespassing, and dead people in bathtubs could crack under too much pressure.

"Hi," Vicky said from behind me. "I'm Vicky."

"It's her car," I said.

"'Sup." Alex's gaze didn't linger on her. "Gotta get going. See you around."

"Sure thing."

He ambled down the street. Shane was nowhere to be seen, and I felt better that Ian hadn't forced him to stand guard all day.

Vicky checked her phone. "Ugh. Guess I better go too. Gotta eat and get ready for the evening tours. Saturday's always my busy day. You good here?"

I passed her the keys. "Yep. Thank you for letting me use the car."

She gave me a fast hug. "That's what friends do."

The moment she was out of view, I locked the door and returned to the kitchen. I had realistic blood to finish and a show to perform.

TWENTY-THREE

Brimstone and Destruction arrived at three on the dot. I waited for the telltale crackle of thunder, and he didn't disappoint.

Even in the bright afternoon light, he still managed to look like a pocket of gothic darkness surrounded him. His hair was gelled and brushed back from his forehead, and his dark dress trousers and vest belonged inside one of the mansions rather than out in the alleyway.

"Are you ready, witch?" he asked in his truculent voice.

My lips locked into my best customer-ready smile. "Come right in."

He entered the backyard, his gaze flitting over the weeds and general disarray before returning to me. Fluffy's excited barks escaped through the kitchen window, and I hoped the guy didn't hate dogs.

"Do you need fire?" He stopped by the fire pit, his lips curling into a sneer.

"Nah." I plopped a leftover shelf board on top of the metal bowl to create a table of sorts, then pointed at the stool I'd dragged from the shop. "Sit?"

He eyed the stool, unimpressed, but made use of it. His long legs stretched forward, and he crossed his arms, the picture of elegance.

"Begin, witch." His melodramatic, booming voice echoed on the brick walls.

Fluffy barked again from upstairs.

"Shh," I chastised. Nerves and adrenaline were starting to ride me high. "The neighbors will hear."

"Then you better hurry."

I knelt by the makeshift table and placed the ingredients for the "spell" on top—crystals, vials, and some flashy herbs. I drew a pentagram with a black

marker, then placed a crystal on each end. This wasn't necessary at all, but I was going for a full in-your-face witchy stereotype. I spread the herbs in a circle linking the crystals, then placed an empty glass vial in the middle.

My hands were starting to shake, and I paused for a few moments under the guise of concentration to hold them tightly and try to ease their trembling.

If this went bad...

I swallowed hard and fortified myself with some of Grandma's advice.

You are in control of your magic. All potions will succeed as long as you have faith in yourself.

Reasonably sure that I could continue without spilling liquid everywhere, I picked up the first filled vial and emptied it into the empty one.

"What's that?" the mage asked sharply.

"The base tonic. Without it, the blood will have nothing to react to when I do the spell." No moon water in this case, just the highest max-strength energy drink the grocery store had to offer.

He nodded, seemingly appeased, and I popped the stopper of the second vial.

"That's the blood?"

"Yes." I tilted the vial and took my sweet time allowing the thick, viscous liquid to drip into the potion. It had taken several tries to get the correct consistency, and to me, it still looked way too thick and too bright a red to be the real thing, but I had run out of time to try another batch.

The mage's gaze was glued to the syrupy, fake unwilling blood dripping into the vial. His smile grew into a wide, gleeful slash across his cheeks.

Maybe he thought himself a vampire. It'd explain the getup.

Once enough "blood" had gone into the potion, I put the vial aside and inserted a stirrer into the small bottle. I concentrated, closing my eyes and filling my lungs with air. Magic rose in my veins, tickling and yawning awake. It trickled along my body and concentrated on my fingertips, waiting for instructions as I moved the thin glass rod.

I had put some thought into this spell. The mage had no way of knowing dark magic from normal magic use—it wasn't the magic itself that made it dark, but the ingredients. But he might be able to tell when magic was simply thrown out into the world from magic used with a purpose.

Purpose was *belief*.

And belief was its own power.

I repeated the mantra as magic flowed out of my skin and into the

swirling liquid.

My soul ached after the outpour of magic, but nothing I wasn't used to. This had been as much power as I usually poured into making my normal potions, and it was part of life. My life, at least.

I removed the stirrer and shook the few clinging drops into the ground, then topped the bottle and examined it in the shadows of the backyard.

"It's done?" the mage asked. He leaned forward, avid eyes fixed on the bottle.

My max-strength energy drink, glucose-filled fake blood, placeboenhanced masterpiece creation was, indeed, done.

"It's done," I confirmed.

He took the bottle with reverence and opened it to taste.

I braced myself, one hand inching toward my last emergency freezing potion I'd hidden earlier by the fire pit.

"It tastes odd, but..." He licked his lips. "Yes. This will do nicely, I think." He stretched his arms out. "I can already feel the difference."

Snapping out of his wonder, he gave me a haughty look. "Consider yourself paid from last time."

Then he spun on his heel and left through the back gate.

I leaned on the makeshift table, uncaring of the crystals and vials rolling off the edges, my body suddenly boneless like someone had popped the balloon containing all my stress.

It had worked. Somehow. For now.

I needed to tell Ian about him. I wasn't sure how long the mage's newfound belief in the potion was going to last, but if he discovered my deception, I'd be toast—literally.

Fluffy's happy barks drifted down into my ears, as if she was trying to infuse me with enough energy to return my body from a gooey blob to a human being.

Lifting myself off the ground, I decided it was time to take a break from the shop and magic.

The reviews, Sonia and the PBOA, the Council meeting, the attack, the mage... I needed a break. A real one, not simply taking a bath.

"Fluffy," I said, going upstairs. "We're going for a long, long walk."

Heck, I could do better than a long walk.

I called Vicky.

"Hello, lovely," she answered in a jovial tone. "Did you get the blood

made?"

"Yes, and it looks great. Say, do you have any empty spots in your tour today?"

She gasped.

"I know it's late," I added. "But—"

"I do! Don't worry about it. Give me a sec." Noises of traffic and conversations rose in the background as if I'd caught her outside. "I can make an opening for you at nine. Is that good?"

"Perfect."

"You can bring the dog."

"Really?"

"Yeah. As long as you sit in the last row."

I looked down at Fluffy. "What do you say, Fluffy? Wanna take a tour tonight?"

Fluffy barked in agreement.

Vicky laughed on the other side of the call. "Sounds like a yes. Meet me at Balton Square. It's where I start the carriage tours."

"Will be there. Thanks!"

I prepared some late lunch. Ian didn't contact me, and I decided to give him until tomorrow before prodding him. Looking at Fluffy playing with her T-shirt toy constricted my heart. This cheerful creature didn't deserve to be stuck upstairs all day long. I was going to either have to apply for permits or return her to Ian—her job as a cleansing creature of goodness was done.

And it'd give me an excuse to show up at the cemetery.

Sending the strays to check on me was a show of friendship, I told myself. Ian was probably still miffed I hadn't called him first instead of Dru during the attack, but there was nothing I could do about that now. My reasoning had been sound, and it was too bad if his male ego had been wounded in the process.

By ten minutes to nine, Fluffy and I presented ourselves at Balton Square. It was big and lively, with the statue of a mounted man in the middle. Couples and groups strolled past, talking loudly and carrying drinks. In one corner, a couple of carriages were unloading passengers.

I recognized Vicky and walked up to her and her carriage. The mule was a pretty brown creature with doe-like eyes. Dora, if I remembered the name correctly from Vicky's effusive praises. The carriage itself was firetruck red with a white canopy and the logo for the mule's stables printed on the back,

advertising their services. Part of renting the carriage and the mule, she'd told me once.

Fluffy sniffed at the back wheel with curiosity while I waited for Vicky to receive her tips and send her clients on their way. Once that was done, she gave me a fast hug.

"You came!"

"I've been wanting to take the tour since I met you," I told her. "Just never found the time."

"Well, tonight is perfect." She turned to the family of four waiting patiently on the side, all smiles and laughter. "Is it okay if the dog comes with us?"

"Puppy," exclaimed their little boy. He tugged at his mom's hand, and she relinquished her hold. The boy ran to Fluffy and crouched to give her hesitant pets.

As if sensing barking might scare him, Fluffy remained still and silent, wagging her tail and panting in a friendly gesture.

"He's so cute," said their teenaged daughter, taking out her phone.

"Her name is Fluffy."

"Oh, my God. Seriously?"

"Yup." I waited for her to take a few photos, then gathered Fluffy in my arms and stepped into the last row of the carriage. It was narrow, so I sat in the middle, dog on my lap. Hopefully, she wouldn't get overexcited and start barking at everything.

The kid and his sister climbed into the second row. The boy immediately turned to look at Fluffy, even as his father told him to stop bothering the dog. Lastly, the parents took the first row and Vicky got up onto the driver's bench.

She got Dora moving, and the carriage rolled forward with a small lurch.

"Welcome to Olmeda's Wonder Sightings tour," Vicky said cheerfully. As I'd guessed, her voice and disposition were perfect for giving tours. There was a warmth to the way she pointed out places of historical, curious, or macabre significance that glued my attention to her explanations and descriptions.

We left the square and started a slow circle around the historical side of town. The teenager snickered as Vicky explained how Petticoat Row got its name from the brothels that had populated the street before John Harris the second had cleaned up the area, and it had turned into bars and shops. The

boy's eyes went round when we passed by the green area known as John B. Fieldman Park, named after the man who was famously and erroneously hanged for a series of deadly robberies.

The tree was still there, she told us in deep, hushed tones. "And if you go at night, you can still hear John begging for his life."

The boy immediately asked his parents if they could come at midnight.

The mother gave him a strict negative, but from the glint in his eyes, I hoped they locked his door at night.

We moved on, crossed the revelry of Guiles and Romary, which filled the teenager with longing looks, rode by the Modern Cabinet of Curiosities—which I took to be a tiny museum of weird stuff that paid her to be included in the tour—then made a small detour through a quieter area to pass by the Three Sisters.

"The middle house was built in 1870 by a French gentleman who wanted a new start," Vicky said. "Unfortunately, he found no fortunes in Olmeda and was forced to sell the land on each side of the house." She pointed at the first of the three Victorian monstrosities built side by side. "Sebastian Sheldman built the Second Sister. Rumors have it he was jealous of the original house, and since he couldn't have it, he would build one exactly like it."

"And the third?" asked the boy.

"Sebastian built it for his son, hoping that one day they'd be able to buy the middle one and combine all three into a grand mansion. Sadly, Fournier's heirs kept the land and the house, and Sebastian's dream was never realized."

"Was he the one who offed his wife?" the teenager asked.

"No, that's rumored to have been Sebastian's second son, Albert."

The mother shuddered. "Please, no scary stories."

Vicky winked at their kids. "Nothing you can't find online."

The daughter immediately checked her phone. The boy tried to take it from her.

The carriage moved on, and after a couple of buildings of interest, we found ourselves back in Balton Square.

"Stay," Vicky told me as I moved to get out. "Give me a minute."

Obediently, I remained on the bench and made sure Fluffy wasn't getting anxious at the inactivity. Vicky talked to the family, who appeared delighted by the tour, put their tips in a locked box in the carriage, then hopped back on.

"Now you get the extra special tour," she said gleefully.

"Oh?"

"The spooky tour!"

I laughed at her excitement. "You don't have to."

"Just sit tight. Wait until you hear all the spooky stuff that's happened in this place."

As promised, we moved away from Balton Square, following a similar route as before, but this time the stories were all full of ghosts.

"They still say she bangs the windows at night," Vicky said in a doom and gloom voice, pointing at the second story of an old building that was now a textiles store. "Can you imagine? Getting yourself free but thwarted by the iron bars in the window? Knowing the insane man who kidnapped you is about to return at any moment to finish the job? Looking for any escape route while holding your breath so you can hear anyone coming up the stairs beyond the locked door? And then... *Creak*. *Creak*."

I shuddered. Between this and the real-life Cinderella story where a woman kept her stepdaughter hidden in the attic, then died with no one knowing about it, I was going to go down the happy kitten videos rabbit hole when I got home if I wanted to get any sleep. The poor woman had spent days trying to be heard, then died from starvation because all the servants had moved on, and the house had been empty while they dealt with the will.

"I didn't tell the group," Vicky said as we passed the museum of weird stuff. "But the Cabinet has a secret room."

"A secret room?" I asked against my better judgment.

"If you tell the man at the entrance that you've come to pray, he'll show you a hidden staff door that takes you into a room full of..."

I leaned forward. "Full of?"

Her voice lowered to a theatrical whisper. "Witch relics."

I jolted. "Witch what?"

"Relics. Fingers, eyes, and hair taken from witches' graves. It is said a coven gathered them from their own members as they died, so their magic would remain in their possession. And when that seemed to work, one of them started to kill the others to gain their power."

"Gross." I shivered as theatrically as her voice had been, but the tale sounded so much like someone using dark magic that I wondered if this city had always had a dark witch problem beyond my shop.

"And now," she said when we were back to the Three Sisters, "the real tale of these houses."

"Yay?"

She laughed at my disparaging tone. "You're into witchy stuff. You'll like this."

The Gothic mansions stood dark and looming in the night.

"Give it to me straight."

"You know about Diana Sheldman and how she was buried alive in the walls, but what you don't know is that her son suffered a similar fate!"

Fluffy twitched in my arms. "Did he?"

"Oh, yes. He was the second son and a bit of a player. The story goes that he started an affair with one of the servants, but he broke it off when he got bored a couple of months later."

I shook my head. "Men."

She cackled. "Right? Anyway, turns out the servant practiced dark magic."

The shiver that ran through me was real this time. "Dark magic?"

"Yes. Summoning demons, offering blood sacrifices, the whole thing. When the son broke off their relationship and began seeing another woman, the servant went insane from a broken heart and decided..."

"Decided...?"

"To pay with his!"

The suddenly loud words made me jump in my seat, and my heart began a heavy beat against my chest. "Damn, you're good at this."

Vicky shrugged smugly. "I know. Anyway, the servant lured the man into a small room in the basement nobody used anymore. The guy must've thought he was about to get lucky. In any case, he followed her down, and she *struck*!"

I laughed through the unease crawling under my skin. "Hah, you're not getting me this time."

She made a sound of disappointment, but her smile didn't falter. "She killed him, tore out his heart, and"—she grimaced—"ate it."

Definitely a dark magic problem. "What happened then?"

"She dragged the man into a closet in the room and left him to rot. But here's the thing. They say that when his disappearance was noticed, and they searched the house top-to-bottom, they never found the door leading into the small room. Like it was hidden by magic."

Which was silly, because glamour didn't affect objects.

"It gets worse," Vicky said.

"Worse than getting your heart torn out and left to rot in a closet?"

"When the body was found many years later, it hadn't rotted at all, and his chest was still seeping blood."

"But corpses don't bleed."

"Exactly! The man bled and felt the pain for years, knowing he was stuck in a closet, dead but not allowed to move on. Not as long as the servant woman was still alive, carrying his heart and blood in her body. According to one witness account, it took tracking down the woman and hanging her for her crime for his body to finally shrivel up and decompose."

"You just made that all up."

She clicked at the mule to start going again. "Nope."

"How come I've never heard of it?"

"You're new. It's a local legend."

You'd think they'd have made about a thousand scary movie versions of that one. "You know the weirdest stories."

"Wait until you hear the next one." She pointed at an unassuming family home in the distance. The neighborhood was a quiet one, and we were alone on the street. "Remember the coven I mentioned earlier? Their leader lived over there. She ran a secret shop where other witches congregated and made potions and all sorts of vile stuff. When she died, they found a room with a huge pentagram, filled with vial after vial of dried blood."

"Are we living in Salem?" I joked weakly. All this mention of blood and potions and witches was getting to me. These were the kind of tales the Council tried hard to keep secret, just as they had apparently done with all the stories about the shop. How had those stories stayed quiet, but these hadn't? Maybe because they were too old?

Something was off.

Another tendril of unease wormed its way into my heart as I felt eyes on my back. I turned to look behind us, but the street was empty. Nobody was following.

"I think I'm done with scary stories," I said. "Let's go back and grab a late dinner."

"One more," she said happily, oblivious to my rapidly deteriorating mood.

A low rumble filled the air as we turned into another quiet street, mingling with the clop-clopping of the mule and the constant scrape of wood against iron as the wheels of the carriage moved along.

It took me a few moments to realize the rumbling was coming from Fluffy. She was growling. The happiest little dog on earth who never had anything but happy yips and hopeful whines was growling.

Again, I checked our surroundings but couldn't see anything amiss.

"Hey, Vicky," I said. "It's better if we cut this short. I think there's something wrong with Fluffy."

"Nonsense." She urged the mule to go faster. "This one last thing and we're done."

The urge to jump out of the carriage grew stronger. But that would be silly.

"Last one," I agreed tersely. "Then we go back."

"Sure. Now, remember the hidden door?"

"Yes?" I answered warily. Fluffy's growls deepened.

"You probably don't believe the story because glamour only affects paranormals, not inanimate objects like doors, but here's the thing—when you use dark magic, so much becomes possible. Unwilling blood is the key to everything."

My blood froze in my veins, and everything clicked into place.

"You're a witch."

TWENTY-FOUR

"Нмм-нмм," Vicky murmured happily.

Not just a witch, but *the* witch. Like me, she had interned for another witch—Ms. Bagley. Like Dru, she had been promised a shop.

And she hadn't gotten it.

Time to get off this ride. I leaned left, intending to hold Fluffy closer as we risked jumping out of the carriage.

Unfortunately, my body barely moved.

A wave of magic surrounded me, tying me down to the bench. Dark, uneven spell circles appeared beneath my feet and on the wooden seat.

I'd never gotten my wards to leave a visual imprint—something way beyond my limits. As a witch, I was woefully outpowered.

"You're behind the sabotage of the shop, aren't you?" I asked, still trying to move my hips or legs. It was no use—the magic was holding strong. "You made all those troll reviews and lodged the complaints to the PBOA and the Council."

She snorted. "Much good it did. Where's their responsibility to the public? The shop should've never gone to someone as weak as you."

"Gee, thanks."

She shrugged and urged the mule to pick up the pace again. The poor thing.

"Fluffy, run," I whispered under the clatter of Dora's clopping. "Warn Ian."

Fluffy let out a sad whine and didn't move. She was as stuck as me.

"So," Vicky said over the rumble of the mule and the wheels. "As I said, remember the servant and the door?" She didn't wait for a response before

continuing. "She taught my great-great-grandmother all she knew before she was caught and executed."

That didn't bode well for my heart. "It's important to know your roots."

"I looked you up."

"Of course you did."

She laughed at that, the same tinkling laugh I had admired from day one. There should be at least an edge of evil to it, some sort of cackle I'd missed, but no—it was pure and bright in my ears.

"Your family is unknown."

"I'd hoped to change that."

"I bet you did. Fear not, I'll tell people what a nice person you were."

Were. Oh, Mother.

The carriage stopped, and I scanned our surroundings. Vicky had driven us to a solitary cul-de-sac that rear-ended into the forest. An excellent place to dump a body.

But she didn't bring out a blade to bleed me dry, didn't jump off the carriage to grab me. She simply relaxed against the back of her bench.

My pulse throbbed painfully in my neck, my muscles aching from the effort to unstick myself. Why was she letting the ward run out? All wards did at some point, even dark magic ones.

The answer came in a flash of insight. "You have an accomplice. We're waiting for someone."

"I do love how quick you are at catching on. To some things, anyway," she added with a wicked smile.

"You should've gone into acting."

"I've done a commercial here and there. Doesn't pay as well as the shop, though."

I didn't respond, too busy wondering who her accomplice could be. Dru? Had they planned the attack to scare me out of town rather than get me killed? Dru would've known the shifters would take care of things and the hitman wouldn't have survived the encounter. And if my ward failed while they got there, all the better.

The thought made me break out in a sweat.

Or it could be Sonia. She could be the bad cop to Vicky's good cop. So public in her dislike of me that she would be too obvious a choice for being the saboteur. A witch in the Council? If Vicky had worked for Bagley, she must've been aware of how shop owner selection went. Had she assumed she

was in the will already and that was why she had made her move?

"You and Bagley killed the man in the bathtub," I said.

"That was all Bagley."

My brain overextended itself in its effort to make things fit. "But she got interrupted...by you? You shoved her down the stairs, then finished with the man. You got his blood and cleaned up." Things fell into place, and I smiled slowly. "Ah, but you couldn't finish the spell properly because it wasn't your spell."

Vicky made a face—all irritation at the failed spell, no remorse at taking lives.

"You're responsible for the shifter attack too," I continued. "You knew the Council would contact me after you lodged the complaints, and you knew I don't have a car. You waited for them to call me to waltz in and offer yours."

"Much easier to track my car than a rental one," she agreed. "But since the idiot I hired failed, here we are."

"You need to outsource better henchmen."

"You'd think one could count on reviews being faithful, but I guess in this day and age everyone leaves five stars simply for showing up to get paid. Non-refundable deposit too."

"It's hard to find good suppliers."

She beamed. "I knew you'd understand."

I wondered if Fluffy would be willing to eat Vicky's face if I threw her at her head.

The rumble of an approaching vehicle stopped my plans. A dark van came to a halt some distance away. I tried to peer into the windows, but they were tinted.

"Okay, Hope," Vicky said. "This is what's going to happen. You're going to get on your phone and email the Council saying you're going home, and that you're giving up on the shop because it's too much pressure."

I laughed, although my insides were getting very cold. This was happening. For real. It wasn't some surreal shared dream. "And get 'lost' on the way back to never be seen again?"

Her mouth formed a downward arch, as if she was genuinely sad about my future demise. "Accidents are part of life."

"My friends will never believe that," I said with certainty. "They'll know something weird is going on."

She blinked. "What friends?"

Oh, low, low blow. "Dru will know."

"Druscilla? Nah, don't worry. We got that covered."

Lovely. I glanced at the van. I was running out of options. "Ian will look for me."

"Cavalier won't move a finger unless he's paid."

"And if he does?"

"Then we'll make sure he or the strays also have an accident. A bloody one, if you know what I mean. Rumors about you doing dark magic will somehow circulate around. That would hurt, wouldn't it? All that goodness gone to waste."

How did she know how important being a good witch was to me? I went through our conversations, and although I couldn't recall that much, my hopes to do good and make people happy must've been obvious from the start.

"Either way, the shop is going to be mine, so it's up to you to choose how much of a bloodbath you want to leave behind. If people don't believe your email..." She hopped off the carriage. "I hear guilt carries over to the beyond. Now, get out."

The magic latching me to the bench popped out of existence. I hugged Fluffy close. "No."

Vicky let out an exaggerated sigh and took a small vial out of her pocket. She looked pointedly at Fluffy. "It doesn't require much magic to harm animals, you know. Even if they're worthless for dark magic."

I stared at her in disbelief. "Who raised you, Hansel and Gretel's witch?" "Chop, chop, time's-a-wasting."

Having no other option, I jumped off the carriage. Pins and needles ran up my legs, and my knees almost buckled at the sudden motion.

"Give me that," Vicky said, reaching for Fluffy.

Fluffy snapped her mouth at her hands.

"Hell, no." I turned to shield Fluffy.

"Christ, whatever." She pointed at the van with an imperious finger. "Get going."

That was going to be another *hell*, *no*.

What I needed was time. Time to keep her talking while I came up with a plan. I didn't have my freezing potion with me, but if I could catch her by surprise, I might be able to make it into the forest.

"Why so obsessed with the shop?" I asked, shuffling slightly toward the trees. "Why not open your own?"

She smiled faintly, as if she had guessed my intentions and was amused by them. It was the assurance of someone who had warded this space ahead of time.

"I'm sure by now you've figured that out too," she said. "That's why you asked me if I'd included it in the spooky tours, right? There's so much darkness imbued into the building—so much dark magic used over the decades, so much sacrificed blood—it's permeated the walls and foundations." A shiver of delight traveled across her shoulders. "The entire building is an amplifier now. It's the perfect spot to do my craft."

"So you knew Bagley practiced dark magic and convinced her to make you her intern and eventually her heir. Then what? You got too eager and murdered her, but turns out she hadn't made you her official heir yet. I haven't made you mine, either, so how do you know the shop will go to you this time if you get rid of me? Killing every shop owner until you get lucky is going to attract some notice."

Her lips pursed. "I was supposed to get the shop, not you, but the dumbass I paid at the Council messed up the lottery." She threw up her hands in frustration. "He said I would come first, and instead mis-clicked on your name."

I almost felt sorry for her. "I'm sorry to tell you this, but you really need to fix your henchmen problem. Doesn't matter, though. The instant you get the shop, everyone in town will be curious, since you're not supposed to know about magic."

"Don't worry, we got that covered too."

"Who's 'we'?"

The van's side door opened, and a man jumped out.

"Hurry up, for Pete's sake," Mr. Lewis hissed in our direction.

My jaw hit the floor. "Mr. Lewis?"

Mr. Lewis, the elderly gentleman, all kindness and old-school charm, standing there in a dark suit, looking around nervously, ready for murder.

"Terry is going to inherit the shop," Vicky explained triumphantly. "He's a registered witch, you see. Why would anyone suspect the dear old man of underhanded tactics? He's going to hire me to manage it—a long-lost relative who has recently discovered magic exists in her blood. Eventually, he'll find the shop too much of a responsibility and give it to me before retiring."

"And he's good with that?" I asked, somewhat impressed.

"Of course. We made a contract."

"Does he know—" I turned to Mr. Lewis and repeated my question louder. "Do you know she's going to shove you down a flight of stairs when she gets impatient like she did with Bagley?"

Vicky grinned. "He knows if he doesn't keep me happy, his supply of invigorating tonic is going to run out. Not the kind of stuff you wean off of, unfortunately."

"Shut up, and hurry," Mr. Lewis said tersely.

Vicky held out her hand in front of me. "Phone, please."

"Not going to happen."

"Good lord," Mr. Lewis muttered. He walked up to us in a few fast strides and pointed a small gun at Fluffy, who was snuggled against my chest. "Give her the goddamn phone or the mutt is history."

I eyed the gun with disgust. What kind of witch used a gun to do their bidding?

I took out my phone, unlocked it with one hand, and passed it to Vicky. A part of me howled in growing desperation—I was giving in so easily, not even putting up a fight. This was so not like me. I needed to get over the shock and get my brain working properly again.

As Vicky got busy on my phone, I lowered Fluffy to the floor. She jumped out of my arms and shot off running, leash trailing behind her.

Mr. Lewis cursed and turned the gun toward the dog.

"Don't be stupid," Vicky said matter-of-factly. "Save the gunshots for emergencies. The dog doesn't matter."

I sent him a look of victory, and he snarled.

Without Fluffy as collateral damage, I'd have a better chance of...not much, really. But even if I died, being killed here might leave enough evidence for Ian to figure things out—and he *would* look for me, no matter what Vicky believed, especially with Fluffy running for help.

I wasn't called Hope for nothing.

"Catch," Vicky said and tossed me the phone.

I caught it easily and read the screen. She'd written a few paragraphs directed at the Council, letting them know how sorry I was at failing to keep up the quality needed to maintain an official witch shop, how my pride had gotten in the way of my inexperience. The Hope in this email was contrite, and so, so very sorry. She hoped to learn from this lesson, and, perhaps, if the

Council would graciously allow it in the future, she might try again in a decade or two.

Did I actually sound like this? The idea distracted me for a few seconds.

And the truth was, the email wasn't so far off base. I *had* failed at keeping up the quality of the shop—I had faked dark magic potions instead of coming clean and reporting the young woman and the mage to the Council, and I had kept Bagley's murderous secrets. My pride and my fear of losing the shop had gotten in the way of what was better for the community.

Vicky reached over and tapped the send icon of the email program, then turned to tell Mr. Lewis it was done.

An undo message popped up at the bottom of the screen. Vicky must've not known this could happen, because she wasn't paying any attention.

My thumb moved of its own accord.

Then it froze, hovering but not touching.

The message went away, and my world disappeared along with it.

I stood there, stunned, my mind struggling to catch up.

It was over. The shop part, at least. Even if I survived the night and called to explain things, it'd be a mark too many against me. They'd investigate Vicky's reasons for wanting the shop, link it to the sabotaging, and discover everything. Bagley's dark magic, the building being an amplifier for evil—everything.

Grandma would be so, so disappointed with me.

TWENTY-FIVE

"Now, be a good witch and get into the van," Vicky said.

When I didn't move, staring at the phone as the weight of my actions—or lack of—locked my muscles in place, she grabbed my arm and pulled.

"You two starting a new business together?" a new voice asked loudly.

We spun toward the street. Dru stood there in a breezy green summer jumpsuit, her pose casual.

"Go back to the store," Lewis snapped. He was hiding the gun behind his back.

Dru's expression was hard to read in the shadows, but the long-suffering sigh that came out of her hinted she was rolling her eyes.

"Druscilla, hi," Vicky said cheerfully. "I was taking Hope for a tour, but the carriage's having some trouble."

Was she going to use that as the explanation for Lewis and the van's presence? Their plan was up. If I disappeared mysteriously now, Dru would be suspicious for sure.

Ah, crap.

"Gun," I shouted.

Lewis brought out the gun and shot at Dru. Dru ducked faster than any full human could. Errant streetlight gleamed on her nails—long and curved and not part of a manicure. Dru was a demon.

"What are you doing?" Vicky demanded. "You're going to wake up the whole place!"

"Bah." Lewis aimed again. "The plan is blown."

And he didn't intend to leave witnesses. And now that he had jumped into action, neither would Vicky.

I slammed my hand on Vicky's face.

Let evil *sleep*.

Magic burst through my arm like the world's saddest, tiniest firework. Vicky stumbled back, dazed. I curled my other hand into a fist and socked her in the jaw.

Pain radiated through my fingers, and I bit down a curse. Vicky howled in outrage, holding her face and taking another couple of steps back. Behind me, another gunshot rang off, making me duck, but I couldn't afford to take my attention off Vicky.

She spat some blood, then rounded on me, a short, thin dagger in her hand. An athame. The woman had come prepared.

She lunged, and I jumped back. Vicky using my blood to maim me with a dark magic spell was not how I wanted to die. Too much on the nose for my battered pride.

The good news about this fight was that witches needed direct contact to perform their spells. As long as I stayed out of reach, the fact that she was a lot more powerful than me wouldn't matter. From her look of annoyance as she attempted another slice with her dagger, whatever wards she had laid down weren't close enough or hadn't been set to freeze me in place.

Witches couldn't make wards with more than one specific purpose, no matter their power.

"Ah, whatever. Shoot her," Vicky commanded.

"I'm trying," Lewis snarled. Another shot boomed in the cul-de-sac.

"Not that one." She met my gaze and shook her head with mock exasperation, as if I could commiserate.

And the thing was—I could. That was what made the whole experience so bizarre. The person in front of me was the same woman who had sat at the counter sharing cupcakes and jokes with me. She hadn't worn a mask or faked her cheerful buoyancy. It hadn't been a case of Tour Guide Jekyll and Miss Hyde but a case of simply not talking about witchcraft.

My lips curved into a reluctant grin. "Need better henchmen."

She grinned back even as she readied to go at me again. "Next time."

A blur of white crossed my vision and leaped at Vicky.

"Fluffy, no," I cried, terror squeezing my lungs.

"What the f—" Fluffy latched onto her leg, and she tried to shake the dog off. "Get off me!"

I grasped her forearm with both of my hands before she could stab Fluffy.

Spirit magic wasn't meant for harm. It was meant to help, to ease a life fraught with challenges and pain. To elevate despondency into hope.

Magic was meant to *protect*.

Vicky's magic exploded under my hands in a burst of power that stung my skin. She gasped in shock as the muscles of her forearm spasmed with the sudden concentration of defensive magic. The dagger clattered to the ground.

I kicked it away. I didn't know how to wield a knife—using it would only harm me.

My legs, though, those I knew how to use. While Vicky was holding her arm, trying to get her magic under control, I kicked her in the knee.

She didn't go down, but she cursed in pain and sent me a look of betrayal, like I was cheating by using blunt force instead of daggers and spells.

Fluffy let go of her jeans, then readied herself for another attack. Vicky straightened and scanned the ground, searching for her dagger.

"Fluffy, back," I ordered.

The dog came to my side, leash still trailing behind her, and growled at the witch.

A cry of pain came from the van's direction, but neither of us broke eye contact to check who had produced it.

"Terry?" she said.

Another cry joined the first one.

"Sorry, he can't speak right now," Dru said with some satisfaction.

Vicky's eyes narrowed in a way that told me she was mentally spewing every curse in existence. Dru came to stand by my side, and I felt safe enough to flick a glance her way. Her smile was broad, a hint of fang peeking through. Her irises had turned red, and a pair of horns peeked through her hair. Blood marred her claws.

A howl sounded close behind us. The sound chilled my insides, all the way into my soul. Had Vicky hired another shifter hitman? Already my energy sagged, and my arms ached.

A dark gray wolf came to stand by us, so large his head reached my waist. Ian?

The possibility popped into my mind, leaving me breathless. I looked down, but it was impossible to identify the person inhabiting the wolf. Reluctantly, I looked back at Vicky.

"How did you know how to find me?" I asked in a low voice meant for Dru.

"Ian called."

Vicky watched us warily, then glanced at the van. She either had potions stashed there, or was considering making a run for it. Lewis's wriggling body lay half in, half out the vehicle. I couldn't tell what Dru had done to him, and I was thankful for it.

The wolf growled and stepped forward. Vicky sent him a measuring glance.

"How did Ian know?" And was he this wolf? The urge to reach out and run my hands through the wolf's fur was overwhelming. But I didn't have permission. And this might not be him at all, which would make things very awkward.

"No idea." Dru licked her lips, gaze fixed on Vicky like she was a particularly well-cooked steak.

The wolf's head turned to stare behind us. He was missing an eye.

Shane.

Disappointment hit me, hard and fast. I pushed it away. Ian must've told him to follow me—Shane must've been the one who had realized things were off and had called Ian. Nothing in the situation merited disappointment.

Because I had people looking out for me.

Friends.

I was part of a group. A community.

Joy exploded in my chest.

Underscoring the flash of glorious realization, the rumble of an oncoming car reached my ears. The vehicle stopped behind us, and two car doors slammed closed.

Shane leaped forward. Something flashed on the floor, and he crashed into an invisible barrier. He snarled, shook his head, then pushed forward again to be met with the same blockade—Vicky had activated one of her wards.

She pursed her lips, glancing over my shoulder. Someone came to a stop right behind me, and this time I fully recognized the familiar warmth, the teasing scent. The tug on my insides.

Ian had arrived.

Not bothering to say a thing, Vicky whirled around and ran for the forest, stopping to pick up her athame on the way.

Shane howled and pawed at the invisible barrier. It remained steadfast.

"It'll be active for a while," I told him, coming closer to examine the

ground. Faint lines shimmered on the asphalt. "She's a powerful witch, so she likely put these down a couple of days ago and poured a lot of magic into them."

A chorus of distant howls lifted into the night.

Startled, I turned to Ian. "You called the pack?"

The corner of his mouth kicked up. "It's their territory."

Shane woofed, perhaps disappointed he didn't get to join in the chase, perhaps speaking his derision toward the pack in general. I didn't know—I didn't speak wolf.

I stopped a giggle from bursting through and clamped a hand to my mouth. My mind was spiraling into a free fall, trying to process everything that had happened—Vicky's reveal, her attempt at killing me, Dru's appearance, the fight.

The email.

Ian's hand landed on my shoulder. He squeezed softly. "Are you okay?"

I inhaled deeply. "I'm good," I said, thankful no uncontrollable giggles followed those words.

Mr. Lewis groaned, and I remembered his existence with a bit of a shock. Dru had returned to the van, and I approached warily. Mr. Lewis had managed to crawl inside and was holding on to a wound on his flank. It was hard to see in the shadowy interior, but the smell of blood clogged the warm air.

"Sorry about him," I said.

Dru had returned to her human form; the horns were gone and her irises were their normal brown color.

She put her hands on her hips and cocked her head, then shrugged. "Eh, he was kind of an asshole."

A squeak of outrage came from inside the van.

"What?" she said. "You were."

"Alex," Ian said. "You know what to do."

Alex saluted grimly, then got into the passenger seat of the van.

"What does he know to do?" I asked.

Ian pulled me away from the van as Dru picked up Mr. Lewis's gun and threw it inside. She closed the side door, then slapped the side of the vehicle and stepped aside.

Alex started the engine and drove away.

"What's going to happen to him?"

"You don't wanna know," Dru said.

Hopeful being that I was, I imagined taking care of things meant taking him to a hospital before reporting him to the Council.

You were never too old to believe in fairy tales.

The howling in the distance increased, and my mouth went dry. "And Vicky? What will happen when they turn her in and she babbles to the Council?"

"She won't be talking to anyone," Ian said flatly.

"Oh?" I remembered the shifter hitman's fate. "Oh. She's powerful..."

"Hutton will take care of it. I updated him on the problem. The last thing he wants or needs is dark magic spoiling his pack's reputation for protecting its own and the community. She has no chance."

Regret and guilt filled my chest for a few heartbeats, then drained as fast as they had come. Vicky and Mr. Lewis were killers. Paranormal justice was brutal, and they had known that before embarking on their murdering schemes.

They had accepted the risks.

I turned to the carriage and Dora, who appeared completely unperturbed by the wolf, the gunshots, and all the howling and growling. She was either under the effects of a potion or had long ago grown used to the wild happenings in Olmeda. "What do we do with her?"

Dru walked up to the carriage and peeked inside. She opened the cash box and her eyes widened. "Oh, wow."

I joined her and peeked into the box. It was chock full of bills.

"Is that her tips?" I asked, mouth hanging open. "She makes this much on top of the ticket sales?"

No wonder she could afford all those cupcakes.

Dru slammed the lid closed and held the box under her arm. "Well, she's not going to need it, so it's mine now."

I lifted my hands in surrender. I wanted living room furniture, but not that badly. "All yours. How are we getting the carriage back?"

She took out her phone. "I know Wilburn from the stables. I'll tell him I found it abandoned here. He'll send someone."

"You good to wait?" Ian asked.

Dru waved her phone in a dismissive wave. "Don't worry about me." Ian took a hold of my elbow and began dragging me toward his SUV. "We can't leave," I protested.

"Sure can," he said. "Shane, make sure nothing escapes this side."

Shane barked in agreement and slunk into the shadows of the nearby trees.

"But Dru—"

"She'll be okay. She can take care of herself."

Better than I did, that was for sure. Acquiescing, I turned to the SUV.

Fluffy waited for us by the doors, tongue out, tail wagging happily. I picked her up and buried my face in her warm, furry body. "Thank you, Fluffy."

Fluffy squirmed with happiness, and, hopefully, not the need to pee.

We got into the SUV. I wasn't surprised to see Rufus sitting in the back seat. He sniffed Fluffy as soon as I deposited her by his side, as if ascertaining she was whole and safe. What a ridiculous yet totally endearing couple they made.

Ian started the car and made a turn back into the streets of Old Olmeda.

"You had Shane follow me all day," I said.

"Yes."

"You thought I might get attacked again." I wasn't sure if siccing the shifter on me was a show of his worry for my safety or his certainty I would fail at protecting myself. Again.

"The escalation from the sabotage to the hitman was too fast. Whoever —Vicky, apparently—was obviously getting impatient about getting rid of you. Shane called me straight away, but I was on the other side of town."

"Did you know Dru is a demon?"

"Everyone knows Dru is a demon."

"I didn't."

"You do now."

"Does everyone also know about the mage who uses dark magic?"

His gaze sharpened. "No."

"Hah."

"This is not a competition."

"It is now."

He tried—and failed—to suppress a smile. After he got his lips under control, he grew the inscrutable, stony expression I had gotten to know so well. "Tell me about the mage."

"He had a standing order with Bagley for a potion to augment his powers," I said. "At first, I thought someone was spreading rumors about the

shop—that wasn't the first person asking for dark magic—but then I discovered Bagley's stash of potions."

"The ones you destroyed."

"Yes."

His hands tightened on the wheel. "The mage didn't threaten you when you told him you didn't have his potion?"

I cleared my throat. "I, ah, made a placebo potion for him. With lots of caffeine."

Once again, his eyebrows met his hair. "And it worked?"

"So far."

"Tricky."

"I think you mean smart."

"Smart would've been telling someone—me—about him."

"I asked Dru about local mages or dark magic users. Besides, I don't really *know* any of you. You could've been doing the sabotaging together."

He didn't appear insulted by my suspicions but didn't add anything else.

"Bagley is back." I might as well confess all my sins. It wasn't like I was going to stick around.

The reminder sank my heart.

Ian's lips tightened into an unforgiving line. "Of course she is."

"Her soul is tethered to the shop itself. You can move the object she is in out of the room and that makes her disappear for a while, but eventually she snaps back."

"The room, not the building?"

"Just the room."

He nodded, archiving the information somewhere in his brain.

I leaned against the seat and watched the streets pass by: the shops, now closed, and the restaurants and bars brimming with the Saturday night crowd. My chest ached at the view—I had only been here for a few weeks, but the thought that this would no longer be my city felt like Vicky had torn a chunk off my heart and taken it with her to the grave.

Like this had always been my home, and these my people, and I would never get to experience the feeling ever again.

TWENTY-SIX

IAN PARKED in front of the shop and we went inside, leaving the dogs in the SUV with the windows rolled down. Another wave of bittersweet nostalgia hit me at the sight of my little shop, the cozy tables, the shelf with all the books and merchandise, the blackboard with the day's special tea... I was going to miss this so damn much.

"Oh, my goodness," came Bagley's excited voice. "Something happened, didn't it? I can read it on your face!"

I wouldn't miss that.

Ian walked around the counter and checked out the mugs. "Which one?"

"Now, Cavalier. You be a good man and leave well enough alone," the witch said, all aloof.

I pointed at a mug with a witch cat drawing on it. "Black with the cat face."

He grabbed it, ignoring Bagley's sputtering, and went into the hallway. He returned a few seconds later, empty-handed.

My vision blurred, and I blinked hard.

Ian walked up to me and touched the edge of my drooping mouth. "What's wrong? Is it the fight? You used too much magic?"

I shook my head, feeling an acute lack of air.

He withdrew his touch and eased me on one of the stools. "Sit." When I obeyed, he returned to the other side of the counter and rummaged through the small fridge. He opened a can of soda and placed it in front of me. "Drink."

The can shook in my hands, but once I got my throat to work properly, the fizzy coolness felt like a universe-sent gift. I gulped greedily, but while the refreshment eased my parched insides, it didn't abate any of the soul-deep ache. The utter and total sadness.

On the other side of the counter, Ian leaned his forearms on the wood, waiting patiently for me to get my act together and tell him what was wrong with me beyond shock. He had tied his hair back and tendrils escaped to frame his face. He was handsome like that. Harsh and handsome, with lovely, sharp green eyes one could get lost in.

I glanced down at the can in my hands. "The Council's going to take the shop away."

"Why?"

"Vicky's plan was for me to send a resignation email to the Council and disappear on my way home. She sent the email from my phone before Dru and Shane arrived." I swallowed thickly and met his gaze. "That's not all. After she sent the email, there was an undo pop-up."

He studied me for a couple of seconds. "And you didn't press it."

I grimaced and shook my head. "It was like I was frozen. No magic necessary."

He straightened and rubbed his chin. "I get it."

Surprise made the burn of tears disappear. "You do?"

"You think the shop is failing because of you. You think you're a failure and aren't sure if you deserve the shop."

Each word was like a slap. How could he know me so well? "Yes."

"Did you cheat to get the shop?"

"No." My shoulders slumped. "But Vicky did. I got the shop because her inside man failed at life."

"She needs to hire better people."

I laughed, the pressure around my chest easing slightly. "That's what I said."

"Beyond her actions, did you take any shortcuts?"

"No." I poked his arm. "I know what you're doing, and it's not going to work."

"Oh?"

"Even if *I* didn't cheat, I still got the shop unfairly."

"Do you actually think the Council awards shops based on merit? Or do they look for who will make them look good rather than who will be the best to occupy the position?"

I squirmed on the stool. "It usually goes to well-connected families."

"There is a list hierarchy, and your worth as a witch or shopkeeper has nothing to do with it."

"You're awfully familiar with how the Council works."

He ignored my halfhearted jab. "You giving up the shop will make no one happy. Whoever replaces you will have to deal with the witch and her clients. What do you think will happen?"

I was starting to feel like a not-so-bright student being reprimanded by the school principal. "They'll close the shop. Probably burn down the building."

"At least if you stay, we can keep track of the witch's dark magic clients."

"I have her client ledger, but it's in code."

He gave me a hard look that told me to shut up and let him finish his pick-me-up speech. "The Council will not bother investigating the dark magic users in Olmeda. They'll erase all knowledge that a dark witch operated under their noses for decades. They won't want that black mark on their reputation."

"What will happen when the dark magic clients come to me and realize I can't do potions for them?"

He covered my hand with his and gave it a small squeeze. "I'll help you."

And, perhaps, I thought to myself with a glimmer of hope, I could fool them like I did the fire mage, show them you didn't need dark magic to get what you wanted—no, what you *needed*. Perhaps there was a job for me here beyond making glamour potions for the community.

Grandma would approve.

Unfortunately...

I covered my face with my hands. "But the email is sent. It's too late."

"Call them and make up an excuse."

Sighing, I slumped over the counter. The wood was cool against my forehead, and the smell of my favorite pine cleaner tugged at my heartstrings. Another reminder that this was home now. "Even if I call them, they'll consider me too flighty on top of everything that's been going on." I looked up. "It's not like I can tell them Vicky forced me to write that email because she wants her own dark magic emporium," I added dryly.

"Why not?"

I straightened abruptly. "What do you mean?"

"Tell them you had a fight with a friend and they got their hands on your phone and played a prank on you."

"That's not going to fly."

He crossed his arms. "You won't know until you try."

"Speaking from experience?"

One of his rare grins made an appearance. "Perhaps." Leaning forward, he added, "I bet you have some sort of affirmation about this."

Tilting my head, I considered his words. What would Grandma say in a situation like this? What would the Hope that woke up this morning ready for an awesome day say, rather than this sad excuse of a lousy witch currently impersonating her?

"Where there's hope, there's a chance."

"It'll do."

Hope igniting deep within me, I took out my phone. "I'll email now, then call in the morning. If I'm lucky, whoever is in charge of reading the inbox will see both emails and trash them without telling anyone in charge. I'll tell them I got hacked—it works for famous people all the time when they put their feet in their mouths."

"That's the spirit."

With a huge smile, I refocused on the phone. A notification flashed on the lock screen, and I pressed it out of habit.

Email delivery failed.

What on earth? The message took me to Vicky's email, and I stared hard at it until I recognized what was wrong.

A startled laugh escaped me.

"What?" Ian asked. He rounded the counter and hovered by my side.

I showed him the screen. "She wrote the email address wrong."

His lips broadened into a wolfish grin. "I think the universe is trying to send you a message. Nobody is *that* unlucky."

The relief was so overwhelming, I squeaked with joy and launched myself at him. My arms went around his waist and I hugged him tightly.

He let out a noise of surprise, then his arms encircled me back.

"I get to keep the shop," I exclaimed into the warmth of his T-shirt.

"You get to keep the shop," he agreed. His hands moved to my arms, and he gave me a reassuring squeeze before standing back.

Something flashed through his eyes. Regret? His fingers lingered on my skin, as if he was as reluctant to lose contact as I was. The possibility filled me with eagerness.

I was ready to face a new day. With him. With him, and Dru, and the

strays, and Fluffy, and even Sonia and the evil old witch, if that was the price I had to pay to keep the shop. To keep this.

To keep my dream.

The next day dawned sunny and full of possibilities. Now that the danger was over, Ian had taken Fluffy with him. I missed the cheerful, little fluffball, but she'd be much happier at Ian's place, where she could roam to her heart's content and play with Rufus and her own toys.

Besides, I still had something in my pipes.

They clanged once while I drank my morning soda, and before I made a run to the bakery to stock up on muffins—no more cookies for the shop. Ever.

My shop.

I couldn't help the huge grin on my face. Couldn't, and didn't want to.

My dream—my and Grandma's dream—was still happening. Without Vicky to sabotage me and true allies by my side, things would run much smoother from now on.

My phone dinged as I flipped the sign to open. A text message from Brimstone and Destruction with a long URL and a thumbs-up emoji.

Rule one of the internet—never follow unknown links.

What is this? I texted back.

My review. You're welcome.

My curiosity increased tenfold. Live a little, Grandma would say.

Grandma wouldn't know what to do with the internet, but I was feeling lucky. It was a beautiful Sunday, and I figured I'd had enough bad luck for the universe to be kind to me for a couple of weeks.

True to his word, the link took me to a review page for my shop, and not any review site I was familiar with.

5/5 stars.

New owner at Olmeda still finding her way, but great service. Procured exactly what I needed. Tested the potion and was better than what the old witch used to make.

I reread the review twice, then dared go to the main page. Reviews for different shops and services popped up on a timeline, as well as people asking for strange things that read awfully close to code words for illegal magic.

Was this a dark magic marketplace?

I scrolled some more.

Yes. Yes, it was.

Turning off the phone, I stared into the distance for a few long moments.

Then I took out the best-looking muffin from the display, the huge one with chocolate chunks, and proceeded to celebrate.

A five-star review was a five-star review.

And as I stood there, refusing to allow the fact that I was now listed in a dark web marketplace as a reliable dark magic seller to mar the wonderful day, eating my muffin and remembering the feel of Ian's hard body pressed against mine, I decided to get started on our agreement.

He had taken Bagley's ledger to try to crack the code, so I forwarded him the link to the dark marketplace. I would wait five minutes, I told myself, then call him up and ask what he thought.

Not because I had the itch to hear his voice. Not at all.

As I finished sending the text, there was a clang on the back gate. I froze, holding my breath in trepidation, but when no crack of thunder followed, the dumbest smile curved my lips. Ian must have come to check on me.

I hurried into the backyard and opened the gate expectantly.

Hutton stood in the alleyway.

He looked up and down the narrow street as if to ascertain nobody was around to hear, then glanced at the windows on the buildings to make sure nobody was around to watch.

"Uh," I managed to say, whiplashed from what I expected to what I got—the wrong brother.

"I saw the review," he said in a harsh, low tone. "You've taken over for Bagley?"

"Uhhh..."

"I need my special potion."

He looked at the alley again, then spun on his heels and strode away, hunching his shoulders as if to make himself look less of an alpha leader and more of an average passerby.

I gaped at his retreating back.

Taking over Bagley? The review? Did he mean the one posted on the dark web?

Was his special potion a dark magic potion?

I closed and locked the back gate, my neurons firing with a speed and power my magic could only ever dream to achieve.

Now, why would an alpha willing to kill Vicky and others to maintain the reputation of a dark-magic-less city need a dark-magic potion?

And did Ian know about it?

Thank you for reading! What kind of special potion does Hutton need? Find out in Right Wrong Shifter, available here!

Curious about **Hope and Ian's first meeting** from his point of view? <u>Download his bonus chapter here!</u>

If you enjoyed Good Bad Witch, please take a moment to leave a review or rating—it really makes a difference for authors.

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Isa Medina loves writing and reading Fantasy and Urban Fantasy books, playing MMORPGs, and scouring the Internet for pet pictures and beautiful art.

Her love for adventure Fantasy books was ingrained early in her childhood after getting her grubby little hands on the first Dragonlance trilogy, and it only grudgingly shared the spotlight when she discovered the wonderful worlds of Gothic novels and Romance in her early teens.

If it has Fae, ghosts, vampires, demons, mythical creatures, or magic in it, she's all in.

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