

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
TABITHA BARRET



RAVEN



Raven
Silver Springs Pets Series

Tabitha Barret

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“When you get into a tight place and everything goes against you ... never give up then, for that is just the place and time that the tide will turn.” -
Harriet Beecher Stowe

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Acknowledgement

It's been a long time since I've completed a book. The last book I finished was *Dahlia 2: With a Side of Fries*. After publishing, I took a year off to get healthier, mentally and physically. I needed to make many changes in my life so that I could find happiness. Thankfully, the time away from authoring paid off. I feel stronger than before and a lot thinner. As much as I missed writing, I believed it was important to take time for myself. That doesn't mean I wanted to stop writing, but I had to hit the pause button.

Charlie's story has been a long time coming. I knew she needed her story told ever since her first appearance in *Dahlia 1*. It took some time, but I've been teasing her book throughout my other Silver Springs stories. She's a great friend, a mother figure to those who need it and a brave woman. Her story is difficult to tell because she has so much darkness in her past. For *Rom Coms*, it's hard to tell a story about a woman who went through what Charlie did, but I felt that it was important to tell her story in a way that celebrated her future. She deserves her happy ending.

Writing this book has taken more time than usual since I used to write from a place of anger, anxiety, and frustration. Writing has always been an escape for me. So learning how to write from a place of peace and happiness has been challenging. I sometimes miss my angst and my drive, but I prefer running around with my husband on our date nights and seeing Taylor Swift's Eras Tour on the big screen. I have so many things I want to do away from my computer.

It may take some time to find a new groove, but I will get there. I have so many amazing projects to write for all of you. Thank you for waiting until

I could get my head on straight. I appreciate all the support from my friends, family and my fans! Without you guys, I would be binge watching TV and not writing.

Chapter 1 Charlie

Hallowed Woods (Cliff Haven Academy), Fall Semester 2007

Of all the advanced spells I learned from the Book of Ancient Charms, I didn't know a single one that could erase my epic mistake.

Running through the woods, I considered using my light spell so we could run faster, but they would spot us.

“Come on, Ravens! We have to get out of here!” Zeth was somewhere ahead of me, but the dense fog blurred his tall frame.

In the distance, the squishy sounds of melted marshmallows consuming the forest as it knocked down trees and expanded across the fallen leaves, made me regret my life choices. I ran as if my entire academic life was on the line, which it was. As much as I loved a good s'more, I wasn't about to eat my way out of the catastrophe heading towards us.

“How did this happen? The spell was only supposed to spread as far as the ends of the Pike stadium. How did the marshmallows melt, and why the hell was it growing? At this rate, it might actually reach the castle. The Headmaster will murder us if he finds out we pulled this prank.” My lower lip trembled at the thought of expulsion. Though I’d had a rough time fitting in during my freshman year, I had come to think of Cliff Haven Academy as my home away from Silver Springs.

We reviewed the plan a million times. We found the perfect spell. I fine-tuned the words and the conjuring movements until they were flawless. We chose the ideal time and place. I even made sure James wasn’t playing in the match. Luckily, he had injured himself on the dueling platform earlier in the week, which forced Cliff Haven to use their backup mage. My brother was safe in the infirmary with a broken rib.

“Don’t worry about the spell right now. Worry about figuring out where to hide.” Reed’s gruff voice

cut through the fog behind me.

My mind spun as I flipped through spell after spell, trying to figure out how to get us out of this mess.

“Dude! I can’t see shit. How can they possibly find us when I can’t find us?” Miz coughed deeply as he wheezed.

“Miz, you have to lay off the junk food. Eat a salad once in a while. If the Pike guys manage to break free, they will kick our asses.

I’m not looking forward to dueling them. They cheat.” Vek was somewhere to my right. I wasn’t sure what he was worried about since he could sprint for days.

Even though his dueling skills were lacking, he could hit the state line before the rest of us could reach the end of the forest.

“Focus! I’m not taking the blame for this!” Zeth’s heavy breath and pounding feet scared me more than the creeping marshmallow of doom.

Zeth wasn't one to panic or fear detention. His impression of a marathon runner made me worry even more.

Aser laughed. "Come on, Zeth. Don't you want to be known as the king of pranks? No one will ever outdo this one. The Pike team will be so embarrassed. They will look like asses fighting their way out of that goo. They'll never call us losers again."

I shook my head at Aser's ability to see the bright side of every failed plan. Well, technically, the plan hadn't failed. Instead, it had worked too well. The jerks on the Hallowed Woods' Pike team would never live down the fact that their match was interrupted by falling marshmallows that grew in size, ending their biggest tournament of the year against Cliff Haven. And none of them knew a spell to stop it.

Their captain, Christopher Myzer, thought he was a god because he was the best mage in the academy's history and rarely lost on the dueling platform.

The rest of the casting team did whatever he

commanded on and off the field. For some reason, he made it his life's mission to make our lives miserable.

Sure, we were outcasts, which every school needed, but we didn't start this war. Devin Pierce, Christopher's right-hand thug, had attacked us first. The Circle of Ravens Coven couldn't let that go, so we struck back. Three years later, with a few injuries and a shit ton of detentions, we were the undisputed victors of the war.

With the ominous creaking and cracking getting closer, I envisioned replanting every tree in the Hallowed Woods knocked down by the sticky blob moving faster than I could run.

"I can't do this much longer!" Not a fan of exercise, my body had yelled at me three oak trees ago to stop punishing it.

"Then figure out where we can hide until this all blows over, Charlie." Zeth's footsteps faltered to my left. His body made a loud thud as he grunted and coughed.

“Are you okay?” Slowing down, I searched the ground, hoping to find Zeth.

Through the fog, I saw a black shadow a few feet away. My hand searched the leaf-covered ground and found a shoe.

Grunting, Zeth slapped away my hand. “I think I sprained my ankle. It’s time to stop running. We need to end this, one way or another.” I cringed at the determination in his voice. I hated when he sounded like a warrior ready to die on the battlefield rather than surrender.

Always one for theatrics, he liked to sound tough, but he hated detention as much as I did.

The motion to my left made me jump when Reed threw himself into the leaf pile beside me. “Babe, you’ve got to figure something out. We need to lay low for a while. They can’t prove it was us if we are far away from here.” He took a deep breath and leaned over to put his warm hand on my cheek. “Focus, baby. I know you can do this.”

Nodding, I looked into his handsome face. He was right. I could figure out how to save us if I had enough time. I had to block out everything and think. I had gotten us out of worse situations than this, sort of.

Six months ago, I had blocked Christopher's sneak attack in the gym after dueling practice when he tried to slime us. Using a fun little spell, I turned his clothing into cement. It took the groundskeeper three hours to chisel away Christopher's clothing.

Three months ago, Christopher's girlfriend, Lucy, had flooded Zeth's room. Performing an insanely complicated protection spell, I had protected Zeth's belongings from the water. Christopher was so pissed when he came into the room to gloat but found us floating around the room on inflatable chairs in our bathing suits.

Even though I was able to turn most of Christopher's pranks against him and his buddies, or at least lessen their impact on us, our coven paid the price for fighting back. Headmaster Marshal had made little

personalized signs for our detention seats in the library. He gave us standard punishments, such as writing apologies and suspending our use of magic outside class. Still, he had to up his game when we refused to surrender.

Last year, we were responsible for weeding the entire campus during both semesters, which made the new gardener happy. This year, we were in the running for most hours dedicated to scrubbing the castle walls. Interior and exterior walls. I had broken a nail on damned near every brick in the school.

Catching up with us, Miz, Aser and Vek fell to the ground, huffing and puffing to catch their breaths.

“What now, Zeth? We need a plan.” Miz wiped the sweat off his face with his blazer sleeve.

Zeth leaned close enough that I could feel his breath on my face. “Charlie, darling, you’ve got this. There’s a reason I chose you to join my coven. You are by far the most talented witch here; you just lack the confidence to take your magic to the next level. That’s

why I gave you the Book of Ancient Charms. I've been preparing you for this moment for the last three years.

It's time to embrace the power within you. Be exceptional, my Raven."

I trembled as I stared into Zeth's eyes. He believed in me. He had faith that I could get us out of trouble. For the first time, I felt like I mattered. Zeth had chosen me to join his coven, not my twin, the champion, my parent's favorite child, the Headmaster's darling and the school's beloved James. Tears sprang to my eyes when I looked at the smiling faces of the other coven members. My friends believed I could do this.

For the first time in my life, I felt genuinely accepted and worthy. I was finally out of James's shadow. Me. Charlene O'Malley. I wasn't James's sister or one of the O'Malley twins. I was my own person, capable of achieving my own status and making a name for myself.

Accepting the challenge, I closed my eyes and

flipped through all the spells I had memorized from the book, just in case I needed them. It was my time to shine. I could do this.

Rubbing my hands together, I searched for the right words to prove I had more skill and power than my brother.

“Everyone, hold hands and hang on.” Zeth took Reed’s hands as Miz, Aser and Vek joined hands.

“Oh man, please don’t turn my skin blue like Miz did a few weeks ago. Getting my skin color back to the right tone took forever.” Vek whined.

“Everyone, quiet! Let Charlie concentrate.” Zeth’s gruff voice silenced everyone.

To perform my miracle, I needed my companion, my familiar.

“*Îl chem pe Ignatius, familiarul meu credincios.*” Twisting my hands around and around, I formed a ball of crackling green energy and focused on the image of my best friend. I pulled my arms wide, and Ignatius flew out of the summoning portal. Taking

to the air, his shiny black wings disappeared into the foggy sky. Hidden inside the clouds, my raven would be my eyes and ears. *“Ignatie să fie ochii și urechile mele.”*

“I love how your eyes glow with purple energy when you connect with Ignatius, babe. It’s impressive and sexy as hell.” Reed’s hand rubbed my knee.

“Keep it in your pants, man. She’s working.” Vek slapped Reed’s hand away.

Ignoring Vek and Reed, I shifted my vision to see the entire forest through Ignatius’s eyes. The sticky marshmallow had slowed but would overtake us within a few minutes.

Back at the field, some Pike players had freed themselves from their gooey prison. They were helping the fans out of the bleachers and pulling them to the safety of Hallowed Woods Academy. The jerks would probably get commendations for their bravery.

Ignatius flew closer to us, searching the woods for the Hallowed Guardians, who would love to catch us

and make themselves look good. Locating them and the Headmasters of both academies on the far side of the woods, I relaxed. The marshmallow would hit us before anyone of interest found us.

“Okay. We’re sort of in the clear, but we’re still too far away from the castle to make it on foot in time to appear innocent. We have to transport ourselves to the castle before the Cliff Haven Guardians go room to room to rule out the guilty parties.”

Miz groaned. “We’re fucked. No student on campus has successfully transported to their intended destination. Pulling a familiar from your room takes serious skills, Charlie, but relocating all six of us is insanity. I’m not interested in catching a bus back from North Dakota or wherever the spell decides to drop us. Let’s just surrender. Scrubbing the castle isn’t that bad.”

Snorting, Aser put his hand on my shoulder. “I trust you, Charlie. You can do this. We will be legends at this school after graduation, and the memories of our

misdeeds fade a little.”

Vek shook his head. “I heard the last kid who tried to transport without a teacher helping him lost a few fingers. I can’t handle that. I’m supposed to meet up with Casey tomorrow night behind the gym. I need my fingers if you know what I mean.”

“Shut up, Vek. You’ll lose more than your fingers if I have to listen to one more self-righteous speech from the Headmaster. I’m tired of hearing him drone on about using my gifts for the greater good. He has no idea what it’s like to be us. The wicked must be punished, and we’re strong enough to do that with Charlie.” Surprised by Zeth’s statement about punishing the wicked, I gulped. Fighting back was one thing, but punishing people wasn’t part of my agenda for the year.

“Zeth, I’m not in your coven to curse people.” My voice broke at the thought of hurting anyone. Stupid pranks were supposed to cause chaos, though sometimes the spells accidentally hurt someone. To

intentionally hurt someone required dark spells. I had no interest in using curses.

Taking my hands in his, he smiled. “Don’t worry about it, Charlie. I’m just tired and in pain. I didn’t mean it that way. I just want to get out of the woods without detention.” He glanced at Reed, who leaned over to kiss my cheek.

“Babe, you can do this. You’ve got what it takes to perform any spell you desire. Now, use that sexy body and conjure the hell out of that transportation spell.” He ran his hand up my thigh and bopped the end of my nose to make me giggle.

Gathering my courage, I nodded. Zeth was right. I could do this.

I stood up and shook out my achy arms and legs. “*Transportați acest...*” I blocked out the sounds of the crashing trees and focused on the precise movement of my feet and arms. Every step and every arm position had to be perfect. If I didn’t curl a toe or finger correctly, we could end up in a lake or at the top

of Mount Everest. Worse still, we could be severely injured if I mispronounced one syllable. I couldn't make any mistakes.

“Don't move a muscle!”

Footsteps to my left heralded the approach of someone who had avoided Ignatius's sight. Christopher was the only one smart enough to cloak himself while searching for us.

Pausing my spell, I put my hands in the air to avoid him attempting to freeze me. I opened my eyes and tried not to laugh at the marshmallow dripping down his face and Pike uniform.

“I'm so happy you find this funny, O'Malley. Half of my team is still stuck in that shit. You're all going to pay for this.” Christopher's wand was at the ready and pointed at Zeth.

Zeth slowly raised his hands as he got to his feet. “I find it interesting that you're out here searching for us instead of helping your teammates, your supposed friends. Did you even think about helping them, or was

seeking vengeance on us too strong a motivator? If you were smart, you would have brought the Headmasters along instead of letting them wander around the woods.”

Sneering, Christopher took a threatening step forward. “No, this is precisely how I want it to be. I sent the headmasters in the opposite direction. I refuse to let anyone stop me from doing what I must.

No rules this time. Just you and me, *Zeth*.” He mockingly drew out Zeth’s nickname.

Aser, Vek and Miz slowly got to their feet, reminding Christopher that Zeth wasn’t alone.

“Guys, let’s call a truce. It’s been a long night, and we need to get out of here before the marshmallow reaches this area. It’s too close to stay here for much longer.” Uninterested in a pissing match so close to curfew, I had to de-escalate the alpha bullshit.

Christopher snorted. “Letting a girl speak for you, Zeth. Figures. You don’t have the balls to face me in a no-spells-barred duel.”

Seeing the fear in Aser, Vek, and Miz's eyes, I was glad they understood the consequences of what Christopher wanted.

Reed put his hand on Zeth's shoulder and gave him a shake. "Show this asshole what it really means to fight a conjurer, Zeth."

Flashing a look of warning, I gave Zeth a quick headshake, attempting to call off this ridiculous plan.

Zeth smiled as he pushed up the sleeves of his black and purple blazer. "Big mistake, Christopher. Now!"

Before I understood what was happening, Zeth, Reed, Aser, Vek and Miz pushed their hands through the air, sending a massive fire wall at Christopher.

Time slowed down as I watched Christopher process how much danger he was in. The standard water or extinguishing spell didn't stand a chance against the power of all five conjurers. There wasn't enough time for Christopher to run or dive out of the way due to the size of the fire blast headed toward him.

“Zeth! Reed! No!”

Watching the fire tear through the foggy air, I did the first thing that came to mind.

“*Eliberați pământul pentru a crea un perete de sol.*” Moving my hands in a scraping motion, I pulled a giant chunk of packed soil from the ground and created a solid dirt wall.

The fire blast hit the cold block of earth with incredible force. The dirt exploded in every direction, sending grass, rocks, and hard clumps of soil at us.

“Ahh!”

“What the fuck?”

“My eye!”

Covering my head, I dove behind a large maple tree to avoid the shrapnel. The rest of the coven ran to escape the chaos.

I closed my eyes and used Ignatius to locate everyone and make sure they were okay.

I was relieved to see everyone getting up from the ground and brushing themselves off.

Searching for Christopher, I prayed the wall was enough to keep him from being burned. From what I saw, the earth barrier had stopped the flames.

“Charlie!” Zeth’s voice pulled me back to reality. Releasing Ignatius’s sight, I poked my head around the tree.

“I’m here. I’m okay.” I stood up and shook the dirt out of my hair.

Seeing Zeth’s eyes bugging out of his head, I noticed him pointing to something. I turned to watch the marshmallow blob closing in on us from all sides.

Shit!

Reed appeared from the other side of the tree and grabbed my arm. “Time to go, Charlie. We need the transportation spell. I’m not ready to die. Are you?”

Shaking my head, I followed him to the clearing where all the best illegal parties took place.

Zeth rushed up to me and grabbed my face. “Time to shine, my Raven.”

My hands shook as I focused on my dirt-covered

friends. I had to do this for them. Putting all my fear and pride into the spell, I ran through it, making sure I had all the components. We needed a miracle.

Slowing down my spinning mind and ragged breath, I spun and twirled, curving my arms and tapping my feet to the rhythm of my heart. *“Transportați acest coven în dormitorul meu din Cliff Haven. Etajul 3, camera 48.”*

Everyone grunted in unison. They must have felt the same intense tugging inside their stomachs.

Feeling nauseous, I threw my arms around my midsection. The forest in the distance wobbled and grew wavy as if I was seeing it through heated air.

An invisible force knocked the wind out of me, sending me to my knees. The back of my mind registered the guys falling to their knees a second after me.

My eyes watered, making it hard to see, but I swore I could see a blurry image of my dorm room.

Afraid I had made a mistake, I tried to think of a

protection spell, but I wasn't fast enough. The ground disappeared beneath me. I felt myself falling off a cliff. I closed my eyes and curled up into a tight ball. Holding my breath, I really hoped we didn't end up in the ocean.

My body slammed into something hard. I gasped, stunned by the impact. Seeing my stuffed dog, Jester, in front of me, I felt so relieved.

I pushed myself into a sitting position and found five disoriented wizards sitting on my dorm room floor.

“Holy shit, she did it. She really did it.” Vek looked at me with shock and admiration.

“Way to go, Charlie.” Aser gave me a thumbs-up as he threw himself back down to relax.

Miz yawned. “Great job. Now, it's nap time.” He curled up on his side and got comfy on my roommate's rug.

Reed blew me a kiss. “You'll get your reward later, babe.”

Smiling, I laughed. I had done it. I had performed a miracle.

I glanced at Zeth, waiting for him to cheer at my incredible accomplishment. My smile faltered when I noticed he was looking toward the door. His eyes narrowed, and his face fell into a sneer.

“What’s wrong, Zeth? We’re safe. We made it.”

He was probably worried about room check, but I was confident that we had returned in time to fool the Guardians into believing we were in the room the entire time. Christopher was the only one who had seen us, but it was our word against his.

“Safe. We’re safe, are we?” Zeth’s sneer deepened as he turned to look at me. “We may be safe, but you aren’t, little Raven.”

Confused, I froze as he stood up and stepped closer to me. Towering over me, he was suddenly menacing, crowding me as he bent over to stare into my eyes.

I quickly looked to the others for help, but none of

them looked at me. Instead, they stared intently at random things in my room. Even Reed silently looked down at the ground.

Zeth growled. “We had him. *He* came to *us*. *He* threatened *us*. *He* set the rules. No spells barred. *He* begged us to fight him. We could have ended it. We could have finally proven that no one fucks with the Unkindness of Ravens Coven and gets away with it. Instead, you had to grow a conscience at the exact moment we were about to set ourselves on the path we’ve all wanted. We’ve all craved. We could have ruled both schools by cursing their precious Christopher. Instead of laughing at us, they would have feared us.” He was less than an inch from my face.

I’d never seen him so angry. I shook in terror, afraid he would challenge me to a duel. I had trouble processing his words and his rage. And since when did he call us an Unkindness of Ravens? That was new. However, after listening to his grand plans of school domination, I realized it had a better ring than the

Circle of Ravens Coven, which I always thought was dumb.

“I don’t understand. That fire blast was strong enough to permanently cripple Christopher or even kill him. You can’t possibly want that.” My mind spun at the implication. There was no way Zeth wanted to curse Christopher. As annoying as Christopher was, he had never cursed any of us. Sure, Zeth hated him, but not enough to kill him, or so I had believed.

My stomach dropped to the floor, and tears sprang to my eyes. How had things gotten so out of control? Had I really stopped the coven from cursing Christopher?

Zeth’s expression changed so quickly that I got whiplash.

His frown dropped into a look of concern. His eyes grew bigger, and he put a shaky hand over his mouth. “You have no idea what you’ve done, Raven. I can’t believe you led us astray. I mean. We all wanted to have a little fun. Sure, we had pulled a prank here

and there, but we never meant for things to go this far.”

He paused to clear his throat before continuing. “Raven, she just, well, she kept pushing the limits of her magic. She was power-hungry. I should have said something when I saw her reading from the Book of Ancient Magicks, but she was my friend. I trusted her. I had no idea how dangerous she really was. She hurt her own brother to ensure that he wasn’t playing in the tournament that night. Then, she unleashed her terrible plan. She intended to drown everyone in liquid marshmallow. We begged her to stop, but she attacked us.”

Behind him, the other coven members muttered spell after spell.

I watched their uniforms tear across the seams and fall apart, revealing welts and bruises across their exposed skin. Bloody cuts and scratches appeared on their faces, arms and legs.

“She went crazy and came after us. We tried to

fight her, but she was too strong.” Vek lowered his broad shoulders and pretended to cower in fear.

The rest of my former friends put on a good show of how they would lie about me. Jerks.

I never should have made them my special caramel chocolate angel food cake.

Zeth waved his arm, opening the dorm room window. I watched Ignatius fly to Zeth’s arm and hop onto his shoulder.

Blinking, I saw my traitorous familiar take a piece of his favorite chewing gum from Zeth’s hand and blow a bubble.

Et tu, Brute?

“What? Did I not give you enough bubble gum, Ignatius? Did I not give you enough affection during our spa days or read enough bedtime stories when it was thundering?” Of all the people I thought I could count on, I expected Ignatius to be at the top of that list.

Ignatius looked straight at me with his black eye.

“Zeth tells me I’m a good boy.”

Dumbfounded, I nodded. I couldn’t fault Ignatius for falling into Zeth’s trap since I had done the same thing.

I felt numb and alone. I never would have believed that my supposed friends could sink so low, or rather, had sunk so low as to turn on me.

“What’s wrong with all of you? Why can’t you understand that I saved you all from prison?”

You can’t really believe the students would fear you if you cursed Christopher. Cursing someone doesn’t make you cool. It makes you a criminal. I’m going to the Headmaster.” I pushed myself off the floor, but Zeth threw out his hand, sending me crashing into the far wall.

Mad at myself for not expecting Zeth to attack, I accepted the throbbing pain in my head and used it to fuel the next spell that came to my mind.

“Not so fast, Raven. You don’t want the Headmaster to find this in your room.” He picked up

the Book of Ancient Charms and waved his hand.

The cover changed from a thin blue cover to a thick black leather-bound cover with “*Book of Ancient Magicks*,” hand carved into the leather. My cute blue spell book turned into a book of curses you would find on the table of an evil witch who was cooking green goop in her cauldron.

My entire world shifted as the reality of my narrative at Cliff Haven Academy came into focus. Zeth had used me. He used my loneliness to gain my trust. He manipulated my need to prove that I wasn’t just James’s sister by handing me a book of dark spells and encouraging me to learn them. He praised me, so I kept pushing myself to please him. And I fell for all of it.

“I’m guessing you hid the true intentions of the spell book as well. That marshmallow spell wasn’t supposed to drop a few hundred solid marshmallow pieces onto the field. It was supposed to turn into a giant river that would consume everything. How many

other spells did you fuck with?” Fury overrode my fear, focusing my mind as I reviewed every spell, every word of encouragement Zeth had given me. Looking back, I was the one who inadvertently taught Zeth the fire spell he and the coven used on Christopher. The fire spell was supposed to evaporate water to create a thick mist to hide inside, just like the fog tonight. Clearly, the dark spell was much more sinister than a simple evaporation spell.

Zeth’s sneer curled into a smile. “You are smart, Raven, just not smart enough.”

“Fuck you and fuck your glamor. No one will believe I’m responsible for any of this.” Balling up my fists, I assessed the skill and power of each new enemy in the room.

Miz knew stupid spells like door-closing spells and spells that popped open beer cans. He could pop open every beer can in the room at once. Yet, he was more likely to hurt himself if he used an advanced spell, which generally backfired on him.

Aser and Vek were morons, but they always kept a few spicy spells in their back pockets for emergencies, such as tripping spells and migraine spells. I wasn't too worried about them.

Reed and Zeth were the ones I had to watch. Reed didn't hold back when he dueled. He threw everything he had into a spell, even when conjuring innocent spells. If he made a rose, he made the biggest fucking rose imaginable. And Zeth knew a bunch of dangerous spells, which he obviously wasn't afraid to use.

Chuckling, Zeth smiled. "Oh really? If I used a darkness spell, how would you counter it?" He crossed his arms, tucking the book under his armpit to prove he wasn't trying to conjure. Looking at Ignatius, he blew him a kiss.

I wanted to roll my eyes and say I'd use a daylight spell. Instead, I opened my mouth and said, "The Luminozitatea Soarelui spell." Confused, I blinked a few times.

Why would I use a light spell as bright as the sun

that would blind someone and scorch anything near me? That certainly wasn't a standard defensive spell.

My eyes went to the book in Zeth's hand. Why was my first instinct to use a spell from the Book of Ancient Magicks?

“That's right, my little dark Raven. There's a reason why witches are warned never to read from this book. As terrible as the spells are, the need to use them after reading them is so much worse. You're good at memorizing spells. Yet, how can you recall every single spell from this book after only reading a spell once? Only truly talented and powerful witches can perform the magic inside these pages, witches like you. But, the terrifying part is this, Raven. The more powerful the witch is, the greater the urge is to use the spells. Now that I've removed the glamor and you know the book's actual name, its spells will forever live inside you, begging to be used.” He smiled sinisterly like an actual Bond villain.

I couldn't believe it. Zeth had intentionally given

me a cursed book of dark magik – the Michelin star of dark magik books. It contained the kind of magic that you didn't pass Go and collect \$200.00. Instead, you went straight to jail for using it.

“You son of a bitch.” I raised my arm to conjure a spell but forced myself to stop. I had no idea which spell would come tumbling out of my mouth. As much as I hated him, I couldn't risk getting into more trouble by cursing him.

The asshole actually bowed. “I will take that as a compliment. Now, if you are finished with your useless moral temper tantrum, we have work to do. Come along, my little dark Raven.”

“No.” I crossed my arms and planted my feet like a toddler, which wouldn't do any good. The only way to leave the coven would be to scare them so badly that they ran from me.

Reed finally stepped forward and placed his hand on my cheek. “It will be so much easier if you give into it, babe. Imagine all the things we could have. We have

an amazing future ahead of us.” He leaned forward to kiss me but turned his head to whisper in my ear. “If you resist, we’ll do worse than ruin you. We’ll ruin your brother. Is it worth watching James fall from grace when you have a way to stop it?”

He pulled his head back to kiss me like it was an ordinary Tuesday, and he hadn’t just threatened my brother.

With all eyes on me, waiting for my ultimate decision, I smiled.

“You’re right, Reed. We can have everything we ever wanted.” Taking Reed’s hand, I played along.

It would take time for them to trust me completely, but I would bide my time until I figured out how to send them all to the deepest, darkest magical prison I could find. Once I did that, I would find a way to remove my curse.

Chapter 2 Milo

Silver Springs, NY, Present Time

“We never go out for lunch together, Boss. I like this.” I wiped the sauce dripping down my chin from my chicken parm sub.”

Dahlia gave me a puffy cheek smile since her mouth was stuffed with cheese fries. Swallowing, she put her hand over her mouth. “This is nice. I love hanging out with the girls, but we should hang out together, just the two of us.”

I was happy that Dahlia considered me a friend instead of just an employee. I valued her opinion when it came to tattooing, but I appreciated her friendship more.

I was also very protective of her.

While she was always kind and helpful, I learned early on how unique she was. She was special enough to need two wolves watching over her.

Even before I realized she was a psychic, I’d learned to listen to her strange advice. Whenever she said something offhand, it would always relate to a future occurrence, even if she didn’t realize it. Her comments had come in handy a few times. I was proud to be her unofficial familiar.

“So when are Charlie and James coming back to town? Have they said anything about their cousin’s wedding?” Did I sound desperate? Was it obvious I was scared that Charlie would drink too much and hook up with a handsome groomsman? Technically, I had no right to say anything since I had a girlfriend for the last year, but that was only because I was trying to give Charlie space. The last thing she needed was me dropping to one knee in the middle of the pub and begging her to marry me, especially since she had no clue we were mates or that I was even interested in her.

Though Charlie had never directly told me about her shitty dark wizard ex-husband, I'd heard plenty from Dahlia and Gray. Had I known the full extent of what the bastard did to her, I wouldn't have gone easy on him when he attacked Dahlia.

"Her cousin got married inside the barn at their farm. An emu was the best man. Charlie complained about removing mud stains from the bottom of her dress. I got the impression she was relieved to come home. She should be back by now." Dahlia pulled out her phone to show me photos of the wedding that Charlie had sent. I found it interesting that Dahlia didn't mention James once.

Studying the photos, I smiled. Charlie was dazzling in her low-cut green dress. She must have driven every man at the wedding crazy with her hair pulled up, exposing her long neck. I couldn't stop staring at her. I imagined dancing with her while she was dressed like that. My wolf would've challenged everyone in the room to a fight and carried Charlie away before they had second thoughts about claiming my mate.

"It looks like they had a beautiful wedding." I handed the phone back and looked away. I had to get myself under control before I terrified the lunch crowd with my yellow predatory eyes and the howl building in the back of my throat. I wanted everyone to know Charlie was mine, but I had to keep myself in check. I didn't want to scare her off.

"Any second thoughts about your new tattoo?" Dahlia pointed towards my ribs.

Chuckling, I raised my eyebrows at her. "We both know I asked you to tattoo a compass along my ribs to help me find my way now that I'm free to live without the fear of my former pack coming for me. I'm not sure why you tattooed a black raven instead."

A sly smile spread across her face as she pushed up her glasses. "Yes,

you do. Instead of helping you find a pathway, I gave you a destination. Of course, I planned to tattoo the compass, but the universe told me to tattoo something different. I get the feeling you'll understand soon enough."

Sighing, I looked down at the tattoo on the back of my hand that read, "Unthinkable." It was the response I gave Gray when our insane pack showed up for a fight. We did the unthinkable and took on our parents and the Wildling Pack so we could stay in Silver Springs. Thankfully, everything had worked out, but it was the second scariest thing I'd ever done. The first was deciding to leave our pack and run for our lives.

I wasn't sure how the raven would figure into things, but somehow, I knew it had to do with Charlie. Dahlia knew it, too. I just had to wait and find out what it meant.

I stretched my back after a long tattooing session in the morning. I couldn't believe how hungry I was after skipping breakfast. I reached for a garlic knot but froze when I saw Dahlia's eyes glazed over.

Shit! Not at Anthony's.

Familiar with the distant look, I stood up and waved to Marco. "Can we get the rest of this to go? Dahlia's not feeling well."

Helping Dahlia to her feet, I looked around the packed restaurant. I had to get her out of there before her vision ended. There was no way of telling if she would scream, cry, punch someone, reach for a pencil and paper or say something completely off the wall. She would be embarrassed by having so many people staring at her once she came out of the vision.

Marco quickly ran over with to-go containers and bags. "Will you make it back to the shop?"

Marco's knowing look made me feel a little better. Since Dahlia practically lived at the pizza place, all the employees had seen the various stages of her psychic power in action. They were super supportive, especially

after she told George, the owner, she saw him investing in other locations. Since then, he'd opened three new shops in the surrounding towns and was making bank.

"I'm really not sure." Seeing Dahlia's fingers fluttering, I worried that she was about to pop.

He nodded and carried the leftover bags to the front door while I carefully guided Dahlia through the restaurant. Using my height, I curled around her to hide her from prying eyes.

"Good luck, man. Let me know if she sees anything good in my future. Okay? Oh, and I gave her some dessert at no charge." Marco handed me the bags and waved.

"She'll appreciate that. Thank you!" Grabbing her with one arm, I pulled her along as quickly as her feet would move. I wanted to throw her over my shoulder and carry her to her office at Lady Blue Tattoo, but I didn't need someone calling the cops, believing that I was trying to kidnap her.

"Marshmallows," Dahlia muttered the word over and over again.

"That's right, Boss. We'll get you some marshmallows to help with your psychic hangover, though you should eat some protein to keep up your strength." Reaching the end of the first block, I looked around to make sure no one was staring at us. "Come on. Not far now."

"Forgiveness, not anger. Proof, not words. Truth, not lies. Companionship, not competition. Trust, not denial. Once they understand, he will rise." Listening intently to her latest prophecy, I said it repeatedly in my head so I wouldn't forget. There was no way of telling if Dahlia would remember what she said, so it was up to me.

"It's okay, Boss." I fumbled around for my phone in my pocket to call for backup, but I dropped the phone and the food. "Damn it."

I let go of Dahlia for a second and leaned down to grab my phone.

Dahlia slowly swayed and fell backward. Diving toward her, I caught her just before her ass hit the sidewalk.

I carefully sat her down and propped her up with my arm while I tried to reach for the phone.

Damn it! Come on, Dahlia, work with me. I don't feel like playing Twister right now.

"Take him to her." Dahlia went completely limp like spaghetti and slipped out of my grasp. She crumpled to the ground and curled up into a fetal position.

"Boss!" Before I could pull her back up, I heard honking and tires screeching.

Turning towards the street, I watched an SUV slam on its brakes. A black ball rolled across the sidewalk and landed a foot away from me.

Curious, I stared at the ball, trying to figure out what it was. The SUV driver rolled down his window and swore at me before speeding away.

Ignoring the driver, I shuffled closer and crouched beside the object he hit. I reached out to poke it and realized it was soft. I stared at it until I noticed it moving up and down as if it were breathing.

"Take him to her." Dahlia's groggy voice made the ball twitch.

"Holy crap, it's an animal." Gently picking up the animal, I saw it was a large raven. "Son. Of. A. Bitch." Apparently, I didn't have to wait long at all.

I glanced back at the spot where the SUV had stopped. How had the driver hit a bird? Why was the bird flying so low? The accident was bizarre.

My eyes settled on something shiny in the road. I'd seen the birds in the forest picking up reflective bits from the ground and taking them back to their nests. Maybe the raven was attracted to whatever it was.

Looking at Dahlia over my shoulder, I saw her lightly snoring. I wasn't about to shake her to ask what her cryptic message meant

Take him to who?

A chill ran down my back as the answer became clear to me.

Shit. I was supposed to take the raven to Charlie, though I had no idea why. Aside from her being a witch and probably knowing about birds because they used them as familiars, I didn't understand why Dahlia's vision preferred Charlie over a trip to the vet.

Leaning over, I finally grabbed my phone as I cradled the raven to my chest. Dialing for help, I stood guard over Dahlia.

"Where the hell are you, Milo? I tried calling you twice. Your next appointment is here." My sister's terse voice made me roll my eyes.

"Cancel the appointment and close the shop. Dahlia's lying on the ground after having a weird vision, and I'm standing here holding an injured raven. I need you at Anthony's Piz..." Before I could finish talking, I heard claws scraping against the pavement in the distance. I looked up to see Gray's wolf bounding towards us.

Seeing Dahlia on the ground, Gray shifted and ran the last few feet. "Is she okay?"

"I think she's asleep. We need to get her safely back to Lady Blue so I can get this raven to Charlie." I turned my body to show her the raven curled up against me.

She carefully lifted Dahlia and held her tightly. "I have no idea what the bird has to do with Charlie, but I got Dahlia. Let's get her to the couch. You can call the guy who wanted a goldfish tattoo on his stomach later and explain why I threw him out of the shop."

Shaking my head at Gray's lack of etiquette, I pushed my phone into my pocket and grabbed the leftovers. I glanced back at the shiny thing in the road. Waiting for a car to pass, I trotted into the street and picked up what looked like a small dog collar. It was teal with green rhinestones attached to

it.

I hopped back onto the sidewalk and examined the collar.

There was no name or any kind of identification on it. Deciding it was more hamster-sized than dog-sized, I placed it around the raven's neck. "Here you go, pal. I hope it was worth the effort."

Following Gray back to the shop, I petted the unconscious raven. Hopefully, Charlie would know what to do with him; otherwise, I would feel stupid showing up with an injured raven.

Unlocking the shop's backdoor, I followed Gray into the waiting room, where she placed Dahlia on the couch. "I'll call Daire, Ian and Aiden and tell them about Dahlia.

Did she say anything before passing out?" She grabbed a spare T-shirt from the closet and pulled a pair of leggings out of her purse to get dressed.

"She said a bunch of things." I quickly repeated everything back to her. "Of all the cryptic things she said, I can't stop thinking about how she told me to *take him to her*. My gut is telling me to go to Charlie."

Never one to question Dahlia's prophecies, she nodded.

"Go. I'll deal with your clients. Aiden can probably help me call them back. Dahlia will sleep this one off for a while based on how she's was drooling on the pillow." She pointed to Dahlia holding the blue couch pillow. I, too, could see that Dahlia was done for the day, which meant I had to figure out the raven problem on my own.

Charlie

Kicking my laundry into a pile in the corner of the room; I wasn't in the mood to wash it before my shower. Long car trips always made me feel sweaty, but leaving a farm smelling like horses and goats, plus the car ride, was too much to deal with.

I missed seeing Joely, but at the same time, farm life was not for me. I was happy petting the animals, but caring for them was not my jam. Once a big city girl, I was surprised to see how quickly Joely had adapted to life with John on his farm. Seeing her knocked over when feeding the pigs for the first time two years ago was hilarious. Now, she was a pro at feeding the pigs. I was proud of the way she had adapted.

Still, I was perfectly fine with living in my small town and coming home, smelling like burgers and beer instead of farm animals. Though, I did have to wake up at the ass crack of dawn most mornings to get the pub set up for the day.

I was happy for Joely and John. Watching them dancing and laughing during the reception was heartwarming. John was a good guy and a positive influence on Joely. He was human and wasn't a fan of magic. It weirded him out. Joely happily left her spell book in the closet when they were engaged, which was why she was the only family member who didn't give me a hard time about not using magic.

Mom and Dad relentlessly nagged about every topic of my life, but not using magic came up more than once during the weekend. Thankfully, I diverted them several times by throwing James under the bus. Since my parents hadn't met Gray, or Gunner and Cillian, I had tons of fuel to add to James's interrogation. Best of all, they kept asking him when they would get some grandchildren instead of asking me. I felt terrible that Gray's womb

was the topic of conversation. Still, James had decided to keep her far away from our family, so he was on his own to answer their questions.

Sadly, my wedding hadn't matched my childhood dream, so I had no interest in doing it a second time, even if my husband-to-be wasn't a piece of crap. I hated Reed with all my heart, and I was glad he couldn't hurt me anymore. Why would I want to open myself up to that kind of pain again? There were no guarantees that I would find the right guy the second time around.

Pulling down my ponytail, I ran my hand through my hair to remove the knots from sleeping on the pull-out couch. Man, I missed my bed. I pulled off my shirt and kicked off my jeans.

Hot shower, here I come.

Ding dong!

“What the hell?”

Who the hell was at my door at noon on a Monday?

Everyone who knew me would expect me to be in the shower, running errands for the pub, or serving tables. Which meant they wouldn't come to my house looking for me or would know better than to interrupt my shower.

Pulling on my flannel robe, I rushed down the stairs to glower at whoever was on my doorstep.

I opened the door, ready to shout that I didn't want any when my voice died in my throat. Standing before me was Milo, breathless as if he had run from his house. In his arms was a black mass of some kind.

“Charlie! I know you just got home and were probably headed for the shower, but I had to see you.”

Seeing the panic in his eyes, I waved him inside.

“Of course, please, come in, Milo. What's wrong?” I waited for him to catch his breath, which was strange. I'd never seen him breathless before. His

wolf could sprint through town without breaking his stride. He must have been distraught.

“You have to help him.” Carefully moving the thing in his arms, he reached out to hand me whatever he was carrying.

Looking down at his hands, it took a moment for my brain to fully register what I saw. At first, I thought I was looking at a dead crow until the light hit the black feathers in such a way that the blue and purple shimmer became apparent.

Holy shit!

Milo was holding a raven. Based on the slight motion of its chest, it was still alive.

Blinking a few times, I looked closer at the raven’s face. “Why is it wearing a cat collar?”

Milo shook his head. “He was hit by a car. I think he flew into the street to grab it so I put it on him. Please, you have to help him.”

Confused by his statement, I glanced up at him. “He needs a vet, not a chef.”

Huffing, Milo pulled the raven against his chest and paced across my living room. “I knew this was a mistake. I must have misunderstood what Dahlia was saying. She mentioned marshmallows, then the thing about forgiveness, not anger, proof, not words, truth, not lies and companionship, not competition. Then he will rise. I don’t know what to do.”

I held up my hands. “Hold on. *Dahlia* told you to bring *him* to *me*?”

Milo had my full attention. I had learned as a kid never to fuck with Dahlia’s visions.

He took a calming breath and told me everything Dahlia had said during her trance.

The words that really caught me were “marshmallow” and “he will rise.”

It was definitely a prophecy. Dahlia had to be talking about the marshmallow attack of 2007, which was a bad sign. If her vision started there and ended with “he will rise,” it meant someone from my past would show up soon.

Great.

If Dahlia saw Milo handing the raven to me, then it could only mean one thing.

The bird was my former familiar, Ignatius.

I could only guess why he was in town, but it definitely had to do with my dark past. Even if it wasn't Ignatius, I believed the bird was part of a bigger problem.

“Okay, let's all take a moment to think this through. Let's get the raven to the bathroom to figure out how badly injured he is.” And if he would make it through the night.

I wasn't sure how to feel about seeing Ignatius again, or Iggy, as I called him when he was being sweet.

Poor Milo stood over the sink, trying to figure out how to help the bird. Technically, I could use magic to examine or heal him, but that was out of the question.

Checking the bird's wings, I felt a break on the left one.

Aside from that, nothing else felt squishy or out of place. Grabbing an elastic bandage from under the sink, I carefully wrapped the broken wing based on the magical pets' first aid class I had taken as an elective.

“Will he be okay?” My heart broke at Milo's concern for the creature. His wolf must have felt a connection to him on some level, which was adorable. Milo really cared about people. I appreciated that he would look out for a random animal the same way he would a friend.

“That's up to him. Once he wakes up, we'll see how he feels. I'll swing by the pet shop and get him a cage, food, a water bowl and pain meds. We

need to restrict his movement until his wing heals.” Look at me being Nurse Nancy, like the little girl from the kid’s books I used to read to Ignatius.

Of course, I wouldn’t be reading him books if this were my former friend. I would be reading him his rights. I needed to keep him contained so he didn’t fly back to his master, whoever that might be.

“Thanks, Charlie. I just didn’t know what to do with him.” Milo threw his arms around me and pulled me into a tight hug. I could practically feel the stress leaving his body.

“You did the right thing, Milo.” Well, based on what Dahlia said, he did the right thing.

Hopefully, Dahlia knew what she was doing, or rather, the universe knew what it was doing.

He pulled back and smiled at me. “I’m glad you’re home.”

“Me too.” And I actually meant it. At that exact moment, I felt like I was home. Not the physical place but the sensation deep inside that made a person feel warm, happy, protected, and loved.

Milo walked to the front door and gave me a small wave.

“Let me know how he or she is doing. I’ll see you, Charlie. Thanks again.” He pulled the front door closed.

Turning back to stare at my feathered guest, I had to keep an eye on him, not in the Good Samaritan way, but in a prison guard way. If he was my former friend, and he was in league with another dark wizard, I could have a war on my hands.

Chapter 3 Charlie

“Kick him in the balls!” Sitting on my blanket on the edge of the graveyard next to Dahlia’s house, I took a bite of my turkey sub, complete with extra pickles.

Daire used a lame scatter spell to send the giant demon with the strange purple eyes and long horns and the demon with the blue hair in separate directions. Unfortunately, it wasn’t strong enough to scatter the energy holding them to this realm. I should have suggested a banishing spell or the *Fuck Off and Go Back to Hell* spell that I had just invented, using a variation of an ancient, more powerful scatter spell. Instead, I threw a few salt and vinegar chips into my mouth.

“I don’t think he has balls, Charlie. How about giving me something that might actually help?” Daire dove and rolled under the slashing talons of the demon with oversized fangs and claws.

Handing a granola bar to Dahlia, I waved to Ian. “Behind you!”

A sneaky, forked tongue demon was trying to be stealthy and knock Ian to the ground.

Dahlia smiled. “Thank you. I love the full peanuts in these bars. They’re better than the ones with ground-up peanuts. I like the crunch.”

Agreeing, I nodded and mumbled. “So good.”

I almost felt bad for James, who had dropped off our picnic lunch at Dahlia’s house but didn’t leave fast enough before Daire sneezed and accidentally summoned the demons. Poor guy. He’d had a head cold for over a week. In that time, he’d called upon six random ghosts, most of whom were friendly, except for that douche of a ghost name Arnold, who was a peeping tom during his life.

Then there were the poltergeists, two boggarts, the spirit of a pissed-off moose, the spirit of his high school science teacher, who despised him and tried to fail him, the spirit of his mother who cried and said she expected more of him as an adult, two spirits of lawyers who threatened to sue him and the demons he was currently battling.

“Hey, Charlie. What was that spell we used on Dad when he was extra cranky? It was a lullaby spell of some kind.” James threw his hand into the air, summoning lightning into the demon's chest to his left.

Seeing James mid-battle brought back so many memories.

Most of them were good, except for the ones when he attacked me in the kitchen because I took the last cookie.

“Sorry, I don’t remember.” I hated lying to my twin, but thankfully, we didn’t have that mystical twin connection that allowed him to know I was lying. If he did, I would have been in a shit ton of trouble. Despite all the years, he still didn’t understand why I refused to use magic or why I had stayed with Reed for so many years.

If he or anyone else knew about my curse, they would try to help me. I couldn’t let them do that. I couldn’t put them in danger. After years of researching a cure for the curse placed on me by reading the Book of Ancient Magicks, I understood all too well the consequences of removing it.

“Should we be worried that the demons will come after us?” Dahlia took a swig of her soda and softly burped.

“Nah. The demons are likely working for someone. They aren’t the typical demons you see walking around Silver Springs. These are higher-level demons. They have no interest in getting jobs and living like humans. They’re more interested in ending the world by turning it into a version of Hell. They want the heavens to rain down fire and watch everyone perish. You can’t reason with assholes like them. You can’t bribe them with Taylor

Swift concert tickets and expect them to leave peacefully. You have to send them back to Hell, though the right level of Hell. You don't want to unleash them on the average tech demons."

Popping a few pretzels into my mouth, I drowned out Daire's high-pitched screams as one of the demons chased him around the cemetery.

"Huh. Daire thought he summoned these things. Why didn't you tell him it wasn't his fault?" Licking the Cheetos crumbs from her fingers, Dahlia watched Ian wallop a demon with a punching spell that had a high level of difficulty.

I shrugged. "I'll tell him later. I'm having too much fun watching him freak out over summoning the demons."

Dahlia shook her head at me. "You guys have to be nicer to Daire."

Snickering, I wiped the corners of my mouth with my napkin. "Daire has to stop letting his anxiety override his rational thought. Pulling a spirit from its resting place isn't hard for a necromancer. Summoning a demon of the highest order requires precision, ingredients that are nearly impossible to find, skill, strength, and the name of the demon. You can't just call it Toblerone and expect it to show up or have a crazy sneezing fit. Once he calms down, he'll realize how silly he was."

Granted, Daire had already summoned a powerful demon, so he definitely had mad skills. Though, these demons hadn't captured the love of his life.

Dahlia laughed. "I still can't believe Daire called Tenebrion the name of a chocolate candy. That's something I would totally do."

Keeping myself busy with my lunch, I ignored the spark of magic gathering at my fingertips. In the back of my mind, a multitude of spells gathered, each one capable of hurting, destroying, or sending each demon back to the Nether World.

My body ached to stretch my arms and legs, contorting into the perfect pose to conjure the spells. Instead, I riffled through my favorite recipes for cornbread, homemade potato salad, green bean casserole, sourdough bread and chicken potpie from scratch. I imagined kneading and rolling out the dough, chopping vegetables, and stirring chicken broth in a large vat, anything to keep me from calling upon one of those spells, or rather, curses. I had disciplined myself for years, but it didn't make it any easier to convince myself not to use the dreaded curses imprinted on my brain.

Meditation sometimes helped until the curses whispered, begging me to unleash them. Exercise usually helped, but staying busy and packing my day with tasks without giving me more than two minutes to think or rest usually did the trick. Sometimes, I felt that if I stopped and stood still for five minutes, I would give into the book's desire to conjure all the spells inside it.

Nope. Not today.

I would not give in. Instead, I had to watch my friends and brother figure out how to stop the demons on their own.

As it was, it took more effort than I had expected to push away the desire to carry out more spells after using the Nightmare spell on Zeth and his cohorts a few weeks ago. I went through a sort of magical withdrawal. The pain alone reinforced my willpower to ignore the curses threatening to overtake me at any moment.

“Oh, I meant to tell you about the new yoga instructor at the coven. Ian suggested we try a class with him. I liked the other instructor, but Ian says this guy will challenge us. While it doesn't sound appealing, I figured I should try it. I want to have the skills to fight things like that someday.” She pointed to the demon writhing on the ground next to James, who had finally figured out that a positive energy spell would disrupt the negative energy of the asshole controlling these things.

“While I would love to see you kick a demon in the balls, I doubt even Gray could take down one of those things.” Just as I spoke, Gray’s wolf sprinted past us and leaped at the blue-haired demon, grabbing it by the throat with her teeth and pulling it to the ground. Biting its wrist, she stopped it from clawing her. Her sharp teeth dug into the demon’s side, drawing black blood from the wound.

Dahlia snorted. “You were saying?”

Watching Gray shift back to two legs, she did one of those flying kick things, knocking another demon away from James. Shifting in midair, she pounced on the back of a third demon before whipping her head around, biting the leg of the last demon, and knocking him to the ground.

With a few seconds to think, the boys regrouped. I wanted to shout a spell that would turn them to ash, but they would never forgive me if I told them to curse the demons with a death spell. Killing things wasn’t their mission, even if it meant saving the town and the people they loved.

I gathered my trash and waved at Dahlia. “I have to make sure the beer dude arrives on time, or there won’t be a happy hour tonight. Tell everyone I was impressed by their skills, and drinks are on me later.”

I had to keep moving, thinking and planning. I had to fight the urge to succumb to the darkness, waiting for its chance to break loose inside my mind.



Charlie

Shining my living room lamp at the new birdcage in my living room, I pulled up a kitchen chair. I sat down and glared at my new houseguest.

“So, what will it be, the rack, a bed of nails, or Baby Shark on repeat? What will make you talk, bird.” I sat back, waiting for the raven to give some indication that it understood what I was saying or, at the very least, thought I was funny. “Who are you working for? Who sent the demons into the cemetery this morning? What’s the master plan here?”

The raven ignored me to groom his feathers, careful to limit the motion of his broken wing.

“We both know I can fix your wing, Ignatius. Just say the word, and I’ll break my no-magic rule to help you.” I wasn’t sure if I was wasting my time talking to a regular, run-of-the-mill raven or my old familiar. Given how we ran into each other, my gut told me there was more to this bird than he was letting on.

I felt a little foolish interrogating an ordinary bird. Still, if there was a slight chance that the raven was playing me, I had to know if I was dealing with Ignatius.

“I want to know why you’re in town. Are you spying on me? Clearly, you aren’t running back to me, begging for my forgiveness. Or, have you been in town ever since Zeth sprinted for the next zip code? I don’t recall seeing any suspicious ravens in town, but you know how to be sneaky.” Of all the betrayals I’d suffered, Ignatius’s was the worst. There were still days when I thought about summoning him just to see him again.

“I thought we were friends. When I chose you at the magical pet shop, I thought we would be together forever. I was the only kid in the store you said hello to. I noticed you were separated from the other ravens, so I assumed

you were lonely like I was. I was so excited to play with you and teach you new words. When you hopped onto my shoulder, I immediately felt bonded to you. I guess you didn't feel the same way." Sniffling, I tried not to tear up at the memories of my first days getting to know Ignatius.

The second we returned to the academy, I ran into the yard and lifted him into the air. He took flight and flew around the castle and grounds, getting a feel for his new home.

After a few circles, I clicked my tongue, and he landed on my head. I giggled when he hopped down to perch on my shoulder. I felt loved when he nuzzled his head against my cheek. Petting his head, the loneliness drift away.

James rushed through the front door.

"Learn to knock." I snapped at his annoying habit of walking into the house as if he still lived there.

"Yeah, okay, Dad." He rolled his eyes and sat on the couch. "Is it him?"

I threw my hands up. "I've been at this since the raven woke up. He's giving me nothing to work with. I've been covering the cage as much as possible to prevent him from spying. I don't want Zeth, or whoever he pledged his loyalties to these days, to be able to see through his eyes."

James turned to look at me. "Wait. I thought the ability to look through a familiar's eyes required complicated spells and a lot of power. Zeth was ambitious, but he wasn't that gifted. Could he pull off a spell like that?"

"Zeth is creative and crafty. He could have found someone else to perform the spell." I doubted Zeth was stupid enough to read from the Book of Ancient Magicks, but James was right about him being ambitious.

It was more likely that Zeth had found some other sucker to work for him.

"What do you plan on doing?" I appreciated that James wasn't telling

me what to do. Instead, he was letting me handle the latest bullshit in my life.

Standing up, I tapped the cage, startling the bird.

“Oh, I’ll make him talk; otherwise, we will serve raven wings with garlic sauce.” Part of me hoped I was dealing with a regular bird who might one day forgive me for taunting him. I wasn’t sure if I could handle confronting my former best friend.

I tossed the shade over the cage and motioned for James to follow me outside. Closing the front door, I looked around the yard.

“If it is Ignatius, someone may show up to rescue him. He’s a valuable familiar. He’s been around long enough to know how to be of use to a conjurer. Whoever owns him won’t like that he’s been sidelined. He’s here for a reason. If he can’t do his job, whatever that might be, I guarantee someone will get twitchy enough to come for him.” I crossed my arms and glared at everyone driving by the house.

James let out a long breath. “I’d ask if you will set up a protection spell on the house, but I know better. I’ll set up spells to keep strangers out and alert you to a break-in.”

He rubbed my shoulder to show he cared.

“Thank you. Just make sure that a raccoon isn’t going to set it off if it gets too close.” I didn’t need to be woken up at night because a trash panda was looking for discarded brisket.

He stopped short and backed up. “What if they send a raccoon shifter to break in? Zeth is a little crazy. We should plan for the unexpected.” He chuckled at his joke.

“Sadly, Zeth is crazy enough to do something like that. Let’s make sure the protection spells keep out raccoons, regular ones, and shifters.” I didn’t like the idea of playing Zeth’s games again.

Hopefully, my nightmare curse made Zeth think twice about attacking

me directly, but I wouldn't hold my breath.

This time, I didn't care who he threatened. I would make him so afraid of me that he would run far, far away permanently.

Chapter 4 Charlie

“Hurry up. I don’t want to be that person who shows up in the middle of class. I would rather walk into school naked than walk into a yoga class late. I don’t need those judgy eyes on me. Those women get up at the ass crack of dawn to be in the first row so they can show off their perfect poses to the instructor. They also like to smack talk people who can’t hold their positions, so I’ve been practicing.” I checked my watch as we walked up the steps of the Black Dawn Coven. Only the promise of a new yoga instructor would make me intentionally walk into a coven, that and an excellent tricky tray auction.

Gray sneered. “I dare anyone to complain about my Super Soldier pose.”

Shaking her head, Dahlia looked at me. “Next time, we’re leaving Gray in the car. I have a hard enough time training and sparing with her. I don’t need to see her nailing all those impossible poses just to improve her sex life.”

I almost tripped on the top step when the mental image of Gray in a yoga pose with Gunner, Cillian, and my brother standing around her.

Ick.

Pushing away that nightmare, I tightened my ponytail. “Since I have no one to show off my yoga skills to, I will seek higher enlightenment to find balance within myself.” Inner peace was more like it.

“I hope we get to do the corpse pose. I need a power nap.” Dahlia swiped her official coven ID and opened the door to let us walk ahead of her.

I chuckled. “You could literally fall asleep in the front row of a Metallica concert. I remember when you got into trouble because you learned how to sleep with your eyes open in the fourth grade. I was so jealous.”

Dahlia shrugged. “There was nothing to be jealous of. I had too many nightmares to sleep at night. It’s only since meeting Ian and Daire that I’ve learned how to shut off my brain at night. Of course, even the mental exercises they’ve taught me can’t keep all the darkness out. Last night, I had a whacked-out dream. I saw four men mud wrestling. They were super angry. One turned into a duck, one turned into a robin, one turned into a chicken, and the last one turned into a penguin.”

“Geez. That sounds like one of those job interview questions. Which animal are you? I would pick the honey badger if it was on the list.” I snickered at the thought of shifting into an animal again. Oh, what I would give to be young and back at the academy learning cool spells.

I shook the thought from my head.

No. Those were not the good ole days. That was my past, and those memories should stay in the past.

Gray stopped in the middle of the hallway to look at Dahlia. “Who won?”

Dahlia pulled off her glasses and shoved them into her gym bag. “Hell, if I know. I was too busy trying to run in the other direction. Chickens terrify me.”

Laughing, I put my arm around Dahlia. “I will help Daire look for a more potent sleep spell for you. We’ll get these nightmares under control. I promise.”

I couldn’t stand knowing Dahlia still suffered from her psychic abilities. Yet, I couldn’t bring myself to create a spell that might actually help her. I loved her like a sister, but I couldn’t risk losing myself to the dark magic.

I followed Gray into the room on the left and suppressed the urge to run back to the car. Though this was technically a yoga class for conjurers to improve their flexibility, strengthen their core muscles and boost the power

of their spells, it was open to the public. Non-supes would believe they were at a regular yoga class to learn mindfulness and tone their bodies. That's why I was there. I loved chicken wings too much, so I had to find fun ways of staying in shape.

I watched Dahlia nervously eye the other men and women in the class. She'd always been self-conscious about her appearance. Having found her mates, she had more confidence, but sometimes, I saw the doubt creeping back in.

"Don't forget to use your stomach muscles to hold the positions." I smiled at her as we walked past a blonde who was giving Dahlia that, *what is she doing here*, glance because Dahlia wasn't rail thin.

I wanted to tell the woman Dahlia could talk to ghosts from this woman's past and learn juicy details, but I restrained my motherly instincts. Dahlia could take care of herself, especially while wearing the magically enchanted jewelry Daire had given her. Hell, she could take me in a fistfight.

Dahlia nodded and patted her stomach. "I'm excited that I finally have core muscles, even though I'm still learning how to use them."

Glancing back at Dahlia, Gray smirked. "Don't worry, Boss. Soon, you'll have upper and lower body strength, too. You just have to stop crying when we're sparring."

Dahlia rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue at Gray. "Maybe that's just my battle cry."

I chuckled. "*Ow, you're hurting me* isn't much of a battle cry."

"You try fighting her, Charlie. I'd love to see you go three rounds with Gray. I would grab my popcorn and curl up on the couch to watch that fight." Dahlia smiled brightly at me.

"No thanks. I like my jaw where it is." I waved off Dahlia's taunt. I vaguely wondered what it would be like to fight Gray. While my rational side

threw herself on the ground and laughed hysterically, knowing I would have my ass handed to me in a physical fight, my darker side knew I could take her with magic.

Down girl. No fighting your wolf-shifting bestie for funksies.

Walking past a lady I recognized, I smiled, though she didn't smile back. She was a pub patron, though we'd never really spoken aside from taking her drink orders. Instead, the woman busied herself by unrolling her mat.

Huh. Fine. No free refills for you, miss high and mighty yoga lady.

Gray picked a spot behind me to my left, away from Dahlia.

While Gray didn't mind showing off to the rest of the class, she didn't want Dahlia to compare herself. It was sometimes hard being friends with a badass wolf shifter.

Gray would protect Dahlia with her life, but she never wanted Dahlia to feel less than her in any way, so Gray often went out of her way to downplay her abilities.

Personally, I was happy to blend into the middle of the room.

I was stiff from sleeping weirdly, so I planned to take it easy and play the newb since no one here, aside from my friends, knew I was a witch. To most people, I was just Charlie, the lady who served them drinks and told them the daily specials. Technically, I knew almost everyone in town, but none of them knew me – the real me.

Moreover, they didn't know about my past. Even my friends were clueless, just as I preferred.

Rolling out my mat, I stretched my neck and back. A nice, easy workout was just what I needed to take my mind off the lunch and dinner menu for a little while.

“Good morning, class. My name is Preston. I'll be filling in for Jeff Holder while he gets to spend quality time with his wife and newborn baby

girl. Now, let's plant our feet on the ground, clear our minds and get ready to sweat. Being new here doesn't mean I plan to go easy on you. Jeff has told me all about his routines, so no phoning it in people. We are here to sweat out the toxins and clear all the negative energy from your minds and bodies." Preston smiled like a salesman who had just found the sucker in the car showroom. He had a lot of confidence for someone who walked in off the street to teach a room full of conjurers and shifters. And a badass psychic.

So much for going easy. I quickly glanced around the room to see if anyone else was as grumbly as I was. Seeing every woman and a few guys perk up and smile back at Preston made me look closer at the new instructor.

Dahlia shot me a look that implied if she had to do a handstand, she would be at Anthony's Pizza instead of helping me with back-to-back engagement parties at the restaurant. Thankfully, the town constantly threw engagement parties and weddings, keeping our catering business busy.

Preston's dark hair was short on the sides, but the top was longer and combed back with that cute little flop guys did to keep their bangs out of their eyes. He had piercing blue eyes, which was probably the reason for everyone's sudden attentiveness at 8:15 on a Saturday morning. His loose shirt and long gym shorts couldn't tell me what I needed to know about his physique, but he had to be in decent shape to lead a conjuring class.

The midlevel witches in class would laugh him out of the room if he weren't flexible enough to pull off the problematic moves needed for defensive spells, weather spells, or, my favorite, the burrito-making spell.

That one was a bitch when it came to creating all the toppings. I often struggled with the guacamole phase, which blew up in my face the first few times I attempted it. It was impossible to get out of my hair. If I couldn't twist myself into a pretzel to fold the wrap tightly enough, the room would look like a tornado had hit a Mexican buffet table.

Rubbing his hands together, Preston scanned the room and looked into everyone's eyes. "I like to start with a meditation session so everyone can focus on their goals instead of their evening festivities. Yoga can help build your strength and your mind, but not if you are hoping that cute person from the library calls you for lunch or if your mind is concentrated on counting the seconds until you can escape my class." He chuckled at his joke.

The lady in the matching green body suit and leggings snorted loudly, causing everyone to laugh.

I couldn't help but laugh too. Preston reminded me of an advanced spells teacher at Cliff Haven Academy. He was legitimately funny, but he liked teasing the class about the difficulty of the material. I loved the challenge, so I didn't mind the class.

"Let's get started." He pointed to his mat and sat down with his eyes closed.

Following Preston's instructions, I sat crisscross applesauce on my mat and closed my eyes.

"Great. Everyone get comfy. I want you to clear your thoughts. Focus on the sound of my voice."

Without the distraction of the flirty blonde to my right, smiling and flipping her hair every time Preston spoke, I could finally focus on his voice.

"I want you to think about your childhood. Think about the person who you tried to become. Did you want to be a police officer, a firefighter, a rocket scientist or a business owner? Picture the person you wanted to be when you grew up." Preston's voice was soft yet clear. There was a distinct quality to it that made me want to listen. Few people could hold my scatterbrained attention, but I hung on to his every word.

I did as he said and pictured myself as the adult I expected to become. I'd always believed I would be a successful witch with a business and a

family.

I wanted it all. I wanted to be my own Boss and yet have time for family and friends. I had imagined twin daughters running around causing havoc. Like most conjuring families, magic would be central to everything we did.

After a long day of running my successful, upscale American Cuisine restaurant, I would come home to a loving husband who danced around the kitchen with me. I would create family dinners with new spells using nacho cheese flavors. Laughter would fill the house when we invited our friends to board game night. It would be perfect.

“Great. Keep that picture in your mind. Hold that image of your future self up to your current self. While you probably didn’t become a firefighter or an astronaut, how does your current self compare to who you are now? Would younger you be proud of who you are?” Preston’s voice was melodic as if he was singing directly into my ears. There was no judgment, only curiosity, though there was an undercurrent of something I couldn’t quite discern. He was asking a serious question with enough gravity that made me compare the two versions of myself.

While James and I were very successful in business, sometimes it felt like we were cheating since we had taken over the restaurant when our parents retired. We didn’t have to struggle to create something from the ground up.

Granted, we had to ensure we maintained the food's quality and developed new marketing tricks. *Bring your mom and grandma to watch the male beach volleyball nights* and romantic movie date nights at the pub kept things interesting. Still, it wasn’t the same as owning my own fancy restaurant.

I didn’t even want to compare the dream of marrying a wonderful man to reality. Being married to a dark wizard wasn’t exactly my fairytale ending.

But that was in the past. I had firmly closed the door on that disastrous chapter of my life.

Thanks to Dahlia, Gray, Milo and Dahlia's mates, Reed was locked away for the second time in a magical prison. Sadly, I had completely closed myself off to love, so a husband and children were out of the question.

Preston's voice grew deeper and sharper. "Don't worry if the two versions of you don't compare. There is always time to become the person you've always wanted to be. That's where we will start our meditation. Focus on the version you want to transform into today. Focus on the goals deep inside your heart. Let them fill you with a renewed purpose. Today, we will help you get one step closer to the best version of you."

A heaviness sat on my chest, making it harder to breathe.

Though Preston's words lifted my spirits and settled inside my heart, giving me hope that I could be happy enough to find love, the tone of his voice didn't match his inspirational sentiment.

Instead, it felt like something was pressing against me, pushing its way inside my chest.

My eyes flew open when I realized what was happening. I grabbed my water bottle and threw it at his head.

All around me, I heard a surprised gasp. I ignored the angry faces and grumbles of the people who thought I had lost my mind.

I quickly gathered my stuff as Dahlia beamed at me. She was more than willing to use my madness as a reason for leaving.

Preston rubbed his forehead where the bottle hit him. "I'm sorry, Miss, is there a problem? Did I say something that upset you? Normally, students feel refreshed after my class, inspired even. They don't usually throw water bottles at my head."

His concerned frown didn't fool me for a second.

“You know what you did.” I threw my workout bag over my shoulder and rushed to the door. Gray and Dahlia were hot on my heels.

Preston stood up and held out my bottle to me. “You’re forgetting something.” His tone still sounded amused, but a tenseness around his eyes gave away his true thoughts.

Grabbing the bottle, I turned to look at the rest of the class.

“Don’t let his pretty smile fool you. He’s not what he seems.” I rushed out the door into the hallway.

“Say the word, and I’ll bite his ass. I don’t really need a reason.” Gray bared her teeth as she trailed behind us, guarding our backs as we headed toward the exit.

Trying to unlock my fists, I shook my head. “I’ll tell you later. I’m too pissed to speak.”

Dahlia power-walked next to me. “I felt like I was getting a headache. There was something weird about him.”

I nodded. “You could say that.”

Hearing sneakers running down the hall, I dropped my bag and turned to confront whoever was stupid enough to follow us.

Preston slowed his approach and held up his hands. “Easy now. I just want to make sure you’re all okay. I’m new here and don’t want rumors spreading that I’m a bad guy. I was hoping to make friends in this town. Now, if you tell me what happened, I can explain any misconceptions.”

I laughed harshly at the jerkoff. “Who the fuck are you, Preston? If that’s your real name. Mind telling me why you attempted to use a truth spell on me.” I raised my arms and crouched low into my battle stance, prepared to duel the bastard. Depending on the next words out of his mouth, I would break my no-conjuring rule, or he would give me one hell of an explanation and apology.

Chapter 5 Milo

Feeling the wind in my fur made all my problems fly away.

My tattoo still stung as I dug my paws deeper into the wet grass. I needed to get my ass out of bed more often so I could enjoy the morning dew on my whiskers. Of course, that meant I had to get out of bed in general.

I appreciated Dahlia letting me miss a few days here and there for the past few weeks, but it was time to get my head on straight.

Staying away from work made forgetting about certain people easier.

Who was I kidding? Forgetting wasn't possible, but ignoring...no, that wasn't right either. *Hiding*.

Yes, hiding from certain people was easier. Of course, that was before I showed up on Charlie's doorstep in a panic. She must have thought I was crazy.

Walking home from her house yesterday, I had evaluated my life. I wasn't the strongest or the fastest wolf. I had been trying to improve my strength, yet I knew deep down I wasn't giving it my all. It was hard yearning for something that might never happen. I felt stuck. I'd waited two years for Charlie to realize I was the one.

Unfortunately, Charlie was content without a mate. Who was I to force her into a relationship she didn't want?

Charlie needed someone. No. Deserved someone who could protect her. I would make her feel loved and cherished every day, but she had to accept me into her life willingly.

Leaping into the tall grass, I zipped through a tight grouping of trees, trying to improve my agility and speed. The last time I ran through the trees, I tripped over a large root and landed in the mud. I wasn't going to let that

happen again. It was time to focus.

I rounded the first tree, barely grazing the bark with the tips of my fur. My head shifted to the right, followed by my body as my paws gripped the dirt.

Clearing the second tree, I tried not to feel cocky. I still had ten trees left.

I ducked and weaved, increasing my speed as I went.

The trees were becoming a blur in front of me. I couldn't put one toe out of line, or I would crash.

A high-pitched sound to my left made my ears twitch. I ignored it while rounding the large oak toward the end of my goal. A second high-pitched sound a second later almost made me turn my head. What the hell kind of animal was stupid enough to run near a wolf?

With my final tree in sight, I kicked into high gear.

I focused on beating my time of two minutes...before I had fallen into the mud. Panting hard, I zeroed in on the edge of the last tree. I could do this. I had to do this. I needed a win right.

I approached the last tree and saw two large shadows moving just beyond the oak.

Shit!

Skidding to a stop, my back legs slid out from underneath me.

My ass hit the mud, and I landed on my back. Sliding past the last tree, I twisted and clawed at the ground. I had no idea what the shadows were, but I didn't want to find out until I had control of my body.

I felt like a pup who hadn't entirely found his legs as I scrambled to get all my claws firmly in the dirt underneath the mud. Hefting out a breath, I finally steadied myself on my legs. Unfortunately, the shadows were behind me. I jumped into the air, twisting around to face them. I put on my best

snarling face and growled deeply to scare away whatever was stalking me.

“Aww, that’s cute. The big bad wolf thinks he can frighten us.” Gavril snickered as he crossed his arms.

Aiden laughed. “I would try to shiver in fright if there wasn’t moss hanging on his ears and tail.”

Seeing my vampire friends sent a wave of relief through me.

At least I didn’t have to fight an enemy with a sprained ankle and tail. However, I could have done without the teasing.

I sat back and sneezed at them, showing my annoyance.

“I think we hurt his feelings.” Gavril winked at me as he leaned over to pull the moss off my ears.

He rubbed my head and scratched the side of my face. “You’ll show those trees whose boss, don’t worry. Even if you don’t, you can always lift your leg and make them your bitch.”

Aiden snorted. “Dude! Gross!”

Laughing, Gavril smacked Aiden on the shoulder. “Come on. The sun is almost up.” He pulled the hood of his green sweatshirt over his head and put on his sunglasses.

Aiden squinted through the trees. “I hate mornings, but I do like a good sunrise.” He grabbed the sunglasses hanging from the front of his hoodie and placed them on his face. “Come on, Milo. We ran all the way out here to cheer you up. Change out of your fur and join us.” He walked past me but stopped to look over his shoulder. “We brought a bag of spare clothes, so we don’t have to stare at your balls any longer than we have to.”

Grateful for the clothes and the company, I shifted back to two legs and rummaged through the bag. Seeing what they brought me, I rolled my eyes. “Fuckers.” I pulled out a purple sweater I had seen Dahlia wear on many occasions and tight jean shorts that had to belong to Gavril’s mate, Jupiter.

They laughed like school kids.

“Oh, come on. Show off those sexy legs, Milo.” Gavril whistled at me, prompting me to wiggle my ass at him.

Aiden chuckled. “I thought you enjoyed wearing tight pants.”

Shaking my head, I gave him the finger. “Only when I want good tips from my tattoo customers.”

I stared down at the borrowed clothing, annoyed that my friends were teasing me, and yet, I was grateful that I had friends. I felt like I was finally part of something bigger than myself in Silver Springs.

Sensing that sunrise was close, I sucked up my pride and threw on the clothes. The shorts were much shorter than I realized. They rode up my ass, giving me the worse wedgie ever. How did women wear these things?

Gavril and Aiden couldn't contain their laughter as I tried to get the damned thing zippered.

“I need a photo of this.” Aiden pulled out his phone, but I extended my fangs and snapped at him.

“Fine, I'll just have to describe what you look like to Gray.

Great. Just what I needed. My sister would never let me forget that I wore short shorts.

Ignoring them, I climbed the large oak and sat on a sturdy branch halfway up the tree. Gavril and Aiden leaped and swung from branch to branch until they had a clear view of the sky over the trees. We settled in and watched the sky lighten, casting brilliant orange and yellow beams.

As much as I hated living like a feral monster in the woods with my pack, I did miss the sunrises and sunsets.

Like my sister, I loved bright colors and scenic overlooks. Though I didn't understand the concept of tattooing then, I had carved rocks, trees, and even ice with the beautiful landscapes I saw around me.

When I learned how to use a tattoo gun, I nearly cried when I realized I could finally add color to my “carvings.”

Gavril cleared his throat. “Intervention time, Milo. We want to know why you’ve been so upset lately. When I text to see if you want to hang out, you don’t reply. When I call Gray to make sure you’re still alive, she says you’re locked away in your room. What’s up, man? You broke up with your girl a few weeks ago, but don’t seem heartbroken. I know you aren’t sick. So what’s up? You’re acting like a man afloat without a life raft, yet you have the perfect job you love and amazing friends who leave their warm beds and sexy mates to cheer you up. What more do you need?”

Swinging his legs over a branch to face me, Aiden frowned. “Are you afraid that your parents will come back?”

I stared at the sun, peeking over the tree line.

I lived in constant fear of my parents coming back to ruin my life, but even they couldn’t keep me from doing the things I loved. “I appreciate you guys coming out here, but it’s not something I can really talk about. And it’s not a problem that anyone can fix.”

Gavril tilted his head and tapped his foot on a small branch. “I’ve seen some shit in my 300 years. There’s rarely a problem that can’t be solved.”

I bit my lip. I knew Gavril was full of shit. He had run away from his problems his entire life. I was the one who had forced him to leave his apartment and live his life.

“We need to take you out of town so you can get laid. Dahlia won’t let you sleep with clients, so I get not wanting to play the field in town. Let’s plan a road trip and get you out of this funk.” Aiden smiled brightly.

At one time, a road trip would have helped me forget about my loneliness for a little while, but it wouldn’t help anymore.

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m not interested in a one-night stand.” I

absently scratched the tattoo along my ribs.

Watching Gavril and Aiden exchange a strange look, my stomach churned. Aiden pulled his wallet from his back pocket and tossed Gavril a ten-dollar bill. "I hate when you're right, but there's no other explanation."

Confused, I raised my eyebrows and stared at Gavril.

Gavril took the ten and slid it into his back pocket. "I know I'm right. Milo is in love with a woman who doesn't love him back. It's the only explanation for all of this."

He motioned to my entire body as if it explained something.

I clenched my teeth, not wanting to admit anything. I didn't need them saying something to Charlie. I would die of embarrassment if she found out I was pining for her from someone else.

Aiden let out a long breath. "Milo. Who does the raven tattoo on your side represent?"

Closing my eyes, I hung my head. "It doesn't matter. She's out of my reach."

Gavril nodded. "That's rough, buddy. I know the feeling. Hopefully, you'll find your mate someday, and this feeling will immediately be forgotten.

Finding that one woman will change your entire perspective on life. Trust me, you'll be fine."

Pretending as if I hadn't already found "the one," I smiled. "I know you're right. I'll get over this."

"I'll ask Dahlia if she has any idea who your mate might be. Don't worry. You'll find her." Aiden gave me a thumbs-up to encourage me.

Watching the sun rise over the trees, I decided on a new plan.

Instead of sitting around, waiting for Charlie to see me, I would take every opportunity to woo her until she finally recognized me as her mate.

Though the sunrise was amazing, it wasn't enough to warm the coldest parts of my heart.

"I appreciate the bro time, but I have to get ready for work. I'll see you guys later. Next time, I won't have my ass hanging out, and there will be beer." I was often caught off guard by the kindness of my friends and the people in town. I was grateful for every day I spent in Silver Springs.

Jumping down off my branch, I landed softly on the wet grass.

The hair on my neck stood up, and my shoulders tensed.

"Superhero landing, ladies and gentlemen." I ignored Gavril's round of applause.

"Show off," Aiden grumbled because he was still getting the hang of his vampire balance.

"Shut up. I feel something." Staying in my crouch, I slowly turned my head, trying to figure out what had my wolf on high alert.

Gavril landed so softly next to me.

"Which direction?" His whisper was barely audible.

I motioned with my head. Somewhere behind us was a disturbance in the air. It was more than just someone breathing or jogging. It felt as if the air was rippling.

"Get down!" I saw Aiden jumping straight at Gavril and me from the corner of my eye.

With no time to move, I felt Aiden's weight take me to the ground. I had the wind knocked out of me, but I wasn't in pain.

A gust of wind grazed my girly sweater and hair a second later.

Splitters filled the air like confetti, landing on all three of us. The sound of wood exploding quickly followed.

My ears rang and twitched at the booming noise echoing through the woods.

What the fuck just happened?

Leaping to my feet, I spun around and launched myself at whatever blew up the tree. My fangs were out of my mouth a split second before my growl raced through my throat.

I had no idea what I was about to bite, but I knew I would enjoy it.

My eyes focused on something moving in the shrubs a few feet in front of me. Targeting the shrubs, I allowed my wolf to rise and pursue my prey. A half step behind me was Gavril, who was snarling.

It was nice to have backup again.

Racing into the bushes, I opened all my senses. The smell of refried beans and taco seasoning hit my nose. We were nowhere near the Mexican restaurant, so whoever was out here was stupid enough to eat a burrito before attacking us.

“Why do I smell tacos?” Aiden caught up with Gavril and stood at his right side.

Snapping my teeth at him, I tried to get him to focus.

I put my nose to the ground and sniffed the area, but I couldn't pick up any other scents. Odd. I couldn't detect cologne, hand soap, laundry detergent, or a human scent.

Gavril sniffed the air and crouched down low to stare into the dense part of the woods.

Frustrated, I darted around, trying to figure out what the hell...

Pain radiated through my snout as something collided with my chin. Before I could shake off the pain, I felt my body flying through the air. Unable to flip myself over to get my claws into the dirt, I fell into a pine tree.

“Milo!” Gavril and Aiden shouted in unison.

Sliding through the sharp branches, I landed roughly on the ground. Slowly rising to my paws, I was pissed that my fur was sticking together

from the sap.

Whoever was fucking with me would find out the hard way that wolves held severe grudges.

I crouched down low and scanned the area for any branch, twig or leaf movement. Someone was trying to make a fool of me.

Gavril caught on to what I was doing and stepped out of the bushes to be my second set of eyes. Together, we searched all around the area. If this bastard stepped on a bug, I would hear it.

Confused, Aiden stood vampire still, waiting for us to tell him what to do.

Breathing deeply, I waited for the invisible burrito dude to make a mistake.

Creak.

I launched myself at the roots of the tree to my left.

The moron had stepped on an arched root that was raised above the dirt. Gavril sprinted in from the side as my teeth attempted to chomp down on a body part.

Gavril dove past the tree with his arms extended to grab or knock down the intruder. At the same time, I slid under Gavril, taking out the legs of the invisible dirtbag.

My teeth grazed something hard. Hoping for an ankle, I turned my head and locked my jaw around something heavy enough to be a leg.

Grunting, Gavril landed on the ground and rolled to his feet.

To my left, I heard the roots creaking. Something had hit the ground next to me.

I growled and pulled on what was probably the taco dude's leg.

The guy made no sound, which was eerie.

I hadn't drawn blood, at least that I could taste, but he had to be in

severe pain between the diving tackle and my teeth around his leg.

“Who are you?” Aiden ran up and stomped his foot down on the dude's back, or chest area.

When no reply came, Aiden pressed harder.

“You have until the count of five to drop whatever cloaking spell is hiding you. If you don't comply, I will call the Japanese God of Unluckiness. And a dragon shifter, who has some serious trust and anger issues, who hates witches. We'll let them decide how to make you confess.” Gavril pulled out his cell phone from his back pocket.

Damn.

Gavril was serious. I was going to call Daire and Ian so they could Scooby Doo this asshole and pull off his mask. Having Fukitsu and Blaze deal with the ass clown was a whole other level of “who has the bigger dick.”

Feeling the leg move, I assumed the guy was ready to cry for his mother and reveal himself. I opened my jaw and stepped back to see what we were dealing with.

I waited for the shape of a person to appear in front of me.

Instead, the brightest flash of light I'd ever seen blinded me, causing me to drop to the ground and cover my eyes with my paws. Before my eyes could recover, I felt something heavy drop on top of me.

Afraid I was caught in a net or a bag, I lifted my head.

Something wet and slippery slid down my nose. Sniffing, I was confused. Why did I smell artificial cherry flavoring? My nose bumped into a wiggly, jiggly thing. I stuck out my tongue to taste it.

Gelatin.

Seriously?

Was I covered in cherry gelatin?

Pushing myself off the ground, I shook out my coat.

Lumps of gelatin plopped all around me.

I blinked a hundred times before finally focusing on the chunky gelatin hanging from the trees, bushes, and my two friends.

“This is the last time I get up early for anyone who isn’t a sexy blonde psychic.” Aiden’s hair and clothes were a soggy, gooey mess.

I would have laughed if my fur hadn’t been covered in sap and gelatin, causing it to spike out in every direction. I looked like a porcupine.

Gavril stared at the red goop on the back of his hand. “I get enough of this shit thrown at me in the nursing home by the disgruntled panther shifter lady when we serve it for dessert. I don’t need to deal with this on my personal time. Ugh.”

Sniffing the air, I couldn’t get the cherry scent out of my nose. Even if the burrito dude was standing right before me, I couldn’t smell him.

Damn it!

I changed back to two legs and crossed my arms. “What the fuck was the point of that? Who tries to blow someone up and finish the battle by tossing food around? This guy is an idiot.”

Aiden smirked. “A coward. You had him, and he knew it. His only way out was to play dirty with the light spell and run like hell during the confusion of the gelatin. We’re not dealing with a sophisticated witch. We’re dealing with someone who knows just enough magic to be dangerous but not enough to win a fight.”

I had no idea why Aiden was happy about that fact, but I let him have his moment. Witches were now his territory since he was Dahlia’s liaison to the Black Dawn Coven.

“Cool. It’s been fun, but I have to shower and get to work. As tolerant as Dahlia has been, I don’t think she’ll accept a random jelloing as a good reason to be late. Thanks for cheering me up. I’ll see you guys later.” I ran my hand

through my hair, which got stuck in the sap. Giving up, I shifted and lopped into the denser woods.

“You’re buying next time!” Gavril’s laughter made me smile. Despite our weird encounter, my friends were loyal enough to keep being friends with me.

I had no idea if we had walked into some kind of witch initiation or target practice. Regardless, Ian would want to investigate the incident with Aiden. They might even bring in Dahlia to figure out who was brazen enough to attack other supes.

I was proud of myself for standing up to the invisible menace and relieved my hard work was paying off. I had sensed the guy before Gavril which was saying something. I had to keep pushing myself until I felt stronger and worthy enough to protect my mate.

Chapter 6 Preston

Seeing Charlie crouched in a defensive position, I swore at myself.

“My apologies, but you misunderstand. The spell wasn’t meant solely for you. The truth spell is supposed to help people let go of their fears and find the truth within their hearts. It can help them find the right path towards enlightenment if they open themselves up to it. Some people need a little clarity in their lives before figuring out how to become the person they were meant to be.” I was surprised that she had noticed the spell at all. It was more of a suggestion spell than a commanding spell.

Her sensitivity to magic was impressive.

Still holding her hands up as if she were ready to set my pants on fire for lying, she sneered at me. “Bullshit. I know a suggestion spell when I feel it. You were trying to get someone in that room to open their mind to you so you could slowly interrogate them. Who are you, and why are you trying to hypnotize me? Trust me; you won’t see me hopping on one foot, using my arm to pretend I’m a drunk elephant. You’ll have to use something more potent than a suggestion spell, pal.”

The angry blush on her cheeks was intriguing. It almost matched her strawberry-blonde hair. There was something mystical and a bit dangerous about a woman who called you out on your bullshit and was willing to hand your ass to you for deceiving her. I pitied the man who tried to control her.

Eyeing her wolf-shifter friend, I was more worried about her attacking me.

Her loyalty to Charlie was evident in how she stood slightly in front of Charlie but angled to attack me.

I didn’t rule out the blonde as a threat since her furious expression made

me think twice about turning my back on her. I wasn't sure what her abilities were if she had any. I got the impression she was trying to see inside my mind.

Clearing my throat, I dropped my hands to my sides. "I assure you, I'm not trying to hypnotize you. I'm just trying to help you, help everyone here. I plan to stay in town for a while, so making enemies isn't my intention. And, for the record, my real name is Preston Dascălu. Might I learn your name?"

I watched her eyes narrow when she processed my last name. I shouldn't have given her my surname, but I needed her to trust me enough to stand down.

"Huh. Not every day does a descendant of a founding witch family stroll through Silver Springs. I never thought I'd meet an actual Dascălu. What are you doing so far from Romania? Did you feel like slumming it with the salt of the earth conjurers? Where's your Rolls Royce? Or did you decide to borrow a Toyota from one of your servants so you could blend?" I tried not to let her perception of my family and me get under my skin, but it still stung.

"Actually, I own a hybrid. Gas prices are so high right now." Her back stiffened at my attempt at humor, though the gas prices were ridiculous. I lowered myself into a seated position and sat on my hands to prove that I wouldn't use magic on her. I hated being in a vulnerable position, but I clearly underestimated her fighting spirit.

I won't do that again.

"Go on, ask me, Preston. What information were you trying to get out of me?"

Assessing her stance, I was a little turned on because she hadn't moved a centimeter. Her feet were solidly planted on the floor, and her hands were steady without a hint of a tremor despite standing in a tense position for a few minutes. Someone had trained her well. I almost wished I had gotten to see

her yoga stances. She would have been exquisite in the Cobra Pose.

Feeling my body stir at the thought of running my hand over her arched back and firm ass, I attempted to focus my mind before she really got mad.

“What could I want to know about a woman I just met?” I braced myself for her fury the moment the ridiculous question was out of my mouth. What was wrong with me? Why was I letting her beautiful but stern face throw me off my game?

I was good at my job. Was I having an off day because I didn’t eat enough bran, or was Mercury in retrograde? Or was I too busy trying to figure out precisely what spell was about to rush across her full lips?

She laughed. “I’m not going to answer your ridiculous question. Instead, I’ll find the answers for myself.”

Her arms twisted and turned like intertwining serpents as she went to her tiptoes.

Damn.

She was more graceful than any male or female conjurer I’d ever met. If she weren’t about to literally pull the truth out of me with her Trust Me Not spell, I would watch her move all day.

“Okay, okay. Hold on. I don’t want to vomit out the truth, literally. Geez. You know some fascinating spells for someone who claims not to use magic anymore, Charlie.” I held my breath, waiting for the partial truth to hit her and hopefully, confuse her enough to deflate her anger.

As expected, Charlie stopped mid-spell to glare at me. “There’s no way you know that spell or my nickname. Spill your guts; otherwise, you’ll be pulling guacamole out of your hair all night.”

The blonde and brunette exchanged a surprised look. Yes, I had been right to worry about them. If they felt Charlie was in real trouble, they wouldn’t hesitate to help her.

Amused by her guacamole comment, I let out a breath and nodded. “Fine. It’s not often that I screw up this badly, so forgive my sloppiness in trying to use magic on you. I’m not at my best today. Truth is, I came here to investigate several recent magical infractions. For such a small town, the amount of dangerous spells cast is surprising. I came to see what’s going on in Silver Springs.”

Charlie dropped her arms and put her hands on her slim waist. “Oh, so you’re a dark wizard hunting, hybrid-driving asshole. Got it. I was right about you slumming it. Don’t you have a slew of hunters at your beck and call? You should lead a coven somewhere, eat pheasant, and terrorize the inferior witches and wizards you detest. Teaching yoga to a bunch of low to mid-level witches is beneath your pedigree.”

I chuckled at her description of my family. “So, you’ve met my father, uncle and ancestors. Sadly, pheasant gives me heartburn, and running a coven gives me a migraine. I enjoy terrorizing witches and wizards, but only the really evil ones.” I could practically feel her hatred towards me burning my skin.

“Wow! I forgot to wear my Not a Dark Wizard shirt today. Maybe then, you would have let me tone my abs in peace. I heard your family liked condemning people before they had all the facts. You should know that I run a pub, play bingo with my friends and paint my own nails. I’m not a dark wizard and don’t associate with them. You’re wasting your time with me.” She tapped her foot in annoyance.

“Perhaps. But you did associate with dark wizards at one time. And you have marks on your record for using dangerous spells, not including the spell you were ready to use on me. Then there’s the rumor that you associate with a powerful psychic and wolf shifters from the Wildling Pack. Having such powerful friends is a dark wizard’s wet dream.” I motioned to her wolf

shifter friend.

She blanched at the accusation. For the first time, her hands shook, and tears filled her blue eyes. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. My friends have protected this town more than once. I would do anything for them because they are good people. Regarding my association with less than reputable witches, that was a long time ago, and I was punished for what happened. I suggest you learn the facts before tearing through town attempting to recreate the Witch Trials. For the record, you shot first with your truth spell. I’m allowed to defend myself against a stranger.”

Grabbing her bag and mat, she motioned to her friends. “Let’s go.”

“So, we’re not going to kick his ass?” The blonde pulled her glasses from her bag and pushed them up her nose.

“Nope. Not today. We’re going to speak with your boyfriend. I promise to stop and get you extra cheesy breadsticks with bacon if you don’t ask me any questions.” Charlie pulled the blonde along with her.

“I don’t see anything unusual. Who said anything about dark wizards?” The blonde made a zipping motion with her fingers so she could get her breadsticks.

The shifter with the wolf tattoos on her shoulders and an impressive air of danger trailed behind Charlie. Her predatory stare actually made me flinch like a newbie. She sniffed the air as if she were memorizing my scent so she could kill me later.

Watching them leave, I groaned. Things certainly could have gone better, especially since the blonde resembled the woman in the photo sitting on the desk of Ian Foster, High Priest of the Black Dawn Coven, who had graciously allowed me to conduct my investigation within his coven.

Chapter 7 Charlie

“Who does that guy think he is?” I pushed open my front door and dropped my yoga gear on the couch. “Pompous ass!”

I wanted to march back to the coven and kick Preston’s ass. Even dark wizard hunters can’t provoke a coven member without a good reason. They have rules just like the regular police.

He can’t just go around lulling people’s minds so he can barge into their thoughts and kick around their memories until he finds the time they lied to their parents about staying at a friend’s house when they were really making out with Craig Goodall in the backseat of his Camaro.

Man, that was a nice Camaro. If only Craig hadn’t come out the following week and picked up Jeff Tulston in that sweet Camaro.

And screw Ian! I had hoped that he would understand the gravity of the situation, but he had explained how his hands were tied. The order to investigate Silver Springs came from much higher up the coven chain. Of course, it did. The witch royalty sent one of their own to investigate the townsfolk, or rather, me. Someone had obviously snitched about my encounter with the Wildling Pack. What should I have done? Should I have stood around and watched my friends get hurt or die?

I took a breath and pulled my sweaty hair off my face. If Preston had used magic against Dahlia, Ian would have challenged him to a duel in the middle of the street at noon.

Dick!

Pacing around my living room, I rolled my eyes.

This wasn’t Ian’s fault. He had a job to do and people to answer to. I knew that. It was one of the many reasons why I refused to be part of a

coven. At the same time, I had to respect his loyalty to his witches and wizards. If he had tossed Preston out on his ass, there would've been consequences. Ian was a good leader, and he had to protect his members.

Unfortunately, I only had myself to blame. My past was less than squeaky clean, which opened the door for any hunter to stroll through town and point a finger at me.

“Squawk!”

I turned around to glare at my feathered friend.

“Why do I get the impression that you are the reason for a dark wizard hunter's appearance in town? Did you do something you shouldn't have? Are you trying to lay low or paint a target on my back?” I watched him innocently fluff his feathers.

“Maybe I should use Preston's interrogation spell on you. Would that loosen your beak?”

The raven flapped his wings furiously as if he were agitated.

“Yeah. That's what I thought. You can't play dumb for long, Ignatius. I will get you to confirm your identity and confess any crimes you committed in town. Don't believe for one second that you're fooling me. Traitor!” I turned my back on him to avoid his expressionless, beady eyes.

Staring down at my yoga mat, I contemplated my next move. Should I shower and go into the restaurant early, or get my chocolate, marshmallow and pretzel ice cream from the freezer and find the biggest spoon in the kitchen?

I closed my eyes for a second. Preston's stupidly handsome face appeared in my mind.

Why did all hunters have kind eyes, charismatic smiles and ridiculously perfect hair?

I snorted and shook my head. Because they had to put on the charm to

get close to people before they could accuse them of practicing dark magic. They had to blend into any group to go undetected until they were ready to make an arrest. Sneaky jerks.

Hearing the doorbell ring, I prayed that a Girl Scouts troop was selling off their truckload of cookies. I would buy them out of mint cookies and coconut caramel chocolate cookies on the spot.

I pulled open the door and froze. Standing before me was the back of a man wearing a tight gray short-sleeve shirt that stretched and moved against his well-defined back muscles. His nicely broken-in jeans hugged his former track star ass. Though I wasn't close to menopause yet, my body heated up as if I were standing in the kitchen on Thanksgiving afternoon. My cheeks felt like they did on Christmas morning when I stood before the roaring fireplace to keep warm at my aunt's house in the Catskills. Forget the Girl Scouts; I would willingly buy ten of whatever he was selling.

Unable to form coherent words, I stood in a daze, waiting for him to turn around to see his face. If the front of him was as impressive as his ass...er... the back of him, I might melt into the carpet.

The man arched his neck around to greet me.

“Oh, hello. Miss O'Malley, nice to see you again.”

My mind ignored whatever he said to focus on his beard, which was just a few days of growth, and the crinkles around his gorgeous pale green eyes. Wetting my lips, I nodded at whatever he said while my eyes made their way down his lean but sculpted chest.

“Peanut butter.” My breathless reply made no logical sense except to my brain as it envisioned licking peanut butter off every ridge and plane of his body.

There might have been some chocolate sauce, too, but I was more focused on the sounds he made when my tongue slid over his nipple.

Tilting his head, the man frowned. "I'm sorry. What?"

I shrugged and smiled, waiting for my thoughts to reboot and catch up with the reality of the stranger saying hello to me instead of the fantasy of him kissing my neck as his fingers slowly caressed my clit.

I pushed my hand towards him since that was an expected gesture when someone was standing at your front door. "Hi."

Good, Charlie.

Good. That's progress. Whatever you do, don't lean in to sniff his cologne; otherwise, he'll probably call the police on you.

He chuckled nervously but graciously shook my hand. "You were expecting my father. I know. I should have called to let you know he retired to Spain with his 20-something-year-old mistress. My mom doesn't know that part yet, so I'd appreciate it if we could keep that between us. Technically, she shouldn't care since she got the pool guy in the divorce, but who's keeping score. All I can say is that Steve is a wonderful stepfather and calls me champ, even though he's three years younger than me. And I once babysat him when we were younger. At least Mom is happy, and Steve has offered me free pool cleaning and maintenance for life...once I get a pool."

Nodding, I slowly started to understand what he was saying. Thankfully, there were enough context clues to help me remember that I had called the handyman, Mr. O'Brien, to fix the gutter that fell off a few weeks ago during a strange bout of storms that rolled through town. Mr. O'Brien previously mentioned that he and his wife were going through a divorce when he came to repair a broken step on my aging house.

"Quinn! Sorry. It's been a weird morning. I should have recognized you. Your father constantly bragged about how Dani and you traveled across the world, rescuing animals for Furry Friends International. He loved showing my mother the photos of the two of you. I think I still have one of those cool

Christmas cards from the rainforest that my parents forgot to take with them to Florida.” Along with the ten thousand boxes of James’s dueling trophies and Dad’s old issues of Kiss the Cook magazine from Ireland, which supposedly gave him inspiration for his pub recipes, even though my mother constantly complained that he was more interested in the food photos, or food porn, as she called it. “You didn’t have to come all the way over here just to tell me your father retired.”

Biting my lip, I thought about Quinn’s hot girlfriend to help douse the fire brewing in my panties. She was smart, a world traveler, and a vet who spent her days helping anything on four paws. So, of course, she got the hot guy who rivaled my brother on the dueling platform, and the number of girls he had to reject before each academy dance because he liked to keep his options open for the night.

Quinn’s full bottom lip fell into a pout. “Oh, right. Dani. Considering this town’s size, I’m surprised you didn’t hear.” He ran his hand through his short, dirty-blond hair and gave a half-shrug. “Well, let’s just say that we’re not together anymore. I’m back in Silver Springs, taking over Luck O’ the Hammer from my dad.

I wanted to change the name, but Dad threatened to turn all his expensive tools into those small plastic tools they give to kids. I wasn’t sure if he was serious, so I’ve kept the name for now.”

I chuckled at his father’s threat. “From what I know about your dad, I’d say he was serious. I hired him a few times after I took over the house from my parents. He wasn’t one for cracking jokes, but he worked fast and was out the door in a flash.” I laughed at my paraphrasing of his company’s motto.

Quinn snorted. “Yes. He’s a tough old bastard sometimes, but he is good with a hammer. Less so in bed, according to my mother, hence the motto.”

He snickered as he shook his head.

I couldn't help but laugh at his easygoing humor. I had almost forgotten about my crappy morning.

"Well, I guess I should show you to the gutter. I assume you're okay with fixing gutters since I mentioned it in my voicemail." I held open the door for him and waved him into the living room.

Quinn smiled at me and stepped over the threshold.

A jolt of electricity shot up my back, causing me to shiver. Thankfully, Quinn didn't seem to notice. I wasn't sure if my mind was attempting to remind me about the 8th-grade dance and my failed attempt to kiss the boy, or rather, the man entering my house, or if it was his positive aura crashing into my sour aura.

"If I remember correctly, the sliding glass door off the kitchen leads to the deck. Right?" He pointed towards the kitchen.

I blushed when I recalled the family parties our parents threw when we were younger. Quinn was forced to hang out with James, Dahlia, and me, along with the other kids who couldn't stay home alone while their parents drank and socialized past midnight.

"Good memory." Following him through the house, I shook off the terrible memories of James and Quinn watching Pike games on TV as I sat awkwardly reading a book in the corner.

Walking through the kitchen, he chuckled. "Wow! I'm surprised you haven't changed the wallpaper yet. That's the first thing I would have done. Let me know if you need an estimate to eliminate the giant lemons from your walls."

I snorted. "I think only the fires of hell can kill this wallpaper. My father hated it when he saw it in the store, so my mother bought it. They agreed he would decorate the pub, and she would decorate the house. If they were in the middle of an argument, she would intentionally buy something for the house

that he hated.”

His eyebrows flew up as he giggled. “My parents did the same thing. I swear, Dad installed the UGLIEST toilet in the downstairs bathroom just to piss off Mom because she wanted to make stew for Easter one year instead of lamb. Growing up, I refused to let my friends use our bathroom because I didn’t want them to know I had a fuchsia toilet with hand-painted blue flowers and butterflies in an orange-tiled bathroom.”

Unable to contain my amusement, I doubled over and laughed so hard I couldn’t breathe. “Oh my God! That’s some serious vengeance decorating. Remind me to show you the half-naked lady poster in the back of the lesser-used freezer at the pub.”

Laughing, he wiped the tears from his eyes. “Uh, yeah, I think I need to see that.”

I playfully slapped his arm as I opened the sliding door for him. “Come on, I’ll show you the gutter.” I suddenly remembered why I liked Quinn in the 8th grade, back when he was the jokester in class. That was before his hormones changed the tall, skinny kid with glasses into the Hallowed Woods Academy champion of damned near everything.

Heading over to the back corner of the house, I pointed up at the space where there should have been a gutter.

“That’s easy enough. I’ll fix it and get out of your hair in a jiff.” His confidence confused me since I hadn’t noticed the handyman truck in my driveway during my brief moment of lust. I vaguely recalled seeing a blue Mini Cooper.

Quinn rubbed his hands together and reached into the back pocket of his jeans. Pulling his hand out, I watched an entire wand appear.

“Hold on. No one said anything about using magic. Your father was a legit carpenter. He never used magic to fix the house.” I held up my hands

and took a few steps back.

Opening his mouth, Quinn paused. “Umm, we’re witches, Charlie. Why would I use tools for a quick repair job? It’s not like I’m sculpting clay or making a bear out of a log with a chainsaw.”

I shook my head vehemently. “Go, just go, please. I don’t want magic used in the house or around me.” I made a wide circle around him and headed back towards the deck.

Quinn held up his free hand. “Take it easy. I’ll put the wand away. No problem. I can still fix the gutter the non-magic way. I just need to run and grab the truck. I’m sorry if I upset you.” He slowly pushed the wand into his pocket and raised his hand to show it was empty.

Calming down a little, I let out a breath. “Thank you. If you don’t mind, I’m going inside to get ready for my day. You can use the side gate to bring in your ladder and tools once you return with your truck. If you can’t do it today, I fully understand. If I have to pay extra for the manual labor, I’m happy to do so. Thank you.”

I didn’t wait for Quinn to reply before I ran back into the house like a child, terrified of a thunderstorm.

I rushed up the stairs and sat on the edge of my bed. “It’s okay. It’s okay. Quinn didn’t use magic. Nothing bad happened. We tried to use a curse on Preston, but we stopped ourselves in time. No one got hurt. Nothing is wrong.”

Repeating my calming thoughts, I rocked back and forth on the bed until my hands stopped shaking.

I let out a breath and wiped my eyes on the collar of my T-shirt. I had to get hold of myself. Everything was fine. Everything was okay.

“Squawk!” The raven flapped his wings against the cage bars downstairs.

Rushing back down the stairs, I glared at it. “Laughing at me, Ignatius? Laughing at the witch who hates magic. Keep it up. Soon, you’ll have no choice but to admit who you really are. Then, we will have one hell of a chat.”

The raven settled and turned its head to look through the sheer living room curtains.

Following his gaze, I saw Quinn jumping into what I had correctly identified as a blue Mini Cooper.

What a complete and utter disaster of a day, and it wasn’t even ten o’clock yet. No wonder I lived vicariously through my friends. I couldn’t even talk to a male without my phobias screwing everything up. How was I supposed to be an adult and live like an adult when my past was constantly holding me back?

With any luck, Quinn would be back if I hadn’t completely scared him away.

Chapter 8 Charlie

I drove over to Lady Blue to see Dahlia about a...

I rechecked my text. I wasn't sure if she was asking me to come by to give me something or if I was supposed to give her something. I couldn't understand her message. She probably texted me from bed before she put her glasses on.

Pulling into the back lot, I ran through the backdoor and into the main area, which was full of clients.

"There you are." Dahlia poked her head out of her office and waved at me to join her.

Apparently, I had walked right past her.

Doubling back, I walked into her office. "I couldn't understand your text. What's up?"

She tilted her head and gave me a confused look. "What text?"

"Umm, the one I couldn't understand. You texted me at like 6:30 this morning." I pulled out my phone to show her the garbled message.

Staring at it, she shrugged. "I didn't wake up until 7:30 when Ian started snoring."

She handed back the phone.

I looked at the text again to make sure it was Dahlia. Reviewing my contact list, it definitely came from her. "Hmm. Maybe you were sleep-texting. Weird." Unable to figure out why Dahlia had texted me this morning, I shrugged it off. "So, why were you expecting me if you hadn't texted?"

Crossing my arms, I suppressed a yawn. I needed more coffee before I contemplated anything psychic-related.

"Oh, I knew you were coming by this morning. I saw a flash of it when I

was brushing my teeth. You wanted to tell me more about this Preston guy and the raven.” She sat down behind her desk and leaned back into her chair.

I shouldn’t have been surprised by her vision, but I was. I hadn’t planned on talking to her about Preston at all. The last thing I needed was Preston hauling her into an interview room. Dahlia knew almost all my secrets. I didn’t want her lying for me or telling the truth about me. It was better to keep Dahlia in the clear.

“There’s not much to say. Preston’s a dick. And the raven hasn’t given me any clues about his identity.” I hoped that she would believe my simple answer.

She nodded as she rubbed her forehead. “Sorry I dragged you to yoga. If I had known he was an investigator, I would have told you to wait for the other instructor to return before joining the class. I had a few stern words with Ian. I know he sometimes has to keep his secrets, but he should have told me since it concerned you.”

I held up my hand. “It’s okay. You shouldn’t be mad at Ian. I forgave him. In my mind, anyway. Ian is a good coven leader. He was just doing his job.”

Smiling, she let out a breath. “That’s kind of you to say, but I’m still not having sex with him tonight.”

I laughed at her punishment for poor Ian.

“I should get going. I have to help with the frozen food delivery. I’ll see you later.” We waved goodbye, and I walked into the hallway.

“Charlie.”

Hearing Milo’s surprised voice, I turned to see his tight black Lady Blue T-shirt and extra-tight jeans.

I was surprised Milo didn’t have women jumping out of his closet to fuck him after seeing him in those amazing jeans.

“Hey, Milo.”

I quickly pulled my hair into a ponytail since I rushed over to see Dahlia and didn't have time to put it up.

Milo took a small step toward me. “You should leave it down. Your hair catches the sunlight when it's down.” He smiled awkwardly and looked away.

I chuckled. “I would, but lifting tubs of frozen ice cream is hard work.” He'd never mentioned my hair before. Honestly, I wasn't even sure he knew that I had hair. We didn't exactly discuss fashion trends while doing shots at the bar.

“Oh, right. It's delivery day.” He nodded and looked at his feet.

He might have overheard my conversation with Dahlia. Still, he had no reason to know I received my ice cream and cheesecake orders every other Thursday.

“I heard about the invisible kid attacking you and the vamps. Are you okay?” Changing the topic, I was curious to learn more about his encounter since Gray had mentioned it in passing.

“I'm fine. None of us were hurt. Though, I'm not sure if it was a kid. I wanted to ask you about that. Would a teenager know a spell to blow up a tree?” He finally looked up to see my reaction to his strange question.

“Wait. Did the invisible attacker use a spell to blow up a tree? Did it fall over, or did the wood splinter into a million pieces?” Gray had obviously left out a few significant details.

Milo shook his head and pulled his hands apart, showing me an explosion. “No, it splintered into a million pieces. Thankfully, Aiden noticed something was wrong and jumped out of the tree to push us to the ground. I felt a weird vibration, so I knew someone was in the woods behind us. Gavril heard it, too. We tracked the dude, but he tried to avoid us. I got my teeth

around his leg, and Gavril knocked him to the ground. Then there was sap and gelatine. If I find the guy, I'm seriously going to punch him. It took an hour to clean up. I think there's still sap in my hair."

Confused, I pointed my finger at him. "Go back. How did you bite an invisible guy?"

"Oh, we knew someone was there because he smelled like Mexican takeout. We couldn't pick up any other scents or sounds aside from a bush rustling. Then, he must have accidentally stepped on a creaky root. We were able to pinpoint him and got lucky. The bastard used some kind of bright light spell to escape." Milo huffed his annoyance at losing his prey. His wolf must have been super pissed that the attacker escaped.

"Did you taste any blood when you bit him?" The person sounded more like an adult who knew his shit.

Invisibility spells were notoriously tricky, but paired with a spell to hide not only their scent but any noise from their clothing rustling or general footsteps required a very high skill level. Yet, they were stupid enough to eat AFTER using the invisibility spell. It was a boneheaded move.

"That's the weird part. I didn't taste anything when I bit the dude, but a few hours later, I tasted blood in my back molars." He shrugged, not understanding that the invisibility spell had worn off by then.

The spell only lasted so long, and its timing wasn't always perfect.

"Well, at least you have the scent of his blood if you come across him again. It was probably someone testing out a few new spells. The covens will likely find the person and issue them a warning or arrest them depending on what else they've done." I didn't want to scare Milo since it was probably an isolated incident. "I'm happy to know you weren't hurt."

"Don't worry. I can handle myself." He gave me a bashful smile as he looked away. "How have you been? Gray mentioned something about a dark

wizard hunter in town. Why is he here?”

“Preston is from a coven of asshole witches who are responsible for things like the Salem Witch Trials and the Spanish Inquisition. They like to stir up trouble, point the blame at innocent people, and watch the town tear them apart before stepping in and looking like the heroes by arresting the supposed bad guys.” Of course, that was putting it mildly. They had been the driving force behind the Dragon Wars, amongst other large-scale wars against the witches. Come to think of it. They were also responsible for the conjurer and caster wars. They believed conjurers were the superior witches and didn’t mind spreading their beliefs.

Milo clenched his fist and growled. “Do you need me to talk with this Preston guy?”

“Ahh, no. I can handle him, but thank you.”

Surprised by his willingness to kick Preston’s ass for me, he sounded more like Gray than his usual self. Then again, I realized that I usually did most of the talking when Milo and I hung out. He laughed, smiled, and reacted appropriately to whatever I said, but I’d never seen him so protective.

“I don’t mind talking with him.” Taking a step forward, I saw his eyes turning yellow.

His wolf was certainly worked up over Preston.

“I think this will be a war of words. But if I need someone to bite him in the ass, I will definitely call you.” I was worried Milo might do something rash if I kept talking about Preston.

“If you need anything, don’t hesitate to text me.” He relaxed his fist, and his eyes changed to their normal color. “I hope you have a good day. Let me know if you need any help with the ice cream tubs.”

I nodded at his kind offer. “Will do.”

Waving, I turned toward the backdoor and ran through the entire

conversation in my head. Why was Milo acting differently around me? I mean, we were buddies, but we never offered to fight each other's battles or move each other's couches. He was highly protective of Dahlia and would certainly help me if I were in danger, but he'd never offered to help lift ice cream tubs.

And the hair comment was still throwing me off.

Maybe he had more free time since breaking up with his girlfriend.

Or maybe he was more in tune with women now that he wasn't dating anyone. Whatever the reason, I kind of liked attentive, chatty Milo.

Heading to my car, I saw Daire riding up on his bicycle. "Are you going to upgrade to a dirt bike or a scooter next? Do you even have a driver's license?" I loved Daire like a nerdy brother, which was why it was just too easy to poke fun at him.

"Do you know how much I save on gas and car maintenance? Plus, I'm toning my thighs." He pulled off his bike helmet, releasing his messy curls.

"Dahlia can admire your thighs later. I'm off to work." Walking past him, I skidded to a stop. "Wait. Were you with Dahlia last night? She mentioned that Ian was there, but I'm not sure if you were there."

He hesitated as he looked at the shop. "Ian is still weird about telling people we sleep in the same bed with Dahlia, but yes, I was there."

"Cool. Did you see Dahlia texting in her sleep?" I handed him my phone with the strange message on the screen.

Reading the text, I saw his eyebrows pop up. "Umm. This wasn't Dahlia. She doesn't know this language."

I glanced back down at the phone. "What language?"

He chuckled. "Ancient Romanian. I'm surprised you don't recognize it. I know it's been a while since you read a coven history book or an old spell book, but this is the beginning of a spell."

My mind completely crashed. Dahlia had texted me a spell. What the hell?

“Maybe she heard it in a vision and grabbed her phone so she would remember it? What does it say?” I took the phone back and adjusted my brain. I knew some Ancient Romanian, especially since I had the Book of Ancient Magicks floating around my head. Still, I wasn’t exactly fluent in it.

Reading it repeatedly, I picked up a few words, but none of them made any sense.

“It’s possible, though, for her to spell it out correctly and include the inflection points for the spell would be very difficult. While I can technically read some of the words, I don’t know what kind of spell it is. It’s using a dialect I haven’t seen before. Whatever it is, I don’t suggest that you read it out loud unless you know what it does. You don’t want to accidentally summon a demon.” He looked at me pointedly. Clearly, he had figured out that he wasn’t responsible for raising the demons in the cemetery.

“Good advice. In return, I’ll give you this advice. Next time, don’t automatically take the blame for a difficult summoning. Whoever raised those demons knew what they were doing. They didn’t accidentally use a sinus infection to summon them.” I patted his shoulder.

Groaning in the back of his throat, he gave me the finger. “The next time you accidentally summon something, I won’t let you forget about it.”

“Don’t hold your breath, Daire.” Blowing him a kiss, I pulled out my car keys and hopped into my car.

I couldn’t stop staring at the message, or rather, the ancient spell. Dahlia could do incredible things, but writing a complex ancient spell was beyond her skill set. Or it had been as of yesterday.

What the hell was the spell used for, and why did she send it to me? I loved my best friend, but sometimes I wish she came with an instruction

manual.

∞

Preston

“What the hell am I doing? Is this a stakeout, or am I stalking her?” Sitting outside Charlie’s house in my car, I checked my watch. It was still early, but it felt like I’d been waiting for hours. Now that I had blown my cover as a visiting yoga instructor, I couldn’t exactly walk into the pub, order a beer, and watch her interactions with the customers.

I shook my head. Why hadn’t I lied better? I was trained by the best of the best to conceal my identity, determine with certainty if someone was telling me the truth based on their body language and micro-expressions, and, most of all, lie like a fucking pro. I could spin any tale with a smile and never think twice about it. I had pretended to be an academy teacher, a Pike coach, and even an academy student in my younger days. Being a yoga instructor was supposed to be a breeze compared to my deep-cover jobs within dark covens. Why couldn’t I keep up the charade with Charlie?

Flipping through her file for the millionth time, I glanced at all the highlighted areas.

Excellent student, advanced spell classes, and a loner. All the ingredients to create the base layer of a dark wizard. Add in known associates who went dark over the years, and I had Charlene O’Malley. Yet, I couldn’t bring myself to accept that she had gone dark.

She could have gotten the drop on me at any point while I was distracted by her beautiful eyes, her lush lips, and her toned body that could conjure for days.

Instead, she had hit me in the head with a fucking water bottle. Of all the things I’d been attacked with over the years, no criminal had ever thrown a water bottle at me.

Rubbing the bruise on my forehead that I refused to heal with magic, I

reevaluated my perception of her. She was a business owner and part of the community. She had the perfect job as a bartender with access to inebriated people who were open to suggestions. She was a local, so no one would question her appearance in any store or location in town.

Hell, if she had kids, she could have been a fucking PTO mom who baked cookies and recruited women who wanted more out of life than a cheating husband and low self-esteem.

Still, I had trouble seeing Charlie as a threat.

Scanning her list of offenses, she undoubtedly knew how to start trouble. The local covens knew all about the O'Malley twins.

James was the star, and Charlie was the promising student turned delinquent. On top of that, the twins were known for their public brawls. Of course, my brother and I had been detained and questioned numerous times over the years for punching the shit out of each other, so I couldn't really accept that Charlie was dark based on that. However, the headmaster's records from Cliff Haven painted a pretty damning view of Charlie.

Incident after incident, page after page, the Headmaster talked about the secret coven Charlie was involved with. He had suggested that Kevin Kelly, aka Zeth, was the ringleader. Kevin had potential as a leader but squandered his talents by involving himself in rivalries and revenge. I was surprised that Headmaster Marshal hadn't red-flagged Zeth earlier on.

It wasn't until after the Pike team was attacked and Christopher Myzer went missing that the Headmaster understood what he was dealing with.

I understood wanting to give a kid every chance to redeem himself, but he should have realized Zeth was destined to be in jail.

Tapping my finger against Charlie's academy photo, I wondered why she had involved herself with Zeth. Then again, with her twin being the star of the show, I could see why she would follow someone with a darker edge.

I'd seen plenty of good girls fall for future dark wizards or already established dark wizards. Some craved power, others thought they could bring the dark wizard back into the light, or they lacked the self-esteem to realize they were falling victim to the darkness.

Charlie was obviously a brilliant, talented witch. Someone like Zeth would target and use her to strengthen his coven.

The question was whether Charlie knew what she was getting herself into. Or, did she slowly turn dark?

Rubbing my head, I couldn't accept that Charlie took either path to become a dark wizard, but the evidence was too hard to ignore.

I threw her folder into the passenger seat. Why was I losing my cool over this woman? Sure, she was attractive, especially when she was pissed. But I'd never been so drawn to anyone before.

Drawn to Charlie wasn't the proper sensation. Obsessed with was closer to the truth. I'd never thought about kissing someone during an investigation before.

I'd known a few hunters who had fallen for their suspects, but those relationships never lasted. Most of the hunters had been fooled into believing the person's innocence, only to find out later they had been spelled or straight-up duped.

My father would kill me if I fell for someone I was investigating. He would fire me and then disown me. I could never show my face in Romania or any coven under our jurisdiction again.

Technically, being fired would be worse than being disowned. I was barely part of the family as it was. The disowning would just make it official. I certainly wouldn't mind living far away from my father's scrutiny.

Drumming my fingers against the steering wheel, I ran through all the reasons I felt this way for Charlie. Appearance aside, I only knew what her

file told me and what I observed during our encounter. She had a great sense of humor. She cared about her friends based on the way she tried to keep them away from me.

She would have given me one hell of a fight based on her fluid body movements if she had dueled me. Most of all, she seemed sad. The way she talked about herself and her life, she sounded unfulfilled by it.

Great, now I was empathizing with her.

Fuck.

So much for being an objective investigator.

Seeing the front door open, I ducked down into my seat.

Charlie rushed to her car and turned on the engine. She sat in her car for a minute. She seemed to be staring off into space.

What is she doing?

Feeling compelled to check to see if she was okay, I balled up my fist so I didn't open the car door and rush over to her.

After a few more seconds, she backed up and drove away.

The handyman Charlie had called was already leaving. Did she need an estimate, or did he quickly service her? Why would he leave after her?

Annoyed that I didn't know anything about the man, I jotted down his physical description next to the company's name so I could investigate them both.

“Tall, sandy blonde, green eyes, thin, stupid expression and dumb car.”

I needed to know more about the situation before I assumed the worst of the handyman. However, he could attempt to earn her trust before convincing her to rob a bank. Or she could be trying to persuade him to help her rob a bank. Though, he was probably there to fix a clogged sink.

Aargh! Why can't I get the image of the two of them having sex out of my mind? Why am I suddenly jealous of some random guy?

Putting my head against the steering wheel, I pictured her face. What was it about this woman? Why did I care so much about her even though I'd just met her?

I quickly turned on the engine and took off. There was only one way to get my questions answered. I had to learn more about Charlie O'Malley.

Chapter 9 Quinn

Starting up my car, I let my disappointment wash through me. Here I was, reconnecting with Charlene freaking O'Malley for the first time since we went to rival academies. She had bolted so fast that I could practically see the cartoon plume of smoke coming from her sneakers as she ran away from me. Could this day get any worse?

When I heard her voice on the company answering machine, I damned near wet my pants.

What were the odds of her being my first phone call since officially returning home and taking over the business?

Yeah, I knew Dad helped her occasionally, especially with his mostly incoherent texts telling me he had seen Charlie. I just didn't expect to see her so soon. I definitely would've had a better answer when she asked if I was still with my ex.

Returning to her house brought back all my memories as if time had stood still. I remembered the card games, the hide and seek, and the music. Being an only child, I loved going to anyone's house to play, but the O'Malley's house was the best. There was laughter and tons of great food.

I pulled out of her driveway and headed home to crawl under my bed and spiral into a self-loathing depression for the next few hours.

Hmm. Do I pick up self-hatred fries or loneliness red velvet cupcakes?

Neither option was drastic enough. I had just lost my chance at making a good adult impression on Charlie that might help wipe away the minor reason for hating me.

Yeah.

Minor. As minor as calling the sinking of the Titanic a boating accident.

I could have opened with something clever like; sorry, I was a competitive asshole in school. I had built my fragile ego on top of trophies and awards since my parents never hugged me as a child. Of course, that wasn't entirely true. Mom gave great hugs, but Dad was more of a, *go get um, slugger*, punch to the shoulder, guy. Hell, I could have simply apologized for keeping my distance from her during school because I felt guilty for wanting to bury James under the Pike field to prove that I wasn't a loser to the jerk kids I had fallen in with.

Charlie was the kind of girl who looked out for everyone and cared about people. She didn't like when James got hurt unless she was doing the hurting. The O'Malley twins were known to fistfight in the middle of the street if they had an argument. God forbid someone attacked Charlie. James would put his fist up their ass. The same was true if someone stupidly attacked James.

Charlie was fiercely protective of her brother. She didn't like to lose and hated being ambushed. Ronnie Dolan learned that the hard way when Charlie, James, and I were playing outside as kids. Ronnie and his goon friends rode up on their bikes and threw water spells at us for no reason. I started to cry because that's what seven-year-olds without siblings did. Unfortunately for Ronnie, Charlie didn't cry. The second the jerk circled around to laugh at us, Charlie stepped in front of James and slammed her foot into the ground. "*Scutură pământul!*"

Feeling the ground shake, I watched Ronnie and his friends fall off their bikes and hit the ground hard.

I almost rooted for Charlie, but Ronnie, who had to be twice our size, pushed himself off the ground with a bloody knee and a gashed elbow to point his wand at her.

Charlie fucking laughed. Not a cute laugh to diffuse the tension.

No. She laughed like a psychopath who was about to start some shit.

I wanted to run for help, but I couldn't. I had to see what happened next. I needed to experience what it felt like to have someone stand up for me.

So what if a girl was fighting my battles? I was perfectly fine with it as long as it was Charlie O'Malley.

Charlie flicked her wrist, sending Ronnie's wand into the garbage can at the end of the driveway. The rest of Ronnie's friends picked up their bikes and escaped. Before Ronnie could decide if he had the guts to punch a little girl or if he should save face by running for his life, Charlie swung her slim arms in a giant circle, pulling Ronnie toward her.

"If I ever see you on our street again, I will use the Stop Punching Yourself spell until you knock yourself out." Though Charlie only reached Ronnie's chest, she looked like a serious badass with her dark hair knotted and tangled from wrestling with James earlier. There was a dirt smudge on her cheek and a hole in the knee of her jeans from a previous fall off her bike. Charlie wasn't the dress-wearing, polite little girl. She was as rough and tumble as her appearance.

"We won't come back. I swear!" Ronnie put his hands up in defeat and nodded. I could swear I heard the jerk crying as he rode away.

That was the day my child-sized heart fell in love with Charlie O'Malley. Sadly, life had other plans for us.

Seeing her again, I felt that familiar spark inside my chest.

Damn, she looked good. While I liked her naturally dark hair, she looked amazing as a strawberry blonde.

If she had that hair color back at the academy, I might not have gone out of my way to avoid her.

Right. Avoid her. Hid in terror was more like it.

Deciding on the diner for a stack of pancakes with chocolate chips, I

made a quick turn. What did it matter if I ate myself into a food coma? I was destined to die alone, with only my goldfish to mourn me.

I stopped at the light and watched a guy cross the street. Why couldn't dating be simple? Why couldn't you tell someone you liked them and promise to wash the dishes if they did the laundry? It didn't need to be so complicated.

Tap, tap.

Startled, I turned to see the guy who had crossed the street tapping on my passenger window.

What the fuck?

Taking a better look at the guy, I opened the window.

"You missed the game last night. What happened?"

I laughed when I recognized my newest friend. "Hey, Daire!"

Seeing the light turn green, I waved at him to move over so I could park in the spot a few feet up the street.

I quickly parked the car and jumped out to join him on the sidewalk. "I'm so sorry. I got involved in a project at a client's house and lost track of time. I promise. I will be at the next game." Running my hand through my hair, I felt bad for blowing off the invite to hang out with other adults.

Daire chuckled. "It's okay, though you missed a hell of a campaign. It was a real life and death situation. Doug rolled a six and got blasted into a million pieces because his shield wasn't strong enough. He was so pissed. The best part was when Blaze got to choose his weapon and used a trident to defeat Lymrith. It was epic. He poured a sip of his beer for the dragon in solidarity for his fallen comrade. Then, he started singing this old Romanian battle song from the Dragon Wars. I was dying. I wasn't sure if the big guy would fit in with a bunch of nerds, but the dragon shifter proved he could party with us."

Snorting, I laughed at his story. “Oh man, I wish I had been there. I admit I was a little intimidated by Blaze when I first met him since ancient dragons and witches don’t usually get along, but he seemed like a good guy. I promise I will be at the next Dungeons and Dragons campaign.”

“Awesome!” Daire slapped me on the shoulder.

“I’m preparing an amazing campaign, so make sure you’ve got time to stay for the entire thing.”

“Definitely! I can’t wait. As I mentioned before, I’m a little rusty, but I will bring my courage and soft chair cushion. And, because I missed the last one, I’ll get the snacks.” I wasn’t sure why I wanted to make a good impression on Daire and his friends, but it felt right. Unlike my old academy buddies, who preferred getting drunk and dueling each other in the middle of a field for fun, I needed down-to-earth friends.

Daire bit his lip. “That’s a tall order. I’ll warn you. Blaze can finish a plate of chicken wings in seconds. We usually chip in since we go through a ton of food.”

Nodding, I understood his concern. “Gotcha. How about I bring a few pizzas and order some appetizers from O’Malley’s? That should get us through the first hour.” I chuckled at the thought of going through so much food.

Daire laughed. “Sounds like a plan. If you mention my name, Charlie O’Malley will probably give you a discount.” His smile faded and turned into a frown. “Or maybe you shouldn’t. She’s still pissed because I accidentally communed with the lady who used to own her parent’s house before they bought it. Apparently, the lady really hates the kitchen wallpaper and thinks Charlie should make better life choices.”

I did a double take, surprised that Daire knew Charlie well enough to visit her home. “Yeah, I was just telling her that the wallpaper had to go.”

Raising his eyebrows, Daire smiled. “How do you know Charlie?”

I shrugged. “Childhood friends, though we lost touch over the years. She called me to work on her gutters.” If only my simple explanation were true, things would be much easier.

Daire held up his hands. “Shit. You didn’t go over there and try to fix the gutter with magic. Did you?”

While I appreciated how quickly you showed up to fix the overflowing toilet in our office when we were in the middle of battling the Demon Lord, Charlie would freak if you used casual magic around her.”

Letting out a long breath, I crunched up my nose. “I did, and let’s just say she wasn’t happy with me. I told her I would be back to do it the old-fashioned way, but I figured I should give her some time to cool off. She was really shaken. I hate to ask since we recently met, but do you know why she reacted that way?”

Daire quickly looked from side to side as if he expected Charlie to be standing over his shoulder. “I’m not exactly sure why, but she refuses to use magic. I’ve only seen her conjure a few times, but it was because her friends were in danger. She’s not a fan of Ian and me using it around her in general. Using it at her house is forbidden.”

Tapping my chin with my finger, I was surprised to hear the fear in his voice.

He was definitely afraid of the consequences associated with breaking Charlie’s no-magic rule.

“I appreciate you telling me that. I’ll have to apologize when I see her.” If she accepted my apology, I had to watch what I did around her since casting was so second nature to me that I used magic for everything.

“Of course.” He gave me a sympathetic look that changed into a curious expression. “That means you know Dahlia too.” His face lit up at the mention

of Dahlia's name.

"Yeah. I often hung out at the O'Malley's, but Dahlia was usually around. She kept to herself a lot. She loved drawing, so we left her to it. She sometimes joined in, but we weren't allowed to use magic around her, so it was tough. Dahlia enjoyed drawing skulls and graveyards, which was odd, though she was sweet when she wasn't talking about her weird nightmares."

"Huh. She's never mentioned you. She's my mate, though we don't often talk about her past. She's actually a powerful psychic. She helps the covens track down dark wizards and other dangerous creatures." Daire puffed out his chest as he spoke about her.

I could see that he was beaming with pride.

"Wow. Good for her. I'm glad she found a way to help people. And congratulations on finding the person who will love you forever." My voice almost cracked, but I managed to keep it under control. I was happy for Dahlia, though it made me feel worse. She had found a great guy, at least from what I knew of Daire.

"Thank you!" Daire looked around my shoulder at something behind me.

Turning, I saw his business partner waving at him from the doorway to Charmed Security.

"Looks like you're needed. I won't hold you up. Just let me know when you're ready for the next campaign, and I'll place my order for the food." I stepped aside so Daire could acknowledge Doug.

"Cool. I look forward to seeing you. I'll give you a call." With a quick wave, Daire sprinted down the street to run inside his office.

Staring at the sidewalk, I scratched my head. I thought I knew Charlie, yet she was so different from the little badass who stood up to Ronnie and others like him. What had happened to make her turn against her true nature?

Why had she stopped being a witch?

Even if Charlie hated me for eternity, which she was very capable of doing if she really despised someone, I had to find out why she feared magic so much.

Chapter 10 Charlie

The lunch crowd was a little rowdier than usual for a Thursday. I ducked and weaved through a birthday party table, powering down the jalapeno poppers and potato skins like movie popcorn.

Mental note: order more cheese. A lot more cheese.

Sliding behind the bar, I checked everyone's drink levels to see if they needed a refill.

"Hey, I have that special peanut butter, banana and ice cream on sourdough someone ordered." James popped his head out of the kitchen to flag me down.

"Oh, thank the gods! Give me that!" Grabbing the plate from his hands, I rushed past him and went to my corner in the storage room, my sanctuary, to eat my emotions away.

Biting into the chocolate ice cream, I felt some of my crappy day melt into the floor.

The second the peanut butter and banana combination hit my tongue, I groaned. Yes. This was what I needed.

James snickered. "I should have known. It's been a long time since you ordered a triple-decker sadness bomb. Isn't that what mom used to call it?" Crossing his arms, he leaned against the wall next to the shelves of sauce and gravy.

Swallowing, I wiped the peanut butter off my chin. "The only thing that can make this better is chunky peanut butter. Aside from that, it's a solid 9 out of 10. Should we add this to the menu?"

He chuckled and shook his head. "You haven't dated anyone in a decade that I'm aware of, so this can't be because of a breakup. I believe it was Scott

Mitchel who broke your heart the day you invented that abomination of a sandwich. When you found out Quinn O'Brien had a girlfriend, the tuna sandwich with sour cream and onion potato chips sprinkled with M&Ms was dedicated to him.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t say that name. I already fucked that up today. Though you’re right, I should have gone for the tuna combo. Regardless, the triple-decker sadness bomb is because I met a dark wizard hunter this morning who tried to dull my senses so he could ask me questions.” I looked around the shelf behind James to see if I could find any M&Ms to add a fourth layer to my sadness bomb.

Pushing himself off the wall, he stared at me. “What? Why the hell is a hunter here? What did he want to know?”

Without realizing what he was doing, James fell into a partial battle stance as if he would fight my battle for me.

“Apparently, there’s too much scum and villainy in our little hamlet. He’s come to figure out why so many dark wizards are popping up in town.” I tried to sound casual, but my voice broke with fear.

Shaking out his arms and releasing his dueling stance, he nodded. “First Reed came to town, then Zeth and his crew showed up. Great. I wondered when the covens would start to notice. Honestly, I’m surprised it’s taken them so long. Now, we’ve got demons running around town, though that could be completely unrelated. You know how weird this town is.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Gray called me and told me about what happened to Milo, Gavril and Aiden. Some kid was probably messing around the woods and stupidly tried to show off against a wolf shifter and vampires. Of course, this Preston guy will probably think it’s a conspiracy. And I will be in the middle of the inquiry since Reed is my ex-husband, and Zeth is my ex-friend. I’m sure the Dascălu are foaming at the mouth to send me away.”

James did a double take when he heard the dreaded last name. I could have said Grim Reaper, Boogeyman or Satan, and he wouldn't have flinched. Only the Dascălu name could evoke such terror.

“Fuck. Why are they involved? They don't swoop into town until someone is ready to confess to shooting JFK, give up the location of Emilia Earhart, and admit they kidnapped the Lindbergh baby. This is serious, Charlie. You need to go to the covens and tell them everything you know before the Dascălu make up their own version of the story. Once that happens, no one will believe the truth.

Licking the melted ice cream from the edges of my sandwich, I shrugged. “I doubt that will help. This guy Preston was trying to be all sneaky and go undercover. He wasn't interested in hearing the truth. He just wanted to pick my brain until he pieced together the story he wanted. I'm fucked either way. Guilty by association.” Never mind that I sent Zeth running from town as if I had given him a black eye and stolen his lunch money. I assume they can't find Zeth and are looking for the next best thing.

His friends.

James rubbed his bottom lip with his thumb. “There has to be something we can do. We aren't powerless. Maybe Dahlia can figure out why he's really here. Or, we can ask Cillian's ghost friends to spy on him. We can't just let him walk into town and put you in restraints.”

I appreciated James's willingness to jump into action, but I didn't want to drag him into my problems. I had made the wrong decisions that led me to this moment. I had to make better decisions, so I could walk away from this without prison time.

“Dahlia already threw a prophecy at Milo. We're still trying to figure that one out. I really don't have time to solve a second jigsaw puzzle. Asking Cillian for help would be overkill. Besides, I'd prefer to keep our banshee

friend away from the covens. The less they know about him, the better. I'll sleep on it tonight and devise a strategy when I'm not focused on the restaurant." I waved away James's concern.

"Fine. Just don't wait too long. You need to get ahead of the inquiry." He turned to leave but paused to look over his shoulder. "You'd better not let the Dascălu see the raven, just in case it's Ignatius."

Groaning, I rolled my eyes. "Damned bird. I wanted him to admit the truth to me, but I might have to call his bluff. I don't want to be caught harboring a dark familiar. I'm not going to let that traitor get me into trouble."

"Good."

James headed back toward the kitchen, leaving me to consider my options. If I didn't deal with Preston the right way, it could ruin my plans of becoming a spinster aunt who played with the children and grandchildren of my brother and my best friends.

Finishing off my sandwich, I shook the tension out of my shoulders and focused my thoughts on getting through the rest of the day. I still had a business to run.

I wrapped my apron around my waist and walked out of the kitchen to make sure no one at the bar was getting out of hand.

I immediately connected with blue sparkling eyes and a smug fucking smile. Walking over to the far side of the bar, I put my elbows on the wood and leaned my chin against my hands. "I swear I didn't say Dascălu three times in the mirror to summon you, so why are you here? What you're doing is called intimidation or stalking. Or maybe you're just plain creepy. If you're hungry, might I suggest any other place in town, except for Anthony's. I don't want to run into you on my off hours."

Preston wore jeans and a dark blue T-shirt that made his blue eyes pop.

If only I cared about the way his shirt clung to the prominent muscles underneath it.

He winked at me. “Actually, this is called me doing my job. Look, if you’re innocent, then great. I will return to the coven and tell them to stop investigating you. I just need to know the truth.” The fucking charming smile returned to his face as if it would smooth everything over.

“Do they send people like you to charm school? If so, they should get their money back. It doesn’t matter what I say. You already think I’m guilty, so what’s the point? You probably have your men surrounding the pub right now, ready to throw a net over my head and haul me away.” I was being dramatic, sort of.

I’d heard too many stories about the Dascălu capturing the wrong people or even setting them up. My family and Dahlia’s mother weren’t fans of them. Dahlia’s mother was an actual investigator who tracked dark wizards. She often handed over the wizards and creatures she’d help capture to the Dascălu, so she’d seen them in action. If Darlene Huston, the badass supreme, didn’t like them, I had no reason to trust them.

Shifting on the stool, he tried to make himself look comfortable and at ease. “I’m sorry about what happened earlier. I shouldn’t have treated you like a suspect. I should have approached you in good faith and asked for a formal interview. Scaring you or threatening you wasn’t my intention. I’ve been doing this for so long that I got carried away. After years of infiltrating dark covens, I lost my objectivity. So, how about we start over? Come with me to the Black Dawn Coven and answer a few questions.” He reached over to shake my hand.

I snorted and smacked his hand away. “Please. You showed your true colors. Shoot first and plant evidence on them later. I’m not buying this good cop crap. For that to work, you need someone else to play the asshole cop.

You already filled that role nicely, so don't stretch your acting abilities and pull a hamstring."

Standing up, I wiggled my fingers and waved goodbye to him.

"Charlie, wait." Preston hissed. "Damn it. Look. There was a reason I was sent to Silver Springs. You have no idea what's been going on in this town. Covens have been infiltrated by dark wizards, and violent wolf packs are running through the streets, paid by dark wizards to wreck shit. Your ex-husband attacked your best friend because he was trying to build a powerful coven. A demon turned coven members against themselves and trapped your friend. What else needs to happen before you turn to us for help? None of you can handle this on your own. It will only escalate. Please. Unless you want subsequent encounters to harm, or gods forbid, kill one of your friends, you have to help me."

His charm completely slid away, exposing a layer of truth similar to when he told me who he really was.

Hmm.

Was I wearing him down, or was he really that desperate to save his career. If I didn't know better, I'd say he needed a bust to keep himself out of trouble.

"Sorry, Preston, but we have been handling this without your help for some time. We've been working with the covens to protect this town, and things have turned out fine. We don't need the help of the Dascălu. You're just going to make things worse." I turned my back on him, but he reached over the bar and grabbed my arm.

"You're making a mistake." His harsh whisper made me jump.

I saw the tightness around the edges of his eyes as he clenched his jaw. "What are you not telling me?"

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "We have it on good authority

that you're involved with something big. I need to prove or disprove whatever it is."

Shocked, my body went numb. Someone had made an accusation against me. That's why Preston had been ready to handcuff me when we first met.

"Who made the accusation?" It was the first question that popped out of my mouth.

He looked around at the customers next to him and behind him. "Not here."

Wonderful.

I had to play spy with him and meet somewhere in the back of an unmarked van to find out why I was under investigation.

"Fine. When and where?" I almost rolled my eyes at what was probably another tactic designed to make me say something incriminating.

See? I'm getting better at identifying red flags. Go me!

He released my arm and pulled a pen and paper from his pocket.

Scribbling down a note, he slid the paper across the bar to me. "Meet me here."

Scanning the bar again, he took off without another word.

I glanced at the scribble and sighed. "Weirdo."

Only an out-of-towner would want to meet at the After Dark Casino under the Silver Oaks Retirement Home. At least I had one advantage there.

Jupiter.

Chapter 11 Quinn

After finishing the gutter installation, I stepped down the ladder and admired my work. It had been a long time since I had fixed something without magic. Granted, it wasn't a difficult task, but it felt good to work with my hands. It made me realize how dependent I had become on magic.

Yes, we fully embraced magic at home, so I didn't really think about it, but knowing that Charlie ran a successful restaurant without magic made me feel like a fraud. My entire identity was built on using magic and being better than everyone else.

The only time Dad avoided magic was when he was building something. He liked to do it the old-fashioned way. When I was younger, I thought he was being silly. I always told him he could finish a project faster if he used a spell.

He would nod and shrug. "Trust me, Quinn. One day, you'll understand the value of hard work. You'll take pride in making something by hand, not just because it's harder, but because it came from your heart and mind, not a spell." I thought he was nuts. Why waste time manually putting Tab A into Slot B when magic could do it in seconds? I only saw the value in sculpting clay or painting still life by hand.

Seeing the gutter hanging straight and secure, I felt good about myself. Maybe Dad was right, after all? Perhaps some things should be done by hand.

Looking at Charlie's weathered deck, I thought about how it would feel to fix the loose deck boards and sagging steps with a hammer and screws instead of a wand. After years of watching Dad and complaining about the grueling work he made me do, I knew how to fix plumbing and electrical issues, build decks and repair drywall. I just imagined using magic if I ever

took over the business.

On a high from my minor repair work, I accepted the challenge.

I ran to the truck to grab a hammer and nails. Though Charlie hadn't asked me to fix the deck, I needed to prove to her and myself that I could do it by hand.

Wiping the sweat from my face, I stretched my back. Three hours later, the deck looked almost like new. It could use some waterproof stain to brighten and protect it, but that could wait until I figured out what color Charlie preferred.

I packed my tools and jumped into the truck. I wasn't sure if Charlie was at work, but a drink and a burger sounded delicious.

I drove over to O'Malley's and quickly changed into my spare, clean shirt.

"Would you like a table, sir, or a seat at the bar?" The hostess looked down at her seating chart as she smiled.

"I think I will sit at the bar. Is Charlie working today?" I felt like a stalker asking if she was around, but I wanted to update her on the gutter. And the deck that I took upon myself to spruce up.

"Yes, she's tending bar." The hostess pointed towards the back of the room.

"Thank you. I appreciate it." I went to the bar and sat on the side, away from the TVs. It would make it easier to hear Charlie if she could chat.

Feeling giddy over my accomplishment today, I worried I would sound like a lunatic when I explained my happiness over a silly gutter. I imagined what Charlie's reaction might be. Would she be happy for me, or would she think I was spoiled by magic? I felt good about helping Charlie, not that she really needed my help.

"Hey, Quinn. Can I get you a drink?" Charlie's voice wafted through the

noise at the other end of the room. Thankfully, she sounded excited to see me.

Smiling, I waved. “Hey. I finished up at your house and needed something to cool me down. I could go for a soda with ice, and if I could get a bacon cheeseburger with BBQ sauce and fries, my stomach would forever be in your debt.”

She giggled, which made me giggle. God, I missed her laugh. She could brighten any room with her smile. I was still gobsmacked by her beauty. How did I let her get away when we were in school?

“I can do that. Were you able to reinstall the gutter?” I was almost offended by the doubt in her voice or would have been if I hadn’t doubted myself for the first few minutes on the ladder.

“It’s like new. You won’t be able to tell which part fell off. And I didn’t use any magic. Plus, I took care of a few loose nails on the deck and repaired the busted bottom step. At no charge, of course.” I couldn’t stop myself from smiling like an idiot.

Her eyebrows rose in surprise as she handed me my soda. She didn’t think I could fix things without magic, or she assumed I wouldn’t try. “Wow! You didn’t have to work on the deck, but I appreciate it. Thank you! Let me know how much for the manual labor, and I’ll get my checkbook.”

I put my hand on her arm as she turned towards the kitchen, presumably to get her purse. “There’s no extra charge. I’m a handyman, and I fixed it how it needed to be fixed.”

“Oh, are you sure?” I appreciated that she was being polite.

“Yes. I’m sure. It didn’t take me long at all.” I took a gulp of my drink and stared into her gorgeous eyes.

“Okay. I appreciate it. Lunch, of course, will be on the house. I might need you to fix something else, so I want to make up for my weird outburst

earlier.” She pulled her hair behind her ear, which she used to do when nervous.

Huh.

She was afraid that she had upset me or scared me off. Interesting.

“I will gladly accept the burger and fries as my retainer fee to continue as your handyman.” I held out my hand to shake on it.

Chuckling, she took my hand and gave it a quick shake. “Deal.”

My heart sped up so quickly that I felt lightheaded. The same buzzing sensation I felt when I entered her house filled my chest. Was I having a heart attack? If so, I should change my order to a salad instead.

I was about to reply when a guy approached the bar and waved at Charlie.

“Hey, Charlie!”

Charlie spun around with a glass in her hand. “Hey, Milo!”

He hopped onto the bar stool next to me. “Why didn’t you tell me that Preston showed up here earlier? I would have run over here to help you.” He flexed his arm as he imagined punching the guy.

“Let me guess, Gray told you. I swear. No one can keep a secret around here.” She rolled her eyes and grabbed a towel to scrub the bar. Apparently, Charlie liked to angry clean.

“I’m sorry, but are you in trouble, Charlie? Is someone harassing you?” I couldn’t deactivate my damsel in distress mode fast enough. I knew better than to offer to protect her, but something inside told me she needed help.

Charlie’s shoulders sagged. “It’s fine, Quinn. Just a misunderstanding.”

Her friend turned to glare at me. “Who are you?”

Surprised by the aggressiveness of his question, I squared my shoulders and held out my hand. “Quinn O’Brien. An old friend of Charlie’s and her new handyman.”

I squeezed his hand a little tighter than was considered polite. I didn't know why my non-existent Alphahole side came out suddenly, but I felt compelled to tell the guy that I cared about Charlie.

"Milo. Charlie's current friend." Standing up to his full height, he squeezed my hand so hard that tears came to my eyes.

I patted his hand, clenching around mine like a vise. "Great to meet you. Always nice to meet a friend of Charlie's." I wanted to crawl into the bathroom for a quick cry, but I held firm.

Whipping the towel at our hands, Charlie sighed. "Time out. Do I need to put you two in separate corners? Milo, this is Quinn. We were friends as kids until we went to different academies." She looked at Milo while motioning to me. Turning to look at me, she motioned to Milo. "Quinn, this is Milo, my friend's younger brother. He works at the tattoo shop for Dahlia."

Nodding, Milo and I released our hands and looked each other over.

I noted the tattoo on the back of his hand that read, "Unthinkable."

Oh good. He's probably a thug.

"Wait. I thought your handyman was an old guy." Milo gave me another look. He appeared displeased that I wasn't an old man.

"His father retired. Quinn took over the business." She waved away his question and leaned against the bar. "Can I get you anything?"

Seeing her smile and an odd twinkle in her eyes, I wondered if she had a crush on the thug.

I thought back to what Daire said about Dahlia being a psychic, which made sense. I couldn't believe I hadn't figured that out years ago, but my focus had always been on Charlie.

There was no way Dahlia would hire someone dangerous to work for her.

Unfortunately, Milo must have been good people.

Damn.

Looking at me from the corner of his eye, he nodded. “Dahlia wanted some cheese fries. She had a vision. I wanted to see if you needed help with the Daskalu guy, so I volunteered to pick them up. Oh, and Gray asked for a cobb salad.”

Daskalu?

Wait. Did he mean Dascălu?

Fear spiked through my chest. What the fuck did the Dascălu want with Charlie?

Preston.

If I recalled correctly, Preston was the black sheep of the family. Witch Weekly had an article about him taking down a dark coven. However, the article spent more time praising his brother, even though it didn’t sound like he had done much to catch the assholes.

I’d heard rumors from Dad that there was internal strife within the Dascălu organization. It sounded like Preston was the hard worker, and Madsen Dascălu was the golden boy who received all the praise for sitting on his ass.

It was interesting how so many retired hunters had moved to Florida and liked to spill the tea during poker games at the community center.

Lowering my voice, I hissed. “Why is the Dascălu talking to you?”

Charlie frowned. “Like I said. It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

However, Milo looked worried about it. I didn’t get the impression he was a witch, so he probably didn’t know much about the Dascălu. He was more likely a shifter, based on his fantastic posture.

Regardless of what Charlie said, I was worried.

Milo sat back down as Charlie ran into the kitchen to place his order.

“Is Dahlia okay?” Looking at Milo, I decided to give the guy a chance.

He couldn't be all bad if he was willing to punch a dark wizard hunter in the face to protect Charlie. Offering to get food for Dahlia, put another checkmark in his “decent guy” box.

He shrugged. “She gets terrible headaches after visions. It’s rough on her. I’m guessing you know Dahlia too since Charlie and she were tight as kids.” Seeing him lower his shoulders, I relaxed a little.

“Yeah. She was a bit of a mystery. After speaking with one of her mates, I figured out why. I wish I had known she was a psychic. I would have been more sympathetic. I just thought she wanted to be Goth.” I shook my head at my stupidity.

Milo snorted. “She’s definitely not Goth. Did you speak with Ian, Daire or Aiden?”

My eyebrows flew up. Dahlia had landed three guys? Wow!

Good for her. She deserved it. Hopefully, she was happier than she was as a kid.

“Umm. Daire.”

He nodded. “Oh, you’re the guy who fixed their toilet. Got it. Daire mentioned something about inviting a plumber to their D&D game.” He glanced over at me. “Sorry about almost breaking your hand. I thought you might be bothering Charlie.”

Flexing my hand, I shrugged. “I still have feeling in it, so we’re good.” I chuckled.

“I’m actually glad that Charlie has someone to watch over her. I’ve been away from town for a really long time. I’m happy that she has great friends to support her.”

He turned on the stool to look at me. “Do you know anything about the guy giving her a hard time?”

I appreciated his directness. “Not personally, but I know of him and his

coven. If he's investigating Charlie, she is in more trouble than she wants to admit. He might be trying to figure out if she knows anything about a dark coven, or worse, he might believe she's in a dark coven."

Seeing the anger flash across Milo's face, I knew he didn't believe either was possible.

I was starting to like Milo a little more.

"That's bullshit. Charlie is one of the kindest people I know. She's been through some serious shit. There's no way she's involved with dark wizards." He quickly looked away as his face fell.

"What? What is it?" My heart stopped. There was no way Charlie was mixed up in anything dark.

He leaned closer to me. "Does the name Zeth mean anything to you?" Whispering, he looked around to make sure no one was listening to us.

Fuck!

"I'm familiar with the asshat. But it's been a really long time since I've seen him."

If I never hear that stupid nickname again, I will die happy.

"He's bad news. Right?" Milo's eyes turned yellow, confirming that he was a shifter and that he really didn't like Zeth.

"Awful news. Is Charlie still friends with him?"

Please say no. Please say no.

Milo shook his head. "No. She kicked his ass the last time she saw him."

Letting out a breath, I wanted to cheer for Charlie. Unfortunately, seeing Zeth again would explain why the Dascălu talked with her. I had to find out what kind of trouble she was in.

I'd heard the rumors about Zeth and his friends, which included Charlie. She certainly didn't have a problem with magic when they filled the swimming pool at Cliff Haven with blow-up dolls that talked dirty and

moaned.

I had a few friends who swiped some of the dolls to take back to their dorm rooms.

Man, those things said some crazy shit.

My favorite was, “Come in my mouth, not in your hand.”

Ahh, the good old days. Yet, the woman who had helped carry out that plan seemed to have seriously mellowed out since then. If I had asked her out back in school, would she have fallen in with a future dark wizard?

Seeing Charlie pop out of the kitchen, I raised my hand to wave her over. I hated pressing her about her Dascălu problem, but I needed answers.

Screaming behind me made me spin around on my stool. I saw people at multiple tables jump out of their seats and run for the front door.

What the hell? Is this a new way for people to skip out on the bill?

I looked at the tables to figure out why people were freaking the fuck out.

“What happened?” Milo searched the room as he stood up.

“I have no idea. Let’s find out what’s going on.” I hopped off my stool and headed into the dining room. I immediately froze when I heard a strange hissing noise coming from different directions.

“You have to be kidding!” Milo skidded to a stop next to me.

Glancing down at the tiled floor, I discovered what was wrong.

I climbed onto a chair and suppressed the high-pitched scream that almost came out of my throat.

Unwilling to completely embarrass myself in front of Charlie, I let out a soft whimper.

Snakes. Mother fucking snakes!

Slithering across dinner plates and squirming across the floor, I watched in terror as the customers ran from the restaurant as if it were the fucking

Titanic after it hit the iceberg. Though, like if they had enough lifeboats.

Shit!

I was too overwhelmed to think straight. I HATED snakes!

“I need to call James! We need help.” Hearing Charlie behind me, I turned to see her kneeling on the bar.

“Wait. I can help. I can just use a spell...” My hand went to my back pocket, but I paused. I wasn’t sure if the no-magic rule applied to snake-related emergencies.

Charlie’s wide eyes stared at me. I wasn’t sure if she was upset because the hissing creatures had taken over her pub or because I was asking permission to pull out my wand. “I...”

Shaking his head, Milo motioned for me to stop. Apparently, he was aware of the no-magic rule, too.

“We have to do this the hard way.” Milo’s body contorted and broke through his clothing. Fur sprouted everywhere as his face elongated into a snout with a shit ton of teeth.

A wolf shifter. Hmm. I would have guessed a tiger or a panther, but wolves were cool, too.

Milo’s wolf leaped at the closest snake and grabbed it by the tail. He whipped it across the room into the wall, knocking it out.

Nice trick, but I was not about to pick up a snake.

Staring at the slithering monsters, I tried to make my brain skip past the part where I wanted to hide under the covers and pretend that I was dealing with something, anything other than snakes, to the part where I was a hell of a lot braver with a solution in hand.

So much for feeling as if I could conquer the world when I was in my twenties.

Apparently, doing things without magic was much more difficult than I

ever realized.

“Tongs. You have tongs in the kitchen. Right? We could pick up the snakes and toss them into trash bags.

Once we have them all, we can call a local zoo to see if they will pick them up. Or maybe a snake rescue. I’ve run into a few of them over the years.” The plan was absurd, but it was the best one I could come up with that didn’t involve setting fire to the building and running for our lives.

Charlie nodded. “Okay. Yeah. Sounds like a plan.”

“It does?” Surprised by her agreeing to my god-awful plan, I blinked a few times to restart my brain. “Yeah. It does. Okay.” I searched the floor for the best way to make it back to the kitchen for the stupid tongs. I had no idea if the snakes were venomous or just bitey little fiends, but I was sure I would figure it out quickly.

Plotting my course, I leaped off my safe, happy chair and played “The Floor is on Fire.” Or filled with snakes, which was basically the same game.

What I wouldn’t give for a blowtorch or my wand.

No! You can live your life without using magic as a crutch!

Hot-stepping over and around the hissing, beady-eyed nightmares, I ran for the kitchen.

My hand twitched, begging to pull out my wand. How did Charlie live like this?

Searching the kitchen, I grabbed oven mitts, the salad tongs, a large spatula, garbage bags and two pot lids. I ran through the insane plan in my head and breathed. I could do this.

I jumped on top of the bar to survey the situation. Roughly 30-40 snakes were covering the ground. I knew they couldn’t reproduce like rabbits, but I swore they multiplied like a wet gremlin.

“Come and get some!” It wasn’t my best battle cry, but I felt it was

appropriate for the moment.

Leaping to the ground, I used my large pot lid like a shield and beat back the snakes to get to my original chair.

Milo had taken down a few snakes, but more were closing in around him.

“Quinn. Milo. Be careful! I swear. If either of you gets bitten, I’m going to be pissed at you.” Charlie was biting her lip as her eyes bounced around to the different areas of snakes. She glanced up at me with her eyebrows raised, waiting for me to take on the horde slithering around my chair with a mix of shock and awe. At least, I hoped it was awe. I felt pretty awesome for at least attempting the suicide mission.

In true Charlie style, she threatened to get mad at us for doing something dangerous, yet she had done a ton of dangerous things over the years.

Hearing Milo growl, I saw that he was backed into a corner. I jumped from table to table to reach him.

“Hold on. I’ve got you.” Using my pot lid and tongs, I beat back the snakes to his right side as he attacked the ones on his right.

“Umm. Quinn. I changed my mind. Go ahead and use magic.” Hearing the terror in her voice, I looked through the partition to see her hands shaking.

“Why the change of heart?” Shocked, I tried to figure out what had drastically changed.

“I looked up what kind of snakes we’re dealing with. All of them are venomous snakes. Any one of them could kill us with their bite.”

I felt the blood drain from my face and limbs. Was she serious?

Fuck me!

I had just run through a room full of venomous snakes.

So much for her looking at me with awe. She had been looking at me

with fear in her eyes, mixed with suspicions of me having a death wish.

My life flashed before my eyes. I saw the time my grandmother gave me a cookie at Christmas, and my throat swelled up. It was the day I learned I was allergic to walnuts and that eating her homemade walnut surprise cookies would land me in the hospital.

Okay. Change of plans.

Milo yelped and quickly jumped onto the closest table without snakes. He shifted back and stared at me. “I’m cool with snakes and can handle a venomous snake here and there, but this is crazy. Who the fuck fills a restaurant with this many deadly snakes?”

Shrugging, my mouth hung open as I tried not to stare at Milo’s impressive dick that made mine want to shrivel up and die.

“A rival pub? A pissed-off Boy Scout?”

Milo frowned. “Okay, magic boy. You’re up. Do your thing.”

Magic boy? Did that make him wolf boy?

Shaking my head, I tried to focus on getting us out of the terror-filled nightmare.

I tugged on the part of me that craved a good magic duel and dropped my ridiculous tongs and pot lid. It was showtime.

Pulling my wand out of my back pocket, I took a steadying breath. The wood in my hand felt familiar and safe, as it always had. Feeling my confidence rising, I looked at Charlie. “You sure about this?”

I gave her one more chance to tell me to pick up my pot lid and oven mitts and go with plan *Bat Shit Crazy*. I didn’t want her to change her mind and get mad at me for using magic. Having felt magic withdrawal, I had a small glimpse into what she might be going through.

She glanced down at the danger noodles and licked her lips. “I appreciate you confirming my choice, but I’m good. Just don’t burn down my

restaurant or send them flying into the air.”

I checked the box for the no-fire and no-flying restrictions and ran through the list of spells that didn't involve those outcomes.

“Hippety Hoppety transformă acești nenorociți de șerpi în iepurași!”

Bouncing my wand up and down in a hopping motion, I used my spell to turn the fanged demons into fluffy bunnies.

Charlie's eyes practically popped out of her head. “Did you just use a transformation spell to turn deadly snakes into deadly rabbits?” Her narrowed eyes pinned me with the same look my third-grade teacher used when Patty Sunshine tried to make a teapot boil by lighting the fire underneath but blew up the woodpile.

“Dude! What the fuck?” Milo glanced down at the rabbits.

“I'm sorry, did you say deadly rabbits? How did I do that?” I looked at the adorable fluffers and saw them open their mouths to expose their sharp fangs.

“You can't turn a venomous creature into a pig or a butterfly without first making it non-venomous. That's like Freshmen Transformation 101. Were you asleep that day or too busy drooling over Diana March to listen to your casting instructors?”

Son of a bitch. I had somehow made jumping cotton balls of death. I had no idea what she meant by her Diana March comment, but I tabled that conversation for later.

The rabbits leaped into the air, snapping their teeth at Milo and me.

Quickly using my lifting spell to pull the pot lids off the floor, I tossed one to Milo.

He grabbed his pot lid and started smacking the hell out of the rabbits. “Man, this feels wrong, but I don't want them biting my balls.”

Or mine.

“Okay, Charlie. Do you have any suggestions that won’t make this situation worse? I don’t know how to make something non-venomous since my dueling opponents never turned themselves into fucking snakes.” I ran through spell after spell. I could turn the rabbits back into snakes, but that wouldn’t change the problem. Fire was still not an option, so I had no more bright ideas.

“I...” Charlie swallowed harshly and shook her head.

Seeing a bunny hop at Milo, he swung the lid and smacked the damned thing into the wall as if he were swinging for the backfield of Yankee Stadium. The fluffer hit the wall and fell to the floor, stunned.

That was one way of dealing with this mess.

“Charlie, you should call James or Ian. They’ll figure out what to do.” Milo punted one of the rabbits toward the front door.

“It will take too long for them to get here. Focus, honey! I’ll use the spell. Just point me in a direction. You don’t have to conjure it yourself.” I kicked a fluffer who tried to jump up and bite my leg. “Sorry, cute demon bunny.” I really needed to turn them back into snakes so we didn’t feel bad about kicking their asses.

Charlie clenched her fist. “I want to help you, Quinn. I really do, but I can’t. If I give you a spell to use, it will likely make things worse.”

“Sweetie, I feel guilty for punting adorable little bunnies across the room even though they want to kill me. How much worse can things get?” Trying not to sound upset since Charlie clearly had worse fears about magic than I realized, I kept my voice calm and even.

She shook her head and scrunched up her face. “Okay.” Gritting her teeth, she hissed. “Use the...use the transformation spell to...” Breathing heavily, I saw tears rolling down her cheeks. “Use the...*Deschide pământul și trage...*” Charlie clamped her hands tightly over her mouth.

“Are you okay?” Milo looked like he wanted to cross the minefield to check on Charlie.

Shocked by the spell she almost used, it took a second to realize what was happening.

“It’s okay, Charlie. You don’t have to say anything. I’ll think of something...” My brain stopped working altogether. Think. Think! I considered calling James for a second, but my pride wouldn’t let me call my frenemy.

“Quinn! Last chance. We can’t let these things find a way to get to the street.”

Scanning the room, Milo saw what I saw. The rabbits were scattering, trying to find a way out.

In my haze, a plan, no, a stupid plan came to mind. “*Schimbați adorabilii iepurași înapoi în șerpi fără colți.*”

Wriggling my wand and pointing at my teeth, I threw all my fear into my spell. Thankfully, the fur disappeared, returning the little fuckers back into snakes.”

“Ummm.” Milo seemed displeased by my spell.

But, snakes without fangs. Luckily, I knew how to put teeth back into my head after all the rough duels that had knocked them out. With a minor tweak, I could remove the snakes’ fangs by pulling them out. There was one last thing I could try. “*Transformă acești șerpi în mâncare.*”

Blowing out a breath, I relaxed. The snakes immediately stopped moving and flopped onto the floor. Instead of killing them, I turned them into food, specifically gummy snakes. Granted, they still had venom inside them, but at least it was contained inside the gummy so we could dispose of the snakes safely.

“Holy shit! You did it. Great job, Quinn. I’m not going to lie. I really

thought we were goners for a second there.” Milo jumped off his table and high-fived me.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. I’m not going to lie. I thought we were screwed for a while there.” I hopped off my table and averted my eyes from looking at his buff chest.

Running over to help Charlie, Milo and I grabbed each arm and pulled her off the bar until her feet reached the ground.

“You’re safe now.” Milo smiled broadly and flexed his muscles, which might have been intentional, though I wasn’t sure.

Charlie reached out and pulled both of us into a hug. I put my arm around her. “It’s okay, honey.”

“I’m so sorry.” She sobbed into my shirt.

Milo rubbed her back. “Everyone’s okay. You can relax now.”

Despite not being comfortable with partially hugging a naked guy, I was grateful for Milo’s assistance. Charlie obviously felt safe hugging him when he had his balls hanging out.

Taking a breath, I leaned back to look into Charlie’s eyes. I wiped the tears from her cheeks and kissed her forehead.

“First, we’re going to clean up this mess, most likely with magic. Then, you’ll tell me how someone managed to curse you.

Chapter 12 Charlie

Pulling away from Quinn and Milo's warm bodies, I wasn't sure how Quinn knew I was cursed, but my first instinct was to lie. Anytime someone got close to the truth about my reluctance to use magic, I immediately changed the subject or shrugged away their questions.

Yet, seeing Quinn looking at me like he wanted to hold me in his arms and tell me it would be okay, my resolve crumbled.

Before I could speak, he pulled out his wand and cleaned up the pub. I would have yelled at him about having his wand out, but I was too tired and drained to care.

Fighting the Raze the World and Send it to Hell curse, I felt sick. I had no clue why that curse made its debut in the middle of Quinn's battle with the snake, but it was nearly impossible to stop. Thankfully, Quinn helped Milo and rose to the occasion to stop the snakes himself.

Why couldn't I just perform regular magic? Why did I have to struggle with every day? I swore that if I ever saw Zeth again, I would unleash every curse from the book on him. He deserved it after he knowingly made me read from it.

Milo put his arm around me and stood quietly with me. He felt like my silent protector. I sagged against him, allowing him to support me. I wanted to say so many things to him, like thank you and sorry for everything, but I didn't know where to begin.

Once I felt a little stronger, I smiled up at Milo. "I need a second."

"Take all the time you need. I'm not going anywhere. I'll grab some trash bags for Quinn." He put his warm hand against my face, helping to dispel the numbness in my body.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I headed to the kitchen and guzzled a glass of water. It was better to distract myself while Quinn zipped around the pub, sprinkling his socially acceptable magic everywhere.

Stop wallowing. Quinn was kind enough to help clean up someone else's mess.

I dumped the rest of the water in the sink and hung my head. Who would fill the pub with deadly snakes? Someone had to be a complete asshole to do something like that.

Pulling out my phone, I quickly typed a message to James about what happened and how Quinn and Milo were cleaning up. Then, I sent him the outstretched hand emoji to stop him from running to the pub.

I didn't need him freaking out. I was freaking out enough for both of us.

I was surprised that Preston hadn't popped up by now, though I assumed I wouldn't see him until our clandestine encounter later.

Once my nerves were somewhat under control, I returned to the bar. I had to decide what, if anything, I should say to Quinn and Milo.

Watching Quinn's wand and body movements as he spun around, undoing all the damage to the plates, tables, chairs and floor, I smiled. I had missed seeing him cast. Even though I was mad at him during our academy days, or maybe I was jealous of his girlfriends, I still went to his dueling tournaments. Yes, I usually rooted for his opponent out of spite, but I still cared about him on some level.

He was graceful and creative. He had managed to defang the snakes and turn them into gummies. That was inventive. His dueling coach would have been impressed. If only he hadn't gotten too popular for me, maybe we would have stayed friends.

Finishing up, he turned and gave me a quick bow.

“Bravo!”

I clapped at his performance.

He walked over to me and pushed his wand into his back pocket. His goofy expression morphed into one of concern and sadness. My heart stopped when I realized it was the moment of truth.

I sat down at the closest table and reached out to hold their hands.

They both sat down across from me and took a hand.

Quinn kissed my knuckles. “Charlie, please. Tell me what happened. I get the impression that no one knows about the curse. How long have you been living with it?”

Looking away from him, I shook my head. “A really long time.” My shoulders trembled as the truth finally came out.

Milo’s face fell, and he looked like he was in pain. I hated lying to everyone for so long, but I never wanted to see that kind of expression from my friends.

“I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine how you’ve managed to live with this burden. Most people in your position don’t survive long, even if the curse wasn’t intended to kill them. They can’t deal with it, so they take drastic measures. I can only imagine what you’ve been through.” He rubbed his thumb over the inside of my wrist, and Milo clasped my hand with both of his.

There was no judgment, no accusation in Quinn’s voice, only empathy and sympathy, which made me cry. I hadn’t realized how much I needed to tell my secret to someone who would listen and support me.

“It’s been so hard. I just can’t express how much I’ve struggled with it.” My uncontrollable sobbing made me incoherent, but I had to get the words lodged in my throat for decades out of me.

“Shh. It’s okay. Tell us what happened.”

Looking at his kind eyes, I felt like we were kids again. I remembered

how he had cleaned my elbow after James and I had kicked each other's ass in the driveway while playing catch. I hadn't asked him to bandage up my bloody arm, but I was grateful to him. It was the summer before middle school, and everything changed between us.

"Zeth tricked me. I swear, I had no idea what he was planning to do. I found out way too late that he was pure fucking evil. He used me. I was looking for friends, while he was looking for someone to do his dirty work. I was his dark spell caster."

Admitting to what I had become burned my chest. How could I have been so stupid?

He nodded his head and let out a breath. "I knew he was an asshole, but I had no idea he was that far gone. Shit. You could have told me, Charlie. You could have come to me. I would have listened." He and Milo exchanged a knowing glance.

A bitter laugh escaped me. "Right. I would've had to get in line to get your attention. We weren't exactly friends back then."

Confused, he sat back. "What are you talking about?"

I shook my head. "Never mind. I apologize. It was a cheap shot. Trust me. I screwed up my own life. I take responsibility for that. Besides, by the time I learned what Zeth had done to me, I was trapped. He would have hurt you or threatened to kill you if we were still friends. That was their way of controlling people."

Quinn slowly nodded. "I get that. I've read stories and accounts from witches who dealt with dark wizards or escaped from them. It wasn't easy for them to leave."

I chuckled darkly. "No. It wasn't."

"That's why it was so hard for you to leave Reed. Wasn't it?" Milo reached out to wipe away my tears.

I nodded. "One of the reasons."

Quinn closed his eyes and pressed his lips together. He looked like he was trying to control his anger. Letting out a breath, he opened his eyes.

"Okay, so tell me how Zeth cursed you." He patiently waited for me to explain how I had been gullible enough to allow someone to curse me.

Tapping my foot, I shrugged. "Zeth and the others slowly gained my trust and pretended like I was one of them. Looking back, I realize that Zeth told Reed to charm and seduce me while he gained my friendship as the leader of our coven. Zeth made me feel special and cared for through positive affirmations. Reed followed up with physical affection. Boy, they made one hell of a team. They swept me off my sad and lonely feet, and I ate it up. When Zeth gifted me with the Book of Ancient Charms, I didn't question it." I couldn't look up to see Quinn's expression.

I didn't want to see pathetic old Charlie's reflection in his eyes.

"What is the Book of Ancient Charms? I've never heard of that." Quinn looked at Milo.

Milo shook his head. "I've never heard Daire or Ian mention it before?"

Sighing, I wanted to cover my face and hide. "Exactly. You've never heard of it because it doesn't exist. Zeth glamoured the Book of Ancient Magicks to look like an innocent spell book. He even enchanted the pages so the spells had cute or simple names, and their intentions were obscured. Here, I believed I was using a benign, though powerful spell book when I was actually using the mother of all dark magicks spell books to end all spell books."

"Holy fuck. Charlie, you read from the book. That's why you almost opened a giant hole in the ground that would have dragged the snakes, the pub, and us into a lower realm of Hell of all eternity. When you say you're cursed, you mean like fucking giant-sized, top-of-the-line, mega curses of all

curses. The curse that makes all little curses tremble in the corner and shit themselves. Sweetheart, how have you kept this to yourself for so long, even from your brother?” He pulled his hand away to wipe his face.

Confused, Milo looked to Quinn for an explanation. “So, this is really bad.”

Quinn nodded. “Yeah.”

Once more, my strength crumbled, and I wept. This time, they were both out of their chairs, pulling me into their arms.

“I couldn’t tell anyone. They would have feared me or tried to protect me. Worse, they would have tried to undo the curse. Regular curses fight back with a vengeance when a witch uses a counter curse. I’ve read what happens to witches who have tried to counter curse someone who read from the book. It didn’t go well for the cursed witch or the one performing the counter curse.”

Unable to stop my tears, I let them all out. My fear, anxiety, pain and hopelessness rushed out of me, threatening to flood the entire bar.

Kissing my forehead, Quinn offered me his sleeve. “Here. Go ahead.”

I chuckled at his offer, knowing he was trying to use his unique humor to calm me down.

Pushing his arm away, I sniffled.

“I’m okay. Thanks.”

“Charlie. You could have told me. I would have listened.” Milo rubbed my shoulder.

“I couldn’t tell anyone. I’m sorry, Milo.” I felt like he might never trust me again.

Taking me into his arms, Milo hugged me. “I get it. I was afraid to tell everyone about my psycho family. I lived in constant fear that someone would find out. I’m not upset, Charlie. I just want you to know that you can

tell me anything.”

My heart lightened for the first time in so many years. “I appreciate that, Milo.”

Letting go of him, I glanced at Quinn from the corner of my eye. I felt ashamed. I didn’t want Quinn to think I was still a naïve little girl.

Quinn ran his hand through his hair as he sat back down. “Well, I understand your fear of using magic. If I recall correctly, the book entices the reader to use dark spells instead of light magic. I saw you struggling when you tried to suggest a spell to stop the snakes. It looked like you were wrestling with your inner demons, which I guess you actually were. I seriously credit you for keeping the curse contained for so long.”

Wiping the tears from my eyes and cheeks, I cleared my throat and sat back down. “It feels like an addiction. It actually hurts my body sometimes when I push back on the spells trying to come out of me. It takes a toll on me mentally and physically. The only way to combat it is to keep moving, doing, and thinking about something else.”

Quinn took my hand again. “I may not have been with you when all this happened, but I’m here for you now. Whatever you need, I’m here for you. Consider us friends again.” His smile slowly grew until it filled his face. “Thank you for confiding in me. I don’t know if I can help with the curse, but I’m happy to help however I can.”

A sense of relief spread through my entire body. I wasn’t sure why I felt everything would be okay as I looked up at him, but I was grateful to have my friend back.

“Thank you, Quinn. You have no idea how much this means to me.” I looked up at Milo standing next to me and took his hand. “I promise I will confide in you from now on, Milo.”

Smiling, he leaned over to kiss my cheek. “Good. I want to know

everything. The good, the bad, the serious, and the silly.”

I nodded. “I promise.”

Quinn let go of my hand and leaned back in his chair. “Okay, man, time to put some pants on. I can only avert my eyes for so long here. I don’t have any shifter friends, so I’ve reached the limits of my male bonding time.”

Blushing, I snorted. I had definitely missed Quinn’s humor. “I have some spare clothes in the back from the last time you dropped off an emergency supply.”

Milo shrugged. “I’m confident in my manhood.”

Quinn shook his head. “I can see that, or rather, I can’t unsee that.” He jumped out of his chair and headed for the bar. “I need a drink.”

Standing up, I put my arms around Milo and hug him. “Come on. We need to get you decent.”

Milo chuckled. “I don’t understand why guy are so weirded out by seeing other guys naked. I was told that schools made them shower together. What was the big deal?”

“Men are intimidated by dicks bigger than their own.” Quinn shouted from the bar.

Leaning down, Milo whispered, “Is mine bigger than Quinn’s.”

I shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“Trust me. You win.” The sound of glasses clanking indicated that Quinn was refilling his drink.

Trying to hide my laughter, I looked down at the new raven tattoo on his ribs. “Umm. When did you get a raven tattoo?” I was curious about the timing.

He turned to show it off it me. “Recently. It was Dahlia’s idea. I wanted a compass, but she told me the raven represented my destination instead of my journey.”

I wasn't sure if Dahlia was telling Milo to take up bird watching or if the raven had something to do with Ignatius or me.

I hoped it was a bird-watching reference; otherwise, things could get very complicated very quickly.

"Dahlia did a great job with it." Hiding my concern, I focused on the artwork instead of the implications.

We walked over to the bar where Quinn was throwing back his second drink. Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he pointed to the raven. "I was going to ask why he had a tattoo of Ignatius on his side."

My heart stopped. While the raven did have similar features, I doubted it was Ignatius. Then again, Dahlia had changed from a compass to a raven.

I closed my eyes, not wanting to believe it really was Ignatius.

"Who's Ignatius?" Milo crossed his arms.

"Long story, I'll tell you later." I pushed him toward the kitchen to get dressed.

"I'm assuming that you'll want to serve dinner here. You should probably send out a message on your social media about the strange sewer backup that allowed snakes into the restaurant, but your amazing handyman got everything sorted out." He flashed a smile and threw out his hand as if to say "ta-da" like a magician finishing his trick.

Shaking my head, I laughed. "I guess I do owe you one." Wanting to kiss his cheek, I settled on a punch to the shoulder.

Milo headed into the kitchen.

Holding up his hand, Quinn blocked his view of Milo's fine ass. "That you do. How about I make you dinner the next night you're free? We should catch up since we are officially friends again, and your massive secret is already out in the open."

I liked the idea of catching up with him. And not having to cook. "Do

you know how to make your mom's Irish soda bread and creamy mashed potato recipes?"

He put his hand over his chest, and his mouth fell open. "I'm offended, Charlie O'Malley. Do you really believe I would have let her run off with the pool boy without first giving me the secret family recipes?" Smiling, he pretended to be offended just before he chuckled. "That reminds me, Mom wanted me to give them to you so Dad didn't get them in the divorce. She figured you could sell them as an upgrade to your regular menu."

My eyes lit up at the thought of getting his mom's recipes. My parents were terrific chefs, but Quinn's mom had inherited her great-grandmother's recipes. They were heavenly if made correctly. "I may very well do that. I'll have to thank her."

Quinn shrugged. "Nah, I'll just pass along your thanks when Steve calls to check on me before bedtime. He likes to make sure that I brush my teeth."

"Huh. Cool. Steve sounds nice." Milo walked back into the bar fully clothed in jeans and a blue T-Shirt.

Quinn glared at Milo. "Cool. I'll ask Steve to buy you jeans that actually fit."

Wiggling his ass, Milo laughed. "Jealous?"

"A little." Quinn snorted.

I was relieved that Quinn was joking with me like a friend instead of fearing me like a ticking bomb waiting to explode all over his life. If only a guy like Milo or Quinn could love me, I might consider opening my heart to them.

Charlie

“Have a good night, Charlie.”

“We promise not to call unless something goes really wrong. We got it.”

“We’ll handle everything. Enjoy your night.”

Relieved that I had a fantastic group of people working for me, I slung my purse strap over my shoulder and picked up the two paper bags of food from the counter.

With a quick wave, I was out the door and crossing the parking lot. Thankfully, the snake incident hadn’t scared off many dinner customers. However, it was probably due more to the playoff games on our premium channels than our apology post offering half-price drinks for the ladies.

More lunch customers than I expected swung by to pay for their meals and offered to help us hunt down the assholes responsible. Only a couple of people cursed us out in person and online. They swore never to return to the pub, though I figured they would be back once the championship games were playing. Overall, everyone was pretty understanding.

I texted Quinn a few times, letting him know everything was okay and that I was relieved he knew about my curse. He texted me a few jokes to make me feel better.

Finally done for the night, I had to clear my head and prepare for my meeting with Preston. I had to find out who snitched on me to the Dascălu. But I had to make one quick stop.

Crossing the street, I walked past the Magical Rooster and headed to the corner.

Stopping at Lady Blue Tattoo, I pulled open the glass door and walked around the entrance wall and over to the reception desk.

“Oh good, you’re on time. Dahlia is just finishing up a three-butterfly

combo on someone's back. She's going to be cranky and hungry." Gray took the bags from me and pulled out the three food boxes.

I laughed at the thought of Dahlia complaining about not one but three butterflies. "I heaped on extra mashed potatoes and added bacon crumbles to them. Once she bites into that steak, she'll forget about everything. Was the rest of the day busy?"

I dropped my purse behind the counter and walked over to my favorite blue high-back chair in the empty waiting room.

Gray shrugged. "Milo showed up today and took a few walk-ins while Dahlia and I worked through our appointments." She brought her grilled sandwich combo to the blue velvet couch and sat down.

Tilting my head questioningly, I frowned. "I didn't know Milo took time off from work. Is he okay?" Wolf shifters didn't usually get sick. I wondered what he was doing on his time off.

She bit into an onion ring and shook her head. "He's been exhausted and snarky for a few weeks, but it's not like he's partying. I'm not sure what's going on. I just wish he would snap out of it. He's been pissy about all kinds of things at home. Whenever I try to talk to him, he brushes me off and heads into his man cave of a room to play video games. I want to move in with Gunner, but I feel bad leaving Milo alone in the house."

That was odd. I'd never seen Milo argue with anyone, though siblings had a way of pissing each other off intentionally. James and I spent two months only using non-verbal communication and a lot of middle fingers when we had a fight over chores during summer vacation when we were sixteen.

"I know you want to stare at your beautiful new tattoo, but keeping the plastic bandage over it is important. You'll have plenty of time to admire it later." Dahlia rushed out of Room 1 and headed for the register. Her client

shuffled behind her with a jacket draped over her arm.

“It’s amazing, Dahlia. You captured the colors perfectly. You’re so talented. I don’t trust anyone else to work on me. Thank you!”

The woman looked vaguely familiar but faces sometimes blurred together when I ran around town. I was always too focused on the mental list of daily tasks.

“It was my pleasure. I’ll see you soon, Amanda.” Dahlia handed Amanda’s credit card back to her, along with a receipt.

Amanda waved goodbye and headed out the door.

Dahlia let out a long breath. “Please tell me that’s bacon I smell.” Her eyes dropped to the food container behind the reception desk.

“Good guess, Boss. Come sit down and eat before you drop.” Gray motioned toward the seat on the couch next to her.

Walking her food over to the couch, Dahlia opened the container and stuck her nose inside to take a huge whiff. “Oh yeah, this will do. I would tattoo someone for free if they asked me to tattoo this masterpiece of a dinner on their ass. I swear I would. Thank you, Charlie. You always know how to prevent me from committing murder.” She pulled the plastic fork out of the wrapper and dug into the potatoes.

I chuckled at her praise. “You’re welcome. I hope you enjoy it. Personally, I’m going home to do some laundry and finish watching that horror movie I started last night.” It wasn’t exactly a lie, but I wanted to keep them far away from Preston’s snooping nose.

Gray snorted. “Which one are you watching now?”

Standing up, I stretched my neck and back. “Umm, I can’t remember the name of it, but it had poltergeists and vampires that were tormenting a witch. It was just getting good when I nodded off last night. The witch was calling upon the dead relatives of the poltergeist and vampires to figure out their

weaknesses. I was rooting for the vampires, but they are so unrealistic. They need to die.”

Dahlia bounced up and down on the couch as she tried to swallow. “Mmm, yeah. Daire was watching that the other night when I came home. He complained about the vampires, too. You should compare notes with him once you’re done. He had some particular views about the magic the witch used.”

I could imagine Daire bitching about the stupid spells they made up for the movie.

“Definitely. We can make a drinking game out of it. We can get Aiden, Cillian and Gavril to join us. They can point out the stupidity of the vampires and ghosts. It’ll be a party.”

“Definitely!” Gray chuckled.

Waving goodnight, I bent over to grab my purse from behind the counter. The damned strap caught on the chair leg. My purse tipped over, spilling most of the contents across the floor.

I grumbled at my stupid purse and stood up to survey the damage. Turning, I walked directly into Milo’s chest.

“Dude! Where the hell did you come from? Wolf shifters and their silent feet. I swear...” I quickly stepped back, embarrassed by my jumpy nature. Standing so close to him, I could feel his ridiculous wolf body heat. Admittedly, it was nice to experience the intimate pull of warmth crashing over my skin.

Milo always wore the most delicious colognes, which messed with my mind. His incredibly masculine body soap always made me tingly and happy. Sometimes, I walked past him to see how amazing he smelled, though I never told Gray I thought her brother smelled delicious. Talking about each other’s brother sexually was off limits, which was more difficult with her mated to

James.

Milo held up his hands. “Sorry. I came in search of dinner. I smelled it wafting under the door while cleaning my tattoo room. I didn’t mean to startle you, Charlie.”

I pulled my hair behind my ear and tried to hide my blush by bending over to gather my crap.

“It’s okay. I’m still a little stressed. I didn’t mean to take it out on you. I appreciate what you did earlier. I’m glad you weren’t bitten.” I had no idea what I would’ve done if I lost Milo or Quinn.

Milo bent down to pick up my hairbrush and lip gloss. “Did the dinner crowd show up? He handed me the items as I frantically shoved everything back into my purse.

“Yup. Everything was back to normal. I even brought you a lava cake as a thank you.”

He reached out and ran his hand over my cheek. “I’m glad you weren’t hurt today. Gray was about to sniff every corner of the restaurant and hunt down the asshole who released the snakes.”

My heart sped up when he touched my cheek. “James knows when to call off Gray.”

“If I find the douchebag, I’m going to shove my foot up his ass,” Gray growled deeply.

Dahlia snorted as she bit into her cornbread.

Ignoring them, Milo handed me my wallet. His fingers brushed against mine as he slowly pulled his hand away. Chills shot up my hand, up my arm, and down my back.

I bit my lip to contain the unusual emotions fluttering in my stomach. I looked up to thank him, but my throat tightened when my eyes reached his sparkling blue eyes. How had I never noticed his pretty eyes and long lashes?

Did his eyes always crinkle in the corners when he smiled?

Now that I wasn't crying and revealing deep, dark secrets, I looked at Milo differently. Seeing him working with Quinn to fight the snakes had endeared him to me, but I was suddenly seeing him in a new way.

Maybe I was just opening myself up because I knew he wasn't afraid of my curse.

I licked my bottom lip as I imagined closing the small gap between us and pressing my lips to his.

Though I had seen him naked this afternoon, I hadn't been focused on his body. I had been more interested in being held and comforted.

Seeing him in his T-shirt and jeans two sizes too small, I couldn't look away from his chest muscles and chiseled abs. The mental image of the way his ass filled every inch of his jeans made me break out into a sweat.

He had mastered that soft swagger that captured the attention of any woman with a pulse. Even his hair was designed to trap the unwitting female gaze.

I knew from Gray that he spent no less than half an hour sculpting his hair to get the height and volume to create the perfect tousled look. And man, it looked perfect.

Snapping out of my strange fantasy of running my hand down his abs and through his hair, I scooped up the last of my useless junk and tossed it into my purse.

I stood up so fast I felt dizzy.

"Here you go." Milo stood up and moved a step closer.

Though I was 5' 7", Milo's 6' 2" frame and broad shoulders made me feel small.

Unable to stop staring at his face, I held my hand out for whatever he was offering me. "Thanks."

I couldn't identify the squishy object in my hand because I was too focused on the straight edge of his cheekbones.

"Maybe we could have dinner sometime." Was Milo blushing?

Wait.

Is he asking me out on a date, or is he saying we should eat an actual meal instead of appetizers and beer at the pub while we play darts?

Unfortunately, I realized I was holding my purple emergency maxi pads the second before I replied.

I quickly closed my eyes, breaking whatever fantasy my sex-starved brain was conjuring. Turning, I walked straight out the door without a word.

I crossed the street and sprinted back to my car in the pub parking lot. Starting the car, I put on the radio and leaned my head against the steering wheel.

I can never look Milo in the eyes again. I'm going to have to move three states away.

Once he realizes what he was holding, he will avoid me until we're both dead. That's it. I must go hide under a rock for the rest of my life. I'm officially undateable.

Chapter 13 Charlie

I looked at my watch. The After Dark Casino was finally open. Time to tell a dark wizard hunter to fuck off.

Crossing town, I thought about bringing some breadsticks with me in case Preston was late. Or after our very short meeting, where I told him to give me the name of his informant. I was oddly hungry after my strange encounter with Milo. Sadly, I wasn't hungry for food.

I pulled into the parking lot of the Silver Oaks. I walked through the entrance along the east side of the building that led to the Fountain of Youth Spa, which doubled as the After Dark Casino once the spa closed for the night.

I'd only been to the casino once or twice for ladies' night with Dahlia and Gray. It felt weird going in alone, but one of the bouncers knew me because he was still pining over Gray, who slept with him once and broke up with him. If Preston pulled any shit with me, he could deal with the colossal bear shifter.

Though I wasn't there to gamble, I still paid the drink cover fee, just in case I needed to throw one into Preston's jerk face. And I bought some chips to gamble if the need came over me.

With my Guinness in hand, I did a tour of the gaming floor, which doubled as the spa's relaxation waiting room. The sound of the waterfalls and the scent of lilac immediately pulled some of the stress from my neck and shoulders. Maybe I would book a massage before I left. I needed something to help relieve my anxiety after the snake incident and the unusual encounter with Milo.

Not to mention Preston's weird spy shit and my confession to Quinn and

Milo. Was it a full moon?

Tossing some quarters into the closest slot machine, I glanced around the room, searching for Preston. I was right on time. He should at least give me the courtesy of showing up when he said he would.

I didn't appreciate him wasting my time.

I dropped another quarter in the machine and sipped my beer. I was seriously going to give Preston a piece of my mind when he finally showed up.

The slot machine buzzer went off, making me jump.

Out poured \$100.00 in quarters.

"Well, all right then!" I grabbed one of the coin buckets and scooped up the coins.

That's not bad for two quarter's worth of nervous spending.

Calling it quits, I took my quarters to the cashier next to the bar.

"You won! Congrats!" I looked over my shoulder to see Jupiter throwing her hands in the air and jumping around like a cheerleader.

"Hey, Jupiter! I never win anything, so I'm excited. You have a good turnout tonight." Though the casino was small and limited in its games, the card tables were all packed.

She threw her light brown hair over her shoulder.

"It's not bad. It'll kick into gear later tonight once everyone is nice and toasted. They will open their wallets once the liquid courage settles in." Laughing, she peered around the room as if she were counting all the money on the tables, which she probably was. She certainly had a way with numbers.

"So, how is Gavril? I heard about the incident in the woods with Milo and Aiden."

Despite being careless with his anti-detection spells, I was becoming

increasingly convinced that it wasn't a teenager messing around.

Frowning, she balled up her fist. "I swear. If I find the miserable witch who attacked him, I will drop a house on him. I seriously won't be able to stop Fukitsu from turning the guy into an insect or leaving him at the top of Mount Everest. Of course, if Blaze gets hold of the guy, he probably will end up at the top of Everest."

I chuckled at her *dropping a house on him* comment. Personally, I wouldn't mind using a few curses on him.

I pinched my leg to distract me from thinking about cursing the assailant. Milo was a big boy. He could sink his own teeth into the guy. Yet, I wasn't satisfied with that thought. I felt an actual pain in my chest, knowing that Milo could have been seriously injured.

The thought brought tears to my eyes.

Clearing my throat, I nodded. "I totally get it. I want to throat-punch the guy, too." Quickly changing the subject, I looked down at her sparkly emerald green dress that matched her eyes. "I love this outfit."

Jupiter swung her hips, modeling it for me. "It would look fantastic on you with your red hair. Let me know if you want to borrow it sometime."

Laughing, I nodded. "I will call you when I need to borrow it."

Her smile faded when she turned her head to look at something. "Hmm. It's big bad bear time. Someone's fucking around at the Texas hold 'em table. Please excuse me while I explain to him in great detail why he's about to have a terrible evening."

I almost felt bad for whoever was trying to cheat in Jupiter's house. They were screwed.

"May I buy you a drink?" Hearing a smooth yet cocky voice behind me, I swung around to tell the loser to fuck off.

"You'll notice I have my own drink. Move alo..." My voice died in my

throat when I saw Preston standing behind me in black dress pants and a blue button-down with the top two buttons undone. Somehow the man didn't own clothing that wasn't fucking amazing on him.

He chuckled as he pointed to my drink. "I see that I'm late, ma'am. You're already halfway through yours. Perhaps I could buy you dinner instead." His perfect smile was back, which meant I was talking to the spy, not Mr. Honesty.

Damn. What a waste of a handsome face.

"You know, I was thinking about getting breadsticks on the way over, but if you're buying, I want meat lasagna with them."

I flashed him an innocent smile.

He looked over his shoulder and around the room. As if anyone would know he was a Dascălu all the way down to his black heart.

Leaning over as if he wanted to kiss my cheek, he moved closer to my ear and whispered, "I assume you're tired of pub leftovers and TV dinners. If you want to go to Anthony's Pizza, you just have to ask."

My heart fluttered at him being so close to me. I quickly narrowed my eyes and glared at him to hide the fact that I wanted to turn my head to kiss him. "I see you have been digging through my trash. Did you also find my subscriptions to Witch Weekly, Authentic Irish Cooking Magazine, and How to Deal with Stalking Assholes Monthly?"

He chuckled. "Your eyes are gorgeous when you want to punch someone."

"Oh, just wait and see how they look when you're down on the ground, bleeding from a broken nose." If he knew anything about me, he would understand that I had no problem getting physical during fights. And I was aching to put him in a submission hold.

"Feisty women never fail to surprise me." He nodded his head toward

the door as if I should follow him.

I wasn't sure how I felt about walking into a dark parking lot with him. He could have his witch squad waiting for me with shackles in their hands.

The thought of being shackled by him sent a strange thrill through me. What was it about this man that made me want to punch him and kiss him at the same time?

“We're good here. There are enough witnesses to keep me from kicking your ass. Now, who is spreading while rumors about me? I want to know why you're here. I'm sure you've figured out I lead a boring life after following me around town. Unless you consider my encounters with the grocer shady because I like to haggle over the price of avocados.” I wondered if I could convince him to go back to his place so I could dig through his trash.

He ordered a soda and leaned against the bar to look at me and the gambling floor simultaneously.

“Honestly, I don't know who gave us the tip...

I put my hand up to stop him. “Oh good, another lie. It's a great way to get me to come to the casino. Tell me about a Deep Throat who claims I'm a dark wizard, and watch me run straight into whatever this trap is.” I was about three seconds away from ordering another beer and throwing the full one at him.

“Hold on. Let me finish, please.” He looked around the room again. “Though I don't know who alerted us to your supposed activities, I know the call came from Silver Springs. Whoever gave us the tip is in town. I've been trailing your associates to figure out if one of them called.” His expression tightened as he dropped that interesting piece of information on me.

For a split second, I wondered who in Silver Springs had contacted the Dascălu.

Shaking my head, I laughed. “Since you’ve been watching Gray, I’m sure you’ve seen her go to the store for baking ingredients and fucking her mates in restaurants, in cars and on rooves. James goes to the gym multiple times a week. The rest of the time, he’s with Gray. He plays tennis with Cillian on Sundays, and Tuesdays are for window shopping with Gunner, who is still adjusting to life outside the woods. Dahlia is mostly at Lady Blue or the Black Dawn Coven with Aiden and Ian. If she’s out, she follows leads or hunts down bad guys. The two of you should hang out and get your nails done. Daire runs around town installing security systems and plays D&D with his friends. Aside from that, he and Aiden run around putting zombies or ghosts back into the ground, whether Daire or someone else raised them. Have I missed anything?”

He couldn’t hide his disappointment at how well I knew my friends.

Sighing, he nodded. “The most interesting thing I watched them do was fight demons in the cemetery while Dahlia and you ate a picnic lunch.”

“So, no leads there. Right?” I felt slightly smug that he was following the wrong people.

He shrugged. “Tracking dark hunters isn’t always chases through the woods and duels. There’s a lot of time sitting in a car, waiting for something to happen.”

“I get that. I’ve seen Dahlia frustrated when her leads go cold. Why do you think someone is trying to get me arrested?” I was curious to know his actual thoughts.

Taking a sip of his soda, he looked around. “One of your enemies could be setting you up. You could have flirted with someone’s boyfriend. Or that shady grocer really doesn’t like lowering his price for avocados. To be honest, I don’t know. All I can say is that you’re the perfect target or scapegoat. You have dark associates, you’ve proven you know dark spells,

and you caused a lot of trouble at school. Everyone assumed your secret coven was responsible for the marshmallow attack, which injured a lot of people. Even though your stories matched, the Headmasters of both schools always blamed you and your friends.” Finally, he gave me a straight answer.

“Do you think I’m guilty?” I looked directly into his eyes.

He took a breath. “If you are, you’re a perfect liar. And very good at hiding your conjuring.”

“You should figure out who dropped a shit ton of venomous snakes in my pub this afternoon. I’m starting to think that the person who called the Dascălu is annoyed that it’s taking so long to arrest me, so they decided to kill me instead.” I would make the jerk pay for the rest of the lunches.

Preston’s eyes widened. “Are you all right?” He looked up and down my body, searching for injuries.

I nodded. “I’m okay. My friends helped remove them.”

His eyes narrowed. “Which friends?”

“Milo and Quinn.” I wasn’t sure why it mattered.

“Quinn O’Brien.” He shook his head. “Are you sure he didn’t release the snakes? Milo is also capable. He was an assassin with the Wildling Pack.”

Rolling my eyes, I smacked his hand. “No. They both fought the damned things. They had no idea what kind of danger they were in. Wow! You really don’t trust anyone. Do you?”

He opened his mouth to reply but stopped. “Sorry. In my work, I have to see everyone as suspects, or it could get me killed.” He held up his hands in defense. “Okay. Let’s look beyond your friends. Can you think of anyone else capable of doing something like that or had a reason to do it?”

“Miss Delly on my block isn’t a fan of me. She complains when I put my garbage out before sunset. Aside from that, I don’t know. I haven’t seen Zeth since the Wildling pack showed up, and we didn’t exactly sit around

sipping tea and chatting about the old days. I scared him off, and he left. Reed certainly hates me, but I doubt he used his one phone call to snitch on me.” I couldn’t think of anyone else who hated me that much.

Drumming his fingers on the bar, he frowned. “Okay. I will go back to square one and examine the problem from a different angle. I appreciate you speaking with me candidly.”

I smiled. “If only you had talked to me first instead of using your interrogation spell on me.” I finished off my drink and picked up my purse. “It’s been real. I have to be up early, so it’s time for me to leave.”

Preston frowned. “Do you want to stay for another drink?”

“As tempting as that is, I will regret the hangover tomorrow.”

Turning toward the exit, I gasped when a gust of wind hit me. I looked toward the front door, but no one entered the casino. It took a second to realize the gust had come from inside the casino.

Preston and I both turned our heads to see the playing cards from all the tables fly into the air and spin around the room.

“I assume this isn’t some kind of entertainment for the evening.” Preston appeared calm, but I could see his lips pressed together and his shoulders tighten.

“They don’t have a floorshow here. I’m guessing someone is trying to destroy or rob the casino.” I eyed the exit.

“Maybe they’re trying to do both.” Preston stepped closer to the main room as the wind picked up, causing the casino chips and other loose items to fly into the air.

The patrons stood in place, watching the unusual event. A few desperate ones tried grabbing the chips as if they were inside a ticket booth at a kid’s birthday party.

I scanned the room, but I couldn’t see Jupiter or Gavril anywhere.

Even the bouncers were gone. I wondered if the guy they caught cheating had been the distraction for a larger plan.

The wind kicked up another notch, pulling handbags and drink glasses into the building tornado as it shook the chairs and card tables.

My hair was pulled into the air as my feet slid over the carpet. If the storm got any worse, it would suck Preston and me into it.

“We need to leave.” Shouting above the roar of the wind, I tugged on Preston’s shirt sleeve.

His stern face stared at me for a moment.

“We have to help these people. I don’t think any of them are witches, so none of them can stop this. You and I have to stop this spell.”

Spell? I wasn’t 100% sure a spell was causing this odd windstorm. I’d met plenty of other supes who could create something like that.

Hell, Jupiter could have done it by accident if she spoke or thought the wrong words without keeping her power in check.

“Well, you have fun with that.” Saluting him, I took power steps against the wind toward the door.

Grabbing my arm, he pulled me to a stop. “Are you kidding? You can stop this before things get out of hand. Why are you so scared? I didn’t think you knew how to run away from a fight, Charlie.”

He motioned to the screaming people taking cover under the tables or lying flat on the floor with their hands over their heads.

They could not run or crawl away with the wind tugging at them. They were trapped.

I was stunned that the son of a bitch had the nerve to taunt me when people were in danger.

He had no idea what he was asking me to do.

My brain was already flipping through curses to make things oh so

much worse. A nice hellfire spell would do wonders for the situation. Instead of having the wind blowing everything around, we could have inextinguishable fireballs spinning along the edges of the tornado.

I'm sure the town would give me a medal for adding that disaster to the current catastrophe.

"I'm not running from a fight. I'm running so I don't make it worse. You have no idea what I've been through and what I'm going through, Preston. If you want to help everyone, use a counter curse that will disrupt the spiraling winds, then..." Breaking into a sweat, I focused on his eyes to get through the rest of my suggestion.

"Then...use a reversal spell..." Taking a breath, I tried to trap the words I desperately wanted to say deep inside me. "...to put everything as it was." I threw my hand over my mouth and fought against the wind to get to the exit.

Reaching the door, I pushed my shoulder into it, but it wouldn't budge. "What the fuck?"

Through the glass in the door, I could see the people who had left the casino standing still as if they were in a trance. In the distance, I saw Jupiter and her bouncers in the same state. Whoever was responsible for the tornado didn't want anyone else coming or going from the casino.

I turned to see Preston unbuttoning his shirt cuffs and rolling up his sleeves. His dark hair blew around, and his shirt rippled from the gusts.

Shit! As magically competent as Preston was as a dark wizard hunter, I doubted he understood how bad the situation was.

Walking back to Preston, I planted each foot on the ground and leaned forward as far as possible to keep my balance. I dropped my purse since it was only slowing me down.

If I didn't get back my wallet and favorite hairbrush, there would be hell to pay.

Preston's lean body stretched and swayed as he tried to conjure a counter spell., but the wind threw off his balance, making it nearly impossible for him to complete the spell.

Clever bastard! Whoever planned the attack was smart. He took out his heavy hitters by clearing out Jupiter and the shifters. He neutralized any casters or conjurers in the room with the wind.

Finally reaching Preston, I grabbed his arm.

“It’s useless. The wind is too strong, and the doors are sealed shut. Everyone outside is frozen in a trance or paralyzing spell. No one is coming to help, and no one is leaving.” I shouted as loud as I could above the roaring tornado.

Seeing the concern on Preston’s face, my heart dropped. So much for the dreaded Dascălu being able to out-wizard any dark wizard. Apparently, they were more *tall tales* than *legends*.

“We must get these people out of the vortex before we can use any powerful spells.” He kicked off his dress shoes and stepped on his socks to get them off his feet, just like conjurers were taught to do at an early age.

Sighing, I did the same. If nothing else, it would help me to dig my toes into the carpet to stop myself from sliding closer.

The curses were building up inside my throat. I was afraid that if I opened my mouth, they’s spill out one by one.

“Let’s focus on pulling those people out of there.” The determination in his eyes almost made me believe I could help, but the burning inside my chest told me to unleash hell.

“I was serious when I said that I couldn’t help them. You don’t understand. I can’t do this.” Tears came to my eyes. I was a failure. I let down everyone in my life because of this damned curse. I was forced to stand by and watch my friends and brother get hurt.

I hated it, but I had no way to change it.

Confused, Preston took my hand. “Have you ever allowed someone to funnel your energy to enhance their spell?”

I shook my head. Zeth had asked me many times to try an intertwining spell that combined the power of two witches to create one hell of a spell. Funny enough, I never had the confidence to do it before.

Thinking it through, if Preston could tap into my power, he could quickly stop this disaster. Yet, I had no idea if the curse would attach itself to him.

I never expected to be in a situation that required an intertwining spell, so I had never researched the consequences of joining with someone.

“I have to warn you, things could end very badly.”

I was about to tell Preston that I was cursed. He would have no choice but to arrest me. Reading from the Book of Ancient Magicks alone was enough for serious jail time.

“Charlie, we don’t have a choice. Please, help me.” He held out his hand to me, asking for permission.

Glancing at the tables and chairs circling the ground, about to take flight, I nodded. “Okay. Fine.”

“Thank you!” Preston turned to face me as he took my hands in his. “*Combină-ne puterea și fă-ne una.*”

My body trembled as Preston used the power-combining spell. I could feel Preston’s power spread through me and swirl inside my chest. My power whipped its head around like a snake, trying to attack his magical energy.

Shit!

This was a horrible idea.

Calming my mind, I tried to draw his power in so it would mix with mine like flour and starch instead of oil and vinegar. It took a lot of effort to

make the two forces play nice together, but I finally felt a kind of cohesion.

I quickly pushed the combination of our energy into Preston.

His eyes flew open and glowed with an eerie purple light.

“No, no, no!” This couldn’t be happening. Purple, green, and black magic were terrible. They were the colors of dark magic or gray magic.

Preston looked down at me. “I need you to mimic my spell and motions.”

“Okay.” I stomped my feet against the ground, just as he did. I realized he was using a stabilization spell to counter the wind, which was a bitch to maintain because it was so draining.

My body immediately stood up straight without the force of the wind on it. Able to move freely, I followed his movements. To an outsider, it looked like we were dancing together as we held onto one another and twisted this way and that. Our feet moved to the rhythm of music that only we could hear.

I had never felt so completely in tune with someone before. It felt like our bodies were part of a whole, and our hearts beat as one. A feeling of intimacy spread through me as he pulled me against his chest and spun me around. His eyes never left mine as he conjured spell after spell.

In the distance, I could hear the people cheering as they were pulled free from the wind and slid across the floor toward us.

Once everyone was safe, Preston spun me counterclockwise to slow down the tornado. Lost in the dance, I barely noticed the objects falling back to the ground.

Being in Preston’s arms was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I couldn’t figure out where I started, and he ended. We were indeed one.

For the first time in years, I couldn’t feel the curse burning inside my chest and crowding my mind. I felt free. Pure joy swept through me. I could breathe again.

Breaking eye contact, I glanced at the casino area as Preston tamed the storm.

“One down, two to go. We have to remove the binding spell on the doors and release Jupiter and the others from the trance.” Selfishly, I didn’t want to break my bond with Preston, though my rational mind understood that we were saving everyone.

“We can do that together. Are you ready?” His voice was smoother and more sensual than usual. He, too, must have felt the deep bond between us.

“Yes.” I bit my lip, suppressing the urge to kiss him.

Once more, we danced like we didn’t have a care in the world. The movements came so quickly to me. I didn’t have to think about where my foot or arm would go. I felt like a river flowing through the land, twisting around every bend and floating over every rock. I trusted Preston more than I’d ever trusted anyone to guide me where we needed to go.

Lifting me into the air, he broke the binding spell on the door and the building. Dipping me, he countered the immobilization spell on the people outside. Pulling me against his body, he broke the trance spell, freeing Jupiter and the others. Finally, we bowed to each other to create a protection spell inside the casino to eliminate any other surprise spell the attacker might have planted.

A little out of breath, I looked into Preston’s eyes while still holding his hand. “That was...interesting.”

Nodding, he swallowed and took a breath. “Very interesting.” His eyes took in every inch of my face. “*Eliberează-ne puterea înapoi în două.*”

Preston released our combined power, disassembling it back into separate pieces.

My magical energy slammed back into my body like a tidal wave. Overwhelmed, I fell to my knees, coughing and choking. The curse snapped

back into my chest, throat, and mind with a vengeance. It practically hissed at me, pissed that it had been pulled from me. I broke into tears when my joy melted into a deep sorrow. Instead of feeling light and happy, it felt like my soul was weighed down by a thick tar.

“Ahhh!” I couldn’t hold back the scream of misery I felt once the curse fully returned to its home.

Preston knelt next to me. “Charlie! Are you okay? Did I hurt you?” He put his hand against my cheek.

Sobbing, I shook my head. “No. I hurt myself.” I got to my knees and stumbled toward the door barefoot. I had to get out of there before I completely fell apart.

I rushed past everyone, trying to thank me for helping them, and got into my car. Pulling my keys from my pocket, I started the car and raced out of the parking lot.

Despite what happened, I was no hero. Preston was the hero. He was the one who could use my power for something good. I merely allowed him to chance to do so.

Crying, I wiped the tears away so I could see the road.

I was stuck with this damned curse forever. Nothing could change that. Nothing could change my fate.

Chapter 14 Charlie

After an exhausting night, I ran through the menu for today so I could mentally prepare my day, even if it felt like it was still last night. I hadn't slept well. I couldn't stop thinking about how I felt in Preston's arms and how happy I was without the curse weighing me down.

I had trouble controlling my reaction to how he made me feel last night. I never wanted to leave his arms, even though I still wanted to punch him. If only he wasn't snooping around, investigating me.

As expected, I was awake at 3:00 AM, running through all my mistakes from the last thirty-three years alphabetically. At the top of my list was Reed, followed by Zeth. A distant third was my embarrassing crush on Quinn. After his reaction to finding out I was cursed and watching him figure out how to stop the snakes, I didn't feel so silly about my crush on him. Past tense.

Or maybe current tense.

Why was I so terrible at accepting that I had feelings for him. Or for anyone.

I rolled my eyes. Because loving someone opened you up to a world of pain and regret.

"I've got a pocket full of sun..."

My phone startled me since I wasn't expecting anyone to call so early.

I grabbed the phone and hit the speaker button. "Hello?"

"Charlie, I'm so sorry. I completely forgot that I have dinner reservations with Cillian tonight. I'm supposed to be a Le something De super fancy by 5:00 PM, and I'm booked all day. I'll barely have time to pee and grab some peanuts from my purse for lunch. Can you pick up my clothes and makeup from my house? I will seriously owe you. James mentioned

something about an injured bird you're taking care of. I'll bird sit for you whenever you want. I'll even throw in some mint brownies."

It was rare for Gray to beg for help. She tried to be self-sufficient, much like me, which was why I mothered the hell out of her. I didn't want her to feel alone.

I chuckled at the thought of her bird sitting, though having a wolf shifter within inches of Ignatius might loosen his beak. I wouldn't be able to lie with a straight face if Gray growled at me.

"It's no problem. I just left the house, so I'll swing by your place. It's fine. Is Milo home? I don't want to scare him. Having his wolf chase me down the street is not my idea of fun. I'm wearing my nice shoes, not my sneakers, so I can't run fast. I have a meeting with the meat supplier who is trying to screw me on my next delivery. I have to convince him not to raise his prices until the 3rd quarter."

I dressed like an adult, forgoing my leggings and ponytail I usually wore this early, hoping that I looked serious enough to negotiate with him.

"Oh, so you're wearing your red blazer and matching skirt with your strappy shoes, perfect. You'll do fine if you have curled hair and lipstick that's a shade darker than your hair. If he tries to walk all over you, tell me where he lives, and I'll have a *chat* with him." She laughed darkly. "And don't worry about Milo. He showed up early for work this morning. He had an early AM consult. You're free to ransack the fridge."

I loved Gray more than words could express. I could count on her to have my back, unlike my old "friends."

"Thank you, darling. I'll let you know if I need you to strike fear in the heart of Mr. Daniels. I'll drop by shortly with your stuff. Bye." I hung up the phone and made a quick left towards the far side of town.

"Blue dress, heels, lipstick, and..." *Damn it. What was the last thing?*

Why couldn't Gray just text me?

Purse? Perfume? Ugh.

“How am I supposed to know what Gray needs for a date? I haven't had a date in three...oh shit.” I parked on the sidewalk in front of Gray and Milo's rental house. “How long has it been since I was on a date?”

I went out with Tim, the horse breeder. As much as I liked horses, I didn't need to know the complexities of horse sex. Then, there was Gerald. He wanted me to text him my location at all times. He was too controlling like Reed, so I told him I had moved to Texas to raise horses. After that was Carlos. He was sweet, but his mother kept calling me, asking me how many children I wanted and when I would give her grandchildren. That was way too much pressure, so I left the dating world.

Sighing, I shook my head. *Six years.* It had been six years since I had kissed someone. Six years since I cuddled up next to someone. And six long years without sex. Hell, I had longer relationships with my vibrators.

New mental note. Get more batteries for the sex wand and a new charging cable from the Magic Rooster for the Tell Me Your Darkest Fantasy dildo.

Refocusing on my mission to get Gray sexually satisfied for the night, I scanned her front yard for its guardian.

“Here, puss.” I didn't need my face and arms clawed to pieces.

Unable to find the fluffy menace, I put one foot on the grass to summon the beast.

“Meeeeooowwww”. From under the bushes arose Necro Kitty, the badass reincarnated cat who made sure no one fucked with Gray or Milo. Its eerie yellow glowing eyes locked on me as if I had been responsible for its demise.

“Hey, baby. It's Charlene O'Malley, umm, Charlie.” I paused, waiting

to make sure she recognized me as a “friendly” and didn’t launch herself mercilessly at me if the welcome spell had worn off since the other day.

Necro Kitty sprinted across the yard faster than a cheetah.

Shit. I’m in trouble.

Pulling my foot away from the grass as fast as possible, I braced for impact. I was going to have a serious talk with Daire about setting a default friend mode on his necromancy spells.

Necro Kitty leaped onto my leg and straight into my arms. Purring affectionately at me, I let out a breath.

“Oh, thank the gods!” I petted the kitty’s head and scratched behind her ears. “Yes, we are friends. Good kitty.”

If Ignatius continued to play dumb, I might have to introduce him to Necro Kitty.

I waited until she had enough scritch scratches before I safely crossed the yard. Leaving the black fur ball on the porch, I used my key to open the front door.

Maybe when Gray moved in with Gunner, I should adopt Necro Kitty. At least I would have a lifetime companion that wouldn’t judge me and be loyal enough to kick the shit out of people wanting to harm me. If only she knew how to wash dishes. Then, it would be the ideal relationship.

With Milo busy working at the shop, I was free to loiter in the kitchen to indulge myself on the remaining peppermint brownies and the peanut butter and banana s’mores. Gray made a mean dessert. I needed to convince her to add her desserts to our menu. I would pay top dollar for her goodies.

Chewing my brownie, I thought about my strange interaction with Milo last night.

I blamed my sex-starved body for acting like a dog in heat. Up until recently, had a steady girlfriend, so I never thought of him as dating material.

He was loyal, for sure. He treated women well, based on how happy his girlfriend had been. I had no idea why they broke up, but I figured Milo would tell me if he wanted me to know. He tended to keep his sex life to himself, which was nice since I had to hear all about Gray's relationships before she was mated. And after.

I knew I had severe trust issues, but why was it so hard to find a good guy? Someone who wouldn't treat me like crap.

Yes, I had a thing for bad boys, but I was thirty-three now. Why couldn't I learn to like sweet men like Daire, who looked at Dahlia as if she were the moon and stars.

Closing the fridge, I headed into Gray's room to locate her sexy outfit section.

I headed into Gray's closet to rummage around. I found a few different blue dresses, but seeing the backless one, I knew which one she wanted. Picking up some matching heels, the perfume I liked best on her, and the hair comb she used to pull up her hair, I looked around the room for what I was missing.

Lipstick and nail polish! Yes!

With the rest of Gray's hot date wardrobe in hand, I headed down the hallway to the bathroom across from Milo's bachelor pad.

Oddly, the bathroom door was closed. I leaned over to turn the knob, but the door suddenly opened on its own.

Jumping back, I shrieked as if I had seen the ghost of my Great Aunt Martha, who liked to pop up at inopportune times to tell me about the latest trending sexual positions.

Instead of my aunt, I saw Milo staring at me with shock and amusement. My jumbled mind processed multiple things at the same time.

First, Milo was dripping wet and wearing only a towel around his waist.

Second, I felt my ankle twist, causing me to fall because I had dropped Gray's three-inch heels and stepped on them in fright.

Tipping towards the ground, I let out a yelp. Stupidly, I clung to Gray's dress in my hands instead of reaching out to brace myself.

"Charlie!" Milo rushed forward to grab me.

When Milo's chest moved closer to my face, my brain decided I should be panicking more.

Throwing Gray's dress into the air, I finally tried to grab something to stop my fall. I reached for Milo's firm shoulders, but my panicked brain made me wrap my arms around his neck as if I were falling into a pit of vipers instead of the carpet.

"Gah!" Milo let out a garbled sound as I accidentally cut off his air supply.

Pulling me towards his chest to steady me, he must have gotten tangled in Gray's dress because instead of staying upright, both of us tumbled to the ground.

My back hit the ground, but I barely registered the pain. I was too busy staring into Milo's ridiculously gorgeous blue eyes.

I snapped out of my shock to register his weight on top of my entire body.

His breath blew against my ear as he grunted. "Sorry." He rose to his elbows to look at me. "Are you okay?"

His voice sounded a little deeper and more sensual than usual, which almost made me giggle like a schoolgirl.

Swallowing my sudden urge to nibble on his ear, I sighed and nodded. "I think so."

Milo's concerned eyes searched my face. "Hey." His smirk spread into a full-blown smile that unlocked my pent-up lust, which I had buried deep

inside of me.

Taking a deep breath, I noticed that every nerve in my body was blissfully aware of his powerful chest, stomach, and thighs pressed against me.

“Hey.”

My response mimicked his, though not intentionally. I was a little out of breath with him pinning me to the floor, but I had no interest in telling him to move.

Staring at his mouth just inches from mine, an image of him kissing me ran through my head like a slow-motion football replay. And damn, was it a fantastic kiss, complete with his sensual lips moving against mine and his tongue lightly brushing across my bottom lip.

His warm breath tickled my cheek. I couldn't stop myself from leaning closer to sniff his skin to see if he smelled like soap or cologne. My thighs tensed when his cologne hit me full force, sending me into a complete meltdown.

Another few seconds and I swore I would wrap my legs around his beautiful ass and beg for him to fuck me.

It was time to break up with my current vibrator and buy the biggest, most powerful one Juniper had at the store.

“Milo.” His name came out like a whisper, even though I had tried using my grown-up voice.

“Yes, Charlie.” His eyes grew darker as they dilated. I hoped his wolf wasn't pissed at me for taking him down to the ground. Was it preparing to challenge me to a fight?

A wolf's eyes dilated when they were angry and about to shift. Right?

Mental note three. Learn more about wolf behavior from Gray.

“Milo, can you please get off me? I have to get back to Lady Blue to

drop off Gray's outfit for tonight. Cillian is taking her to a private restaurant where they don't mind if you fuck on the table as long as you leave a big tip." I smiled, hoping his wolf wasn't about to break loose while Milo was still on top of me.

Milo cleared his throat and chuckled. "Yeah. Sorry. I just wanted to make sure you were okay." He slowly pulled his arm out from under my back and got to his knees.

Realizing my thighs were spread wide around his muscular thighs, I blushed. My skirt was around my ass and barely covering my panties. While I was in a compromised position, Milo had it even worse. His towel had fallen off completely, leaving him naked as naked could be.

Ho..ly...F..uu.uu..ck!

With every ounce of willpower quickly slipping away, I tried to stare at his tattooed shoulders and chest. Unfortunately, or fortunately, I couldn't stop my eyes from drifting down his well-defined abs, down his happy trail, and straight to his very erect cock, which didn't seem to mind the chilly air.

"Oh my!" I sounded like a virgin seeing a hard dick for the first time. Though, honestly, Milo had what's his face beat by a mile. While I couldn't remember my date's name, I knew for a fucking fact that he would cry if he compared himself to Milo's remarkable cock.

Milo snorted. "What's wrong? You saw me naked yesterday." He leaned back to display every inch of glorious tattooed skin for me. I was compelled to sit up and trace the snowcapped mountains on his right shoulder with my fingertips.

Seeing him look down at my hand, I immediately pulled away when I remembered I hadn't asked permission to touch his skin. I didn't want to make him feel any more awkward or weird about the unusual situation.

"Well, yes, but." Stuttering, I couldn't explain why it was okay to see

his supple ass out in public after he changed from a wolf to a human versus seeing his huge fucking cock in the privacy of his bedroom. “But yesterday, I was in danger and very emotional. And it wasn’t in all its glory.” He chuckled as I stumbled over my words. “Besides, it’s not okay to ogle a friend after he saved you from falling into a wall or breaking her ankle.”

Licking his lips, he shrugged. “Charlie, you can stare at me after I shift or when I rescue you from breaking your ankle. I’m not embarrassed. In fact, all you have to do is ask, and I’ll show you whatever you want to see whenever you want to see it.”

My mind blacked out for a second while my body shivered intensely. Letting out a small squeak, I had no response to his kind offer.

My mouth fell open as I watched his stomach muscles ripple as he breathed in.

I could ask to see him naked whenever I wanted.

Huh. Cool. Good to know. Let’s file that away under “useful facts.”

“I appreciate the offer, Milo. I’m not sure what else I’m supposed to say.”

Panting, my voice was hardly above a whisper, but I assumed his wolf hearing caught every word.

He slowly leaned forward until his eyes were level with mine. “You can say whatever comes to mind, Charlene. Tell me to undress slowly and tease you with every hard muscle, every inch of my cock, until you’re so wet, I’ll slide right into you. Tell me you want me to rub your needy clit with the broad head of my cock until you’re about to come, and then beg my cock to finish you off with one quick thrust. Tell me to fuck you the way you’ve needed to be fucked your entire life. Tell me every filthy, dirty fantasy, and I will leave you satisfied for weeks, though I promise you’ll tell me to fuck you again the very next night. Or, you can tell me to worship your body while you

ride my cock, and fulfill every need you ever had or could ever desire.”

To say that my body craved everything he offered was an understatement. I’d never been so close to coming without being touched. I feared what I would do if he pressed his lips to mine and kissed me. I might never let him go.

Who knew soft-spoken, easygoing Milo was capable of seducing the fuck out of me in less than a minute. I wasn’t sure why he said those things to me, but I wasn’t about to tell him to stop.

“Milo.”

I cleared my throat and tried again to speak without my voice cracking. “If I were looking for just sex, I would date any drunk guy who hit on me at the pub. I’m not looking for sex. I want trust, peace of mind, and a meaningful relationship. I appreciate you making me feel sexy and excited that a younger man still thinks I’ve got it, but I can’t tell you those things. I’m not the girl who jumps into bed without consequences anymore. I need a partner. Someone I can confide in, who understands why I don’t like my hair stroked. Someone who cares about me and would never try to hurt or take advantage of me. Someone who understands how damaged I truly am even when there’s a smile on my face.”

I expected him to nod and walk away forever. If someone said that to me, I would have walked out, though probably not since I would want to help them. However, not everyone was like me. I had given him an out, clear and simple.

A smile slowly spread across his handsome face. “You’re acting like you can’t have a partner and a lover. I would be honored if you accepted me as your partner, your confidant, and your lover who fucks you senseless morning, noon, and night.”

He reached out to run his fingertips lightly across my cheek.

After dealing with so much crap my entire life, my bullshit meter was finely tuned to detect a lie. Oddly, all I saw in his eyes was affection and adoration. In his touch, I felt confidence and lust. Was this real? Was Milo the one I'd been waiting for?

Taking a leap of faith, I wet my lips and swallowed. "Milo, I want you to take my heart, protect it and care for it while your hard cock rides me until I come and beg for more."

I held my breath, waiting for him to laugh and tell me he was just messing with me.

Was I jumping in too fast? Was I making a mistake? I didn't want to make things weird with Milo if this was a mistake, a one-night stand, or rather a one-morning stand.

Instead of running, his eyes went to my lips. "Kiss me, Charlie. I need to know that you want me. No. You need me as much as I need you. I'm more than happy to take control any time you want me to, but it needs to be mutual right now. Please." When he said please, the longing in his voice melted the ice surrounding my heart. He needed me.

Based on the wariness in his eyes, he wasn't talking about needing sexual release. He gave me the exact look I saw in the mirror every morning I woke up alone. He was saying that he needed to be loved.

I ran my thumb over his lower lip. "Say that again. Tell me you need me. Tell me you need me to love you and protect you when the dark memories wake you up at night. Tell me you need me to hold you and dry your tears when the past makes you doubt yourself. Tell me you need me to see past the friendly smile to find the broken pieces no one else knows about because you hide them. Tell me you need me to take away your pain by listening to you and helping you find the inner peace you desperately crave. Then tell me to ease your suffering with my heart, body and soul." Knowing

what Milo endured at the hands of his supposed father and his disgraceful pack, I understood that he was as damaged and broken as I was.

I had no idea if two broken souls could form one complete one, but looking into his sad eyes, I needed to know if it was possible.

Milo's lips parted as he swallowed. "I need you, Charlene. I've needed you for longer than you know." His deep voice cracked from sorrow and relief as he smiled.

Nodding, I slowly rubbed my lips against his. He let out a sigh, which turned into a soft moan. I pressed my lips softly against his, lightly kissing him.

As much as I wanted to take him into my arms and fuck him, I needed to take things slowly and set the pace as we went.

I ran my nails through the shaved part of his head, playing with the stubble as I deepened the kiss. My other hand rested on the heavy muscle of his chest. His skin was so warm it felt like I was standing in front of a heater.

His mouth was patient, though eager, as we slowly kissed, learning the curve of each other's lips. His hand rested on my thigh, though he didn't take advantage of the location. He didn't try to coax me into doing more by raising his hand. I appreciated that.

Pulling back to take a breath, I looked into his eyes. "Tell me I'm not making a mistake."

A smile spread across his face. "Charlie, most women would have thrown me on the bed if I said anything resembling my earlier statements. They would have been done and gone before I got off the bed. I know you want more than a fuck boi. I might flirt, but I'm a commitment kind of guy. My wolf needs his partner. Can't you feel it, Charlie?" He held up his hand and waited for me to press my palm against his.

While I felt enough sexual energy to power the Hoover Dam, my mind

was still hesitant.

“I feel something, but my fear is holding me back.” Afraid I was pouring cold water on this amazing moment, I looked away.

He whispered in my ear, “You are the bravest woman I know, Charlie. You are a survivor. You didn’t allow your past to turn you into a bitter person who shuns friends and family. You’re still hopeful that you can find love. You just need assurances. I get that. If you let go of your fear, I promise you will find all the assurance you need.”

Closing my eyes, I nodded. He was right.

I was letting my fear keep me from what I truly wanted.

I opened my eyes and grabbed Milo’s face. “Make me forget about my past and show me my future.”

He searched my face for any hesitation. When he couldn’t find any, he took possession of my lips, plunging his tongue into my mouth.

His hands slid up my thighs until he reached my hips. Pulling me around his waist, he got to his feet and carried me to his bed.

I wrapped my thighs around him, swearing I would never let him go.

He sat down on the edge of the bed with me in his lap. His mouth never left mine. Quickly sliding off my blazer and unbuttoning my blouse, he had my clothes on the floor in seconds. Breaking our kiss, I leaned back to take in his stunning body.

“I’m sorry to say this, but I hate this bra. I prefer the front snap one that pushes up your breasts. You like to wear it with my favorite red V-neck shirt.” His hand went to the back of my bra to pop the hooks and release me.

“I’ll have to remember that. Personally, I like your super tight jeans with the small rips in the thighs. It puts your cock nicely on display and curves against your ass. I want to punch any woman who sees you in those jeans.” I took his hands, slid them up my ribcage, and placed them on my breasts.

He leaned forward to drag his tongue up the side of my neck. “I swear you are the only woman I will wear them for. From now on, I only tattoo in cargo pants that are a size too big. Only you will see my tight jeans and T-shirts.” His strong hands cupped and massaged my breasts.

Chuckling, I wet my lips.” I’ll keep my favorite jeans in my dresser drawer, but you’ll need the rest of your tight clothes for work. Seeing you stride through the tattoo shop in all your muscled glory is the highlight of my day.”

I turned my head to suck on his earlobe.

“Fuck.” Growling, he ran his thumbs over my nipples. “If you keep that up, I will put you over my knee and fuck you with my fingers.”

Lightly biting his earlobe, I giggled. “Is that a threat?”

His hands went to my hips, and he pulled me closer, trapping his cock between my clit and his stomach. “It is when I stop fucking you and smack your ass for trying to make me come too fast. I will fuck you so slowly that you will scream for me to finish you.”

Unable to think straight, I bit the crook of his neck to stop myself from groaning.

“I had no idea you were capable of saying and doing these things, Milo. I never knew you had this side to you.”

Growling deeply, he pulled me against his cock. The pressure against my clit made my thighs clench and tremble. “You are the only woman I have ever said these things to, imagined doing these things to, Charlie. Before you, I had vanilla sex. I thanked women for having sex with me. I gave them orgasms but typically stopped before I was fulfilled. I couldn’t truly be with a woman who didn’t care about me. I always wondered how I would feel when I found the right woman. Would I say please and thank you, or would I say fuck me like my good girl?”

Breathless, I looked into his eyes. "I'm hoping it's the latter."

Grabbing my chin, his stormy eyes narrowed as he looked at me. "Charlie. I need you to fuck me like my good girl."

Without breaking eye contact, I held onto his broad shoulders and lifted my hips over his cock. "I need you to remove my panties."

He curled his fingers to pop out his claws. Reaching under the sides of my panties, his claws shredded the material. He pulled them off my body, making me even wetter than I believed was possible. He pushed up my skirt and held my hips tightly.

Slowly lowering myself onto his thick cock, I slid down him, throwing my head back as I reached his lap.

"Charlie." His growl rattled inside his chest, sending chills through every inch of me.

Wetting my lips, I indulged myself in the feeling of his cock spreading me wide.

I'd never felt anything as good as his warm body deep inside me. In the back of my mind, I wondered what the horse dude would think of wolf shifter sex. He would probably quit his horse breeding job to find himself a nice female wolf shifter to settle down with.

"Milo."

Groaning his name, I almost asked if I should call him by his given name, Moss Valley, but I didn't want to dredge up his past in the middle of the most incredible experience of my life. "Please tell me this feels amazing for you too."

His eyes opened, revealing tears welling up along his thick lashes. "This is the best moment of my life." He pulled me closer and kissed me with every emotion he felt until he left me breathless.

I slowly rocked my hips and rode him, memorizing every inch of him. I

never wanted to lose the feeling building inside my chest. It wasn't lust or pleasure, but something closer to happiness or perhaps bliss.

Increasing my speed, I found the perfect rhythm. I gasped when he hit the perfect spot. I watched his expression through my hazy vision to ensure he was also enjoying himself. I refused to let him walk away from this experience unfulfilled like his previous sexual encounters.

"Promise you'll come for me." I wrapped my arms around his neck for better leverage. Feeling my nipples rubbing against his chest, I clenched my teeth.

I was so close to finishing, but I needed him to be with me.

"Honey, say the word, and I will come for you. I can barely hang on as it is." Gulping, he threw his head back. "Ride me, darling. Ride me."

Hearing him pant and groan threw me completely over the edge. I was doing this. I was making him feel amazing. He wasn't thinking about what time the game was on or what he wanted for dinner. He was thinking about my body fucking him.

I clenched and let my orgasm take over. All kinds of moans, groans, and swears flew out of my mouth as I held onto Milo so I wouldn't black out.

"Holy fuck, Charlene!" Milo's cock exploded inside of me. Only then did I realize we hadn't used protection, though I was on the pill. At that moment, I was utterly at peace with the thought of having Milo's child.

Riding out the last of our orgasms, I slowed my hips and put my head against his chest.

"Wow." He chuckled.

"I'll raise your wow with an amazing."

He kissed the top of my head and rested his chin on me.

His arms around my body made me feel precious and cared for. I finally understood what people meant by "the best sex of their lives." Though, it

wasn't just the sex. It was having the best sex of my life with someone special.

I leaned back on his lap and wondered if my legs would ever work again. I would have to find an actual yoga instructor to keep up with the powerful wolf.

"I need help getting up." I looked helplessly at my weakened legs.

His face fell into a pout. "Do we have to move already?"

Smiling, I patted his cheek. "If I don't want my legs to fall asleep, yes." He was too damned adorable for his own good.

"All right. Fine." He carefully lifted me up until his cock pulled out of my body.

I immediately felt the loss of him, which was odd. Usually, I was the one running from the bed and calling a cab at the end of the night. Why was I saddened by the thought of leaving his bed?

Helping me to stand, he held out his hands until I was steady on my feet. I had trouble releasing the goofy smile from my face.

"I guess I should bring Gray her date night wardrobe." Glancing down at his beautiful chest, my eyes focused on something weird. A faint orange glow sat over his heart.

I blinked a few times, wondering if I was lightheaded.

Seeing it get brighter, I noticed it wasn't just on his chest but also mine. In fact, the orange glow was faintly connecting us.

Son of a...!

A fucking love spell, or rather the fucking mate finder spell. What the fuck had I touched in this insane town to activate the spell?

Milo froze as I backed up. "Charlie. Please. Don't run. I know you weren't expecting to find a mate. And I know you swore off love and marriage, but just think this through. What you're feeling is real. I feel it, too.

Our connection is so strong that I'm surprised you didn't feel it sooner. I swear. I wanted to tell you so many times, but I knew you weren't ready. I'm sorry. I should have told you before we had sex, but everything just felt so right, so perfect. I hoped that the mating bond was waking up inside of you. I want you to be happy about this. It's a positive thing. I promise."

I wasn't sure how to feel. I wanted to run home and hide under the covers, but seeing the worry on Milo's face and hearing him on the verge of panicking, I tried to calm my own panic.

"It's okay, Milo. I just need some time to wrap my head around this. You're right. Everything felt perfect. I just wanted this to be my choice, not fate making the choice for me." Fuck fate. It had shoved my face in the dirt too often to trust.

"I understand that fate might have more mates chosen for you, but I'm okay with that. Before, I probably would have been jealous, but after seeing Dahlia, Gray and Jupiter so happy with their guys, I'm entirely open to the possibility. As long as they respect and protect you, I'm cool with there being other mates. Though, I doubt I'll want to sleep in the same bed as them." He shivered at the thought.

"Oh shit! I hadn't thought about having other mates. What am I supposed to do? I'm not ready for all of this." Putting my hand over my face, I tried to make myself breathe.

He stepped closer and put his hands out as if approaching a wounded animal.

"It's okay, Charlie. Take all the time you need. I promise. I'm not going anywhere. I've waited this long. I respect that you need to think this through. Being mated to a wolf was probably the last thing you expected. I was surprised when I found out my mate was a witch, but I assure you, I'm thrilled with you being my mate. I couldn't have asked for a more caring,

more passionate woman to spend the rest of my life with.”

The rest of his life. In theory, it sounded good on paper, but being mated to a cursed woman was not what Milo had signed up for.

Kissing him, I ran my hand through his just fucked hair. “I’m not going anywhere either, but I have to warn you. Life with me will be difficult because of the curse.” I hated spoiling his fairytale ending.

He put his hands on my shoulders. “We’ll just take it one day at a time.” His warm smile gave me hope that somehow, we might get our happy ending.

Chapter 15 Charlie

All morning, I switched between happiness, fear and sorrow. I had finally found my mate, or maybe one of my mates, and yet I couldn't celebrate. There were too many unanswered questions. I had no idea how badly the curse my fuck up my love life. I'd managed to survive it so far, but it was exhausting. At least Milo didn't use magic, so in some respect, things would be easier in that department.

I cleaned every surface at least six times around the house until I nearly removed the finish from my grandmother's precious wooden end table in my bedroom.

Pushing my hair out of my face, I took a breath. "Milo. Milo is my mate." I thought about reaching for the phone for the millionth time, but I was intentionally far away from my phone. I needed to avoid the urge to text Milo and the rest of my friends. I didn't want to tell anyone until I finally settled with the idea.

Gray would immediately hear the doubt in my voice, especially since she had gone through the same thing when she found out about her mates.

Dahlia already knew. I gave her credit for keeping the secret for this long.

Obviously, she had seen me freaking out and accepted that I needed time to process. She would call once I came to terms with things. Or show up with pizza and ice cream to discuss what happened.

My brother would probably laugh his ass off, then take Milo aside and tell him that if he ever broke my heart, he would have to deal with the O'Malley twins kicking the shit out of him.

Everyone else would probably be okay with the situation.

So why was I still freaking out?

Because last night, when Preston “borrowed” my cursed power, I saw what a real life without the curse would feel like. I might be happy instead of exhausted from outrunning the curse daily. I might be able to use magic again.

I hadn’t realized how much I missed my magic until last night. It felt good to help people again instead of running away to protect them.

What I would give to have the old Charlie back. Not Raven, but Charlie.

I already loved Milo on some level, and my feelings for him were growing by the minute. But I feared for Milo. Could someone actually love a cursed woman who was only living half a life?

“Squawk!”

Hearing the raven rattling his cage, I knew it was lunchtime.

Running downstairs, I grabbed his birdseed and pulled the cover off his cage. “I’m sure you would love to sit outside and soak up the sun instead of sitting in your cage. You can’t fly yet, but I know you miss seeing the outside world. You never liked sitting in my dorm all day. You got bored. Flying around the castle filled you with joy. I felt it. So, just tell me your name and what you’re doing here, and I’ll move your cage to the deck.”

Checking the bird’s body movements, I had trouble determining whether he understood me.

Ignatius used to love going outside. He used to get itchy and bounce around when he wanted to fly.

Was I torturing this poor, innocent bird? My gut still told me he was Ignatius.

Walking over to the couch, I picked up my purse, which Jupiter had graciously returned this morning, along with my shoes and socks. Pulling out my ultimate weapon, I peeled back the wrapper of Ignatius’s favorite gum

and waved it.

“Bubble gum. Yum yum. I know you miss it. I doubt your new master treats you with gum. Then again, I doubt he tells you you’re a good boy. You must have realized by now that Zeth was using you just as he was using me. I should have fought for you, but I wasn’t willing to fight for someone who betrayed me like that. If you were unhappy being my familiar, you should have spoken up for yourself. You certainly spoke up plenty of other times. When I accidentally bought the wrong birdseed, you called me names for three days, even though I ran out immediately to get you the right one. Come to think of it, you weren’t always very nice to me. Were you actually a spy for Zeth the entire time?” Glaring at the raven, I watched him bite one of the bars.

“Yeah, yeah. You’re hungry.” I poured his food into his feeder. “Try not to choke on your guilt.”

The raven flapped his good wing.

Though I was annoyed with him, I slid the gum between the bars and left it on the bottom of the cage. “Whatever happened between us, Ignatius, I’m sorry. Maybe I wasn’t the best pet owner. I can only hope you got away from Zeth before he made you do something unforgivable. I never wanted that for you.”

If he wasn’t Ignatius, I had to find a nice place to let him go in the woods so he wouldn’t get hit by a car again. If it was him, maybe we could talk things out.

By the time the evening rolled around, I was elbow-deep in orders at the pub. Since my server was out with a cold, I grabbed the big tray and ran around, dropping off everyone’s plates. Thankfully, Trish was due in any minute. My stomach grumbled at the thought of dinner.

Bing!

Though I was still avoiding the calls and texts from my friends, I was letting Quinn's texts through. He had sent seven messages this morning to make sure we were still on for dinner.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and ran into the back of the kitchen.

QUINN: pretty sure i used raisins not choco chips, in Irish Soda Bread, but had trouble managing time. u like choco chips. right?

I laughed at his joke, though I was concerned that he mixed up the ingredients. Honestly, I probably wouldn't mind the chocolate chips.

ME: good either way. looking forward to seeing you. waiting for backup. I'll bring the wine.

QUINN: didnt I tell you. I only drink straight vodka now.

ME: HAHAHA. See you soon.

Shoving my phone back into my pocket, I turned when James walked in.

"So, are we going to talk about Milo?" His big, stupid smirk almost made me laugh.

"Nope. You don't kiss and tell with Gray, so I'm not obligated to tell you anything about Milo." I stuck my tongue at him as I shuffled past him.

"I just want to know that you're okay. We don't talk about it, but I remember what you looked like when Dad brought you home after they arrested Reed. People don't just get over that. Milo is nothing like Reed. I hope you know that. If he's the one, then treat him like he's the one. As hard as it must be for you to open yourself up to him, you'll be so much happier if you do. I know he will treat you like the spoiled princess you are." He winked at me so I wouldn't punch him for his rude comment.

I patted his shoulder. "Thank you for that. I'm trying to work past my shock. Just know that I care about Milo and don't want to see him get hurt."

"Good. Because I don't want Gray to have to take sides if anything terrible happens between Milo and you." He grimaced.

Chuckling, I frowned. “And what should I do if something bad happens between Gray and you?”

James snorted. “I will be hiding far away from Gray and you if we ever break up for some bizarre reason. I fully believe you will take Gray’s side and hunt me down. The two of you will probably make a party of it and bring snacks and beer while Dahlia tracks me. I’m not stupid enough to believe you will take my side.”

I gave James a quick kiss on his cheek. “You’re not as dumb as I thought, dear brother.”

Waving at him, I turned to hand Trish the drink specials for the night. “I’m so glad you’re here, Trish. If you have any questions about the menu, James is here to answer them. Goodnight.”

Not waiting for Trish to respond, I was out the door and driving to Quinn’s house before I had another thought.

Arriving at the white tutor-style house I passed whenever I got my hair done, a flood of good memories overcame me. Playing hide and seek in his huge backyard, dressing up in Halloween costumes, trick-or-treating in his neighborhood for the big candy bars, and riding our bikes up and down the street were just some of the fun times we had.

I ran up the steps and obnoxiously rang his doorbell as we used to.

He opened the door and laughed. “I see that you remember the secret bell chime to enter. Good job.” Holding out his hand, I gave him the wine and followed him into the house.

Breathing in, I sighed. The house had the same smell to it. His mother’s perfume still lingered in the curtain and couch cushions. The room had several differences, but I could tell from the doilies and decorative candy bowls that Quinn hadn’t redecorated yet.

“Tell me your mom kept your room the same after you moved out.” I

clapped my hands, excited to see his Star Trek action figures and dueling trophies.

He snorted.

“No. My mother thought it was a good idea to turn my room into a bathroom with a huge jacuzzi tub. I avoid the room since I’m sure Steve and her had many fun nights there while my father was romancing his future wife. They couldn’t just retire to Boca and live miserably together for the rest of their lives. No. They had to prove that sex with people close to my age was more fun.”

I tried to suppress my smile. “I’m sorry. Trust me, having miserable parents in Boca is not that much fun. Mom texts James daily to remind him to clean the grease traps or take out the restaurant trash. Dad texts me new recipes he saw online. They both text me to complain about how hot it is in Florida and how they wish they had never moved while sending me photos of them sitting by the pool. My biggest fear is that they come back to live with me.”

Quinn nodded. “You’re right. That is much worse.” He held up the wine. “Right now, I really need this. You should grab a glass before I down the whole bottle.”

I followed him into the kitchen and grabbed a wine glass from the top shelf. “As if you can’t reach these. I’m surprised your mom never put them on a lower shelf.”

He laughed.

“No kidding. Last Christmas, she made me get her glasses because I was so tall. Why are parents compelled to tell all their friends how tall their children are. It’s weird. Unless they are a basketball player, it really doesn’t matter.” He poured a drink for both of us and raised his glass for a toast. “May you be in heaven a full half hour before the devil knows you're dead.”

“I’ll drink to that.” I clinked my glass against his and took a sip. “Dinner smells good. Do you need help?”

Finishing off his wine in one gulp, he nodded. “I was really hoping you would ask that. I’m afraid I’ll burn everything. I really wanted to impress you by cooking until I stupidly remembered that you are a much better cook than I am.”

I went to the stove and threw on the apron that said, “I’m Irish; don’t fight me, you’ll lose.”

“Honestly, I’ve stopped judging other people’s cooking. I’m just happy when I don’t have to cook.” Seeing that everything looked fine, I gave him a thumbs up.

“Oh, thank goodness. I have O’Malley’s on speed dial, just in case. I told James that I might need a few steaks ready for pick up.” He poured another glass of wine before pulling out the dinnerware.

Laughing, I put my hands on my hips. “As if I wouldn’t notice.”

He shrugged. “I figured you would be relieved.”

After setting the kitchen table, we scooped out the mashed potatoes and cut the soda bread that did have raisins in it. The pot roast smelled terrific. I always liked his mother’s pot roast better than Mom’s, but I could never admit that to anyone.

We ate and chatted about nothing in particular. I enjoyed a relaxing dinner with an old friend.

After we washed the dishes and cleaned the kitchen, we went to the living room.

“What was that movie about the couple and that dog?” Quinn sat down on the blue couch that matched the carpet and drapes.

His mother had a weird thing about everything matching exactly.

“Oh, you mean Air Bud?” I sat next to him and put my wine glass on the

coffee table, making sure to use a coaster.

“Yes, that’s it. Do you remember how much we loved that movie?” He put his glass on the coaster next to mine so he could turn to look at me.

“I remember. I think we watched for three days in a row when we all had the chicken pox.” Quinn was stuck at our house for a week because his parents had to visit his grandparents to check on them.

“Oh man, I don’t know how the two of you put up with me for so long.” He rested his arm on the back of the couch and turned sideways.

I mimicked him and did the same. “I never minded when you came over. I was glad James had someone to play with and torment.”

He frowned. “Yeah, but you were usually reading or doing something by yourself as we got older.”

I shrugged and looked away. “I didn’t always want to play the same things or watch the same movies. But I didn’t have a problem with you being around. You always made me laugh.”

Smiling, he rubbed his chin. “I don’t remember you laughing as much when we were teenagers. I remember a lot of eye-rolling.”

I chuckled. “I was laughing on the inside. I sometimes felt like the third wheel, so I did my own thing. It didn’t mean that I was upset with you.”

He tilted his head. “How come we didn’t talk at the academy? We certainly ran into each other enough at dueling competitions. Granted, I was busy getting ready for my matches, but you never said hi.”

My mouth opened, but I couldn’t find the right words. I looked away, ashamed of my jealousy. Shrugging, I took a sip of wine. “I’m not sure.”

Leaning a little closer, his expression tightened. “You mentioned something about me drooling over Diana March. We were in the middle of an important conversation yesterday, so I didn’t want to bring it up, but I figured now was a good time.”

Though I was already warm from drinking the wine, my cheeks decided to turn scarlet red.

“Oh, that.” I bit my lip, not wanting to discuss my embarrassing crush on him.

Shifting a little closer, his knee touched mine. “Yes, Charlie. That. You brought it up while yelling at me about not paying attention in my transformation class. Why would you use that against me?”

I shook my head. “Who knows? I was mad at you. It was the first insult I could think of.”

“Hmm. Interesting.” He shifted once more; this time, he was close enough that I could feel his breath on my cheek. “Can I let you in on a little secret?”

Picking up my wine glass, I nodded. “Sure. Go ahead. I’ve already told you my worst secret.”

“Well, this secret isn’t too terrible. At least, I don’t think it is. I’m not sure if you’ll agree or not.” His voice grew deeper as he spoke, sending chills through me.

“Oh, really?” I finally turned to look into his pale green eyes.

“Charlene O’Malley, I’ve had a crush on you since I understood the difference between boys and girls. Though, I don’t think crush is exactly the right word. I think it’s a little stronger than that.” He let out a breath as if he’d been holding his confession inside his chest for decades, which apparently, he had.

Smacking his shoulder, I gaped at him. “Why didn’t you tell me, you moron? Do you know how long I’ve had a crush on you? I had to watch you salivate over Diana Marsh, Helen Melon, Tonya Fondant and Baily Faily, just to name a few.”

Taken aback, he shook his head. “What? Why the fuck didn’t you tell

me you were crushing on me? Who the hell are those other girls? I don't recognize...oh wait. Yeah, I get it. You changed their last names because you were jealous of them. Creative. I give you points for that, but I'm still pissed that you didn't say anything!" He threw his hands into the air and waved them around as he frantically paced through the living room.

"Dude! Why should I have said anything first? You could have confessed your love to me. Besides, if you liked me, why date any other girls?" Dumbfounded, I stood up and paced in the opposite direction.

He abruptly stopped to look at me. "Because they asked me out. If you hadn't noticed, I wasn't the king of confidence back then. I damned near had a heart attack when Diana Marsh told me I was cute. I didn't sleep for three days. Every time I thought about her, my body did crazy things."

"Eew. I don't need to know that you had a hard-on because of Diana." I gave him the finger and crossed my arms.

"Ahh, well, guess who gave me my first hard-on, little lady." He pointed an accusing finger at me.

Surprised, I tilted my head. "Really?"

I was somewhat flattered by his admission.

"Umm, yeah. You were gorgeous. Even covered in mud with a bloody nose, I still wanted to know what it was like to kiss you. I was afraid to tell you because, well. If you didn't like me back, I would've been the one with a bloody nose. And if you did like me back and we broke up somehow, I would lose the best girl I'd ever known." His voice broke at the end of his explanation.

"Funny because you lost the girl by hiding your feelings." I tapped my foot angrily. Why had it taken us so long to talk about this?

"I'm sorry. I was a stupid hormonal boy who knew the girl he liked would have literally buried him if he fucked up their relationship." He wasn't

wrong. I would have kicked the shit out of him if he broke up with me.

“That still doesn’t explain why we stopped being friends. You have no idea how lonely I was. I had a tough time making friends. I withdrew from people because I thought something was wrong with me.”

Looking back, I should have been stronger, but my confidence dwindled around the time Quinn left me. Though, I still wasn’t sure why.

He put his hand on his hip. “I thought you hated me. My friendship with James changed because we were constantly pitted against each other in tournaments. I started to think of him as my rival, my enemy. Coach was continually saying negative things about the competition. You know how heated dueling matches get. If James hurt me, I hurt him back. I forgot to leave my anger on the dueling platform. Instead, I carried it with me. I assumed you were pissed at me because you were so protective of your brother. I couldn’t stand the thought of you yelling at me after each match, so I hid from you. I ruined my friendship with James, and because of that, I assumed you and I weren’t friends anymore.” His hands fell limply to his sides. Seeing the anguish on his face, I suddenly understood his dilemma.

“You jackass. I didn’t give a shit about James’s opponents. Like you said, what happens on the dueling platform stays on the dueling platform.

The only time I got pissed was when someone cheated and really hurt him. Then, I would confront him. You were a fantastic dueler, and you never cheated. I was proud of you. I pretended to watch James when I really went to the matches to watch you. I couldn’t keep my eyes off you, you dick.” Annoyed with him, I smacked his arm again.

“Hey there, Rambo. Watch it.”

He quickly stepped forward and tickled my sides, which he knew I hated.

“Oh yeah. We’re going to do that, are we?” I grabbed at the backs of his

knees, which were equally ticklish.

“Shit. I shouldn’t have started this game.”

He ran around the room, ducking my hands as he tried to tickle me first.

“Why did you break up with your perfect world-traveling vet girlfriend?” Making him squeal when I grabbed his leg, he hopped away.

“The relationship wasn’t as perfect as my parents thought. They had introduced us and pressed me to go out with her. We had fun initially, but I got tired of traveling. I missed Silver Springs.” Ducking and weaving, he got in a few good tickles.

“Jerk.” I swatted his arm away. “Did you ever think of calling me?”

Standing up straight, he paused. “All the time, but I assumed I had blown my chance with you. When you called for the repair, I couldn’t believe I had another chance to see you. Leaving your house that morning, I suddenly realized why my previous relationships hadn’t worked. Those girls couldn’t scare off a bully twice their size, they didn’t have a biting sense of humor that made me laugh, and they definitely couldn’t out-sprint me when something broke in the house, and we had to outrun one of our parents.” Smiling, he shrugged. “They weren’t you, Charlie O’Malley.”

Taking a breath, I smiled. “That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. Though, I’m still pissed at you.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.” He slowly closed the distance between us until he stood right before me.

Gulping, I put my hand against his chest to stop him from getting any closer. “I found out this morning that I have a soulmate. It’s Milo.” I bit my lip and looked at my feet. “The longer you stay in town, the higher your chance of touching or ingesting a love spell, or more accurately, a mate-finding spell. I noticed the spell linking Milo and me together this morning.”

Quinn slowly nodded, but his smile didn’t diminish. “Huh. That’s

cool. Umm, is it anything like this one?" He pointed to his chest.

Squinting, I couldn't see anything. I leaned closer and turned him toward the light on the end table next to the couch. Sure enough, there was the same orange glow, though it was fainter than Milo's.

"How long has this been there?" I had trouble forming words as I covered my mouth in shock.

Chuckling, he pointed toward the front door. "The second I opened the door and saw you standing on the porch. Didn't you notice how much wine I've consumed since you arrived? Especially after I popped the second bottle open. I assumed you hadn't noticed it, so I was scared out of my fucking mind. Your side is fainter than mine, though I'm not sure why. I figured it was because you are stubborn as hell." He bopped the end of my nose.

I sat down on the couch to think things through. "This certainly makes sense. When you started dating other girls, it felt like my heart was broken because it was. It felt like you had rejected me. You dumb ass." I played with his fingers as he stood over me.

"I felt the sadness, too, which was why I was so relieved that other girls found me attractive. Though, I never understood why I didn't care about them the same way they cared for me. I assumed I was fucked up. I had no idea that I had made the biggest mistake of my life by not pulling you into my arms, preferably after I won a spectacular match and asked for permission to kiss you."

He intertwined our fingers and pulled my hand to his lips. "I'm thrilled I was given the opportunity to fix my, I'm sorry, OUR mistake."

Beaming like he'd just won the lottery, he kissed the back of my hand again.

"I don't know about you, but I've always wondered how sturdy your kitchen counters are."

Smirking, I bit my lip.

“Fuck me. You’re telling me that I’ve been missing out on counter sex for all these years. If I had known, I would have thrown you down on top of the bar after we cleaned up the snakes. I wouldn’t have cared if Milo watched, as long as he wore pants.” He pulled me to my feet and lifted my chin. Stopping an inch from my lips, he looked deeply into my eyes. “Permission to come aboard, Captain.”

“Permission granted.” Closing the gap, I kissed him like I’d always imagined kissing him. Though I had had much more experience since 8th grade, it was one hell of a kiss.

Picking me up, I wrapped my legs around him.

He walked me to the kitchen and set me down on the counter. Tangling his hand in my hair, he pulled back my head. He plunged his tongue into my mouth and used my hair to control the kiss.

My body melted at the sensation of his mouth on mine. Gasping, I tightened my legs around his waist, pulling him closer.

“Easy there. We’re in no rush. Of the countless fantasies I’ve had about you, none of them involved counter fucking, so I need a moment to decide what to do to you.” He dragged his lips down the side of my face and neck. Lightly biting the crook of my neck, I groaned.

“What happened to the jokester?” My voice was barely audible.

His hand slid under my shirt to massage my breast.

“He finally found his mate. The only woman he can truly satisfy.” He quickly pinched my nipple through my bra, sending shockwaves of pleasure through me.

“Holy fuck.”

My entire body convulsed.

“We’re just getting started, sweetheart. I’ve heard that true mates can

give each other so many orgasms that they black out. I plan on proving that.” Pulling off my shirt with one swift motion, he leaned down to kiss and lick my collarbone while massaging the other breast.

How could Milo and Quinn make me feel incredible with only kisses and a few touches?

Running my hands down his back, I jumped when he grabbed my wrists and pulled my arms above my head. He pressed them into the cabinet above me and held them with one hand while his other hand held my jaw, turning my head to the side.

“You can touch me later. Right now, I need to taste every inch of you, caress every part of your body.” His rough breath tickled my ear as his tongue stroked the side of my neck. Though I couldn’t move, I felt safe in his hands. I gave myself over to his every touch, craving him more and more.

Moving back to my mouth, his kiss was all-consuming. He let go of me briefly to remove my bra before taking control of my chin again. He held my back and positioned my head so my breasts arched toward him.

“God damn. Do you know how long I’ve wanted to have you in this position, you amazing little minx? You are so damned flexible. Can you feel how hard I am for you?” He pressed himself against my core and rubbed his hard cock against me.

Clenching again, another shockwave went through me. Before I was able to catch my breath, his hot mouth clamped onto my breast.

Sucking and licking my nipple, he groaned in the back of his throat.

I groaned along with him. How had I not known Quinn was my mate? If only we had kissed, we probably would have figured it out. Though if I were being honest with myself, I preferred Quinn’s experienced mouth to his braces-filled mouth.

Feeling the pressure building up inside my stomach, my entire body

trembled. He switched to the other breast, sending me out of my mind. Alternating between the two, I quickly screamed his name as I came so hard, I got dizzy. I'd never come from someone relentlessly playing with my nipples, but I prayed it wouldn't be the last time.

"There it is. I love the sound of my name on your lips." Twisting my hair again, he held my head and sucked on my lower lip. Never in my wildest dreams did I expect this reaction from silly, funny Quinn.

"Please, I need to be fucked." Unable to take any more teasing, I tightened my legs around his hips, trying to draw him closer.

"Not yet, sweetheart. When you beg for my cock, I need to hear the desperation in your voice. I need to know that only my hard cock, rubbing you in all the right places, will satisfy your lust and make you come so hard that you force me to orgasm with you." He licked up my stomach, chest and neck.

His wicked tongue was what I needed to heal every wound and every terrible experience I'd had before finding my mates. "Quinn."

"I'm here with you, sweetheart." He lightly bit my nipple, sending me over the edge. I screamed and writhed on the countertop. I hope his mother forgave me someday for counter fucking her son.

Quinn swiftly pulled me off the counter to stand me up. Hazy, I wasn't sure what he was doing until I felt the cold air on my legs.

Looking down, I locked eyes with him as he dragged my wet panties down my legs. He leaned forward to inhale my scent, something I would expect Milo to do.

"What are you doing?" I sounded drunk, slurring my words like I'd had the second bottle of wine.

"I love your scent. You always smelled like honeysuckles. I'm pleased to know that nothing has changed." Lifting me up, I was back on the

countertop, but this time, he had me positioned with my ass on the edge of the counter and my legs up in the air, spread wide. “Fuck! You gorgeous contortionist.”

I laughed until his tongue licked all the way to my clit. “Fuck!”

“Not yet, sweetie.” Holding my legs, he kept me pinned on the counter while he devoured me.

My mind was consumed with every tongue motion, every spike of bliss he sent through me.

I lost it completely when my orgasm tore through every rational thought I had. Panting, I groaned. “Please! Quinn! Please!” He spread me even wider. “I need to hear it, or I’ll keep sucking on your clit until you say it.” He immediately descended onto my clit, sending more shockwaves through me.

“Quinn. I need you to fuck me! I need you inside of me. Please. Give me your cock and take away this ache. I need you, Quinn!” I was so desperate I had trouble expressing how badly I needed him.

He unbuttoned his pants and pulled down his boxer briefs with one hand. “I’ve wanted you to say that to me since I learned the word cock and understood what it really meant.”

One thrust and I let out a garbled sound of pleasure and relief. Holding my legs, he kept them positioned so he could hit the perfect spot. True to his word, his cocked worked me so hard that I had trouble controlling my body.

An intense burst of energy made me cry out as a toe-curling orgasm destroyed every bad experience I had ever endured.

Bliss, ecstasy, and a little bit of giggling madness took over as my core clenched down so hard I heard Quinn grunting and moaning.

I rode the highs and lows of the pleasure rippling through me. Panting, I saw the edges of my vision grow dim. I slowed my breathing so I didn’t pass out.

Quinn slowed his strokes and took a few deep breaths. “Please let me know it was as good for you as it was for me.”

Nodding, I smiled weakly. “Better.”

After resting for a few minutes, Quinn helped me off the counter and tenderly hugged me.

“I love holding you in my arms. And kissing you. And fucking you. I pretty much love everything about you. We really need to figure out how to break this curse.” He kissed the top of my head.

Sighing, I held him tightly. “I’ve done my research and can’t find a way.”

He pulled back to look at me. “Charlie, every curse has a counter curse or a way to defuse the effects of it. No curse is bulletproof. Even a powerful witch can manipulate a death curse to extend the person’s life.”

“True, but they still die.”

“Everyone dies eventually, Charlie. My point is there is always a light spell to counteract a dark spell. Dark wizards like to spread rumors about how impervious their spells are, yet there is always a balance in the magical world. They talk tough, but it’s only because they know how powerful light magic is. Scare tactics and evil curses go a long way to bolster a dark wizard’s reputation. But think about how many dark wizards were defeated and tossed in jail. It’s possible. We just have to find the right spell.”

I appreciated his optimism, and he made a good point, but I’d had years to search for a solution only to run into a dead end.

“Thank you, Quinn. I hope we can find the answer together.” I patted his chest as I yawned.

“I know we will, but first, you need some sleep. I’d offer to let you stay here, but I’ve been sleeping on the couch. My new bed hasn’t arrived yet, and there is no way I’m sleeping in the same bed where Steve plowed my mom.”

Frowning, he looked at the couch.

“Well, having bought my own bed because my parents took theirs to Boca, I’m invitating you to stay with me tonight.”

He jumped up and down, clapping his hands. “A sleepover? Hell yeah! And I’ve been upgraded to a bed instead of James’s floor. Bonus!”

I giggled uncontrollably. “Extra bonus. You get to sleep with your mate.”

He stopped jumping and took me into his arms to spin and dip me. Pulling me back up, he kissed me sweetly. “Best bonus of all.”

Quinn ran upstairs to grab his sleepover bag, as he called it. My heart opened a bit more to accept Quinn into my life. My fear had made me hesitant to call Milo my mate. After experiencing the level of trust I put in Quinn, my fear of having both of them as mates quickly subsided. I felt happy and optimistic for the first time in a long time.

Running down the steps, Quinn was already wearing cartoon pajama pants and a T-shirt. His backpack was slung over one shoulder. “Ready.”

I couldn’t stop laughing at his clothes and his eagerness.

I worried about Quinn attempting to remove the cure from me. I couldn’t lose him. There had to be something I missed. For the first time in years, I was optimistic about breaking the curse.

Chapter 16 Preston

I rubbed my aching forehead. I needed more ibuprofen to kick the wicked headache behind my eyes. The damned thing had sprung up shortly after Charlie ran from the casino. I'd had magic hangovers before after dueling truly dark perpetrators, but I'd never felt anything like this.

My mouth was so dry that I was on my third bottle of water and second coffee. I'd never wanted to stay in bed so badly, but I couldn't take a day off. The sooner I finished my investigation, the sooner I could put away the dangerous witch. I just had to figure out who was responsible for everything.

Between the demon attack in the cemetery, Milo's encounter in the woods, the snake attack at O'Malley's, and the tornado at the casino last night, I didn't have a single lead. Charlie was the only witch present during the incident.

Had her spells gone awry and accidentally caused all the chaos, or was she actively trying to hurt people? It was interesting how her friends were at each location. Were her friends quietly trying to stop her, or were they cleaning up her messes?

After seeing Charlie speaking with the casino owner when I arrived, I wondered why she would immobilize Jupiter unless she was tired of her friends interfering. Charlie had undoubtedly tried to run from the crime scene as fast as she could.

Why put up a binding spell so she couldn't leave? I still couldn't understand why she pretended to trap herself inside. Perhaps she wanted to make sure no one stopped her plan, until I guilted her into helping me stop the tornado.

Closing my eyes, I couldn't get Charlie's beautiful face out of my head.

Was I painting her to be the criminal? Aside from the anonymous tip, I had no proof that she was the dark wizard. Was it too easy to make Charlie the scapegoat since I had no other suspects?

Based on the news articles and eyewitness accounts, she had been seen at several disturbances in town over the years. There was a poltergeist attack that she was present for. Residents of Silver Oaks claimed she was responsible for an attack on a retired investigator from the Black Dawn Coven, who used to work with Dahlia's mother. Then, there was the attack on the funeral parlor. That was the worst offense. She was seen cursing three men in the middle of the street.

Glancing up at Milo's house, I wondered what was taking Charlie so long.

Was it possible that Milo was one of her accomplices? Had she used Milo to call upon her pack, knowing they were in league with her old buddy Zeth. Did she want to eliminate the competition? Dark wizards often turned on one another to claim more power for themselves.

Perhaps Charlie had been publicly declaring Silver Springs as her territory.

I had trouble reconciling the woman who was afraid to conjure last night and the accounts of the woman who was spotted at the prior incident.

The fear in her eyes at the casino had been real. I was sure of that. She said that running away would save those people. What would make her believe that?

When our magic energy connected, I felt like I'd touched a lightning bolt. Her energy was so powerful and bright that it nearly knocked me over. How could someone with such power not use it for good?

Taking her hands in mine, I was overcome with so many emotions that I had trouble remembering what we were supposed to do. I was actually

embarrassed by the most potent emotions – lust and love.

Never had conjuring been so easy. I hardly thought about the spells I needed to perform. They came so naturally to me that my body embraced them confidently. The strength of our magical power together could easily conquer the work of a dark wizard.

Then, I untangled our power and sent her energy back to her. I felt so bereft I lost my breath. My soul actually ached from the loss of her. Seeing her fall to her knees crying, I knew she felt the same way.

Unable to stop thinking about her all night, I slept in my car in front of her house. Slept was hardly the right word. I kept watching over her house through heavy eyelids. I worried that something terrible would happen to her.

All night, there was a lingering uneasiness that I couldn't identify. I'd heard of residual energy staying behind after an intertwining spell, so the covens considered them dangerous and only used in extreme circumstances.

If I didn't know better, I felt like a shadow was watching me, though it was on the inside of my body. I shook my head at the thought. Maybe I was just tired.

However, if Charlie was dark, she could have left behind some of that darkness inside me.

Damn it!

Why did I want this woman so badly? I was smarter than that. My father always said to keep your dick out of an investigation. It would only lead to heartache and the imprisonment of your supposed love.

Why was it so hard to decide if she was guilty or innocent? My heart told me she was innocent, but my mind couldn't stop pointing out all the apparent clues leading to her guilt. Why couldn't I be objective? I'd never had such conflicting feelings about a person.

Suddenly, the answer came so fast that I hit my head on the overhead

visor. How was I this stupid? I knew better than to fall for this kind of bullshit.

Pulling my grimoire out of the middle console, I flipped to the page I should have opened immediately after meeting Charlie. “*Dezvăluie orice vrăji puse asupra mea!*” Making a protection circle around my chest, I waited for any spells used on me to reveal themselves.

A chill ran up my back as I waited for the spell to sift through every common spell to determine if Charlie had hexed me. If this protection spell didn’t turn up anything, I was prepared to search for any curses placed on me, though I would need Ian Foster’s help for the really rough curses.

After a minute, an orange ball of energy appeared in front of my chest. The energy spread out into a line and zipped away from me. Following the line, the orange glow dimmed until I could barely see it. Even though I couldn’t see exactly where it went, it was apparent that it was headed toward Milo’s house.

Holy Shit! Charlie put a love spell on me.

So much for her lush lips and radiant hair. They were nothing more than a distraction. A way of eluding arrest. This was the lowest of all the sneaky ways to throw me off her trail. She made me believe I was in love with her.

Rushing out of the car, I ran into Milo’s yard.

Unfortunately, I set off the undead sentry who had been glaring at me for the past twenty minutes.

The reincarnated cat sprinted toward me, unleashing an unearthly growl.

I raised my arms, preparing to stun it, though I wasn’t sure what protection spells it had on it. “*Imobilizarea ar trebui să fie imobilă.*”

The zombie cat froze mid-pounce and fell onto its side. Charlie might be upset about unAnimating the cat, but I didn’t care. If she wanted to play dirty by putting a love curse on me, we would play dirty.

Performing a complex spell, I removed any wards or protection charms from the house and barged right in. Further into the house, I heard yelling. I followed the voices toward the kitchen, where it sounded like a meeting was being held.

Perfect! They are finally rattled enough to turn on each other. Now I can get my answers.

I calmed my anger and stepped back to listen to their conversation.

Using my cell phone, I positioned it so I could see around the corner into the kitchen.

James stood before Milo and Quinn, who appeared to protect Charlie. “Dude! This is between my sister and me. I need to speak with her.”

Pushing both men aside, I watch Charlie face her brother. “James, I know you're pissed...”

“Charlie, I’m more than pissed. Why didn’t you tell me? Why have you kept this from the family?”

Now, things are getting good. Tell me your secret, Charlie.

I could barely contain my excitement, though part of me was upset about arresting her.

“She was protecting you, James.” Quinn, the handyman, stepped forward to point at James. “She’s always protecting you. She kicked the asses of the kids in the neighborhood who made fun of you because they were jealous of your talent. She stayed with that psycho path Zeth because his coven threatened to destroy your perfect reputation. Worst of all, she married Reed because he said he would kill you. This curse prevents her from fighting back with light magic. Don’t you get it, man? She would rather suffer than see her twin hurt.”

“Is this true, Charlene?” Hearing James call his sister by her real name meant he believed what the handyman had said.

I had no idea what Quinn meant about a curse, but I kept listening.

I saw Charlie break into tears, and James hug her. “I was afraid of what they would do to you. They knew you were my weakness, James.”

He let out a breath and sniffled. “How do you think I feel knowing what Reed put you through? I wanted to kill him. I thought about visiting him in jail and bribing the guards so I could have five minutes with him alone. Now I find out that Zeth used your power and made you read from the Book of Ancient Magicks. Why didn’t you confide in me? We used to tell each other everything.”

I nearly fell when she mentioned the Book of Ancient Magicks. If Charlie had been forced to read from the book, it would explain why she was afraid to use magic.

Suddenly, several things made more sense. She could still be guilty if the book forced her to use its spells. She could have easily summoned demons and created a tornado. She was still responsible for the outcomes even if she had accidentally used the curses.

Charlie’s lower lip trembled when she looked at James. “Because there’s no cure. Anyone who tries to use a counter curse on the cursed reader of the book is seriously injured or killed. Why would I tell you when I knew you would try to save me? I can’t lose you, you stupid jerk.”

I watched Milo pull Charlie into his arms while James staggered backward from the harsh reality of the situation.

James put his hand on Charlie’s shoulder. “I understand why you kept this a secret, but you should have told me. Did Zeth know any way to cure someone who had read from the book? He had to know a way to undo the curse. He wasn’t stupid enough to with play fire unless he knew how to keep himself safe. There isn’t a doubt in my mind that he read from that book.”

Charlie shook her head. “I never saw him read from the book, so I have

no idea.”

“Well, there’s one way to find out. We can find Zeth and hold him up by his ankles and make him tell us what he knows.” James squared his shoulders like he want to run out and find Zeth that second.

Processing Charlie’s secret, I stepped into the kitchen. All eyes were immediately on me.

I ignored the wand, conjuring positions, and defensive wolf stances of everyone in the room.

Clearing my throat, I pointed to my chest. “Charlie. Give me one reason I shouldn’t arrest you for interfering with my investigation by putting a love curse on me.”

Milo crossed his arms and laughed at me. “I’m guessing you’re Preston. Why do you think she put a love curse on you? Is there even such a thing?”

Quinn rolled his eyes. “Let me guess, there’s an orange glow on your chest, and you’re in love with Charlie. Dude, it’s not a curse. It’s a love locator spell. And here I thought the Dascălu knew their asses from their elbows.”

I considered what Quinn said, though I didn’t understand why Charlie would use a mate finder spell. Or why it would find me. We definitely weren’t mates.

Were we?

I almost laughed when I noticed the same orange glow on Milo and Quinn’s chests.

“I see she’s ensnared you too, Milo. No wonder you called your pack, knowing they were working with Kevin Kelly.” I crossed my arms and glared at the temptress.

Milo raised his eyebrows. “Who the fuck is Kevin Kelly?” He looked over his shoulder at Charlie.

Charlie stopped hiding behind her love puppets and stepped forward to face me. “He’s talking about Zeth. He hated being called Kevin, so he decided his coven needed cool nicknames. Bradley, Darren, and Robbie were called Miz, Aser, and Vek.”

“Huh. I can’t really say anything since I hate being called Moss.” He shrugged away Zeth’s nickname and turned back to glare at me with his wolf eyes. “Now, what is this bullshit about being ensnared by her?”

Snorting, I pointed to Quinn and Milo’s chest. “She really has her claws dug deeply into both of you. Let me guess. Neither of you can’t stop thinking about her. She’s the only person who makes you feel special and loved.” Any woman who could curse a man into loving her without remorse deserved to be locked away forever.

Milo snorted. “Duh. That’s how you’re supposed to feel when you find your mate. Man, you are a cold-hearted bastard, aren’t you? I feel bad for the woman who stupidly falls for your prudish ass.”

Charlie let out a dramatic sigh. “I’m sure you know all about the big bad curses, but you don’t know jack shit about innocent love spells. This town is known for drinks and objects loaded with a benign love or mate finder spell. It doesn’t make you fall in love; it only finds the person or persons who are your soulmate or soulmates. If they are so inclined, the people involved can break the spell. Now, take your uneducated ass out of here before Milo uninvents you from the property and Necro Kitty bites your balls.”

Staring down at the orange glow on my chest, the word “mate” made my head spin. Was this actually a mate spell and not a love curse?

Yes, it was orange instead of purple or black, but witches as talented as Charlie could easily cloak the true intention of the spell.

Witches didn’t have mating urges like shifters, but we did crave true intimacy with the one who would complete us. I certainly felt complete when

Charlie and I were joined the last night. Was Charlie indeed my mate?

Damn it! Why was my life so complicated? I couldn't take myself off her case without explaining to my father that I was desperately in love with the woman I was investigating. He would banish both of us. Or worse, he would send my brother to finish the investigation. He would have Charlie locked away for simply standing within a block of any attack within the city.

"Are we really mates?" Entertaining the possibility, I looked into Charlie's eyes.

Stepping closer, she squinted at my chest. She nodded. It's faint, but it's there. I felt our connection all the way down to my soul last night." She put her arm around me. "I found out Quinn and Milo were my mates yesterday." She blew each of them a kiss.

I let out a breath and allowed myself to slowly embrace the truth.

I love Charlie.

Milo's shoulders relaxed. "Charlie, I have known you were my mate for about a year. One day, I looked at you, and you smiled at me. My heart almost beat out of my chest. Ever since then, I've watched over you but kept my distance. After what Reed did to you, I knew you needed more time to heal."

Quinn shrugged. "I've been in love with her since the 8th grade. We had a discussion last night. So, I can honestly say that I'm grateful for the spell. It made us pull our heads out of our asses and realize we're stupid for each other."

Hearing their declarations made me feel better. Though I'd just met Charlie, I was starting to accept that she was the one.

Curious about what Milo said about Reed, I had to know what happened.

Pulling her tightly against my side, I looked down at her. "Charlie,

please tell me what Reed did to you. I know you married him right out of the academy, and he went to jail a few years later. The records were sealed, so I don't know what happened between the two of you." Seeing the look of pure pain and devastation appear on her face, I suddenly knew why Reed was in jail.

"He, umm." She looked away. "Our marriage was more about control and anger than love. I hated every minute of it, but I couldn't let him hurt James. Reed hurt me and wore me down until I was trapped. I felt like I had nowhere to go. Dahlia was the one who figured out something was wrong and called her father, who was a police officer. When my family found out, they called in the dark wizard investigators. My parents begged for my records to be sealed so I wouldn't suffer the embarrassment." Tears rolled down her cheeks as she looked up at me.

Kissing her forehead, I vowed to protect her. "I'm so sorry."

Looking up at Milo and Quinn, I could see their shock and anger. They didn't know the entire truth about her marriage to Reed either.

My heart broke at the thought of this strong woman living under the constant threat of a dark wizard. "Is it true that you're cursed? Is that why you stayed with him? You were afraid the curses from the book would kill Reed." She nodded against my chest.

"I need you to tell me the truth, Charlie. Did you commit any of the attacks in Silver Springs." Though I believed she was innocent, I needed to hear her say it.

Charlie pulled away from my arms and shook her head. "No. I'm not responsible for any of them, though I couldn't stop them either. I didn't want to accidentally use a curse instead of light magic. Admittedly, I used a curse against Zeth and his friends, but he was about to enslave one of Gray's mates. I used a Nightmare spell on them, hoping they would hide in a corner for the

rest of their life and leave my friends alone. Without Zeth's power protecting them, Milo's parents retreated with their pack."

Letting out a breath, I nodded. I believed her. "I swear. I will do whatever I can to help you, Charlie." I meant it with all my heart. I didn't give a shit about my job or my family. I had to help her. I didn't care if I had to sell cartoon T-shirts and mugs on the corner of the street. I would leave everything behind to make sure no one ever hurt her again.

Everyone in the room visibly relaxed.

"Damn. I really wanted to bite him." Gray sneered at me and turned to pull a tray out of the oven. "Everyone gets my double chocolate surprise cookies with marshmallow filling, except Preston.

James held out his hand to me. "Welcome to the family. Do you have any ideas on how to uncurse Charlie?"

If someone had asked me to fight the Book of Ancient Magicks ten minutes ago, I would have told them they were crazy. Now, I planned to fight the damned thing with everything I had.

"Oh, there is one thing I should tell you about Necro Kitty..."

Chapter 17 Charlie

Taking a deep breath, I glared at Preston. “Daire is going to be so pissed at you. You’re lucky Gray let you live. We all love Necro Kitty, even if she doesn’t always love us. That cat took on wolves to protect this town. She’s a fucking hero and you killed her.”

Preston held up one hand as he gripped the steering wheel with the other hand. “As I said, she was already dead. I just made her dead again. I swear. I will help Daire reanimate Necro Kitty, which is technically against the law. We just won’t talk about that part. She’ll be fine.”

Growling from the backseat, Milo glared at Preston through the rearview mirror. “I want that cat EXACTLY the way she was, or I’m taking a chunk out of your ass.”

Quinn snorted. “I’ll record it so you can watch it on loop.”

Sighing, Preston nodded. “She will be the same. I promise. Now, let’s focus on the larger problem. We need to figure out who is behind the attacks in town and present solid proof to my father that you are not responsible for any of them. If I simply walk away from the investigation, he’ll send someone else who probably won’t believe your innocence.”

I trusted that Preston would help fix Necro Kitty, so I cleared my head and counted all the places where weird shit had happened recently. “Where do you want to start? The cemetery, the woods, the pub, or the casino?”

“The only place I haven’t seen is the woods. We should start there.” Preston reached across the seat to rub my thigh.

“Okay, then turn left at the next light.” Milo gave Preston directions as we drove through Silver Springs.

I patted his hand and pulled out my phone to text Daire. Glancing at my

last text to him, I realized it was Dahlia's weird Romanian spell.

"Do either of you know old Romanian and ancient spells?" I handed my phone to Quinn.

Scrunching up his nose, he shook his head. "It's been a while since my research paper days. I always used the old Romanian dictionary to decipher the diaries and spell books."

Preston huffed. "You two act like you're humans. Use a decipher spell."

My mind went blank. "Umm, I've never heard of that before."

"Me either." Quinn handed the phone back to me.

Shaking his head, Preston chuckled. "Of course you haven't. They don't teach it at the academy because they consider it cheating. Hunters are required to follow the old rules to figure out how to charge a suspect if their crimes are bizarre. I once had to figure out how to charge a man who stole someone's chicken and used it to summon an old Romanian god. There was a twist. The man was a direct descendant of the god, so we charged him with theft and summoning a relative to alter his fate. The sentence was much heavier than the one used for summoning a god."

I chuckled at his story. Life with Preston would never be dull.

Showing my phone to Preston, he glanced at the text at a red light.

"What do you think?" I hoped Preston could figure it out. It was driving me nuts that I didn't know what it said.

"Shouldn't be a problem to decipher. I'll decode it when we stop." He winked at me and smiled.

I was starting to like the real Preston. The one who wasn't trying to toss me in jail.

Using my street as a shortcut, we drove past my house. I wondered how the raven was doing.

"Look out!"

Preston slammed on the brakes as the giant tree in my neighbor's yard fell across the road.

Quinn opened his window. "Did anyone else see that bright light?" He pulled out his wand and opened the door.

"Hold on there, cowboy. We have no idea what happened." I didn't need him to get struck by lightning. I didn't see rain clouds, but this town was notorious for random weather events.

Milo raised his hand. "I know what happened. That was the same light and explosion I experienced with Gavril and Aiden in the woods." He pointed to the bottom of the tree that had exploded into splinters.

"That means whoever did this is cloaked." I opened my door to examine the tree.

Preston jumped out of the car to look around. "Tell me about these attacks. What's the common factor in all of them?"

I ran through each scenario. "No one was seriously injured during the attacks. Nothing major was stolen from the casino. James, Daire and Ian were able to send the demons back to Hell once Gray kicked the shit out of them. They all should have done more damage than they did. There was no clear motivation or reason for them. All the attacks seemed random." I turned around to look at my mates.

Quinn shrugged. "If the snakes hadn't been venomous, I would have considered it a stupid prank by some kids."

"I thought the same thing about the encounter in the woods. Especially since the guy was stupid enough to be chowing down on burritos." Milo scanned the area with his wolf vision.

My mouth fell open. "Pranks. The demons in the cemetery had unusual hair colors, which I figured was a new fashion statement. Still, it was hard to take them seriously. The tornado should have ripped the casino, spa, and

retirement home to shreds but remained contained in one spot. Someone is fucking with us.”

Preston glanced at me from the corner of his eye. “When you said he would be cloaked, you meant invisible. Right?”

I nodded.

A wicked smile spread across Preston’s face.

Quinn snickered. “Yeah, I don’t like that face. I’m glad he’s on our side.” Milo nodded in agreement.

Pushing up the sleeves of his blazer and kicking off his shoes and socks, Preston twirled. “*Faceți vizibil nevăzutul.*”

Distracted by Preston’s gorgeous body conjuring a decloaking spell, I forgot for a second that we were searching for a bad guy.

Milo jumped into the air, shifting as he went, while Quinn pulled out his wand and crouched down into his dueling position.

I stood in the middle of my yard like a helpless girl. Like bait.

This was usually the point where I went inside the house to hide, or inside the tattoo shop to hide, or stood behind my friends, who could use their powers without further damning themselves, to hide. I realized how much my life sucked. I missed being on the dueling platform, throwing out spell after spell, or fighting some bully hell-bent on making fun of the O’Malley twins.

“No!” Turning to look at my side yard next to the garbage cans, I saw a tall man shouting like a lunatic.

Milo’s wolf ran full force at the stranger.

“Milo! Wait!” I shouted, but he was already opening his mouth to bite the guy.

“*Transformă iarba în noroi viu!*” The stranger pulled out a wand and pointed it at the ground, weaving a spell I’d never seen before.

The wolf tried to leap at the caster, but he tripped and fell into the mud.

Hmm.

I didn't recall there being rain today. How had Milo's wolf turned into a mud pie.

Preston and Quinn released spells, one to freeze the dude and the other to disarm him. Unfortunately, the stranger was faster and deflected the attacks.

Feeling something creeping up my leg, I tried to lift it to smack away a bug or something, but my leg wouldn't budge.

I looked down at my lawn, which was suddenly caked in mud. The thick mud was rising over my shoes and ankles.

What the fuck?

Quickly looking over at the guys, they, too, were stuck in the mud.

Though I didn't recognize the jerk's spell, I should have translated the part about "transforming" something into something. Seeing the mud spread across my yard, I wondered why the moron used a mud spell. It wasn't terribly sophisticated. Then again, he seemed to like pranks.

"Darling, if you can run, run!" Preston waved toward the house.

Unable to see any imminent danger, I shrugged. "Why?"

Groaning, he pointed to the ground. "Can't you just follow instructions? This is living mud. It's a curse!"

Confused, I stared at the mud springing up from the ground. It looked like it was forming little pathways between my mates and me. I wanted to giggle at the word mates, but it wasn't time for that.

"Next time, state the emergency first, and then maybe I will comply without question. What the hell is living mud?" I don't know why I loved arguing with Preston, but it brightened my day.

Before he could explain, my feet flew into the air, sending me face-first into the mud. I was pulled across the yard by an unseen force until I collided

with Quinn's side, who bumped into Preston. Milo's wolf was the last to join us.

Grunting, Quinn tried to pull his wand arm out of the mud. "Let me guess. Living mud will trap us and cover us until we drown."

Preston moved his shoulders around, trying to free himself. "Good guess. If anyone can move, we need a counter curse and fast."

Pushing against the ground, the wolf was strong enough to get to his feet, though his legs were shaky. He leaned over and grabbed the back of Preston's blazer to unstick him.

Preston shook his head. "No, Milo. Free Quinn. He has a better chance of using his wand to stop this."

Milo let go of Preston and turned to tug on Quinn's shirt.

"I'm not sure if I can uncurse us, but I will try." Quinn freed his right hand and threw it over Milo's furry neck. A little more, and he might free his wand hand.

Laughing from the far side of the yard made me turn my head. The supreme asshole was laughing his ass off.

"Oh, this is too precious. The caster and conjurer working together is adorable, but seeing a wolf shifter helping both is too much. It's like the Brady Bunch. One big happy family. Unfortunately, no matter what you do, it won't stop you from dying." The guy crossed his arms and leaned against my house. He seemed to be enjoying the show.

"Who the fuck are you?" I was done with this guy. "What's the point of these games?"

"Raven. I'm disappointed in you. All this was for you and your new friends. How haven't you noticed?" Anger seeped into his voice, though he tried to sound casual.

Struggling to keep my head above the mud, I tried to figure out who he

was.

Wait. No one called me Raven anymore.

Thinking back to my academy days, I disregarded the guy's beard and long hair. What was it with dark wizards and having long hair, as if it would make them appear mysterious and sophisticated. Instead, he looked like he needed a shower and a hot oil treatment for his split ends.

Come on.

Think. Take off fifteen years and give him some acne. He knows you well enough to call you by a nickname.

He definitely wasn't Zeth, which was disappointing since I wanted to punch his teeth out. Miz would have a bigger beer gut by now. Aser was probably dead. I always expected him to accidentally blow himself up with a dangerous spell. Vek would definitely have his abs still. He certainly wasn't Reed. Even using a glamour, he would have called me babe or another supposed endearment term.

The only other person I knew who might have gone dark side had disappeared without a trace the night of the marshmallow incident.

Aside from being in my room, far away from the Pike field, the Headmaster couldn't charge us without any witnesses placing us in the woods. They assumed Christopher Myzer had run away from school or died in the woods, though they had never found his body.

"Christopher?" There was no way this weirdo was Zeth's sworn enemy.

"Aww. You do remember. Hey, Quinn. Long time no see." My heart stopped when I looked at his crazy eyes. In no way did he resemble the jerk who made our lives a living hell in school.

Of course, looking back, I was happy that he tormented Zeth, but I could have done without the feud.

"Fuck off, Chris. I didn't like you then and really don't like you now."

Quinn rolled his eyes.

Seeing that Quinn was almost free, I kept Christopher talking.

“What happened to you that night? I saved you, but no one saw you after that.” I intentionally reminded him I was the one who kept him from ending up like a burnt piece of bacon, thanks to the rest of the coven.

He chuckled. “That’s a funny story. One I will wait to tell you until these three are dead. Since you can’t do magic, we’ll have time to catch up until I’m ready to kill you.”

Christopher had obviously lost his mind on his journey to the dark side.

Grunting, Quinn freed his hand and pointed his wand at Christopher. “*Transformă-l pe Christopher Myzer într-un pinguin.*” I wasn’t sure why Quinn was trying to turn Christopher into a penguin, but it would buy them time to figure out how to get us free from the mud.

“*Transformă-l pe Quinn O'Brien într-o rață.*” Christopher’s spell beat Quinn’s by three seconds, giving him just enough time to sidestep Quinn’s spell.

I watched helplessly as Milo pulled a duck out of the mud instead of Quinn. The duck flapped its wings, but the mud covering them weighed him down

So much for flying to get help.

Feeling the mud slide across my back, I was pulled deeper into Christopher’s trap. “Milo, get out of here! Get help!”

Rearing back, Milo unstuck his front paws to run with Quinn in his mouth, but the second he tried to leap, the mud moved up his back legs, trapping him.

Preston’s arms and legs were completely covered. He struggled to keep his head above the mud.

Curse after curse flowed through my mind, but none of them would

actually help. There was a section on fighting dark wizards, but those spells were gruesome.

Preston was right about the book not liking competition. It didn't want me falling in love and focusing my positive energy on loving someone. And it didn't like other dark wizards out cursing it. It wanted me to do really bad things to Christopher.

Seeing the duck sparked a memory. Dahlia mentioned a dream about four men wrestling in the mud. They each turned into a bird – a penguin, a duck, a robin and a chicken.

Oh no.

Quinn's spell should have changed Christopher into a penguin.

Oh shit.

Dahlia was also talking about marshmallows. I thought she meant the Pike match from hell, but Gray mentioned marshmallows inside her cookies.

I tried to remember the exact phrasing of Dahlia's prophesy. "Forgiveness, not anger. Proof, not words. Truth, not lies. Companionship, not competition. Trust, not denial. Once they understand, he will rise."

The prophesy suddenly made sense. I forgave Ignatius. Milo proved that he loved me more than words could ever express. I fell for Preston when we joined our power, and he stopped telling me lies. Quinn realized that he preferred companionship instead of winning duels with supposed rivals, especially my brother. They all understood what it meant to be my mate. Now, Christopher was revealing himself as my enemy.

If only I had figured it out before we got to my house. Unfortunately, Dahlia hadn't really given me any helpful information I could use.

Based on Christopher's comment, the living mud spell would leave me for last, so I decided to keep him talking.

"You realize you started the war with Zeth's coven. You struck first.

Why don't you throw yourself in the mud?"

Christopher swore. "Are you kidding? Is that what he told you? Oh, Raven, you have no idea what really happened."

"Tell me your tale of woe, Christopher, and we can compare notes." I wanted to roll my eyes, but I didn't want to belittle the villain if he had a good backstory.

Milo was almost on his feet again. He quickly unstuck the duck.

Seeing Quinn's duck shake off the mud, Christopher quickly waved his wand again.

This time, Milo turned into a robin and dropped Quinn into the mud. Both the robin and the duck thrashed around in the mud, which only sucked them in deeper.

I had to think of something.

"Sorry, just taking care of your friends. Where was I. Yes. The truth. Kevin and I were friends long before he called himself Zeth. We lived near to each other. We were best friends until he got his powers. He found out he was a conjurer and I was a caster. His father was a cruel bastard and believed casters were beneath conjurers, as so many conjurers do. I wasn't allowed to play with him anymore. It wasn't until we went to rival schools that we ran into each other. He invited me to join the Circle of Raven's coven before he recruited you." He sneered when he mentioned the coven.

"Let me guess, he betrayed you too." Zeth really was a terrible person.

Christopher snorted. "Betrayal wasn't the worst of it, dear Raven. He had me prove myself to the coven. I was supposed to fill the Headmaster's room with pigeons. At least, that's what Zeth said the spell he gave me would do. Instead, it filled the room with poisonous spiders. The Headmaster was bitten and almost died. The school kept the incident quite to avoid embarrassment. I was about to be expelled when my parents fought for a

week's suspension, claiming that I didn't know what I was doing. Which was true. After that, I worked my ass off to stay in school so I could make Zeth's life miserable."

I would have nodded if I could have. "Yeah, sounds like Zeth. Why did you go dark?"

Raising his wand, he changed Preston into a chicken. Pissed, I wanted to use the darkest spell I knew, but I pressed my lips together.

"Oh, come on, Raven. You were there when it happened. Just like I will be there when it happens to you." He chuckled like a legit villain about to get everything he wanted just before the hero threw his knee into his stomach and made him cry for his mother.

My heart sank when I realized his master plan. If he believed I was present for his dark unveiling, then he planned to push me over the edge by killing my mates in front of me so I would embrace the curses inside me and turn to the darkness. I had to admit, it was a solid plan. If I lost my mates, there wouldn't be anything stopping me from embracing the Book of Ancient Magicks and having a duel to end all duels with Christopher.

Watching my mates – birds – getting sucked down in the mud, I wracked my brain, trying to figure out what to do.

Bird.

I had one shot.

Forcing my fingers to curl under the mud, I used everything I had to pull my arms apart. "*Îl chem pe Ignatius, familiarul meu credincios.*"

I prayed my summoning spell worked.

"He's not coming to help you." Christopher frowned as he looked at me.

Shit.

So, my former bestie was working for a dark wizard. Just not the one I expected.

“How did you take control of Ignatius?” Mad that Ignatius had gone dark, I said a little prayer for the friend I once loved.

“Actually, Ignatius came to me. After Zeth’s encounter with you, he turned himself over to the covens. He hoped they would save him from your curse if he complied with them and confessed to his crimes. To avoid capture, Ignatius came to me. It was very touching. Ignatius said he felt bad for the way Zeth had treated me when he overheard Zeth bragging about what a dick he was to me. We had a common enemy, so it made sense to work together. I told him that with Zeth out of the way, it was time to take out the rest of the competition. Since Miz was in jail, Aser died in some kind of accident, and Vek had turned his life around and married the daughter of some coven high priest, you were the only one left to destroy. Ignatius was excited to help plot your demise.” He smiled broadly as if he hadn’t told me my friend had betrayed me again.

Closing my eyes, I chose the perfect spell to make Christopher pay for everything he had done. Interestingly, it didn’t take many moves, but it required a lot of power. The kind of power a broken heart, or rather, a soul breaking in half, created.

Chapter 18 Charlie

“One final question before I blow you off the face of the earth. What do you mean I was there when you turned dark?” I needed to understand how Christopher had snapped and turned into the wacko who had no problem killing the men I loved just to watch me become like him.

Looking at his fingernails, he shrugged. “My teammates and the fans were stuck, but I managed to use a fire spell to melt away the marshmallow around me. I knew who was responsible. There wasn’t a doubt in my mind. I had been preparing to fight Zeth, but that final act of disrespect did me in. I’d been studying dark spells, just in case Zeth threatened me. I considered almost drowning in marshmallow an act of war. When I found your coven in the woods, I had my spells ready. When you saved me from their ambush, something inside me died. I realized that Zeth had already turned dark. I was a new at curses, so I wasn’t good enough to take on a dark wizard. I used the chaos of the night to disappear. Since then, I’ve studied and practiced my art. I knew I had to be skilled to take on Zeth, Reed, and you, Raven. To defeat you, I had to be better than the Book of Ancient Magicks. So, here I am, ready to finally be on top.”

I had no idea why Christopher, Zeth, Reed, and the others were so obsessed with being the best or number one. I just wanted my mates to survive Christopher’s insanity. I wanted to love them and be happy. Was that too much to ask?

“Cool. But I’m warning you, if they die, you won’t be number one, pal.” I could feel the curses burning my throat, begging to be released.

Honk honk!

Hearing a car horn, I twisted my neck to see Ian’s car pulling up in front

of my house.

Daire jumped out of the passenger seat. “Ian knows what the spell is....uhh. What’s happening?”

“Dark wizard in the corner pocket and living mud curse! The birds are my mates!” Giving him a quick rundown, I hoped Ian had some excellent news for me.

Staying on the sidewalk, Ian nodded. “On it.”

Daire pushed up the sleeves of his tweed blazer. “What’s the guy’s name?”

Seeing Christopher winding up for a powerful spell, I shouted, “Christopher Myzer!”

Ian started working on the curse, while Daire smiled. “Christopher Myzer, time to meet your relatives from the great beyond!”

“No, you don’t, necromancer!” Christopher moved his wand, but he never finished the spell. Six spirits rose from the ground, berating the dark wizard, and told him how disappointed they were in him.

Perfect! Daire had bought me some time.

Feeling the mud loosen as Ian muttered his counter spell, I could move my arms a little. Remembering how dark wizards loved to lie and use fear as a weapon, I tried once more to summon Ignatius.

“*Îl chem pe Ignatius, familiarul meu credincios.*” Throwing the forgiveness and love I once had for my companion, I pulled my arms apart.

Seeing the portal open, I held my breath. Hopefully, my spell had failed because I couldn’t complete the movements.

A black blur flew out of the portal and into the air. He wobbled with his one wing.

“Daire, use a repair spell to fix the Raven’s wing!”

Pushing myself up to my elbows, I felt the mud recede.

“On it!” Daire leaped in the air and threw out his hands, sending a healing spell toward Ignatius as his body lost altitude.

Come on, come on!

I hoped Daire’s spell was fast enough.

Ignatius shook off his bandage and swooped over my head. Letting out a breath, I pushed myself out of the mud. I ran over to Ian, who was out of breath and rubbing his wrist.

“I hate when curse bite back. I will be happy if I never have to undo another curse.” Ian leaned his hands against his legs to catch his breath.

“Umm, Charlie, Christopher’s relatives are wearing down pretty fast. He has a pretty high tolerance for criticism. He’ll have them back in the cemetery within a few minutes. What can we do to help?” Daire brushed off some mud from my shoulder.

As Ignatius landed on my shoulder, I looked at Ian. “Tell me some good news about the spell Dahlia sent.”

Ian nodded and stood up. “It’s a counter spell. It’s been used to break powerful curses over the centuries, but it was lost in the 18th century.”

Daire chuckled. “Yeah, apparently Dahlia managed to find it after Ian and I, well, we double-teamed her that night. She dreamed about the ancient book that held the spell. It took a few memory spells, and a bunch of breadsticks for Dahlia to recall the dream, and many translation spells to understand its intended purpose.”

Shaking his head, Ian gave Daire his patented TMI look. “Yes, well, the spell only works if you found your soulmate. According to Dahlia, Milo is your mate. Which I hope wasn’t a surprise. I’m a little behind on the gossip due to an issue at the coven.”

I chuckled. “I’m up to speed on Milo. Quinn O’Brien and Preston Dascălu are the other two.” Pointing to the birds shaking the mud off their

winds, I smiled.

“Well, I’m glad you sorted things out with Preston.” Ian gave me an awkward thumbs-up.

Daire motioned toward Christopher. “And there goes the last sprit. Sorry, Grannie Myzer.” He waved to her spirit as she drifted away.

Turning to Ignatius, I patted his head. “Are we good?”

He nipped at my cheek. “Christopher trapped me after I escaped Zeth a few years ago. I was trying to fly home to you to apologize. I didn’t know what happened until it was too late. I’m so sorry, Charlene. Once I learned Zeth was a liar, it was too late. I was bound to him. I managed to escape when Zeth was injured by Reed after Reed broke out of prison”.

“It’s okay, Iggy. I fell for his lies, too. Friends?” I held out my hand to him.

He extended his wing so I could shake it. “Friends.”

“Good. Can you please pull the birds out of the mud and get them to safety without getting yourself turned into a penguin?” I scratched the back of his head.

Ignatius snickered at my comment. “My pleasure. Penguins are losers who can’t fly.” He jumped off my shoulder and circled overhead, waiting for the perfect time to swoop down and rescue my mates.

One by one, Ignatius plucked the duck, chicken and robin out of the mud and flew them to Miss Delly’s yard a few houses down. I would probably get a complaint from her lawyer about owning too many birds.

I couldn’t wait until the next neighborhood watch meeting to discuss the commotion I caused.

Let them bitch out Christopher. He would love visitors once we threw him in a jail cell.

“So, what do I do? I need to be free from the dark book before I can

wipe the floor with this asshat.” I needed a win. I hoped I had to throw a coin into a fountain and wish for this nightmare to end.

Daire’s face fell as Ian put his hand on my shoulder. “Only the cursed witch can use the counter spell. I must warn you, it involves drawing upon the bond between your mates and you. Just like any curse, it will fight you. The curse won’t admit defeat easily. Since this book is the worst of the worst, I can’t imagine what it will try to do to you.”

Oh good.

Simple. Just kick the ass of the book that has held me down for years.

Cool. Piece of cake.

I tried to hide my dismay since I was grateful for their help.

“Thank you! I truly appreciate it.” I patted Ian’s hand.

Daire looked over my shoulder at Christopher. “Yeah, he’s drying off his tears. He’ll be back to his vengeful self soon. Ian and I can keep him distracted, but it will take a lot out of us.”

Nodding, I understood. “I have to finish him off myself. I don’t want him hurting anyone else. If he gets through your spells, run. I will figure out how to fend him off. You guys have already done enough. Thank you! I couldn’t ask for better friends.”

Ian quickly pulled me into a hug. “Draw upon your love for your mates, and be careful. If anything happens to you, Dahlia and Gray will be inconsolable. I don’t want to think about what Gray will do without you.” He gave me smile before stepping around me to throw up several barrier spells to prevent Christopher from cursing us.

Daire took a breath and rolled up his sleeves. “Did I hear someone ask for zombies? Well, let’s call upon some zombies!” He shoved his hands into the muddy, though less muddy, yard to summon whoever was closest to him and deceased.

“I really don’t want to know if people are buried here.” I frowned at Ian.

Ian chuckled. “Neither did I until Daire unearthed an ancient shark. I found him rather fascinating to tell you the truth.”

Daire quickly looked over his shoulder at me. “He was a very nice shark. We’re having a chat tomorrow.”

“Cool.”

Only my friends would have conversations about friendly sharks in the middle of a battle with a dark wizard. I seriously loved this town, except for Miss Delly.

Regaining his senses after seeing his relatives, Christopher yelled a battle cry that sounded more like an elephant in pain. He whipped his wand around, sending curse after curse at Daire and Ian.

Thankfully, Daire had pulled three pirates, two mafia guys, a Puritan woman, and four wolf shifters out of the surrounding ground. “Zombies, let’s fuck up Christopher Myzer, the asshole with the wand!”

Following Daire’s command, the zombies rushed toward Christopher. The pirates had their cutlasses ready, while the mafia guys had their guns. The zombie wolves let out terrifying howls and ran at Christopher. Surprisingly, the Puritan lady had a cast iron skillet and appeared more than happy to hit someone with it.

Yeah, the neighborhood watch was definitely going to have words with me.

I pulled out my phone to read and reread the spell from Dahlia. I already owed her so much, but if I could get the spell to work, she would receive breakfast, lunch and dinner from O’Malley’s for the rest of her life, which was way better than her friends and family discount at the pub and at Anthony’s.

Once I had the spell memorized, I put my phone away. “Okay, Ignatius.

I'll need you to be my eyes as I conjure this spell. Squawk if Christopher breaks through Ian and Daire's defenses."

Ignatius swooped over my head and nodded.

My palms sweat at the thought of fucking up the spell. Who knew what would happen if I screwed up any of the words. I could make things worse, though I had no idea how it could get worse.

"Are there specific motions for this spell?" I shouted to Ian, hoping I didn't blow his concentration. I needed the barrier spells to hold for as long as possible.

Grunting, he nodded. "Use the reverse motions from the last spell in the Book of Ancient Magicks. The spell is supposed to curse the conjurer in every lifetime for eternity, so they never know happiness. Oh, and it will also curse their soul mates for eternity."

Fuuuuck.

I was very familiar with the spell.

Sometimes, I woke up while conjuring the spell from my bed.

I knew the body motions, but I had to think about how to do them in reverse. "Got it! Thanks!"

"Oh. There was a footnote to the spell. If you mess up the order of the movements or the words, the counter spell will crumble, and the book will fight back by cursing every life you have and every life of your soul mates for eternity." Throwing his back into his protection barrier, he fortified it as Christopher bombarded Ian with spell after spell.

That was a footnote? Whoever wrote that should have put it at the front of the spell in giant freaking letters.

WARNING, screw up this spell and screw up your life and the lives of your mates for generations to come.

Damn.

This book is a serious pain in my ass!

Clearing my mind, I drowned out Daire's zombie commands, Ian's swearing, and Christopher's mad cackling. I had to focus. This was my only chance at happiness in this life and all the rest.

I imagined the motions of the curse I was mimicking. Unfortunately, my body was aching to conjure the curse. I had to be careful not to let it trip me up as I moved through the steps backward. I had no way of knowing if my pronunciations would be correct, so I had to have faith in myself.

With my mates safe and Ignatius watching over them, I kicked off my muddy shoes and socks. It was time to begin my counter spell.

Drawing my hands around my body counterclockwise, I thought about Quinn laughing with me in the living room, Milo catching me when I tripped, and Preston when he intertwined our power. The positive energy from those moments flowed through my chest. "*Viața mea, sufletul meu și iubirea mea sunt conectate cu prietenii mei. Protejează-ne.*" The only word I knew was protect, so I hoped the spell protected the hell out of everyone I cared about.

The moment the words came out of my mouth, I felt my throat closing. The curse was already fighting me. Powering through, I kicked my feet up and pointing my toes. The motions for curses were harsh and sharp compared to light magic. I was relieved to dance again instead of stomping and throwing my arms around like I was in a cage match.

My heart felt heavier and my vision blurred, making it harder to move my body. Struggling to speak, I gasped between each word. "*Mă bazez pe legătura noastră de neîntrerupt pentru a alunga întunericul care îmi ține sufletul în iad. Îndepărtează fiecare cuvânt, gând și intenție de ură care înconjoară inima mea.*"

Making sure I hit my pronunciations, I gritted out each word. My body grew heavier. I felt like I was back in the living mud, yet I couldn't stop.

Once I finally made it through the sentence, I almost closed my eyes to take a nap.

NO!

The spell is messing with us!

Keep going! Milo, Quinn and Preston are counting on us!

A sinister crackle echoed inside my head. “You will fail them as you have failed everyone in your life. They could never love you. I am the only one who cares about you.”

Stunned, I heard Reed’s voice. He had put me through hell during our marriage by making me believe I was alone.

“You sadistic bastard! Dahlia saw through your bullshit. That’s why you wanted to control her. You feared her. She had no idea what you were, yet she loved me enough to fly out to help on me. Every day, I’m grateful for her friendship. And I thank the gods that you are afraid to drop the soap.”

I refused to let the memory of Reed drag me down. Fuck him!

While he was sitting in his little cell alone, I watched RomComs with Dahlia and ate pizza. We told each other our secrets and our wishes. Everything was so much better with her in my life.

Holding my wrists together, I hopped and spun, landing on my toes. For a split second, I almost did the opposite and followed the footsteps of the curse. “*Rupe acest blestem rău asupra mea.*”

I sighed in relief when I caught myself from making the wrong move until I heard another evil laugh. Did they teach dark wizards how to create a terrifying laugh at some kind of anti-charm school? Or did they stand in front of their mirrors at home and practice as they measured the length of their dicks?

I really hated dark wizards, especially the one the book had chosen to torment me next.

“My little Raven, you disappoint me. We would have ruled the world together, but you chose the wrong side. I would have given you everything you desired, but you chose my enemy instead. You were the strongest among us. It’s not too late to embrace the gift I gave you. Allow the darkness inside. Come to me, and we will be unstoppable.” Zeth’s gruff voice echoed inside my head.

At one time, his promises meant something to me, but not after meeting Gray, Jupiter, Ian, Daire, Cillian, Aiden, Gunner, Gavril, Blaze, and Fukitsu. Their friendship proved that I made the right decision to turn my back on Zeth. What he gave me wasn’t a gift. None of it was. Not his praise, not his acceptance, and certainly not the fucking book who had the balls to use Zeth to tempt me into embracing its evil ass.

Nice try, but I’m not giving in.

A sharp pain hit every part of me at once. Apparently, the book was just playing before. Now its claws were out.

A different voice entered my mind. “How could I ever love you? You’re practically a dark wizard.” Milo appeared in front of me, scowling.

Next, Quinn appeared. “I can’t believe I ever cared about you. You’ve changed too much. I barely recognize you.”

Last was Preston. “I’m going to send you away for a very long time. We have a special place for witches like you. You’ll beg for the cell beside Reed once you see your new home.”

Even though I understood the book was fucking with me, it still hurt to hear their harsh words.

I shook my head. I had to keep going, but I was so tired. I was tired of fighting every day against the curses threatening to come out. I had been on this path for too long. I just wanted to rest.

My resolve was crumbling fast. I was losing my will to keep fighting.

In the distance, I heard Ignatius cawing. Ian and Daire's defenses were failing. Christopher would finish me off before I could complete the counter spell.

Tears came to my eyes. Poor Ian and Daire. I should have told them to leave right from the start. I should have protected them. I should have cared more about my love for them.

Love.

Ian told me to draw upon my love.

Part of the spell made some kind of jumbled sense in my head. I had to draw upon my connection to my mates, just as Preston and I had done in the casino. Our soul mate bond made us one and increased our strength.

Reaching for the mating spell around my heart, I followed it back to Milo, Quinn, and Preston. They suddenly appeared next to the jerk versions of them created by the book.

"Why do I look emo?" Milo pointed towards dark Milo.

Quinn snorted. "Mine looks constipated."

"I do not have a double chin and a hooked nose." Preston crossed his arms. "Please tell me this isn't how you see me. I know we've had our differences, but this can't be your mental image of me."

Laughing with relief, I was so happy to see them again.

"Quick rundown. I'm fighting the curse on me, and these assholes appeared to shit-talk me. Christopher is closing in, and I'm worried about Daire and Ian.

I have to end this curse." They all nodded as they started to understand the problem.

Preston immediately threw a scatter spell at his evil twin while Quinn pulled his wand to cast a shrinking spell. Milo raised his eyebrow at his twin before elbowing him in the face. When his twin hit the ground, Milo ball

stomped him.

Quinn glanced up at me. “Now you can tell the difference between us. He has the smaller dick.”

Chuckling, I ran over and threw my arms around him. Preston and Milo joined us in a group hug.

“You can do this, Charlie. We love you for simply being you.”

“The faster you uncurse yourself, the faster we can find a new piece of furniture to have sex on. Oh, and what Milo said about loving you for simply being you.”

“With all my heart, I believe you are stronger than an old musty, dusty curse. Prove us right. We’re waiting for you.”

“Wait, Preston’s being a suck-up. I want to change mine. I promise to make every day special to compensate for all the lost years. There. I like that one better.”

Feeling the love I had for my guys and the love they felt for me, I opened my eyes.

“Facem apel la iubirea noastră să purificăm și să vindece rănille lăsate de acest blestem. Păstrează-ne de răul care se află în Cartea Magickilor antici.”

Dancing and swaying, I threw that love into every word, every move. I refused to live my life held down by the damned curse.

I was stronger than the book on my worst day. I just needed the confidence to embrace who I was meant to be. Zeth had been right about that part. He just didn’t realize I was meant to embrace the light.

A feeling of joy filled the cold areas inside my chest and heart. The darkness retreated from my happiness until it hid in a tiny corner. Embracing my love, I snuffed out the last bit of darkness.

An overwhelming feeling of relief spread through me. I was free!

“Charlie!”

Turning my attention towards Daire, I saw the last zombie fall, which surprisingly was the Puritan lady. There must have been a lot of rage in her. A fire spell dissolved Ian’s remaining barrier, forcing Ian and Daire to the ground to take cover.

“Now for your feathered friends!” Christopher pointed his wand at the birds maters in Miss Delly’s yard.

“Not today, Myzer.” With the curse gone, I could draw on the light spells I learned in school and all the spells I’d wanted to use since.

I threw up a protection spell from the ground to the air. “Ian. Daire. I’m tagging in. Tell Dahlia she gets free food for life from O’Malley’s, and I’ll call her later.”

“Do we get free food too?” Daire pushed himself off the ground and dusted off his knees.

“How about a coupon for unlimited wings on Mondays when you aren’t playing Dungeons and Dragons?” There was no way Blaze was getting unlimited wings. I would have to close the pub due to financial ruin.

“Deal!” He ran past me and jumped into Ian’s car.

Ian looked back at Christopher as he took a breath. “Will you be okay?”

I brushed the mud off his suit jacket. “I’ve been aching to take down another dark wizard. I’ll be good.”

Smiling, he nodded as he headed for his car.

Ignatius settled on my shoulder. “Can you uncurse them?”

“Do you really doubt me, Iggy?”

“Not anymore.” He poked my cheek to kiss me.

Cracking my knuckles, I paired my favorite scatter spell with a transformation spell to defeather my guy. I couldn’t wait to see their handsome faces.

“I will kill them. I will kill all of them.” Christopher’s frustration boiled over when nothing he did made a dent in my protection spell.

“I really don’t think you want to do that. I know a spell that will make you punch yourself over and over again until you black out.” Glaring at him, I dared him to keep attacking my protection spell.

The dark wizard actually paused for a second.

Finishing my spell, the birds all changed back to the gorgeous men I was desperate to learn more about. They ran toward me and threw their arms around me for real.

Quickly kissing each of them, I held up my hands. “Hold on for a second. I need to go throat punch someone.”

“Yes!” Quinn threw his arm in the air, excited to see the old me again.

I waved my hand and cleared the protection spell.

Christopher seized his villain moment and raced across the lawn toward me.

I deflected each of his spells as he closed in on me.

“I’m going to make you suffer!” Admittedly, his spells were impressive, but I’d had a long time to store up all the spells I wanted to use if I ever broke the curse.

I felt like I was on the dueling platform again. I got into a rhythm and matched Christopher spell for spell. Behind me, the guys cheered me on and threw out spell suggestions.

“How were you stupid enough to smell like tacos while invisible?” I couldn’t help but ask him the question that had nagged me.

“I stole it on the way to the woods. I thought I had my scent covered.” He fell into a split and threw a cotton candy spell to slow me down.

Hmm. That was a crappy spell for someone who had turned the guys into birds.

As we continued to duel, I thought about the casino. “Why didn’t you steal any of the money? You could have made off with everything. Everyone was either stunned or stuck to the floor.”

Christopher threw a spaghetti spell at me, though I countered with a meatball spell where the meatballs were the size of basketballs.

“I got caught up in the wind. I managed to escape once you stopped the tornado.” Growling, he threw a cloud spell to keep me from seeing him.

My wind spell blew away the clouds.

Tapping my foot, I looked closer at his sloppy body movements. He was either getting tired, or his opening spells hadn’t been his. He had only mimicked them. Come to think of it, his earlier curses seemed familiar.

I thought back to my academy days when I watched Zeth and Reed duel. Hmm. Christopher’s body motions reminded me of my old pals.

“Dude. Did you steal those spells from Zeth and Reed? Did you stalk them once you figured out the invisibility spell?” I felt like I was being pranked again.

Thinking back, I realized Christopher had also been sloppy as a Pike mage.

“No. These are my spells.”

Slowly, the truth came to me. “You little copycat. You watched the big boys from a distance and learned their spells. I’ll bet you watched James practice on the Pike field and learned his moves too. You’re nothing more than a wanna-be dark wizard.”

“That’s not true.” His hand trembled as he pointed his wand at me.

Disarming him, his wand flew into the air. I ran at him and punched him in the side of the head.

“I can’t believe you thought you could come to my town and hurt me to prove you were a badass dark wizard. Zeth would’ve eaten you alive while

Reed spit you out. You moron.” I hit him with a right cross. “You’re the son of a bitch who called the Dascălu. Let me guess, you wanted them to recognize you as a dark wizard after I was dead.”

He covered his face with his arms. “I’m better than Zeth and Reed. I would have proven it to the Dascălu when I battled them.” His villain voice was more of a whine.

Kidney punching him, I snorted. “You don’t have the spells to take down any them.” I couldn’t believe I was praising the two psychopaths, but Christopher needed a reality check; otherwise, he would get himself killed if he went up against them.

Pushing him to the ground, I grabbed his chin so he was forced to look at me. “You don’t have the guts to be dark. Nor should you. What happened back at school was a mistake. And I’m sorry for my part in it. I did what I could to make it right by saving you. Instead of accepting that you were still alive and living your best life, you tried to turn dark. That’s some stupid bullshit right there. I hope you take the next few years in jail to get your shit together and make better life choices.” I pushed away his face and walked away.

“I am a dark wizard!” Christopher scrambled for his wand as he got to his feet. Winding up for what was probably something Reed created based on the swagger of his hips, I countered with an ice spell.

I watched Christopher slip and slide until he fell on his face. “No. You’re not.”

Flipping and folding myself in half, I conjured the burrito spell I’d been dying to use.

This time, I skipped the guacamole and went for the refried beans.

Christopher rolled and tumbled around as he became the filling of the burrito.

Trapped, he hissed through his locked jaw. “When I get free...”

Putting my hand to my ear, I leaned closer to hear him. “Yeah, you’re not getting free. That’s the point of the burrito spell.”

I turned my back on him and ran to my men.

“You did it! I’m so proud of you, my love.”

“I loved the part where you punched him and then punched him again.”

“I want a rematch now that you can conjure, you beautiful woman.”

Laughing, I pulled out my phone and handed it to Preston. “You can call your hunter friends and explain to them how this supposed dark wizard fucked up his plans to take over the world and ended up like a burrito.”

Preston winked at me. “As much as I love the burrito spell, which I will steal the next time I take down a dark wizard, I think I prefer this.” Dropping into a crouch, he intertwined his arms and pulled them apart quickly.

Finishing his spell, I watched Christopher turn into a penguin.

Chuckling, I nodded. “Dahlia saw the penguin in the refried beans, not the mud. Okay. I can see how she made that mistake.”

Preston tilted his head. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t worry about it. Once you meet Dahlia, you’ll understand.” I pulled him close and pressed my face into his chest.

For the first time in a long time, I felt at peace. I had the rest of my life ahead of me, and I was ready to embrace all the chaos and sex that came with it.

Chapter 19 Charlie

“So you’re sure that the Dascălu aren’t waiting in the shadows to lock me up?”

Remembering what evil Preston said to me while fighting the curse, I just needed to hear that I was in the clear for the 1,239th time.

Taking my face in his hands, he leaned his forehead against mine. “I promise. No one is coming for you. My brother spoke to everyone in the fucking town, and he agrees that you are no longer a suspect.”

“He’s not very friendly. He’s all muscle and no warmth. If he pulled me over with a speeding ticket and looked at me with those cold eyes, I would confess and cry all the way to jail.” I was grateful that Madsen was a reasonable dark wizard hunter, even though he lacked an actual soul.

Preston chuckled. “Imagine growing up with an older brother like him. I had to literally fight for everything I wanted. I envy your relationship with James based on what you’ve said about him.”

“Oh, James can be a dick, but Madsen is on a whole other level.” I put my hands over Preston’s and turned to watch the Dascălu hunter’s cleanup crew using magic to fix my mud and zombie-filled yard. I could just imagine the complaints I would receive.

“Madsen did acknowledge the fact that I had a soul mate, which is surprising since he uses women faster than tissues.” Preston shook at his head as he watched Madsen shouting orders to the other hunters.

“I guess he failed out of charm school.” I snorted.

“Twice.” He chuckled as he pulled my hand to his face and kissed my knuckles. Even before I knew about the spell, I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I know we don’t know each other very well, but I plan on getting to

know everything about you - that's not in your file." He winked at me as he opened the car door to talk to yet another team member who was filling out a lot of paperwork.

Seeing my yard precisely the way it was, I almost cried. It was over. All of it.

Zeth and Reed were in prison, and Vek was somehow a good guy. My curse was gone. I planned on spending as much time as possible with my men once I was allowed to go back into my house.

"Do we like Preston?" Ignatius hopped up onto my shoulder from the backseat. Having found gum in my purse, he blew a bubble.

"Yes, Iggy. We like Preston. A lot." Watching Preston's perfect ass as he walked away to talk to someone else, I couldn't wait to get his clothes off.

"Speaking of which, do you mind heading out for dinner tonight? I want to be alone with Preston." I didn't want to upset Ignatius by asking him to leave, but I figured he would like to explore the town.

Chuckling, he clicked his beak. "Trust me. I don't want to hear the two of you moaning. I'll find my own dinner."

"I appreciate it. Head to O'Malley's and ask James for some leftovers if you want something better than seeds or worms." Oh, to see James's face when Iggy started talking to him.

"Pasta."

"Okay, tell him to cut up pasta for you."

He nodded and hopped towards the window. I opened the door so Ignatius could jump to the ground and take off.

Half an hour later, I was finally showing Preston around my house.

"Over there is the kitchen." Breaking away from his kiss, I pointed in a general direction as he pulled off my shirt.

"Lovely." Not looking at the kitchen, his mouth kissed up the side of my

neck. He dropped his pants and stepped over them to grab my hips.

“Over there is the dining room, but we never use it.” Gasping, he kissed down my chest.

“Have you considered opening the wall and expanding your kitchen? Then you’d have more room to set up a gourmet kitchen to test your new recipes.” Removing his shirt, he dropped it on the ground. He spun me and pulled me against his chest.

“I really like that idea.” My pants disappeared somewhere near the dining room.

Pushing his hands under my bra, he massaged my breasts. “I have to get you an apron so you can cook while naked.”

“Only for you. You could take photos of me in my newly renovated kitchen as I cook. Then post them on the pub’s social media pages.” Reaching behind me, I stroked his hard cock through his briefs.

“As long as I get to take some naughty photos for myself.” Following me to the staircase, he stopped me on the first step and bent me over to place my hands on the step above me. “Perfect. Just like that.”

He kissed down my back and lowered my panties to the ground.

“Do you like what you see?” I wiggled my bare ass.

Growling, he smacked my left cheek. “You are beautiful, my darling. Anyone who says differently can deal with me. Tell me you’re ready.” He quickly pulled off his briefs and stood behind me.

“Fuck, I am so ready. I’ve been ready since we intertwined our power.” I wiggle my ass again, eliciting another smack on the other cheek.

He chuckled. “I can’t believe it took you that long to fall for me. I’m offended. I was ready to fall on my knees and beg you to be mine three seconds after you threw your water bottle at me. Sadly, my job got in the way, like it always does.”

“How many women have you loved before me?” Looking over my shoulder at him, I smiled.

Shaking his head, he ran his hands up my legs. “None. Quinn was right about hunters not having time for dating or love. That’s why I told my brother I was moving to Silver Springs to be the liaison between the Dascălu and the Black Dawn Coven and the Shining Light Coven. You know, just in case another dark wizard is stupid enough to pull some shit in this town.”

“I’m so happy you’re staying. I wasn’t sure how to bring up the conversation.” I was worried he would think I was desperate or clingy if I asked him whether he planned to stay.

“Charlie. I don’t want there to be any secrets or weirdness between us. Ask me what you want to know, and I will tell you.” His hands caressed my ass, making me groan.

“How are you going to fuck me, Preston?”

His cock slid into me, answering my question. “The way you should always be fucked, my wild woman.”

He thrust his cock into me, easing my worries and concerns. We were finally united, and no one would keep us apart.

He teased me and slowly tested my response to see how fast or slow he should move.

Feeling him deep inside me, I moaned. “There. Right there. More.”

He complied by thrusting quickly and pulling out slowly, making sure to focus on the perfect spot. I gripped the stairs and braced myself against the wall. I felt so open, so exposed to him. Here I was, standing with my ass hanging out for anyone to walk in and see. James would undoubtedly learn his lesson if he came in without knocking.

Grabbing my hips, Preston stopped me from riding him. “I know you like to be in control, but right now, I’m fucking you. Behave, or I’ll spank

you again.”

Part of me really wanted to be spanked again, but I didn't want to ruin the moment by acting out. There was time for that later.

Controlling my body, he slowed down whenever I was close to coming.

Without warning, the door opened. I tried to stand up, but Preston pushed my back down.

“I've never seen a finer ass.” I heard Milo's voice before I saw him.

“I really hope you mean Charlie's ass and not Preston's.” Quinn's joke would have made me laugh if I wasn't about to swear from the pleasure curling inside my stomach.

“Are you joining us or not?” Preston smacked my ass again when I tried to turn around to see my other men. “Are you trying to move? Because, if you are, you'll miss out on a special treat.”

“No.” I gave him a little whine just to annoy him. I liked Preston's playful side. There was an edge of danger to him, but I felt safe when I was with him.

“I'm definitely in.” I heard Milo's clothes dropping to the ground.

“Hang on. My spell tied my shoe too tight. There.” Quinn's sneakers dropped to the ground, followed by his clothes.

Laying down on the ground, Milo slid between Preston's legs and propped himself up so he was facing my hips. I opened my mouth to ask what he was doing when I felt his tongue glide up to my clit.

“Mother fucker.” *Holy shit.*

Having been a prude in bed, I was quickly accepting the benefits of having multiple mates.

Preston grabbed my hips and rode me hard. “Quinn. Do you think a smart, charming woman like Charlie should be using such bad language?”

Walking up the stairs, Quinn sat on the step above me. “No. In fact, I

think I have a better use for her mouth.” Quinn ran his fingers over my cheek and cupped my chin. He ran his thumb over my lower lip. “Are you ready to show me what else that pretty little mouth can do?”

Shivering at Quinn’s sexy voice, I slowly opened my mouth to suck his thumb. When he pulled his hand away, I slid my mouth over the broad head of his cock.

Quinn groaned and threw his head back. “I may not have liked you initially, Preston, but you are slowly becoming my third favorite person.”

Preston slowed his rhythm. “I appreciate that, Quinn.” Rubbing my ass to ease the pain from his last smack, he lowered his voice. “Show us how you like to be worshipped, darling.”

Closing my eyes, I focused on Preston’s cock riding me slowly, only to speed up unexpectedly to tease me and slow down again.

My thighs shook as Milo’s mouth worked my clit. He, too, teased me by licking me slowly up and down, then quickly sucking on my clit before he slowed down again.

Quinn’s thick cock kept me from shouting, but I was able to moan and send vibrations through him.

“Oh, Charlie. If teenage me only knew what his future looked like. He would have told Diana March to go find someone else to pretend to like her to make Warren Hoover jealous.” He gasped when I sucked in my cheeks. “Fuck, honey. Your mouth is pure fire. I love it.”

I was slowly losing my mind. Pleasure was coming from all different angles. I’d never felt anything like it in my entire life. Part of me never wanted it to end, but the rest of me was desperate to come for them.

Feeling Preston’s hands tighten around my hips and his movements quicken, I knew he was close.

“Milo, Quinn, let’s finish her.”

Milo raised his left hand to run his thumb over my nipple.

The world crashed around me as I took Quinn deep into my throat.

“Shit! Please, darling.” Quinn gripped my chin and came in my mouth.

Swallowing, I finally found my voice. “Yes! Please!”

With a few quick strokes from Preston’s cock and Milo’s tongue and fingers, I screamed so loud that Miss Delly could hear me without her hearing aids turned on.

Biting my lips, I groaned as my vision grew dark, and all I could do was ride out the spiking pleasure throughout my entire body. Trembling and shaking, my body tightened around Preston’s shaft.

“Fuck! Charlie. Holy Hell!” Preston moved a few times, finishing us both off as Milo sucked my clit.

Spent, I dropped onto the stairs the second Preston and Milo moved away from me.

I rolled over to see Milo’s yellow eyes. His cock was ticking in time with his heartbeat.

“Come here.” I motioned for him to move closer to me.

Milo stood in front of me. His eyes were locked on my face. I ran my hands over his hard body. Leaning forward, I took him into my mouth.

Throwing his head back, he clung to my shoulders. It didn’t take long for Milo to find his release. He howled loudly enough for the whole fucking neighborhood to hear him. Not that I cared. Let them complain. I had found my mates, and nothing could ruin my happiness.

Epilogue

Charlie

“Smile!”

“Honey, you’re supposed to look happy. Try again.” Quinn frowned at me from behind the camera guy.

“I feel like a fraud.” I rolled my eyes and held my plaque, which was just a piece of fancy paper in a nice frame.

Dahlia tapped her foot. “I swear. She never knew how to take a compliment when we were kids, either. Charlie, just smile for the nice man from the newspaper so we can go inside and eat the cake Gray made before Blaze eats it all.”

“She’s right, Charlie; I would devour that entire cake in one bite.” Blaze crossed his thick arms and chuckled. No matter how often I saw the dragon shifter, he always looked bigger.

Jupiter smacked his thick arm lightly and stuck out her tongue at him.

Ian leaned in to whisper, “If you smile for the photo, Charlie, I will ask Dahlia to read Miss Delly’s future so she can find her mates. Then, she won’t have time to make nasty comments about people on social media, especially when she includes a photo of the person. I promise. She will never say another bad word about you again because she will be too busy.” He winked at me.

Damn it.

I hated when Ian was diplomatic about things.

Daire bumped against my shoulder as he held his plaque. “It’s nice being called a town hero instead of the town freak, the town pariah, the weirdo who plays with the dead, or the ghost fucker.”

I was grateful to Daire and Ian for protecting my mates from Christopher, so I would give them their win. Especially Daire. He was

right. He deserved praise for everything he had done to help protect the town.

I smiled brightly as I looked at Milo, who gave me a thumbs-up.

The photographer snapped a few pictures and looked down at his camera. “Got it, folks. Thank you!”

Shaking the hand of the newspaper reporter, I walked inside the pub, which was closed for a party.

“Why did that take so long? I swear. Mom and Dad had to bribe you to sit on Santa’s lap and smile. Why can’t you ever take a nice photo?” James threw his dishtowel at me.

“Santa smelled of bourbon. Blame him for scarring me for life. It’s not my fault I hate taking photos.” Except when Preston pulled out his phone for a photoshoot in the lingerie he kept buying me.

Milo came up behind me and put his arms around my stomach. “I’m proud of you, even if you think you’re unworthy of the town calling you a hero.”

I leaned back against his chest. Though I didn’t feel like a hero for fighting to protect my future, I was relieved Christopher hadn’t caused as much damage as he could have. He seriously had several screws loose in his head.

According to Preston, Christopher was going through rehab because of all the trauma he had suffered. The Dascălu were optimistic about his recovery.

Gray handed me a plate of her double dark chocolate and peanut butter cake with vanilla ice cream and chocolate chips. “Mmm. I love your special, *help me I’m drowning in chocolate*, cake.”

“Of course, I would make my special cake for my future sister-in-law.” She stood next to me and bumped my hip. The excitement in her eyes matched mine. Even though she was already in love with my brother, we

were extra-tied together now that I was mated to her brother.

Jupiter shoved a massive piece of cake into her mouth. “If I weren’t already mated, I would marry this cake. Where have you been my whole life, Gray?” She raised her plate to thank Gray, who actually blushed.

Preston leaned over and opened his mouth. I pulled up a forkful of cake and shoved it in. He wasn’t a big fan of cake, which would change once he embraced Gray’s baking. “Congratulations, darling.”

“Are you jealous that you don’t have a shiny piece of paper with your name on it?” I wiped the corner of his lip with my thumb.

“I would be, but I’ve received many commendations over the years.” He puffed out his chest a little.

“Are they back at Dracula’s castle?” Milo snickered.

Quinn shook his head. “I assumed they were in his coffin. That is where you sleep at night. Right?”

Preston gave him the finger. “Not all of us can inherit our childhood homes. Speaking of which, will you be inviting Steve to meet Charlie?”

Giving Preston a dirty look, Quinn frowned. “At least some of us aren’t homeless now and sleeping on a couch.”

Milo nodded. “Yeah. You snore louder than Gray. Charlie, you need to get to know him faster so he can move in with you. I want my couch back.”

I held out my hand to Preston. “Oh, we’re getting to know each other, but I want to take things slowly. I feel like a new person. I want to figure out who I am now that I can do magic again. You have no idea what freedom feels like after years of being tormented by the book. I’m learning to love myself so I can love the three of you the way you should be loved.”

Preston and Quinn joined Milo in hugging me.

Dahlia clapped. “Finally! Now she can’t give us dirty looks when we hug our mates.” She motioned to Gray, who laughed.

Surrounded by my friends, family and mates, I felt at peace. I couldn't ask for anything more.



Charlie

Huddling in my backyard under our umbrellas, I looked at Preston, Quinn, Milo, Gray and Dahlia. “Everyone light their candles and clear their minds. We can’t screw this up. Daire will notice if we make a mistake.”

They all nodded as we turned to light each other’s candles.

“Can I ask, why did Daire create this abomination...er...I mean, cute cuddly critter?” Quinn quickly caught himself when Gray growled at his attempts to disrespect Necro Kitty.

Milo elbowed Quinn. “I told you. We tried to prevent Gunner from sneaking into the house when he still worked for our old pack. Of course, now, I can’t seem to get him out of my house.”

Gray snorted. “Dude. I’m trying to get you out of the house.”

Raising his hands, Preston tried to silence everyone. “There will be plenty of time to bicker after I undo my mistake. Right now, let’s focus on bringing Necro Kitty back. This is a complex spell, and I need everyone to focus.”

Everyone shifted and nodded as they huddled closer in the cold night air.

“Can someone explain exactly what we need to do? I’m a little unclear here. I need it explained to the non-magical people.” Dahlia rubbed her glasses to defog them.

I held her hand. “The spell requires us to remember our good times with Necro Kitty and tell her why we want her with us.”

“Like, do we mention the time she bit the balls of my former pack members and went bat shit crazy on them?” Gray shrugged.

I put my head in my hand. This was going to be more complicated than I expected.

Dahlia frowned. “Did Daire do that when he originally raised Necro

Kitty? It's not like he knew the cat when it was alive. How could he recall any good times with the cat?"

Turning, Preston glared at me. "No one told me this wasn't Daire's cat. You're saying he reanimated someone else's pet?"

I nodded and looked away. "No one really asked Daire to do this. He kind of showed up with the cat. His heart was in the right place."

Preston bit his thumbnail. "Hmm. This is more worse than I thought."

"We could..."

Holding up my hand, I stopped Quinn. "We are not calling Daire. He will be distraught. We need to figure this out ourselves."

We all looked at each other.

Quinn shrugged. "Do ghosts like cat treats? We could bribe her with a fish."

Rolling my eyes, I sighed. "Anyone have an idea?"

Preston bit his lip. "To find a random cat spirit, we need a necromancer. Or the cat's original name."

I shook my head. "No, to both of those things."

Dahlia stepped toward Necro Kitty's small plot with her favorite stuffed mouse on top. She knelt on the wet grass. "Hey there, kitty. It's Dahlia. You remember me. You always went for my food before trying to bite me. I appreciated you giving me that extra second to run, screaming for my life when the authorization spell had worn off. Look, we're sorry for what happened. It was an accident. You were the best guardian anyone could have. You were strong, fearless, and had super sharp teeth. The birds around here were terrified of you. We all miss you, except for that asshole squirrel who used to tease you by running along the fence. We would appreciate it if you came back to us. This time, we want you to enjoy your eternity as a pet instead of a guardian. We'll get you a nice, cozy bed and a stuffed squirrel.

How does that sound?”

I wanted to laugh at Dahlia’s adorable speech, but I stopped myself. Only Dahlia could do something so kind for a cat she barely liked.

Gray looked at me with tears in her eyes. I could tell that she loved Necro Kitty despite all her faults.

When Dahlia stood up, I motioned to Preston. “You’d better come up with something.”

Stepping forward, Preston smiled. He raised his hands and danced in the rain. I’d never seen anything like the spell he conjured. “*Aduce-l înapoi pe prietenul nostru iubit din marele dincolo.*”

Dropping to his knees, Preston finished the spell.

I held my breath, waiting for something to happen.

A bolt of lightning struck the small plot near the fence. A second later, Necro Kitty jumped out of the dirt and shook her fur.

We all froze.

Preston had done it! But no one was sure if she was still set to kill mode.

Necro Kitty ran straight for Gray.

I threw my hands up, ready to use the authorization spell or reset her factory settings.

Gray caught the cat, who immediately started purring.

I relaxed and nodded to Preston.

Gray scratched behind Necro Kitty’s ear. “I guess you need a new name, baby.”

Reaching over, Milo let the cat sniff him before petting her head. “How about Carina?”

Gray smiled. “Carina. I like that. Now, let’s get out of the rain.” She hugged me as she walked past me, though she frowned at Preston. She was notorious for holding grudges, but I hoped she eventually forgave Preston.

Hugging Preston, I kissed him. “Good job.”

Preston nodded. “I’m happy that worked. Thanks to Dahlia’s speech, I could call to our beloved in the great beyond. That cat must really love Gray to come back to her.”

Putting my arm around Preston, I chuckled. “Everyone deserves to be loved.”



Charlie

“Her?”

“No.”

“What about him?”

“Nope.”

I petted Iggy’s head as Dahlia and I strolled through town. “What does this person look like?”

Dahlia shrugged. “No clue.”

I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk to look at Dahlia. “Okay. So what can you tell me? You woke me up before dawn and told me to meet you here. You said it was important because someone needed help. I need something to go on.”

Sighing, Dahlia shrugged. “I’m sorry. I know it’s early. I don’t want to be up either, but I couldn’t get back to sleep.”

I patted her shoulder. “I know. It’s frustrating. Just take a deep breath and tell me what you can remember from the dream.”

She closed her eyes. “Small. Furry. Something about a fox, but not a real fox. Music. Romance.”

“Okay. You just described half the shifters in this town.” I chuckled.

She rolled her eye. “I know. I suck at this. Why doesn’t this get any easier?”

Putting my arm in hers, I pulled her along. “All this is still new. Trust me. You’re doing an amazing job for someone who recently realized her dreams were real. I give you a lot of credit. Not everyone can handle being a psychic.”

“Thank you, Charlie. Somedays, I feel like I’m stuck in a mosh pit. On other days, everything is in tune, and I can hear the perfect melody. I just

never know which day I'm going to have."

I laughed. "I think most people feel like that."

"There!"

I jumped out of my shoes when Dahlia shouted and pointed at a woman across the street. Poor Ignatius fell off my shoulder and landed on my arm.

"Fuck! A little warning next time. My heart literally stopped."

Dahlia waved away my heart attack. "Come on!"

Dragging me across the street, we ran after a brunette around Dahlia's height, walking down the street.

"Let's not scare the shit out of her. She's wearing headphones. She'll think we're insane." I tried to slow Dahlia down, but I could see she was on a mission.

"Excuse me!"

I shook my head. I really wasn't in the mood to get maced.

"Honey! Excuse me!"

The woman looked over her shoulder at us barreling towards her. She pulled off her headphones. "It's Sugar, not Honey." She smiled at Dahlia. "Hey, Charlie. What are you and Dahlia doing up so late or early, depending on how you look at it."

I drew a blank at first until I saw the gliders on her shoulders. "Insert Favorite drink and food. Right?"

"See? This is why I love O'Malley's. You guys always remember my order."

I nodded, grateful Sugar hadn't called the police on us.

"We believe great customer service will always bring the customers back for more." I smiled like an idiot, hoping Dahlia had the right person.

Sugar looked up at Ignatius. "Cool raven. Is he friendly?"

I wanted to laugh at her question, but I didn't want to upset Ignatius

since I promised not to bring up the past. “Yes, as long as you give him some gum.”

Frowning, Sugar looked at me as if I were crazy. “Oh, okay.” She pulled a piece of gum from her pocket and handed it to Iggy, who leaned down to let Sugar pet his head.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dahlia’s eyes glaze over. “There’s something different about them. You will see when the time is right. When the fox becomes one with herself, love will be undeniable.”

I stepped in front of Dahlia. “Here, I’ve been handing out coupons to some of the locals to get them into O’Malley’s, but I figure I should reward some of my regulars.” I shoved a free drink voucher into her hand.

“Wow! Thanks!”

“No problem. We’re sorry to bother you. We just wanted to say hi.” Dahlia was somewhere out in the ether, so I was left to squirm like a stalking weirdo.

Sugar pointed to Iggy’s collar. “Cute. Where did you get that?”

Petting Iggy, I shrugged. “Poor guy was trying to pick it up in the street when a car clipped him. He’s fine now.”

“Oh no. I’m sorry to hear that.” Sugar laughed when Iggy blew a bubble.

The second the bubble popped, the green collar fell off and hit the ground. Before I could grab it, Daisy, the glider, jumped down to nibble on it.

Suddenly, Dahlia’s prophecy made sense. “It looks like Daisy really likes the collar. She can keep it. Iggy prefers the color red. I’ll grab him a new one tomorrow.” Pulling Dahlia with me, I waved. “See you soon, Sugar. Good luck.” Crossing the street, I snickered. She was going to need all the luck she could get.

Learn more about Sugar in her book:

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0C6MJWG3L>

**To read the rest of the Silver Springs Pet Series, go
to the series page:**

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